

Boat builders beat French for top contract

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BY FRANÇOISE BOTHA 2/4/1996

Cape Town — Robertson and Caine, the boat builders, have trounced French shipping yards to clinch a R37 million international contract from the world's largest charter company, The Moorings.

The contract, the biggest order yet for a South African yard, will see the production of 23 cruising catamarans in three years. The first of the R1,6 million 45-foot boats is due to be launched in late 1997.

Lex Raas, a director of Florida-based The Moorings, said the company had previously bought from French boat builders. They had looked to South Africa which had become one of the world leaders in the development of cruising catamarans.

The project is based on a new design by Alex Simonis, a top yachting designer. It would simplify the

indoor-outdoor flow and increase the living area on deck. Each catamaran will have four double en-suite cabins.

"The boat is going to leapfrog the catamaran concept into the next generation in terms of style, layout and comfort. Some of the new design features will undoubtedly be copied," said Raas.

Recognition

John Robertson, the director of Robertson and Caine, said: "This international recognition is great for South Africa and us."

Commenting on French production, Robertson said: "If you look at the French yards, they build boats like Toyota builds motor cars. We simply cannot compete on those terms."

Robertson said high-volume production was not considered a possibility in South Africa and the industry

concentrated on custom and semi-custom-built projects instead.

The company has produced a number of top performance yachts, including Cape-to-Rio line-honours achiever, Broomstick, and a recent contender, Warrior.

Lower infrastructure and overhead costs had contributed to a price advantage over other yards as had the favourable exchange rate, he said.

Although some imported components will be used, more than 65 percent of the boats will be local content.

Robertson said the contract would result in a 20 percent increase in jobs at the yard.

The charter company operates 650 yachts and catamarans on behalf of their international boat-owner client base and buys about 100 boats a year for sale. The company plans to use the catamarans in one of its 28 bases around the world.