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BY BRYONY MCCABE
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"There will be positives we can draw from this"

Fraser Yachts CEO Raphael Sauleau discusses the short-term and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on the industry...



It is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic is having a major impact on how yachts are being used in the short term, with many itineraries likely to be put on hold for the coming weeks or even months. With over 160 yachts under its yacht and charter management, Fraser Yachts is advising owners on how best to navigate the continuously evolving situation. Speaking exclusively to SuperyachtNews, CEO Raphael Sauleau reveals that there hasn't been any mass panic just yet.

“Understandably some owners are worried and uncertain – no one knows what will happen so it is quite challenging trying to figure out an action plan,” explains Sauleau. “Some owners have already decided to lay up their boats over summer, but this is only a few to date. The majority of owners are simply keeping their yachts where they are and waiting to see what will happen. Everyone is still hoping for a bit of summer to play with, so most owners seem happy to keep their yachts on standby to use as soon as they can.”

Fraser Yachts is currently recommending its yachts to postpone any crew movements for the time being, for both health and logistical reasons. In terms of crew redundancies, the team hasn't seen any drastic measures being taken yet, as owners seem to be motivated to preserve their crew. However, if the crisis goes beyond the summer, Sauleau admits they will probably start seeing requests to reduce the numbers on board, like any business would have to.

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their yachts on standby to use as soon as they can.”

Of course, it is also uncertain as to how the summer charter season will play out, and the next month will be more revealing of what is going to happen. “Obviously there has been a huge impact on any charters scheduled for May and June, with the options for clients either to cancel or postpone,” says Sauleau. “There have been also been a few requests for alternative destinations to the Med, such as the Caribbean, over the summer.”

While some companies are promoting the narrative that yachts can be ‘safe havens’ for owners and clients to isolate during this time, Sauleau thinks this is a stretch. “To say that there is no risk is not true,” he says. “Even with all the measures in place, owners still need to travel to the yacht, provisions need to be brought on board and there are so many other steps involved. And once you are on board, where can you go? Everyday there is another port closing. For many owners their yacht is their home, and of course you are safe in your own home, but all the parameters around the current situation make it very challenging to be on a yacht. So, I think the industry needs to be very careful when it makes such statements.”

While all of the aforementioned issues may be short-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sauleau believes that there might be some practical lessons for the industry to learn in the long-term. “It may trigger some changes to contracts,” he explains. “Contractually, we have never really thought about a situation like this in the past, so the market has had to adapt to serve owners and clients alike. Maybe it will generate a general consensus on how contracts are drafted going forward, for both sales and charter.”

Another possible long-term effect of the pandemic, Sauleau considers, could be a positive one. “Everyone is communicating so much more now that they are not together physically – I think my agenda is even busier now than when I am in the office or travelling,” he proclaims. “It is the same with the owners: there more requests, we are doing more reports, and everyone is being more conscious of the crew and their wellbeing. We were all so busy running around that, when we stop and reflect, we realise we are able to talk to each other so much more.”

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Perhaps the events’ landscape might also be impacted in the long run. “One thing I believe the industry should have utilised better in the past is the use of technology to virtually visit yachts,” Sauleau continues. “While it’s not quite the same as being on board and experiencing the feel of a yacht, I think we need to make use of technology and reduce the number of shows. This situation and the way we are all now obliged to work may realign a few priorities and show that we don’t need as many yacht shows around the world.”

“Obviously, this crisis is about people’s health and more important things than yachting, but there will be positives we can draw from this,” Sauleau concludes. “When I see how we are all communicating, I think it really could change things for the better. If the situation lasts three months like everybody hopes, then these lessons might be very quickly forgotten, but if it goes on longer we would really need to adapt ourselves.”

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