



Captain Paulo Guedes and his crew make life fun aboard *Sweet Escape*

Magnetic Personality

The charter program aboard the 130-foot Christensen *Sweet Escape* keeps luring guests back, in large part because the 1993 build has an incredibly talented captain.

ARUNAS CHESONIS WASN'T SERIOUSLY LOOKING TO buy a boat. The CEO of Sweetwater Energy was perfectly content to charter, something he'd been doing with his family for the better part of a decade. He always booked the same older boat. He overlooked the structural pole that jutted through the master's cabin, and the round mattresses in the guest cabins and all the other little things that might drive other charter clients elsewhere. He instead focused on the thing that he said made that boat better than any other: Captain Paulo Guedes.

"It was a smaller boat and an older boat, but he really made everything just phenomenal," Chesonis says. "The level of service, the creativity in coming up with ideas based on our personalities and interests—he was just terrific. He'd set up horseshoes and barbecues on the sand for us and the kids. When they were young, the crew would surprise the kids with water balloon fights. They loved it. One of my son's friends is lactose intolerant, and he hadn't had ice cream in

STORY Kim Kavim

PHOTOS Kim Kavim and Charles Datlen







A complete array of watertoys includes a 27-foot Cape Horn, a 22-foot Novurania, two-passenger Jet Skis, paddleboards, water skis, six diving sets and a compressor for certified divers and all you need for fishing or snorkeling in Caribbean waters

15 years. Paulo's wife, Lizzie Hall, who is the chef, made this boy soy ice cream, a different flavor every day. He was so excited."

The service is what kept Chesonis coming back, and the fourth charter was the charm. The global recession had begun, and Guedes had been doing some thinking. He knew there were a lot of gems-in-the-making on the brokerage market, and he knew they could be had for a great price. He'd asked the owner about moving up to a bigger boat to expand the charter crew and guest options, but he wasn't ready.

"We were talking about this one day on the boat during one of my charters," Chesonis recalls, "and I just asked him, 'Would you consider doing something with me?'"

Two months later, Chesonis was a yacht owner and Guedes was his personal captain. The 130-foot Christensen *Lady Zelda* became his own *Sweet Escape*, and he set about refitting the 1993 build with Guedes' charter ambitions in mind. In 2010, they converted two

cabins so that the twin beds could be arranged as kings, and they removed the bar from the top deck so that it would become a more spacious sunpad area. They sanded the teak to refresh it, and they bought all new exterior cushions.

They continued the work in 2011, adding all new fabrics in the main salon and dining room. They repolished the foyer flooring, added new blinds to jazz up the windows and did a complete repower with brand-new CAT engines, exhaust, steering—the works. They also beefed up the watersports equipment, adding standup paddleboards, new Sea-Doos and a 27-foot Cape Horn tender.

"Now with *Sweet Escape*, Paulo has seven crew members and he has more time to get even more creative," Chesonis says. "Now we do things with the kids like scavenger hunts. The crew gets into costumes and dresses up so we can have theme nights. They are just willing and open to do anything and everything. He and Lizzie really push the level of service as high as possible."

That's the same thing I was thinking as I stood on *Sweet Escape's* aft deck in the British Virgin Islands, dutifully donning a pair of gold MC Hammer pants and dark Ray-Bans well past sundown. I had enjoyed a lovely day of snorkeling, swimming and playing in the sun, then gone down to my cabin to shower and change for dinner. Awaiting me on the bed was this hilarious getup along with an invitation to a costume party on the aft deck. As I made my way back up, I encountered Elvis Presley, Michael Jackson and a good number of Pink Ladies and T-Birds from *Grease*.

All of the guests absolutely loved it—which is exactly what Guedes tries to achieve every moment that clients are on board, just as he does with the owner's family. If guests are keen to participate, then the crew will organize three or four theme nights in a single week.

"I look for crew who are bored sitting still," Guedes told me. "I want crew who are happy doing what we are selling. We try to read the guests and come up with things that they in particular will like. Most of our gratuities are 18 to 20 percent, so we must be doing something right. One guest had so much fun that he tipped us 35 percent, gave us box seats at Yankee Stadium, treated us to dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant and hired a chauffeur to take Lizzie shopping. He said he wanted to give us the best tip we ever received. It was amazing."

The first thing that many guests compliment in their evaluations of *Sweet Escape* is actually the food, Guedes says. That makes him proud, not only because Hall is his wife, but because she is also self-taught. Some clients see her résumé and instead choose charter yachts with



ABOVE: Guests can tee off the transom for a round of water golf (with biodegradable balls); the cuisine from Chef Lizzie Hall is one of the highlights, along with the crew's hospitality

BELOW: A 2011 refit of the 130-foot Christensen expanded the sunpad area and replaced the teak around the Jacuzzi



ABOVE: Guests can opt for a little speed aboard the tenders or Jet Skis, but there are also options for those who prefer a more relaxed pace

chefs who have trained at Le Cordon Bleu or the Culinary Institute of America, but the ones who book *Sweet Escape*, he says, are always wildly surprised with the quality and presentation of each meal.

I can personally attest to Hall's expertise in the galley based on the meals she prepared during my charter. Hall has a wide repertoire and a real flair for plating. Her food, along with the outstanding service led by chief stewardess Shannon Bridgeman, made me feel as though I were aboard a much larger and higher-priced motoryacht. Some of my favorites from the week included tuna tartare with mango and seaweed salad, braised lamb shank with truffle polenta and pork tenderloin with bourbon ancho chile sauce.

"The food is so important," Guedes says. "It gets the charter started right and keeps making it better every day. You can have a horrible day of travel to the boat and then a great dinner in a nice anchorage, and all about 'real life' is forgotten."

It was actually Hall who got Guedes into charter in the first place. He grew up on Australia's Great Barrier Reef with a commercial fisherman for a father, and he started diving commercially right out of high school. He skipped college altogether to become a licensed captain, and he had his ticket in hand when the couple started

dating and went to Europe for a long wander. They made it to the South of France, ran out of money like so many twentysomethings do, and found work in deckhand and stewardess jobs.

They had no idea that just eight years later they would be where they are today, with a reputation for offering one of the best-value charter programs in the entire industry.

"So much of the charter experience is how the crew treats you and how you feel," Chesonis says. "It's not just where you go and what you do. I wish there could be a crew rating system somewhere, like movie reviews. Then you could know things like the fact that Paulo started out as a lobster fisherman. He'll still go out today and spear a bunch of great lobster for us as an appetizer. He still does things that a lot of captains won't do. You'll see him washing down the deck, pitching in wherever, and splitting the tips equally among all crew members including himself. He's just a commonsense, balanced person. He sets a great tone for our whole charter program." ■

Sweet Escape is part of the Churchill Yacht Partners charter fleet. For more information, visit yachtsweetescape.com

Christensen *Sweet Escape*

LOA: 130ft. (39.62m)
BEAM: 26ft. 7in. (8.10m)
DRAFT: 6ft. 11in. (2.11m)
HULL MATERIAL: GRP
ENGINES: 2 x C32 Caterpillars
 1,650 hp
GENERATORS:
 2 x John Deere 75kW 2011
SPEED (MAX.): 17 knots

SPEED (CRUISING): 13 knots
STABILIZERS: Naiad
NUMBER OF STATEROOMS:
 5 (3 king, 2 convertible twin-to-king)
TOTAL CREW: 7
TOTAL GUESTS: 10
TENDERS:
 27ft. Cape Horn towed tender with
 twin 250 hp; 22ft. Novurania tender
 with single 225-hp Yamaha

BUILDER: Christensen
YEAR BUILT/REFIT: 1993/2011
CHARTER RATE:
 Summer rate from \$85,000 per
 week, plus all expenses; from
 \$90,000 in winter. Destinations
 include Caribbean, Bahamas and
 New England
CHARTER MANAGEMENT: Churchill
 Yacht Partners: churchillyachts.com

*Original dimensions are provided in the metric system