

SEAFARER

There is always a hint of mischief in the eyes of Oscar Siches, an irresistible playfulness mixed with a keen intellect that draws you in until you are complicit. Its warmth and inclusiveness transports me to a time before my sense of wonder was eroded by adult responsibility. It is a pleasure to experience.

I first met Oscar a couple of years ago at a bar called Lola in Santa Catalina Market, close to the seafront in Palma de Mallorca. He is highly-regarded in the world of luxury yachting, known for his expertise and his capability when it comes to big projects, so it was rather disarming to find someone neither narcissistic nor imperious.

On that particular day, I'd arranged a quick chat to discuss a business idea but he was such good company and so generous with his time that we ended up talking for much longer than planned and ordering more beers than I had anticipated.

Oscar Siches is a connoisseur – of boats, of people, of food and wine, of furniture, dogs, history, nautical instruments, of life and its diverse elements but, perhaps most of all, of design. He has lived and continues to live a life that is full; a life that's productive and varied and exciting and all the things of which we dream in youth.

He first took to the water at the age of six, in a dinghy, on the mighty Rio de la Plata, and he has been a sailor ever since, crossing oceans and clocking up tens of thousands of nautical miles, at times in some of the most expensive and advanced yachts in the world. He has raced at the highest level, he has skippered superyachts for royalty and the rich, and he has collected remarkable experiences and the captivating stories they inspire.

Nowadays, he is one of only a few dozen specialist superyacht marina designers. We spoke at his home in the centre of Palma.

ORIGINS

Oscar Siches has saltwater coursing through his veins. He grew up in Buenos Aires, the son of a navy engineer. As a boy he was a member of the navy yacht club, where he was mentored by a Swiss called William Delaporte, a former crewman on Meteor 4, the personal yacht of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Oscar was a natural sailor and Delaporte later gave him his sextant – a precision instrument of brass and bone, made in 1880 and still accurate nearly a century and a half later.

As we talk, he takes the instrument down from a shelf in the elegant lounge of his beautiful apartment in Palma's old town. It shares space with a lifetime of souvenirs, books and memorabilia, attached to each of which is a story. Inside the lid of the sextant's case, a label declares that it was made in Cardiff, Wales, in the United Kingdom, by *'William Weichert, Chronometer Watch and Clock Manufacturer and Adjuster of Ship's Iron Compasses'*. He passes me the sextant and I turn it over in my hands, hardly daring to breathe.

Oscar was educated at the Liceo Naval Militar where the Argentine Navy has trained its sailors since 1872. While there, he sailed and raced numerous categories and classes of vessel, beginning with a type of dinghy I'd never heard of. *"These boats were three-and-a-half or four metres long with a cat rig and they were a heavy thing, probably 200 kilos. The hulls were two and half centimetres thick fibreglass with centreboards of steel and if you didn't get your hand out quickly, they would chop your fingers off. They were called Teros these boats and they were almost impossible to sail. Whoever learned to sail on these boats could sail anything... small, big, anything."*

Along with his brothers he also trained in Cadets, Penguins, Snipes and Finns. Oscar excelled and became captain of the sailing team, faring well in regattas in the Rio de la Plata (“el Rio” for the locals and across to Uruguay. He even raced whalers, in both rowing and sailing events – clinker-built, double-ended boats with ten men at the oars. The canvas, he tells me, was heavy and *“blue with copper sulphate to avoid putrefaction.”* I raised an eyebrow as he said this last. *“Yes,”* he said, nodding. *“I grew up with very old-fashioned nautical elements.”*

His tenure at the academy also gave him exemption from military service, a fact crucial to his story. Upon graduation, rather than join the armed forces, he left to study engineering at university. But, after eight months, a phone call from a former teacher changed everything. *“Suddenly my old professor at the navy college called me and said, ‘Pucho, listen they need a navigator with Matrero, this new Frers hull. You can jump on the boat and do all the races of the Circuito Rio.’*

You cannot simply walk out of military service. At university, on the other hand, you are free to leave any time. *“Of course, it took me fifteen seconds to decide.”*

OCEAN

He sailed across the Rio de la Plata to Uruguay and then took a thirty-six-hour bus ride to Rio. This was 1972 and Matrero – fifty feet in length; designed by no less than Germán Frers – was perhaps the fastest and most advanced yacht of its day. Also, Oscar wasn’t joining just any crew, this was the Argentine team, and they were up against Brazil and America. To say he was in distinguished company would be to understate the case. *“On one of the boats, Charisma, Dennis Conner was the skipper. On the American boat, Ted Turner was the skipper. And here’s me, hanging around with these gods of yachting at the time.”*

The event took place immediately before Carnival and was timed to coincide with the arrival in Rio of the first Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race. For a young man, barely twenty years old and with a love of sailing, it must have been extraordinarily exciting. It must have been phenomenal!

After two weeks of competition, he spent four months delivering boats before returning to Buenos Aires, where he painted houses and laboured in shipyards to make ends meet. More boat deliveries followed, including a six-week voyage from Miami to Buenos Aires aboard a Hatteras 53. This trip was particularly memorable for two reasons. Firstly, the boat suffered engine failure, leaving Oscar stranded in Martinique for several weeks. Secondly, while waiting for spare parts to be delivered, he met and befriended a Dutch couple.

A few years later that same Dutch couple called to offer him a job running a charter boat, a Standfast 40, in the Caribbean. He crossed the Atlantic for the first time in that boat, bringing her to Mallorca and then to Poros in the Saronic Gulf, thirty-one nautical miles south of Athens. Upon arrival in Poros, he was assigned a hostess, a Dutch girl called Ada. They have been together for thirty-eight years, married for thirty-four. Neither had expected to fall in love but then who has? *“I didn’t have to work for it,”* he tells me, smiling. *“Everything was served up for me on a silver tray.”*

After Poros, Oscar and Ada based themselves in Mallorca, where they ran a 24-metre charter boat for a German owner. By this time, however, sail was very much the poor cousin of power. As Oscar puts it: *“Sailing boats meant funny people travelling with the wind.”*

Flying back from the UK where she’d spent eight months studying cordon bleu cookery, Ada was seated next to a young man whose father, a wealthy American businessman, owned a luxury yacht. They chatted and plotted and three days later Oscar became skipper of a 36-

metre CRN motor vessel named *Santa Cruz Tres*. She was beautiful and very much in demand. *"We chartered that boat like mad and we made three times the money we'd been making before."* Guests included the King of Spain, the President of Wembley, the CEO of British Airways, the owner of Hard Rock Café and Oscar and Ada's favourite guest by far, Jim Henson, creator of The Muppets.

TARA

After four years, the Danish new owner went bankrupt but that was immaterial because, in 1993, Tara was born.

For four years, they lived in The Netherlands, primarily to give Tara a chance to establish roots and a strong connection with her Dutch relatives. Oscar worked in marine electronics and delivered a few boats, including a 41-metre Lurssen, which he brought to Mallorca.

And then Sunseeker came calling, with the offer of a job in Port Adriano on Mallorca's south west coast. For two years, Oscar put in long hours and endured what he describes, diplomatically, as *"difficult days and bad behaviour from other people"*. Inevitably, the time came when he was no longer comfortable at Sunseeker. *"So, I let the boss know and off I go."* But by that time Mallorca was home.

MARINAS

Oscar's first marina project was the refurbishment of Pantalán del Mediterraneo on the seafront in Palma de Mallorca. By way of incentive, the developer made him a partner and Oscar threw himself into the work wholeheartedly, introducing much-needed refinements. Pantalán del Mediterraneo was the first dock in Mallorca to have direct phone lines for each vessel, it was the first to have internet access – this was back in 2003 – and it was the first to have black water disposal. This latter fact took me by surprise and I told him so.

"Theoretically people were supposed to go 12 miles offshore and empty the tanks but the reality was that at 3 o'clock in the morning, the engineer would get up and switch on the pumps and pump out all the shit. That was the 3am watch. It's a known thing. Not just here, everywhere."

It seems unthinkable now, little more than a decade later.

Next came Moll Vell, the glorious superyacht marina with the cool, Frank Lloyd Wright-style gates just moments from Palma de Mallorca's old town. Perfectly situated beneath the city's jaw-dropping gothic cathedral, La Basílica de Santa Maria, Moll Vell is in many ways a jewel in Mallorca's crown. Offering excellent facilities and unequalled access to both the upmarket and edgier barrios of Palma's heart, it is the perfect spot to park a superyacht and, as a result, attracts some pretty well-known vessels and their billionaire owners.

It was a big project. The team created Moll Vell almost from scratch. Look closely and you'll find plenty of Oscar Siches touches: custom art deco cleats at the dry dock, cables and hoses running safely beneath the pontoon boards, those Frank Lloyd Wright gates – his tribute to a design inspiration – and, above all, the neatness, the efficiency, the user-friendliness of it all.

In 2005, he started going to international events and the following year was one of the presenters at METSTRADE in Amsterdam, the world's largest business-to-business marine equipment show. He became a regular presenter at boat and marina events and, in 2011, through a colleague at ICOMIA – the International Council of Marine Industry Associations – he

was invited to talk about environmental issues at the Yacht Club de Monaco. A year later, after a second appearance at the YCM, the Secretary General invited him to lunch. To attend the appointment, Oscar drove seven hours from Barcelona and seven hours back. It was worth it. He was invited to become part of a team creating Yacht Club de Monaco branded marinas around the world. In December of 2012, he and Ada were inducted into the club at an initiation ceremony presided over by Prince Albert.

He began work right away, on a YCM marina at Qingdao on China's Yellow Sea coast. It opened in April 2018 and he is now focused on a new marina project near Shanghai. I ask what are his first steps when embarking on a development of this scale. *"When you design a marina, one of the first things you look at is prevailing winds. Because if you're going to manoeuvre with the prevailing wind from the bow or the stern then it's fine. But it's a lot more difficult when you have a cross wind. Prevailing winds also determine where the boatyard will be because boat work brings dust and noise. You will not find all of these things in a single book."*

CORSO

I glance out of the window and see that the weather has closed in, making Palma uncharacteristically cold and rainy. I ask him why boats have so dominated his life.

"I am third generation navy. The women of my family have always been missing their men, either for the navy or trade. My ancestors were..." He struggles for the word and eventually finds 'corso'. In English it would be corsair. *"Drake was a corso with the permission of the Crown to attack and plunder enemy ships. And then someone in the middle of the line lost all the money and here we are."*

And what has been the best thing about a life spent working with boats?

"It has been so bloody good, it's hard to separate one thing. My first Atlantic crossing when I had not a fucking clue what I had to do. I navigated all my life by dead reckoning and sextant so that arrival, that first time perhaps..." He tails off, thoughtful for a moment, remembering. *"There was a very famous American called Don Street, and his boats were called lolaire. He wrote a very famous book about how to cross the Atlantic. I bought that book in Martinique and just took off. Boom! Off I go!"*

I ask him what has been the very best thing about a life that, by any measure, has been well-lived. He answers in barely a heartbeat. *"Tara."*

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Pucho, Oscar's nickname, is a slang term, common in South America, meaning cigarette butt.

Dennis Conner won the America's Cup four times, has twenty-eight world championship titles to his credit and has competed in two Whitbread Round the World races. According to the New York Yacht Club, Conner has had *'more impact on sailing than any other sailor in the world over the past four decades.'*

Before establishing CNN, Ted Turner won the 1977 America's Cup in his yacht, *Courageous*. He is the only person to be voted Rolex Yachtsman of the Year four times.

Donald M. Street Jr. has spent close to fifty years cruising and chartering in the Caribbean. He has written extensively about yachting and is the author of a number of books on the subject. Now in his 80s, he continues to sail and still owns *lolaire*.

Born in Argentina in 1941, Germán Frers is one of the world's most famous naval architects. The Frers-designed racing yacht, *Matrero*, on which Oscar was a crew member in 1972, still competes in classic regattas.

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A few choice Oscar Siches quotes:

Oscar Siches on sailing:

"Anything that goes in the water, I'm game."

Oscar Siches on life:

"When you think you know everything, you're fucked."

Oscar Siches on design:

"To aim for perfection, you must have a clear idea of what perfection looks like."

Oscar Siches on getting to grips with a project:

"Before any design is made, you must have the marina alive in your hand, you must go there and see it and experience it."

Oscar Siches on managing his own expectations:

"If a marina is half of what I intended it to be, I'm a very happy man."