

IF VIKINGS MADE SPEEDBOATS

On the Swedish island of Gotland, J Craft handbuilds elegant boats that are true one-offs – and there are only 29 of them. By Gemma Billington

Scandinavia has a reputation for sophisticated world-class design. But there is a historical rugged toughness too, which goes back to those seafaring explorers, first the Vikings and then the Hanseatic League. It is a peculiar mix and when these seemingly opposing sides of the Scandi character collide, you end up with the sort of muscular elegance that you find in Arne Jacobsen's furniture, a Bang & Olufsen speaker or Volvo's 1961 P1800.

The Swedish luxury boatmaker J Craft is another example of the school of good looks meets uncompromising performance. Its signature model, the 42ft Torpedo, unveiled in 2009, is a powerful beast which, while recalling the glamour and romance of a Mediterranean speedboat, is at heart a Viking craft. Surely it can only be a matter of time before we see 007 haring around the Mediterranean in one.

What sets J Craft apart is craftsmanship. Since it was founded 25 years ago, only 29 J Crafts have been produced, which means their owners are by definition part of an exclusive (and, in typical Scandi fashion, discreet) club. A J Craft is custom built and takes between 8,500 and 10,000 man hours. That is four to five years for one craftsman for one Torpedo. To give an idea of the attention



Each 42ft J Craft Torpedo is handbuilt in Gotland, Sweden, and no two are the same. Above: La Decadence, the first Torpedo built by J Craft

to detail, the boat's polished mahogany veneer is sanded by hand and lacquered 18 times. It is fitted atop a recyclable vinylester resin, which is created using an ingenious vacuum infusion technique adopted by J Craft three years ago. But let's rewind a little.

J Craft was founded on the island of Gotland – home to the world's highest concentration of Viking artefacts and treasures – in 1999 by the businessman Bjorn Jansson and the former mariner Johan Hallen. Jansson had a vision to produce the finest boats in Sweden and the company was bolstered by a high-profile debut commission for the country's King Carl XVI Gustaf, who remains a proud owner of a J Craft called Polaris a quarter of a century later.

Hallen was the man to make Jansson's vision a reality. A skilled craftsman and former navy underwater demolition expert and mine diver, Gotland-born and raised Hallen had been building boats since his teens. Many years ago he worked with the renowned yacht designer Pelle Petterson, who also designed the Volvo P1800, in the research and development department of Nimbus Boats on the island.

Hallen is now the chief master builder and chief technology officer of J Craft and responsible for all the company's builds, innovations and its technical prowess. Because beneath the sleek custom-made interiors (the



most recent Torpedo, Aquila III, has bespoke Hermès upholstery and four integrated fridge-freezers) is a seriously powerful vessel. A Torpedo is capable of handling wave heights up to 4m and has a top speed of 47 knots (54mph). And the Volvo Penta IPS throttle and joystick system makes the boat surprisingly easy to handle, whatever your level of expertise.

This was the ambition of J Craft's owner, Radenko Milakovic. The former financier spotted a J Craft for the first time from his hotel balcony in Monaco and rushed downstairs to talk to its owner. His interest piqued when he learnt J Craft's story – and the fact it was Swedish, not from the Italian Riviera – and he set out to purchase a boat of his own after hiring one for the summer, on condition that the vessel be made with a few "tweaks" to accommodate his lack of experience and confidence on the water. When Milakovic discovered that making such adjustments was not possible, his solution was to purchase the company.

That was in 2008 and the timing turned out to be serendipitous. Jansson had been ill for some time and needed to secure the future of his venture. When he died in 2011, Milakovic had officially taken the reins, although he insists he is a mere "custodian" of Jansson's vision and that J Craft will always be in the capable hands of the small team that builds the boats, led by Hallen.

Clockwise from top left: the mahogany veneer is lacquered 18 times; interiors are bespoke; each boat takes up to 10,000 man hours to build; the Torpedo at sea. Below: chief master builder Johan Hallen



Now based in Visby, the Unesco-listed capital of Gotland, the J Craft factory adheres to Jansson's "evolution not revolution" credo and has been quietly building extraordinary hand-crafted boats for the past 25 years. The move to Visby from its original location on Gotland, close to Faro (a favourite of the film-maker Ingmar Bergman, who is buried there), allowed the team to build their workshop from scratch with a reduced carbon footprint. The site is



heated by renewables and the idea is to keep the factory fossil-free and self-sufficient for all processes involved in the building of Torpedoes. About 95 per cent of a J Craft Torpedo is Swedish-made and sourced and most of the parts and labour hail from Gotland. Boats are built by hand from the keel up in one location. Where parts can't be made in house, J Craft sources them from companies with excellent green credentials. It's all very Scandi.

In this, the company's 25th anniversary year, innovations are afoot. At the Palm Beach International Boat Show in March, Aquila III made its debut. The latest Torpedo is the first J Craft built to American specifications and features Volvo's Dynamic Positioning System and a purpose-built modular Garmin solid-state radar system. Not to mention a bespoke mahogany staircase and cabinetry.

While production has increased to two or three boats a year, J Craft's Torpedoes will continue to be extremely rare, built only to order, with a starting price of £2 million. There are plans to move into luxury furnishings and lifestyle products that complement the Torpedo. It is a clever way of extending the brand universe and getting the word out about these beautiful boats. Crucially, however, production will remain in Gotland under the guidance of Hallen and his team. j-craftboats.com ■