

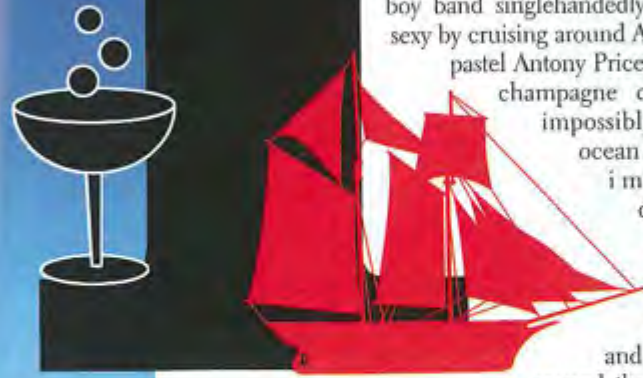
Lapping up luxury

In austere times, prestige brands bestow pleasure, maintain their premium and take the long view ... which includes living life to the full and drinking the best champagne

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● When it comes to chasing extreme experiences – like gourmet lunch in remarkable locations like this one – Mumm's the word.



It's 9 o'clock in the morning and I'm having a Duran Duran moment. Which would be fine, perhaps, if this was 9 o'clock in the morning sometime in May 1982, when Simon Le Bon and his boy band singlehandedly made sailing sexy by cruising around Antigua in their pastel Antony Price suits, popping champagne corks into an impossibly turquoise ocean and chasing implausibly dressed models for their lavish Rio video clip. But this isn't the 1980s and we are sailing around the Great Barrier

Reef, not the Caribbean, and I'm a mother of two smothered in sunscreen, not a London model slick with body paint whose name, we were meant to assume, was Rio. Plus I'm not entirely sure it is politically correct to pop a champagne cork into the ocean. I mean, couldn't a dolphin choke on one and die?

Pop! There goes another one, plopping gently into the Pacific. Followed by another. And another. And then, as plumes of Mumm champagne bubbles glitter and spin in the morning sun, the singing begins. And not, thankfully, to reprise a 1980s chartbuster. "*Allons enfants de la Patrie/ Le jour de gloire est arrive!*" The French national anthem rings out across the gleaming deck of a South African-owned boat beneath a perfect Australian sky. For this is Bastille Day 2009 and we don't need a bunch of louche British lads to teach us what indulgence is all about.

Instead, our ebullient, cork-popping hosts are from France, a nation that surely must take credit for teaching the world about extravagance – had we Anglo-Saxons been any good at it ourselves, we would not have had to purloin the phrase *joie de vivre*, would we? – and, specifically, from one of that country's oldest and most successful champagne houses, G.H. Mumm. And they are intent, bless their Gallic deck shoes, upon sharing that company's longstanding philosophy that "real luxury" is all about pursuing "real, authentic and unique experiences that money cannot buy".

"The audacity of facing nature head on, the courage and passion of these exceptional men and women, the desire to push back the limits of our daily lives: that is real luxury today." So says the *Book of Mumm*, a little black volume given to each guest on arrival the previous day at Double Island, an exclusive enclave off Cairns where demands on one's audacity are limited to navigating the way back to one's private bungalow after the fifth or sixth champagne at dinner.

But now, the real adventure has begun. We are aboard the remarkable 35m-ketch Pangaea, custom-built by eco-adventurer Mike Horn, and heading under full sail to Undine Cay, a remote 100m x 10m sandbank off the coast of Cape Tribulation, where Mumm has flown in Michelin-starred, Italo-Argentinian

chef Mauro Colagreco, to create and serve a five-course gourmet lunch for 20.

True to its philosophy, this Mumm Explorer Experience – the third in a series of seven the champagne house intends to convene in some of the most pristine and remarkable locations on Earth – promises both luxury and audacity. But, in the maw of the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, is it appropriate?

"IT took me two years to appreciate that it wasn't just a complete load of bollocks," Mark Ritson admits cheerily, when I confess later to being somewhat taken aback by Mumm's extravagant hospitality on the high seas. But Ritson, who is an associate professor at the Melbourne Business School and has taught MBA courses in brand and marketing management at top business schools on three continents, assures me this is fairly typical for the world's top champagne houses. And he should know. After nine years serving as a consultant to one of the world's largest and most successful luxury stables – which, in keeping with conventional *luxe mystique*, cannot be named – what Ritson doesn't know about high-end marketing can probably be written on the stiletto heel of a Christian Louboutin shoe.

"What I realised is there is a logic to it," Ritson continues. "In luxury, we talk a lot about 'the dream': something magical or special that exists at the heart of the brand. Mumm is famous because it has at the heart of its *raison* that you can have a sense of style but at the same time you are chasing the extreme experience. The dream for Mumm is this idea of exploration. It's magical stuff and it works.

"Remember that Mumm has been around for almost two centuries. And like any of the truly great luxury houses – most of which have been around for more than a century and have seen these things before – they are responding now to a global turndown by standing their ground, investing heavily in their product and saying 'this is what we stand for'."

He acknowledges the strategy – spending more, and conspicuously so, when the rest of the world is forecast to spend less – may seem misguided. Indeed, "if you believe in price elasticities, rational consumption and a worldwide recession, [it] is certifiable," Ritson wrote in a recent column. "But if you understand the dream of luxury, it makes sense. Great stars shine brightest when the sky is darkest. In austere times, true luxury brands bestow pleasure, maintain their premium and take a long view."

Global crises aside, any lingering discomfort I may have about such extravagance is, Ritson tells me, less about economics and more about genetics. Anglo-Saxons are simply not as good with luxury as their Latin counterparts. "The top 10 most valuable luxury brands are all run by Latins," he says. "The reason? Latins are much more happy with creativity, exclusivity, being non-democratic. That's why the Americans don't do luxury well. They believe in the dream that anyone can be successful and enjoy that lifestyle. But the French are less comfortable

with such a loss of exclusivity. The message the champagne houses like to send, for example, is that it will take you time to learn what they're about. You have to earn the right [to be part of the club] and this takes time."

FORTUNATELY, the one thing guests have in abundance on board the Pangaea, as she cruises north beneath a cloudless sky, is time. Indeed, one of the first things I learn about sailing aboard this beautiful vessel is that the pleasure is less about hooning about a la Duran Duran, having air saxophone competitions on deck and straddling overtly phallic booms, and more about the simple luxury of allowing the minutes and hours to slip away.

A great deal of sailing, it seems, cannot be rushed. At least, it feels that way when you have a seven-strong crew of strapping young men to do all the frantic tacking and trimming, grinding and unwinding that is involved in catching the wind. Or anchoring, for that matter. After about 40 minutes of manoeuvring over a mosaic of reef – colours kaleidoscope-clear, even in six metres of water – I glance around at the dozen other European and Asian journalists aboard, all waiting for the crew to find a safe place to drop anchor before we can disembark to swim, snorkel or scuba dive. Without exception, they are lolling from rigging or perched with feet hanging from the deck, faraway looks in their eyes. You won't ever see that reaction from a group of reporters stuck in a traffic jam on land.

Perhaps this was the allure – the mesmerising, almost mystical rhythms of life at sea – that tempted so many of the young Pangaea crew away from promising careers, high-flying university studies and, in some cases, even wives and families, in countries as diverse as South Africa, Poland, Switzerland and New Zealand, to join Horn's global odyssey. More likely, though, it was Horn, a charismatic 43-year-old who personifies the adjective "swashbuckling" at a time when you are otherwise only likely to encounter it in children's books. And certainly, Horn has been living a boy's own adventure for most of his adult life.

From the early 1990s, when the young human movement science graduate descended the Mont Blanc glacier on a body board, finishing on the French Riviera, Horn has built a career around what he calls "outlandish challenges", more recently to draw attention to environmental issues. In 1997, he decided he'd traverse the South American continent on his own, first climbing up from the Pacific coast to scale Mt Mismi, the source of the Amazon, then swimming down that great and dangerous river with the help of a hydrospeed, before diving into the Atlantic Ocean six months later. His next expedition was Latitude Zero, a bold, 18-month circumvolution of the globe around the equator, without motorised transport: he travelled by foot, bicycle, canoe, hydrospeed and trimaran.

A solo, unmotorised circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle was completed in 2004 and then, in 2006, Horn and Norwegian explorer

● Swashbuckling adventurer Mike Horn at Undine Cay: "Real luxury is about living a real life, an authentic life."



Borge Ousland became the first men to trek without dogs or motorised transport to the North Pole in the permanent darkness of the Arctic winter.

So, when the folk at Mumm cast around for a modern-day equivalent of Commander Jean-Baptiste Charcot – the first Frenchman to cross the Antarctic, who celebrated Bastille Day 1904 by laying a table on the ice and uncorking a bottle of G.H. Mumm Cordon Rouge – the partnership with Horn appeared to be a match made in some sort of extreme-sports heaven.

Horn's latest expedition – sailing to each continent to "celebrate the Earth's beauty", while promoting sustainable development and running his Young Explorers program for 13 to 20-year-olds – would be an ideal vehicle for Mumm's own vision to host "a gastronomic adventure" by taking guests into the wild to be entertained by some of the world's best chefs.

Horn is characteristically blunt about the association. "I'm not interested in whether or not they sell more champagne," he says, sitting at the 16-seat round table of the Pangaea's high-tech conference room. "But the philosophy appealed to me. I loved the idea of climbing a mountain and celebrating that achievement with a bottle of Mumm. Today, real luxury is about living a real life, an authentic life, and challenging yourself in that life. It is the freedom of making your dreams come true, whether they are big or small, so that they become daily victories. The impossible only exists until we find a way of making it possible."

Adds Yann Soenen, Mumm's regional director in the Asia-Pacific: "We believe that you can enjoy luxury, but you can enjoy it with a consciousness, with knowledge and appreciation of craftsmanship, skill and ability."

That a luxury brand should embrace such a passionately green venture in an era when Copenhagen is rapidly becoming more famous for "cap-and-trade" than for Hans Christian Andersen might strike a cynic as a tad too convenient. But Ritson says there is nothing new about prestige houses being environmentally friendly. "One of the myths of luxury is that it's just a materialistic thing," says Ritson. "But if you look at how these companies have managed

their markets over time, you realise they have always been all about sustainability, because they take a long-term view. Look at how the vineyards of Champagne have been lovingly managed for centuries.

"And there's never been a slave-labour scandal from one of the luxury houses, because these are never companies that are going to employ cheap labour in China or India. They are all about using artisans who have pursued their craft in the same way for generations, normally based in Europe."

Marketing theories aside, it's remarkable what a few glasses of good champagne before noon can do to relieve one's natural cynicism. Not to mention one's Anglo-Saxon reticence about indulgence. But by the time the Pangaea drops anchor a few hundred metres from Undine Cay, I am determined to swim to shore. Not only does the spectacular reef surrounding us demand closer inspection, I am also keen to re-acquaint myself with a liquid in which the only bubbles emanate from the mouths of fishes.

But the French will have none of it. As multi-hued reef fish flit past looking like they are on their way to Mardi Gras, and the neon coral gives way to crunchy sand a few metres off Undine Cay, two young waiters in brilliant red Mumm shorts wade obligingly into the waist-deep water, bearing yet more flutes of champagne. Well, I could hardly say no after they got their shorts wet, could I?

Meanwhile, onshore in a small red tent at the centre of this tiny sand atoll, Mauro Colagreco is fighting his own battles. The 33-year-old chef, who in 2006 earned his first Michelin star within a year of opening his restaurant Mirazur, overlooking the Cote d'Azur, says he did not hesitate when Mumm invited him to follow in the esteemed footsteps of Michelin two-star chef Sylvestre Wahid, who prepared dinner on an iceberg drifting in the Sermilik Fjord in Greenland, for the first Mumm Explorer Experience, and three-star chef Gerard Boyer, who prepared a repast at the same spot where Commander Charcot opened that bottle of Mumm in 1904.

"I love putting myself in challenging

situations and this was just a great opportunity for me to push my own personal boundaries," Colagreco says, with the help of an interpreter. "I decided to take part in this adventure because I am fond of Mumm champagne and I totally agree with their philosophy, that real luxury is not what you buy, but what you do."

"Enjoying a spectacular natural landscape in one of the most beautiful places on the planet, drinking Mumm champagne with a menu comprising the freshest and finest ingredients available and cooked for you ... That is luxury!"

"So I was extremely excited after I said yes, but then I thought: 'Oh God, what have I gotten myself into?' I was quite worried about creating the menu where I had to use local produce especially as I had never been to Australia before. I was worried about the portable kitchen equipment, where to do the *mis en place*, the whole kitchen organisation at the sand bank with no running water..."

Renowned for his creative use of more than 250 local herbs and flowers that grow around his restaurant in the old French town of Menton, Colagreco was determined to source similarly unusual Australian ingredients for the five-course lunch he would serve us. Trawling the Cairns markets, he fell in love with a range of tropical and bush foods, particularly finger limes, which he has since incorporated on the Mirazur menu. But arriving by helicopter on the island on Bastille Day morning, he quickly realised the greatest challenge would be to keep the produce for a seafood menu refrigerated from 7.30am until the end of a long lunch. "Having only two prep tables for plating up and what to do with the dirty glasses when you have no water was also tough," he adds. "Ah! Not to forget that the space around us was very tight and the only oven we had decided to not work."

The folk at Mumm liken the chef's challenge to a rock star's acoustic set. "Here, he is alone with his stove and delivering what musicians would call an unplugged live performance," Soenen says. "There are no special effects. Just unspoiled landscapes ... the gastronomic challenge is to celebrate the original purity that these spots have kept untouched."

Fleeting, I wonder whether all French people speak like this normally or whether it's all about the translation. Or the champagne. But then lunch is served. Forget unplugged rock performances; Colagreco has created a veritable symphony of brilliant flavours, sourced from the sea around us and plucked from the wild ridges beyond, and highlighted in dishes like grilled abalone with sesame sauce and bush tomato compote; individual shots of eschallot cream, granny smith apples and seaweed foam; and wild barramundi with paw-paw, green mango and citrus sauce. All accompanied, of course, by the finest Mumm vintages.

As lunch draws to a close with another spirited chorus of *La Marseillaise*, Colagreco and Horn gallop into the sea to attempt to pop the cork on yet another bottle, this time underwater, for the benefit of Pangaea's resident photographer and dive master, Dmitri Sharomov. Is this another demonstration of audacity? Or extravagance? Or just plain high jinks?

I decide it doesn't matter. The sun is shining, the champagne is flowing, the Pangaea and the open sea awaits. On Bastille Day, at least, it would seem churlish not to acknowledge that the French have the right idea about luxury. *Vive la revolution!*

