



01 The multi-million dollar refit of the Necker Belle resulted in a magnificent vessel that is unique, stable and comfortable, capable of extended cruising.

VIRGIN

WATERS

ENTERING CHARTERED TERRITORY

REENA ABRAHAM

SIR RICHARD BRANSON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY WOULD READ LIKE A FAIRY TALE OR PERHAPS, EVEN BETTER THAN A FAIRY TALE. THE 53-YEAR OLD ENTREPRENEUR HAS STAYED THE UNORTHODOX MASTER OF HIS UNIVERSE, DIRECTING A MULTI-BILLION DOLLAR EMPIRE THAT HE CREATED FROM SCRATCH AS A TEENAGER; CONTINUING TO RUN IT FOUR DECADES DOWN WITH THE SAME FLAIR AND BRAVADO. DIFFICULT TO PUT HIM OR HIS ECLECTIC CORPORATE HOUSE INTO A NUTSHELL, BUT IF ONE DID, IT WOULD BE APT TO SAY THAT THE ONLY THING RICHARD BRANSON CONFORMS TO IS UNCONFORMITY.



He is not necessarily the world's greatest businessman, or the most successful. His empire is spread randomly and his track record is checkered with hits and misses. Branson's greatest business feat, perhaps, has been to engineer a breathtaking life for himself, and to successfully sell that lifestyle. He has created a career that feeds his great passions, holds his mercurial interest, and incorporates his incredibly united family while allowing for his idiosyncrasies and quirks. He loves adventure, and his job provides plenty of it. He has an insatiable curiosity, and his job provides an education one would never get in a classroom. "I don't think of work as work and play as play. It's all living."

In 1970 Virgin was founded as a mail order record retailer, and shortly afterwards Branson opened a record shop in Oxford Street, London, building a recording studio a few years later in Oxfordshire where the first Virgin artist, Mike Oldfield, recorded 'Tubular Bells'. In 1977 Virgin signed the Sex Pistols and went on to sign many household names from Culture Club to the Rolling Stones, helping to make Virgin Music one of the top six record companies in the world. With around 200 companies in over 30 countries, the Virgin Group has now expanded into leisure, travel, tourism, mobile, broadband, TV, radio, music festivals, finance and health and now investing in renewable energy and resource efficiency.

Having been in the international travel market for 25 years, the exclusive Virgin Limited Edition was inevitable. A collection of unique retreats chosen for their stunning locations, magnificent surroundings and offering a sense of fun, style, luxury and exceptional personal service, Branson takes a hands-on role in the choice of properties. His portfolio currently extends from his original Necker Island retreat in the British Virgin Islands, to Kasbah Tamadot in Morocco, Ulusaba in South Africa, The Lodge in Verbier, Switzerland, Sa Terra Rotja near Palma, Mallorca, and The Roof Gardens in London, UK for dining and events.

Necker Island is the perfect synthesis of work, play, and life. Located in the British Virgin Islands, a stunning and unspoilt area of the Caribbean, it has been the family home and one where Branson works from for a good part of the year. Necker represents the ultimate in privacy with accommodations, in a stunning ten-bedroom Main House and three separate Balinese



02 Sir Richard Branson, at 53, is a powerhouse of energy and ideas.

03 Cabins are all located on the main deck well above the waterline, designed to meet a multiplicity of accommodation needs and fitted with in-room entertainment systems.

04 A bar is set to port while to starboard, the lounge has a massive 52 inch flat screen television. If there is a need, the saloon can be converted into a fifth cabin using a privacy curtain.



houses, which include sweeping ocean views. The underlying logic is Branson's mantra: Virgin stands for fun, and the unexpected.

Perhaps with the intention of providing his original Caribbean property with a little sister, Branson recently purchased and refitted Necker Belle, a 32-meter catamaran with an unbelievable 14-meter beam. After an extensive makeover in Australia, this majestic catamaran is now available for charter in the Caribbean in winter and the Mediterranean in summer. Necker Belle is one of the largest all-carbon multi hull yachts of its kind and can reach speeds of over 20 knots.

To add to the experience are spacious common areas and four beautifully appointed en suite main cabins, a crew of seven, and the best in fine dining. The portside deck is set up for game fishing and the chef is on hand to clean and cook the catch of the

day. A 6-foot diving board on the top of the aft deck points straight into the clear turquoise waters or one can take the easier route from the built in swimming platforms. Necker Belle has a selection of state of the art equipment and a comfortable 12-person fast boat capable of 40 knots perfect for activities such as waterskiing, island hopping and game fishing. Scuba diving and snorkeling equipment are available for those who want to go out and blow some bubbles with the marine life!

Not only is Necker Belle one of the fastest catamarans on the water, she also boasts one of the world's first underwater aircraft - a 3-person aero submarine - Necker Nymph, tailor-made to exact specifications and capable of speeds to satisfy the most adventure hungry soul. The submarine is anchored to the yacht's top deck when she's not berthed on Necker Island.



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05 Whether you prefer formal or informal dining, fine cuisine on board Necker Belle is a given, and what better way to enjoy a meal than with the great outdoors at your fingertips.

06 The Necker Nymph provides high-speed, live action underwater, James Bond style!

07 The beautiful and flamboyant lines of the 32-meter catamaran with its unbelievable 14-meter beam.



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SIR RICHARD BRANSON, THE INTREPID ENTREPRENEUR AND FOUNDER OF VIRGIN GROUP

TALKS TO DURRAH ABOUT HIS VENTURES, THE VIRGIN LIMITED EDITION AND NECKER BELLE

YOU FOUNDED VIRGIN AS A MAIL ORDER RECORD RETAILER ALMOST FOUR DECADES AGO. WHAT WAS THE PLAN AT THAT TIME? DID YOU FORESEE THE BRAND GROWING TO WHAT IT IS TODAY?

No - one thing led to another. I love a challenge, love creating things, can't resist saying yes!

WHAT IS THE STORY BEHIND THE CHOICE OF NAME FOR YOUR COMPANY?

Well I was 15, inexperienced - and inexperienced in business too!

CRITICS HAVE PORTRAYED THE RAPIDLY EXPANDING VIRGIN EMPIRE AS NEEDLESSLY ECLECTIC AND RANDOM. WOULD YOU SAY THAT THIS IS SO?

Virgin is a way of life brand unlike most brands that specialize in one product. Love learning. Love making a difference.

YOU HAVE BEEN IN THE INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL MARKET FOR A LONG TIME. TELL US ABOUT YOUR VISION FOR VIRGIN LIMITED EDITION.

Well, it all came about really because I don't like the idea of having a series of homes around the world that lay empty when I am not there. So what I have created over the years are some really special homes that we share with other people.

Each property is small, especially in comparison to the larger hotel chains out there and each one brings soul to the mix; our quirkiness is a nice distinction - you won't find cookie-cutter hotels in our collection. Each property operates with the sole aim of creating amazing experiences for our guests, but are run like a home since they are by and large homes.

HOW WILL YOU UTILIZE AND BUILD ON THE VIRGIN BRAND'S BUSINESS MODEL AND ETHIC IN THE YACHT CHARTER MARKET?

With all the properties in the collection our brand values are the most essential part of our company; they are intrinsic to our goals and as a company we do whatever we can to bring these values to life and deliver on our promises. We strive to provide the very best customer service possible in a friendly manner and believe in going the extra mile when it comes to those all important touches, listening to our guests and offering much more than a place to rest your head.

With Necker Belle each itinerary and charter is tailor made to suit the guests' wishes and life is all about you onboard Necker Belle. Our extra special Virgin touches and the friendliness of the crew allow you to relax in the surrounds of a floating home.

EACH OF YOUR PROPERTIES SEEMS TO HAVE PERSONAL CONNOTATIONS AND EMPATHY FOR IT AS A FAMILY RETREAT. DO THESE PRESENT DIFFICULTIES WHEN YOU TURN IT OVER TO THE BUSINESS?

No not at all, each property within the collection is small and unique which allows our guests to feel like they are in their own home. Our clientele is very loyal and often they will try one property and like it so much that they then visit another; one of the most popular comments we get in our feedback is that they like the atmosphere and intimacy of the properties that allows them to feel right at home.

I wanted Necker Belle to be a yacht that makes you feel like you're in your own private beach house, very comfortable and relaxed – Richard Branson

WHAT PROMPTS YOU WHEN YOU ARE LOOKING AT A NEW PROPERTY? DO YOU FOLLOW AN INSTINCT?

Well they all have to be very different from one another but all of them carry the same brand values with the aim of providing each guest with their own distinctive experience. They have to be the best in the world in their field. The most beautiful island, the best game reserve in Africa and so on. As you know the collection is eclectic, we have Necker Island, an exquisite little jewel in the BVIs, which is where I spend most of my time when I'm not travelling. We also have a private game reserve 'Ulusaba' in South Africa, a mountain retreat 'Kasbah Tamadot' in Morocco, a chalet 'The Lodge' in Switzerland, a villa 'Sa Terra Rotja' in Spain, a restaurant 'Babylon' and a private members club 'The Roof Gardens' in London, 'Necker Belle' our 105ft luxury catamaran and most recently a 3-man aero sub 'Necker Nymph'.

I have a wonderful team at Virgin Limited Edition who instinctively know the right sort of property that would fit in with the rest of the collection. We attract those who value excellent service and tailored experiences; therefore, when choosing a property we need to be sure that the location is just right and that we are bringing forth an experience that is unique to the market place.

WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO BUY AND REFIT NECKER BELLE?

I have always been an avid sailor. Being on Necker Belle provides me with quality time to spend with friends and family away from it all and a chance to visit new destinations.

I wanted Necker Belle to be a yacht that makes you feel like you're in your own private beach house, very comfortable and somewhere guests could feel relaxed about coming out of the water in their wet swimming costumes and not worrying about the furniture. After a two and a half year refit the result was exactly that and the indoor areas are light and airy and offer undisturbed views as she cruises two metres above the water.

WHERE IN THE CARIBBEAN WILL SHE CHARTER? CAN ONE COMBINE A CHARTER WITH A STAY AT NECKER ISLAND?

She is available for weekly charters throughout the year, during the summer months she sails

around the Mediterranean and in the winter she sails around the Caribbean. If guests want to combine the charter with a stay at Necker Island before or after they are very welcome to do so!

SOME OF THE SUPER YACHTS AVAILABLE FOR CHARTER TODAY OFFER SERVICES AND COMFORTS THAT CAN BE COMPARED TO A FIVE OR SEVEN STAR HOTEL. WHAT MAKES NECKER BELLE SPECIAL?

Necker Belle is not your average catamaran. In fact, she is one of the largest all-carbon multi hull yachts in the world, reaching speeds of over 20 knots. In addition to her speed, the interior is luxuriously spacious (14 metres wide) so you feel like you're in your own private beach house. Our guests are our number one priority and we will always continue to strive to offer an experience that is unique to them and the market place, be it on land or water!

YOU SOUND EXCITED ABOUT THE SUBMARINE HOUSED ON THE NECKER BELLE. ISN'T THAT A PRETTY DANGEROUS GADGET FOR A GUEST TO USE?

Necker Nymph is fantastic and she's very safe. She's been tested to the highest possible safety standard, has generous back-up supplies of oxygen and is positively buoyant so she naturally stays afloat. She also carries flares and a radio.

A trained pilot always operates her so two guests can go down at any one time. She's particularly popular with the boys as she's a bit like a fighter plane underwater!

HOW INVOLVED IS YOUR FAMILY, ESPECIALLY YOUR CHILDREN, IN THE CHARTER BUSINESS? DO YOU SEE A ROLE FOR THEM IN THE RUNNING OF THE COMPANY?

They all like to sail but they're not involved in the charter business as such, merely as guests onboard Necker Belle and at all of our other properties.

ANY PLANS TO DEVELOP A RESORT IN THIS REGION?

We're always looking to expand the collection where we can whether it be a new property or a management contract but at the moment we don't have any immediate plans to develop a resort in the Middle East.



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08 The main helm features two unique armchairs for skipper and navigator who have the use of a comprehensive electronics package.

09 To provide an unsurpassed culinary experience a cordon bleu chef dishes up delicious meals for up to 30 guests, working from a full commercial galley.

10 The inviting apartment style saloon decorated with tasteful appointments and comfortable seating. A buffet table on the side houses crockery and cutlery.