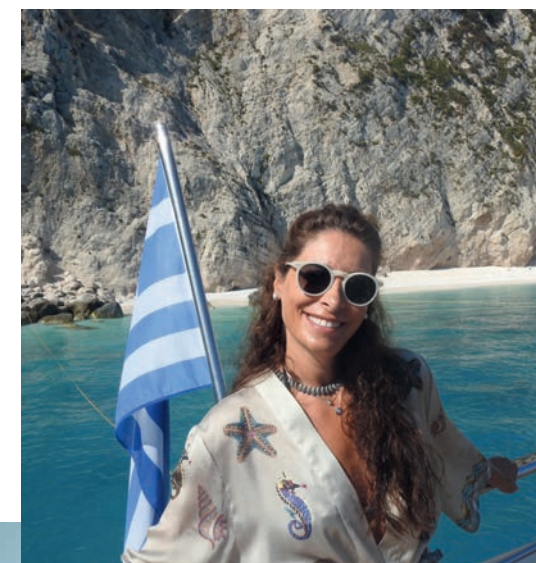




Right: Ioanna Elena Markou. Above: daughter Aimilia and boyfriend Adonis at a taverna they discovered on Donoussa



“She’s this amazing reward – we’re not too young or too old, and we can really appreciate everything that we’ve accomplished”



ON BOARD WITH

Ioanna Elena Markou

The self-made Greek-American tells *Charlotte Hogarth-Jones* how her Sanlorenzo will help usher in the next phase of her life

Many yacht owners paint a colourful picture of their early experiences out on the ocean. For Ioanna Elena Markou, the charismatic new owner of 38.5-metre Sanlorenzo *Naia*, her love affair began not on the water, but on the beaches of Mykonos in the early 1990s.

“Back in the day, we were all girlfriends, borrowing tanning oil, chatting about where people were from while [our boyfriends] were out windsurfing,” the Greek American says. “Then girlfriends became fiancées, fiancées became wives, the next thing we’re all coming out with pregnant bellies and newborns!” she says.

Many, like Markou’s husband, Apostolos, had been visiting the surf spot since childhood. “The men were like these Neanderthals who only knew each other in the water and spoke to each other only when they needed help with gear,” she says. “We’d go every summer, and it became like home,” she smiles fondly, with the glow of someone who has seen many happy years pass. “We created our own little windsurf community.”

As time went on, the windsurfers and wives became friends, spending time together away from the water in the winter months too. Today, while the passion of the sport still endures in

their mid-fifties, children are flying the nest. Markou says acquiring *Naia* (ex-*Bliss Easy*) came at the perfect time. “My husband and I are so grateful, she’s this amazing reward – we’re not too young or too old, and we can appreciate everything that we’ve accomplished.”

Their daughters, 18 and 20, are off to higher education this year – though, given they’ve inherited their father’s love of watersports, they’re sure to capitalise on their parents’ new acquisition. One enjoys the eFoil, wing foil and kitesurfing, while the other has a passion for jet-skiing and fishing. The name *Naia*, meaning water nymph in Greek mythology, also represents the family’s initials – N for Natalia, A for Aimilia, I for Ioanna and A for Apostolos.

Based in Athens, the family had always ended Mykonian holidays with a yacht charter. The experiences “grew slowly as our pockets grew”, explains Markou, from sailing boats to larger sailing yachts, to catamarans. Once they reached the stage of chartering large motor yachts, the discussion around ownership began.

A trip to the Cannes boat show helped steer them in a certain direction. “I remember, we kept stalling and loitering around the Sanlorenzo



Following years of chartering, the Markous bought *Naia* (left) and promptly refitted her

section of the show,” Markou recalls. “We were really drawn to that lean, clean, minimal Italian aesthetic, and when Apostolos and I had dinner and drinks at Hotel Martinez, I said, ‘Well, you know, sweetie, if I ever were to get a yacht, I could definitely do a Sanlorenzo.’ So that was that.”

They initially considered a 32-metre Sanlorenzo in Miami and put in an offer, which was promptly shot down. “It wasn’t meant to be,” she recalls. Holidaying in Tuscany during the 2023 Greek Orthodox Easter, Apostolos flicked through yacht listings online to pass a cold and rainy day stuck at the hotel. A special boat caught their interest, and two days later, Apostolos was

en route to Hong Kong with a makeshift team. He sent photos saying, “Ioanna, it’s really nice.” “Let’s move on it,” she replied.

The couple admired the boat’s aesthetic. “It was love at first sight,” she says, and they were comforted by the story of the yacht’s first owners when it was called *Onyx*: a Swiss-Italian couple in their mid-thirties, “real yachters, they loved life and sailed it internationally; it was nice to have that in the history of the boat,” reminisces Markou. It was a good job they had bought into *Naia* hook, line and sinker, given the path to owning her would be far from straightforward...

The challenges included “some small issues with lawyers and the Chinese owners and some serious issues with bringing it over from Hong Kong”, Markou explains. The cargo carriers reneged on the timing of their contract, “but what can you do?” she poses. “It was terrible, she was supposed to come in mid-June and she ended up arriving in mid-August, when nothing is operating in Greece and mistral winds are



Tristan and Apostolos out on the water toys



Above: daughter Natalia as Naia cruises through the Corinth Canal. Right: girl time on the upper deck

blowing at full force. The bureaucracy and actual feat of trying to get her off [the carrier ship] and having all the right permits and the captain and this and that...it was a logistical nightmare.”

In a way, however, the difficulties were productive, every stumbling block forcing the family to put their purchase under a microscope. “We put everything on the table. We considered issues from all angles - what kind of expenses we’d be looking at, what liabilities we had, when would it be ready, were we really going to use it and for how long?” she recalls. Apostolos and Ioanna had been “talking business since we first met”, so evenings staring at spreadsheets together came naturally. “It’s what we would do, whether we are investing in a business or buying a bicycle,” she smiles.

Once *Naia* was delivered, work could begin – and, as is traditional for many first-time owners, the initial plans of some minor cosmetic tweaks soon snowballed. At first, Markou’s main obsession was with the interior decking. “I hated it,” she laughs. “It must have been beautiful once, but over time the varnish had yellowed. Then we had a bunch of teams come in and they were like, ‘We can’t do anything, we can’t sand it, we’re going to have to tear it apart...’”

Initially, the owners resisted – they wanted to be on the boat in under a year. However, they made it a point to sleep in each cabin “and we started noticing [other] stuff we didn’t like,” she admits. “So it went from doing just the floors

and the suspended ceiling to doing everything.” “Everything” included repainting the exterior, replacing most of the flooring, a total interior and exterior renovation, with new loose and fixed furniture, not to mention a new CCTV system, Dali lighting, impressive audiovisual systems, including mirror TVs, high-fidelity home cinema speakers and external speakers, plus an upgrade to superfast Starlink.

The couple was hands-on throughout the renovations, with Apostolos focusing on the major electrical, electronic, technological upgrades and toys and Ioanna steering on aesthetics and hospitality. Their brokers – Dimitris Kyriazakos of EKKYachts and Michel Chryssicopoulos from IYC – arranged for them to visit some of their clients’ comparable charter boats for inspiration. All Ioanna could think was, “Goodness, I do not want these 50 shades of blue that all Greek owners overuse and too much of that Greek evil eye thing!” Today, *Naia* duly delivers, with striking shades of pillar-box red, crushed raspberry and deep, rich scarlet and

burgundy, offsetting the yacht’s glimmering silver hull and pale wooden teak decking.

Given the Francesco Paszkowski-designed *Naia* had won two World Superyacht Awards back in 2009 – for Best Semi-Displacement Motor Yacht, 30–39 Metres and Best Exterior Styling – the couple notified the builder that they were now the proud owners of one of their most noteworthy craft and were introduced to the style director of Sanlorenzo, Sergio Buttiglieri, who in turn introduced them to Milanese architect Alessia Garibaldi. “The first thing she did was invite us to Viareggio and Milan,” Markou recalls. After that, Garibaldi took the couple on a “whirlwind masterclass of Italian design”, dragging them around “every single major showroom – 14-hour days, every single day”, to help the couple find what they wanted. Garibaldi’s mood board set the stage for the Italian aura, substituting the Greek blue with an elegant beige and aubergine colour palette. Athens-based interior architect Aggeliki



Above: Apostolos getting ready for a morning dive. Below: post refit there's not a bit of blue on board – instead deep reds offer a splash of colour



“We woke up early, my husband and I, opened up those terraces and just jumped off for a morning swim”



IOANNA ELENA MARKOU'S TOP INTERIOR FINDS



KIM SEYBERT

“I bought a lot of our napkin rings from Kim Seybert in the US. I love them – they're like table jewellery.”

KOHRO

“All of the sheets, linens and tablecloths are from Kohro, a brand of the Martinelli Ginello Group. They're beautifully made.”

DEROS GROUP

“They are local to us and represent some major brands like Venini, Georg Jensen, Raynaud and Ercuis. We get all our cutlery and tableware from here.”



SEAX BY DEDON

“We loved these German chairs – they're very lightweight, sleek and minimal – just amazing!”



Makri from AM Design Concept assisted in implementing Garibaldi's concept using local Greek teams, in addition to designing custom features, selecting fabrics, carpeting and lighting, down to sourcing custom bed linen, tableware and cutlery. Meanwhile, Serafeim Papadopoulos of Seara Maritime oversaw the full repaint of the hull and superstructure in addition to all technical upgrades, maintenance and overhauling, as well as the reclassification to ABS and the procurement of water toys.

The whole party was exacting, making for some lengthy meetings, shopping trips and cold days in the docks, but all worked to the same brief. “I envisioned myself and my guests in a damp bathing suit and being able to sit in that Cassina armchair, I wanted to have my iced

coffee and just leave it on the Maxalto console with no worries,” recalls Markou. “I wanted the yacht to be beautiful and iconic, but I also wanted it to have a comfy, relaxed feel.”

And what fun *Naia* must be to live on – as Markou rattles through the many improvements they've made to the yacht, it's hard not to want to step on board and join the party. Take the on-deck bar area, for example. “If we have a cocktail party, we want people to leave their glass on the side and dance around barefoot,” she says. Or there's the never-ending list of new toys including inflatables, Flite efoils, wing foils and kitesurfs, Seabobs and Seadoos, wakesurfs and wakeboards and scuba gear including a Coltri air compressor. Apostolos chose a new Axopar 37 cross chaser (aptly christened *Naia II*) for

“I envisioned myself and guests in damp bathing suits and being able to sit on that Cassina armchair with no worries”



A 40Alloy model by Sanlorenzo, Naia features fold-down terraces in the main-deck master cabin

moving both gear and guests to smaller, under-the-radar coves that *Naia* herself can't get to. And Ioanna even took into consideration “lazy” guests by curating a small library in the master cabin featuring a hand-picked selection of Greek-themed, English-language books on mythology, biographies and other works of literature.

Markou's daydream of being the first on board to pop open the champagne was sadly not to be – once works were complete, it was a group of American charterers who were lucky enough to try out the swish new *Naia*. “To say I was upset is an understatement,” admits Markou, but the family have since managed two stints on board and are clearly making the most of all *Naia* has to offer, intending to keep using the yacht well into the winter months.

“I can't wait until it gets chilly and Apostolos and I can watch Netflix on that sofa,” says Markou, of the cosy Flexform in the saloon. “We could be on the boat in mid-November, having a coffee or going out for a Sunday cruise or having some friends over for dinner in the marina.”



Their itinerary so far has been solely focused on the nearby Greek islands. “I've been complaining to my husband that we've been going to Mykonos for a consecutive 25 years – I am Greek, and I want to see some other islands! There are another 399 of them here!” she laughs.

They've already enjoyed the Argo-Saronic islands like Hydra (“it's like the 21st arrondissement of Paris with so many French people”), Spetses (“our captain knows some wonderful little coves and beaches”), and had a memorable trip to Donoussa. “It's a very alternative island in the southeastern Cyclades where everyone on the beach is nude,” recalls Ioanna. “There's this amazing little gem of a taverna which serves Greek food with a twist – we absolutely love it. Our dream days were when we woke up

early, my husband and I, opened up the terraces and just jumped off for a morning swim.”

Trips to Croatia and Turkey will follow their Greek odyssey, while the family also builds a seaside villa in Ellinikon. “It's a redevelopment of the old airport in southern coastal Athens, which is maybe four times the size of Monaco” Markou says. “It's the largest urban regeneration project in Europe. *Naia* was bite-size, a small hors d'oeuvre in comparison but it was a unique challenge that gave us so much knowledge we will use for building our seaside home.”

Retirement – or at least a version of life that looks a little like that – will be a change of pace for them. “Apostolos and I have been busy working all our lives, we just can't retire, because I don't know what we'd do,” muses Markou. *Naia*, surely, will provide some answers. “Yes,” she agrees, “the best thing one can buy is experiences. That's what *Naia* will offer to us now.” ■