

ON BOARD WITH

Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza



With the sea and arts coursing through her veins, it comes as no surprise that Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza is dedicated to heritage, travel and conservation. *Tristan Rutherford* explores an extraordinary life of adventure



Francesca Thyssen-Bornemisza was born to be an art collector and ocean activist. Her father, Baron Hans Heinrich, owned one of the world's finest collections of art – his trove of treasures was surpassed only by Queen Elizabeth II, and Thyssen-Bornemisza recalls touring the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg in 1982, viewing Matisse and van Goghs in candlelit basements as her father negotiated an exhibition. He also kept a yacht in Monaco's Port Hercules, so it comes as no surprise that Thyssen-Bornemisza followed suit in both respects once she reached adulthood.

Her own yachting odyssey began in Venice. "You probably know Johnny Pigozzi?" she asks at the start of our conversation, referring to the madcap collector of African and Japanese art. "He's quite a legend. Anyway, he sailed *Amazon*

Express to the Biennale." This steel trawler was converted into a 67-metre expedition yacht in the Arsenal di Venezia, then redesigned by a young Espen Øino.

"Johnny said: 'The whole point of having a boat is to take it to the far ends of the world. And where you want to go is Greenland.'" Thyssen-Bornemisza took a long lease on *Dardanella*, a 37-metre Vitters explorer she found "lingering neglected in a harbour in Barcelona" which she still rents on a long-term basis for her research projects. The vessel had form, as it had already circumnavigated the globe. "So I asked my captain, 'Could we go to Greenland with her?' He looked at me in horror and replied: 'Erm, we could start with the Scottish Isles.'"

It's where she is when I speak to her, and Thyssen-Bornemisza is hosting our video call

PHOTOGRAPHY: JOSE ALEJANDRO ALVAREZ; JUAN OLIPHANT; WOLFGANG KUNZ/UNITED ARCHIVES VIA GETTY IMAGES; PABLO CIADRA/GETTY IMAGES; EARL GIBSON III/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF THE DARDANELLA CREW



Dardanella travelled to Cocos Island, Costa Rica, to bury a treasure chest designed by the contemporary architects Aranda/Lasch. Right: kindred spirit Jean Pigozzi



from a rugged yellow RIB near Scotland's Isle of Mull. The reception fades as she navigates over kelp forests to track a basking shark she spotted an hour earlier. Covid-19 has led a number of superyacht owners to find sanctuary in Scottish waters, where grey seals and dahlia anemones guard some spectacular wrecks.

However for Thyssen-Bornemisza, like Viking explorers of old, Scotland was merely a stepping stone. "During our 2011 Scotland cruise we found another captain who knew the waters of Iceland and Greenland really well," she explains. *Dardanella* circumnavigated the island's volcanic coastline with her new hire at the helm. "He was not overly excited when we asked to join the Atlantic crossing between Iceland and Greenland, because crews generally don't like carrying passengers [during potentially rough voyages]."

"At the last minute I begged to sail with the crew," laughs Thyssen-Bornemisza. She admits the sea got rougher and rougher as *Dardanella* neared Greenland. "Icelandic fishermen had told us horror stories about 12-metre waves out there and it was true. Then a huge sea egg, a 25-kilometre sheet of rock ice, broke off. They are extremely dangerous floating islands and they believe it's one of these that sank the *Titanic*." Her yacht had to circle deep into Baffin Bay to arrive at an iced-up Ilulissat harbour. (Clue: the port's name translates as "Icebergs" in Greenlandic.) Furthermore, her three children were flying in and there wasn't a local hotel room to be had.

Fortunately another explorer yacht sailed into Ilulissat. "It was *Akula* [a 59-metre ex-Dutch navy vessel, transformed into an expedition boat by



Vosper Thornycroft]. It boasted a small helicopter on its bow. So I sent her a note, from one explorer to another, asking to borrow it to rescue the children. And guess who was waiting on board? Johnny Pigozzi. He had made the same passionate Greenland speech to an English guy and Johnny had come along for the ride. What are the chances? Anyway that's how I fell for adventure yachting in a big way."

A second epiphany occurred while drifting in a tender off the Dominican Republic. "The sound artists Jana Winderen and Chris Watson [who worked on David Attenborough's *Blue Planet* series] handed me a pair of hydrophones. I just drifted into a Zen moment listening to humpback whales singing." (*Dardanella* would later be refitted with an ambisonic 360° onboard



Spotting whale sharks on an expedition in Fiji in 2014. Left: Francesca with her father, Baron Hans Heinrich

studio by Tony Myatt, the head of Music and Media at the University of Surrey in the UK.) "However I was brutally shaken out of it by the engines of illegal fishing boats poaching unbelievable amounts of stock from this marine reserve. It was so sad."

Thyssen-Bornemisza decided to take action, co-founding the Alligator Head Foundation in Jamaica, which protects fish stocks by restoring habitats and regenerating local economies. It's now the island's largest privately backed marine sanctuary. "Our underwater recordings highlighted nature in a way we have only been





Left: sunset in Milne Bay. Below: a catamaran races next to Dardanella in the Louisiade Islands, Papua New Guinea. Bottom: at the Crocodile Festival in Ambunti, August 2018



Clockwise from top left: Thyssen-Bornemisza, accompanied by her family, receives the Austrian Order of Merit in 2009; cruising the Lau Islands, Fiji, and Milne Bay, Papua New Guinea; diving in the Solomon Islands and Raja Ampat



visually connected to," she says. "So I asked myself: How can I better communicate the way the ocean is being abused by using the network I have in arts and culture?"

It's quite a network. In 1993 Thyssen-Bornemisza married Karl von Habsburg, head of the House of Habsburg-Lorraine, which once ruled much of central Europe. After a decade-long career as an actress, singer and model, she dedicated herself to art collecting and pioneering exhibitions - one of which entailed a floating barge of talking television sets by Turkish visual artist Kutluğ Ataman, which sailed up the Danube from Romania to Vienna. In 2002 she set up TBA21, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary foundation, in Vienna's Museum Quarter, an ironic location given that the von Habsburg family had been barred from the city since losing power in 1918.

As *Dardanella* sailed through the Panama Canal, a more sophisticated conservation programme began to take shape. "We completely focused on inviting aboard established artists, indigenous leaders, lawyers and marine biologists," Thyssen-Bornemisza says. It was christened TBA21-Academy, an offshoot of her Vienna-based foundation. The plan was to cruise remote Pacific regions of interest, among them the Marovo Lagoon (the largest saltwater lagoon in the world) and the 10-kilometre-deep Tonga Trench ("it's like flying a boat on top of Mount Everest"). Then these advocates "could find a common language to articulate environmental topics, such as campaigning for quieter oceans, which has become my cross to bear."

In 2015, TBA21-Academy discovered an aquatic first in the Solomon Islands. *Dardanella* was carrying *National Geographic* explorer and marine biologist David Gruber, who noticed a "bright red and green spaceship" approaching during a night dive. A tribal chief had warned of saltwater crocodiles in the Solomon depths. But this reptile was a biofluorescent hawksbill turtle. The technicolor footage set the *National Geographic* website ablaze.

When asked about her preferred destination, Thyssen-Bornemisza is unwavering. "Definitely Papua New Guinea. We've been there four times." The explorer yacht boasts "extremely large water tanks and a purification system enabling guests to voyage far up the Sepik River." This 1,000-kilometre waterway snakes through verdant rainforest and crocodile-infested narrows towards Ambunti, a once-in-a-lifetime location for festivities. "The Crocodile Festival there is indescribable," she explains. "Fire dances, sacred spirit performances, it just never stops. Like so many Pacific nations, their traditions suffered enormously under colonisation. Now we're seeing a cultural renaissance, from tattoos to language and dance."

Some cultural highlights couldn't be planned. "*Dardanella's* guests were invited to a ceremony where local shamans and chiefs were reconsecrating a longhouse," Thyssen-Bornemisza recalls. "In the 1960s Michael Rockefeller bought the original longhouse for his collection. It now resides in the Museum of Modern Art in New York." The young Rockefeller was killed, purportedly by Papuan headhunters, during a second art-gathering trip in 1961.

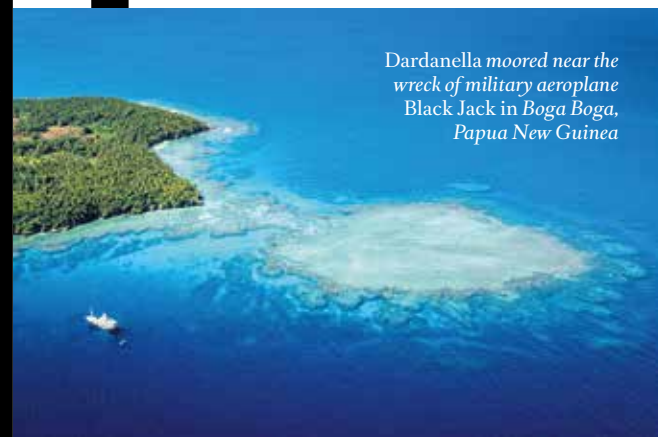
Papua New Guinea is far safer today, which is fortunate as *Dardanella* recently gained her charter licence. "There's no reason why the chance to explore truly remote regions should be exclusive to us," says Thyssen-Bornemisza. "After ten years in the Pacific the crew have developed an irreplaceable know-how. We can propose fantastic guides we've met along the way." These include one of the few people who has been bitten - twice - by a bull shark and who ranks among the world's most experienced shark divers.

"We're also known in the industry for having an amazing crew," continues Thyssen-Bornemisza. These staff members sport low-key T-shirts and leather bracelets, a far cry from formal charter whites. The yacht's Scottish-Japanese wellness practitioner, for example, lived in the Himalayas, decamped to a Japanese Zen temple, and now presides over the onboard yoga programme. ARTnews called *Dardanella*: "a ship unusually suited for both rigorous scientific research and multi-course meals with fine wines to match". Three tenders can sail multiple missions at once, in support of art, conservation or out-and-out leisure.

"Not everybody wants mad adventures," says Thyssen-Bornemisza. "Doing a lot of diving works well with morning Pilates and evening massages. The yacht offers a complete experience." Headline destinations include Maupiti near Bora Bora, which hosts an "underwater garden" of sea life, and Tetepare, the largest uninhabited island in the



PHOTOGRAPHY: KARL SCHOENDOERFER/SHUTTERSTOCK; COURTESY OF THE DARDANELLA CREW; IMAGE COURTESY OF FRANCESCA THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA



Dardanella moored near the wreck of military aeroplane Black Jack in Boga Boga, Papua New Guinea





LOPUD-1483, Thyssen-Bornemisza's luxury conservation project in Croatia. Left: exploring the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia, in 2017

South Pacific, where reefs support the world's second-highest levels of fish and coral biodiversity, after Raja Ampat in Indonesia.

Thyssen-Bornemisza's latest project also involves conservation in another guise. She is creative director of LOPUD-1483, a 15th century heritage property with accommodation and an art collection on a car-free Croatian island. Like her other adventures, the backstory of this 2020 opening is utterly compelling.

"In the early 1990s I wanted to document what was going on in Vukovar," explains Thyssen-Bornemisza, citing a conflict zone where thousands of pieces of art were reportedly looted. "Travelling [in the former Yugoslavia] was no easy feat. Croatia was scrambling to organise its own cultural ministry and was accepting any kind of support offered. The government gave me a mandate to document and protect their heritage." After the Siege of Dubrovnik in 1991 ended, she initiated a conservation studio inside the city's Franciscan monastery. "From there we helped restore the paintings with experts from the Getty Museum and Uffizi Gallery that are now exhibited in the Dominican monastery [a stunning backdrop used in the *Game of Thrones* TV series]."

A local friar, Father Pio Mario, knew of another Franciscan monastery in a far more parlous state. In 1994 Thyssen-Bornemisza boarded a boat with her friend, the architect Frank Gehry. The long chug from Dubrovnik to Lopud (a 30-minute RIB ride today) passed lonely lighthouses, unnamed islets and sandy coves only accessible by sea. "It looked like nobody had

cared for Lopud's monastery for 100 years," says Thyssen-Bornemisza. "The floors had gone, the roof was missing, but there was a spirit to the place. Gehry advised me to take my time with the project. I did - it took 20 years!"

LOPUD-1483 has five guest rooms cloistered near a medicinal garden dating from 1317. All are decorated with contemporary art from TBA-21. "The collection arrived by ferry in the fishing harbour, although it posed no more difficulty

than transporting art to a city museum". Guests at LOPUD-1483 dine at a 16th-century refectory table once used by Baron Hans Heinrich to entertain guests. Renaissance ceramics are exhibited next to designer furniture by Paola Lenti. "I'm not worried that anything will get damaged. Most items have survived for centuries as it is." The property, with its private swimming cave, yoga studio and world-class chef, can be booked exclusively for €10,000 per night.

Within striking distance is the island of Korcula, the birthplace of Marco Polo, plus the Bay of Kotor, where sea captains would plant exotic trees from their travels, in a park now sited behind Porto Montenegro. "Oceans connect all people of the world," she concludes. "Except possibly the Swiss, like me!" But, like many things in her life, this clearly doesn't apply to Thyssen-Bornemisza. She is a true citizen of the world. ■

QUICKFIRE

Francesca
Thyssen-Bornemisza

CHEF OR CHAUFFEUR?

Chef, by a long shot. But choosing a favourite dish is like choosing a favourite artwork - it's impossible

SPEED OR STYLE?

Style. Either you have it or you don't

FIRST ITEM YOU PACK?

Swimming goggles and reef-friendly sunscreen



HOW MANY WATCHES?

Two. A Garmin dive watch and a customised Bulgari snake watch

FAVOURITE VEHICLE?

Mali Andro (pictured), the restored fishing boat at LOPUD-1483

YOUR IDEA OF LUXURY?

Being able to push one's limits past the comfort zone, but safely



FAVOURITE ISLAND?

Jamaica, where I have a fish protection project - and where the people have more style than anywhere else in the world