

Filling niche in the yacht market

EARL KRUSER
Staff Reporter

MANY business ideas are born out of the strangest situations.

Take Peter and Fiona Wehrley of Milnerton, who decided on a business idea of their own while chartering a yacht in the Caribbean.

They decided on building huge catamarans for charter and private use, which sounds like hundreds of other businesses out there, but the Wehrleys were determined that theirs would be "unique" in its designs it offered clients.

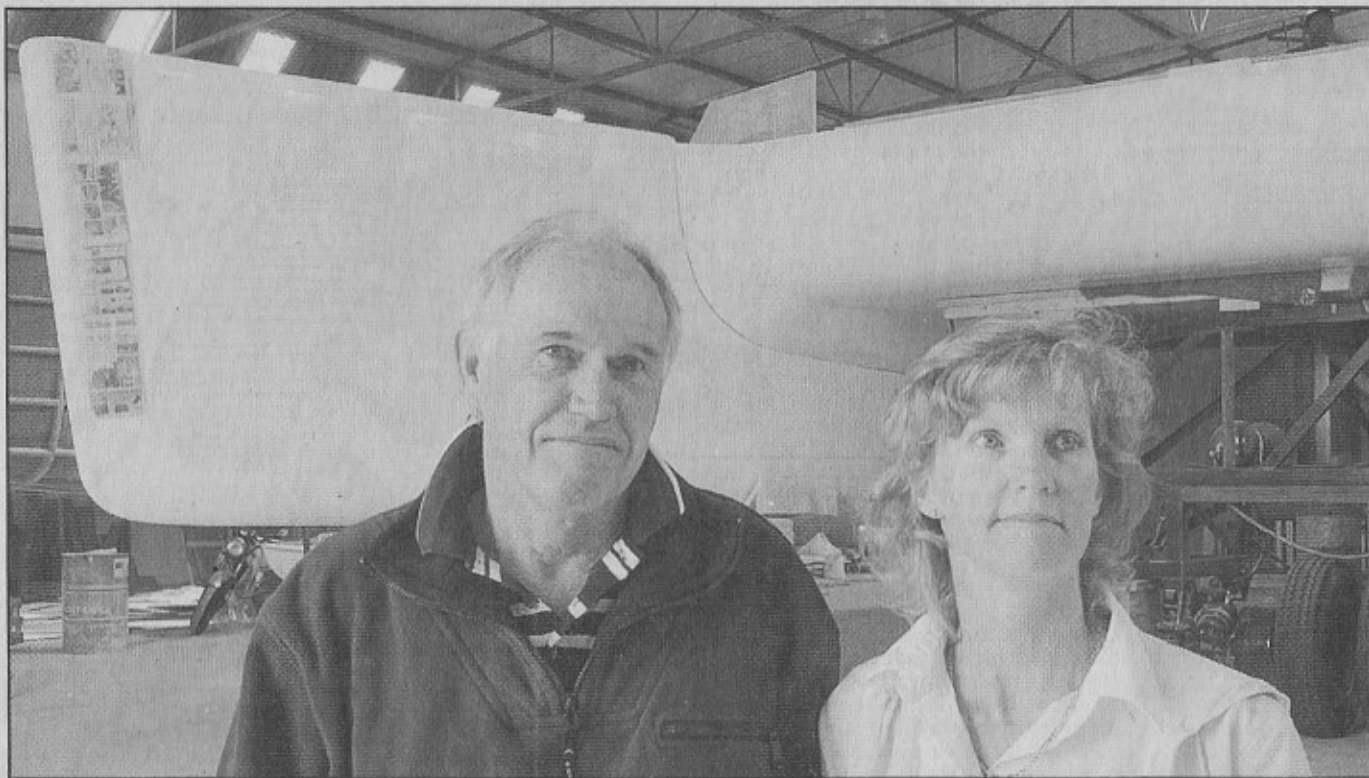
Today the family business, Matrix Yachts, is situated in Killarney Gardens, and is run by the Wehrleys and their sons, Lee and Mark.

The business opened in September 2001 and the premises had to be customised to allow for boat building. It is about 2 000m², which allows enough floor space so that three yachts can be built at one time.

Originally from Durban, the Wehrley family operated charter yachts within United States and Caribbean waters, gaining invaluable work experience within the charter industry and first-hand knowledge of the luxury yacht market.

But the extent of their experience was not only limited to this.

Peter had operated a consulting structural engineering/project management



Big projects: Peter and Fiona Wehrley of Matrix Yachts are pictured with their second project, having recently completed their first catamaran, the Akasha.

BRENTON BEACH

private practice for 25 years and since 1995 he had been actively involved in the leisure marine field.

Then there are their sons' achievements, which proud dad Peter was eager to boast about: "Mark is 30 years old, has a master mariner class 4 certificate and has worked his way up to being one of the youngest captains to take

control of a costly prestige private motor yacht. He is in charge of our marketing and detail design.

"Lee, at 31, is a motivated and capable young man and is the factory manager, working with the fibre glass construction and various other aspects of the actual building processes."

The Wehrleys employ a

staff of about 30 full-time workers, and have their own in-house training facility.

"The yacht building industry is challenged to find staff with the necessary skills. Companies are forced to train most of their employees in house," said Peter.

"Our staff complement gets considerably larger as the qualified carpentry and

plumbing contractors come in during the latter stages of the designing and fitting procedures, but they too have to be trained to further develop the specialised skills and standards demanded."

Their first project, the largest catamaran ever made in South Africa on a dedicated production line, took Matrix one year to build and

has just been completed.

"It's the size of a tennis court (22m x 11m) with state-of-the-art design and technology on board.

"The catamaran, known as Akasha, is a production model and has been sold for around €3 million to Ralph Auchincloss.

The new owner will use the vessel for chartering, as well as private use, said Peter, who is the company's managing director and is a senior professional structural engineer with a BSc degree in engineering.

According to Fiona, the uniqueness of their design lies in spaciousness and style, and in allowing the prospective owners to customise the interior with all sorts of accessories such as plasma screen television sets and fancy furniture.

"Our design includes a large kitchen, four fairly large cabins all featuring their own en-suites, with the main cabin facing the front of the vessel and situated above the deck presenting a full view of the ocean from the front," said Fiona.

The Wehrleys have decided to focus on building catamarans of this size as there are very few companies in the world constructing them. France and Poland are the only two countries who have production lines for such huge boats.

"There is a definite trend towards larger yachts that can take more guests and offer ultimate luxury," said Peter.