



The \$50 million mega-yacht Ronin sat in a Travelift at the Marine Group Boat Works in Chula Vista. *Nadia Borowski Scott / Union-Tribune photos*

# The heavy lifting

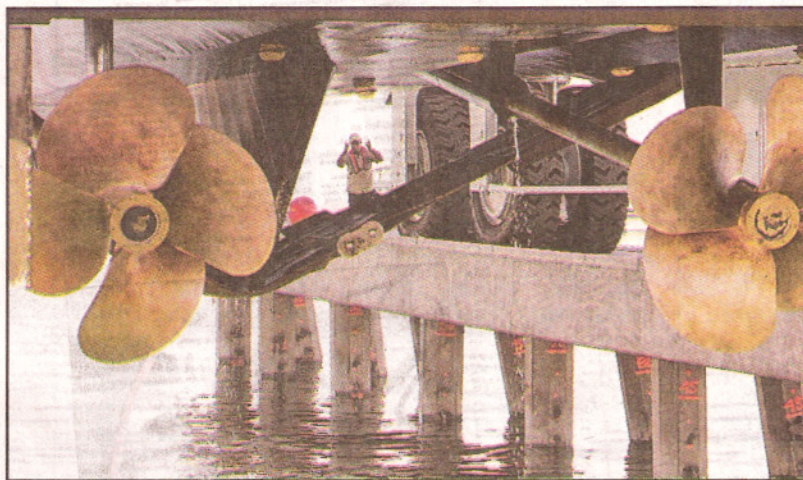
Facility gets gear to be port of call for mega-yacht fixes

By David Washburn  
STAFF WRITER

Mario Olivarez stood in the shadow of billionaire Larry Ellison's \$50 million super-yacht Ronin, ready to make history.

Strapped to his chest was a tackle box-sized contraption with a dozen switches and a small computer screen. Nearby in a slip at Chula Vista's Marine Group Boat Works, the yacht was secured — via three 90-foot-long straps — to one of the largest travel lifts in the world.

Olivarez looked up, got the "go" sign and flipped a few switches. Slowly, the straps tightened around the 384-ton boat and began to lift it out of the water. After the hull had cleared the edge of the slip, the Marine Travelift, with its four pairs of 9-foot-tall wheels, rolled the boat



A worker directed the movement of the company's new Travelift as it raised the 193-foot mega yacht out of a slip.

away.

A couple of hours later, the 192-foot-long yacht was up on blocks in the boat yard, where it will stay for 12 weeks while Marine Group workers give it new paint, a propeller rehab and dozens of other small fixes and improvements.

The maneuver Monday, accomplished at greater speed and less cost than traditional dry-docking, ushered in a new era at the 30-year-old boat yard and put it on par with other yards worldwide that special-



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# Facility vies against yards across the globe

ize in mega-yacht retrofitting.

"Today is a pretty important day," said Marine Group Boat Works vice president Todd Roberts, who supervised the operation. "It is the christening effort of a six-year struggle to revamp our facility."

The company, which until last year was known as the South Bay Boat Yard, spent \$6.5 million on its recent remodel and expansion. In addition to an extensive cleanup of the facility and construction of several buildings, the company spent \$3.2 million on the Travelift — one of two in the United States that can move boats weighing up to 660 tons.

Roberts said business from the new lift could nearly double revenue, which was \$7 million to \$8 million last year. The company leases 9.45 acres ashore and 8.52 acres of water at the foot of G Street from the San Diego Unified Port District.

Last year Marine Group Boat Works serviced 350 boats; about 60 percent were commercial vessels. This year Roberts said the company will likely service fewer boats, but more will be big ones, including 12 to 14 mega-yachts. He added that the company is hiring and will likely double its staff from about 50 employees to 100.

Others in the industry agree that Marine's investment should pay off. More mega-yachts are being built now than in the past five years, and there is a dearth of facilities on the West Coast to service them, said Anthony Utley, president of the West Coast Boat Yard Association, in Victoria, British Columbia.

"This is pretty exciting," Utley said. "There could be a big wave of business coming through the West Coast ports, and I see San Diego as a great place because it is a jumping-off point for Mexico and Central and South America."

Marine Group Boat Works vies for business against boat yards from all over the world, including big yards in Amsterdam, Netherlands; Barcelona, Spain; and Bremen, Germany. Its biggest domestic competitors are in Seattle, Miami and New Orleans.

The San Diego Port District

is in the midst of a study to determine whether San Diego County is a destination for yachts — and so far the answer is yes, Port spokeswoman Irene McCormick said.

"This is the first port you enter when you come up from the south," Jackson said. "And with boats anywhere from 150 to 250 feet long, the repair facilities need to bring in bigger lifts."

The Knight & Carver Yacht Center in National City and Driscoll Boat Works on Shelter Island also work on yachts. But until Monday, the only way to get a boat bigger than 300 tons out of the water in San Diego County was by using one of three floating dry docks.

Roberts said a travel lift is far more efficient than a floating dry dock. A dry dock is more expensive to operate, takes longer to get the boat out of the water and causes more pollution because work has to be done near the water.

In addition to filling the coffer at Marine Group Boat Works, the refitting of mega-yachts has an outsized economic impact on the region, Roberts and tourism industry watchers said.

Annual expenses for a yacht are typically 1 percent to 10 percent of its value, so Ellison, for example, could be spending as much as \$5 million around the world to keep the Ronin afloat each year.

Ellison, co-founder and chief executive of database-software maker Oracle in Redwood City, has rented downtown San Diego apartments for the Ronin's 14-member crew for the three months the boat is to be out of the water.

And the owners of these types of vessels tend to be big spenders on everything from nights out to flowers for the launch back out to sea.

"Everything is on a mammoth scale with these things," Roberts said. "When they [Ronin] gas up to leave, the bill will be \$50,000 — so there will be a lucky fuel vendor."

Super-yachts sailing the San Diego County coast could help the tourism industry, said Sal Giametta of the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"It's not a big enough piece that we would have research on it, but some of these mega-yachts are works of art, and getting close to them is a special experience for a lot of people," he said.

**David Washburn:** (619) 542-4582; david.washburn@uniontrib.com