

THE NEED FOR STABILIZATION

TEXT: KIM KAVIN

Mike Perkins can still remember the day when he realized the tipping point was coming.

"It was about four years ago," he says from his office as Vice President of Sales and Marketing for Quantum Stabilizers. "A yacht owner who is not known for throwing his money around called me. He wanted to know when we could put stabilizers on his 46-meter motor yacht. I'd looked at his boat, and it was going to be horribly expensive. I told him I didn't think it would be practical."

"He said, 'Mike, I didn't ask how much it costs. In the past four weeks, we had ten serious charter inquiries. The first question for each of them was: Does the boat have zero-speed stabilizers? We charter for \$210,000 a week. The system costs \$500,000. I can't afford not to do it. I just lost \$2 million in charters without it.'"

That was in 2004. Today the idea of zero-speed, or at-anchor, stabilizers aboard charter motor yachts has reached such critical mass that brochures promote them by brand name and model type. The savviest charter clients will only book motor yachts equipped with at-anchor technology. Brokers search the powerful MYBA.net database to weed out vessels that lack zero-speed stabilizers before putting forward boats for clients to consider. Existing yachts are retrofitting to add zero-speed stabilizers as quickly as new builds are coming onto the charter market with them.

Part of the reason is basic comfort. As yachts get larger and marinas get crowded, more yachts of all sizes have to stay at

anchor instead of at the dock. Zero-speed systems from companies such as Quantum Marine and Naiad Marine Systems ease the experience of being on the hook. A yacht can have the newest Kaleidescape entertainment system along with the finest silk linens, but if the charterer is seasick, the experience is terrible.

"We use the phrase 'the comfort imperative,'" says John Venables, President of the VT Motion Control Group, which includes Naiad. "If people are not comfortable, or if they're getting sick, what's the point of spending all that money on a charter? [Stabilization] will enhance the fun things that people want to do onboard charter yachts."

That includes using water toys, drop-down balconies, integrated swim platforms, and all the other amenities that are becoming standard aboard the newest charter yachts. Sure, it's great to offer a submarine, but if the crew can't launch it because the yacht is rolling, the multi-million-dollar toy adds nothing to the charter experience. The same is true of a private balcony that folds out of the hull side. Who wants to sit there and bob up and down every time another boat throws a wake?

"Builders are putting large swim platforms on their yachts because people want al fresco dining. Well, you need those tables to be stable," says Mark Armstrong, who handles public relations for International Yacht Collection, Trinity Yachts, and Quantum Marine. "If you have a touch-and-go helicopter pad, you want to make sure that you have good stabilization."

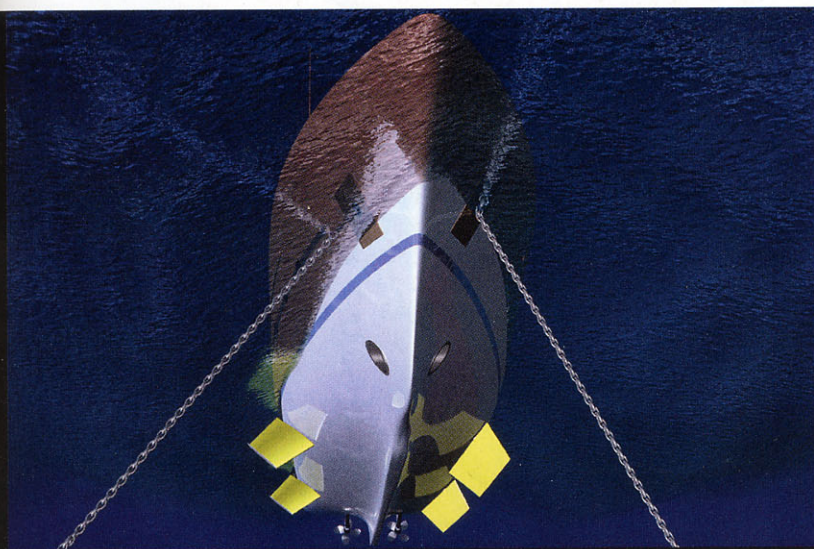
Broker Tom Collins of Burgess Yachts says only the most in-the-know charter clients request zero-speed stabilizers – but that the number of in-the-know is growing. Until recently, zero-speed stabilizers were available exclusively on the largest charter yachts, say 150 feet and larger. Nowadays, the technology is moving into the 120ft motor yacht range and may soon be a regular feature on charter yachts 90 or 100 feet long. For smaller boats, the Wesmar roll fin and Seakeeper Gyro stabilization system – which works at anchor as well as underway – is now available.

In some cases, at-anchor stabilization is unnecessary for a comfortable charter itinerary. A week spent hopping from marina to marina along the Côte d'Azur is a different scenario than anchoring out every night in the Caribbean.

Even still, Collins says, as more clients experience the comforts of stabilization, they will request yachts that have the systems – and brokers will continue to book those motor yachts first.

"There's no question about it," he says. "I was onboard a charter boat, and we were traveling in tandem with another charter boat. We were lying at anchor on the back side of Antigua. The other boat had stabilizers, and ours didn't. I was walking down the decks like I was staggering drunk because we were rolling. You could absolutely see where the other boat right beside us was steady. It is nice to have your glass of wine stay on the table."

Contact: VT Motion Group, www.naiad.com
Quantum Marine, www.quantumhydraulic.com
Seakeeper Gyro, www.seakeeper.com
Wesmar, www.wesmar.com



"WHEN YOU THINK ABOUT ALL THE MILLIONS OF DOLLARS THAT GO INTO BUILDING THESE YACHTS, IT'S CRAZY TO THINK THAT PEOPLE WON'T WANT TO GO ONBOARD BECAUSE THEY'RE GOING TO BE SEASICK. IT WOULD BE LIKE RENTING A CAR WITHOUT AIR CONDITIONING. CHARTER CLIENTS ARE REALIZING THAT THEY DON'T HAVE TO SETTLE FOR BEING UNCOMFORTABLE."

Mark Armstrong, International Yacht Collection