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Down to the Sea in Style

Recession Shrinks but Can't Stop Yacht Show at National Harbor

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He wouldn't say whether he was buying or just window-shopping. He wouldn't even give his name.

But the dapper Canadian gentleman, decked out Friday in a blue polo shirt and khaki pants, walked along the rain-soaked ramp off the marina at National Harbor like a man who knew what he wanted and was ready to get it.

He had flown from Vancouver the night before to look at the luxurious vessels that made the slips on the Potomac River home last weekend for the second annual Yacht Show at the National Harbor.

Organizers said the sluggish economy and gloomy weather report dampened attendance. Still, thousands spent part of their weekend walking along the pier at the sprawling waterfront development to visit exhibition booths selling handmade cigars, hot tubs and Porsches.

"I absolutely love boat shows," said the Canadian man, a retiree and avid boater. "This is a smaller one in comparison to most. Still, I'm enjoying this area. It is very beautiful."

The event drew 51 yachts, including the queen of the show, an Italian-made 85-foot Azimut from Florida. Twenty smaller boats were exhibited from trailers.

"If the economy was in good shape, we would probably have 30 to 50 percent more boats and 50 percent more land exhibits," said Ed Hartman, president of United States Yacht Shows.

Unlike last year, the organizers attracted some exhibitors with smaller boats, such as catamarans and kayaks. Show attendees could ride in the smaller boats and take tours of the larger ones.

The Miss Ann was one of the larger vessels that bobbed gently in the waters by a white canopy tent as exhibitors and attendees milled about, munching on gazpacho, pita bread topped with a creamy hummus and olive combination and bruschetta. Built in the 1920s, the Miss Ann was the oldest vessel in the show.

Guy Schroff, who bought the classic charter boat with his brother last year, said bringing it to National Harbor's yacht show was a chance to make his business known in the region.

"This is the market we expect to be our customer," he said.

One of the smaller boats on display was the AERE' 3.7 Inflatable Catamaran, a sailboat that folds up into three bags that could fit into a car trunk.

"It's a fun boat, but it's a substantial boat," said Dan Kunz of Coral Springs, Fla., noting the \$5,499 list price. "It's not a toy."

Kunz said National Harbor, a waterfront community with condominiums, was the perfect location to market the new catamaran.

"People are interested in sailing here, but they might be people with no boat storage," he said. Hartman said that as with houses and cars, this is a buyers' market for yachts and boats.

"If you have decent credit, financing is still available," he said. "If anybody wants to buy a boat, now is the time to do it. They have a backlog of inventory, just like the automobile dealers."