

# “Highlander was the meeting place of the world”



Highlander in New York in 1986. Above: the then Prince Charles on board with New York mayor Ed Koch, Nancy Reagan and Malcolm Forbes



It was the party boat everyone wanted to be on, owned by the man everyone wanted to be friends with. *Daniel Pembrey* talks to the family of Malcolm Forbes and crew about what it was like to receive an invite

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That night I start out of my sleep at 3am when a huge log thunnngs into our hull,” wrote author and political satirist Christopher Buckley in his 12-day travelogue of the Amazon – the cover story for *Condé Nast Traveler’s* inaugural edition in 1987. “I walk forward in the hailstorm of insects and stand awhile as *Highlander’s* searchlight sweeps back and forth across the water. No lights on either shore. The *Virginian* is behind us, slaloming through the logs...”

The Feadship-built *Highlander* belonged to *Forbes* magazine owner Malcolm Forbes, a high-wattage personality famed for his lavish lifestyle and unashamed self-promotion, who filled the yacht with art, threw celebrity parties and used the boat as a power base to schmooze the elite (both avid readers of, and advertisers in, his magazine). He took charge of the *Forbes* family business when his brother Bruce died young of cancer in the mid 1960s and built the namesake magazine into a brand worth billions.

Named in honour of his Scottish roots, *The Highlander* became almost mythical in the 1980s as one of the most sociable boats of its type ever conceived – the designer being Jon Bannenberg. The 1980s New York power elite lapped up invitations to functions aboard when she was docked at Pier 60 in Manhattan, but guests came from further afield: Prince Charles, Mick Jagger, Paul McCartney, Margaret Thatcher, Elizabeth Taylor, Andy Warhol, the Reagans and President and Mrs George H W Bush, to name a few.

Yet it was on the Amazon that she really proved her mettle. The previous (fourth) *Highlander* – which by 1987 was called the *Virginian* – was now in the possession of fellow American media magnate and billionaire John Kluge, a friend of *Forbes’s*, and these two boats were making the Amazon expedition in convoy.

Buckley, who was invited along by *Forbes*, recorded the river narrowing and, at times, *The Highlander* “steering so close to the bank we can peer deep into the jungle. A curious and not unpleasant sensation, doing that while sitting amid a Gainsborough and a Toulouse-Lautrec, air-conditioned and sipping Bloody Marys.”

The jolt of the submerged trees driven into the well-built steel hull woke the rest of the guests, including the ex-king of Bulgaria (aboard *The Highlander*) and the ex-king of Greece (aboard the *Virginian*). Buckley absorbed the unfolding drama. “Later that afternoon, sitting in the fantail salon with the wonderful dioramas of whaling scenes and shipbuilding, I hear a bang-bang-BANG underneath,” he wrote. “Minutes later the crew are pulling up the floorboards and frowning. Half an hour later they’re donning wetsuits.”

For it wasn’t only tree trunks that *The Highlander* needed to navigate. Branches, vines and other vegetative matter were getting wrapped around the propellers driven by the twin GM 900-horsepower diesel engines.

*Forbes’s* son Christopher (“Kip”) is the middle child of five (between Steve and Bob, and younger siblings Tim and Moira). The boys have all worked in the family business. Recalls Kip: “The ex-king of Bulgaria was scrutinising a model of *The Highlander* [the fifth one, which they were aboard]. Pop liked to display these models in that fantail salon. The ex-king pointed at the model’s stern and said, ‘Have you tried reversing the propellers?’ We looked at each other, then did as he suggested, and it worked – to the great relief of the crew.”

In arranging the trip, *Forbes*, 67 at the time, had been inspired by Jacques Cousteau’s trek through the Amazon five years before. *Forbes* was an exuberant risk-taker, personally as well as professionally. He’d been awarded a Bronze Star



PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF THE FORBES FAMILY; VONNIE HEMSEY/GETTY IMAGES; RON GALELLA/RON GALELLA COLLECTION VIA GETTY IMAGES; GLENN DAVIS; BORIS NIZON/ROB/ULLSTEIN BILD VIA GETTY IMAGES

Top: *Forbes’s* helicopter, Highland Fling, takes a delivery of 50 bottles of Elizabeth Taylor perfume for party guests on board *The Highlander*. Above: Harrison Ford takes the wheel. Below: the ironically named green-and-gold liveried Boeing 727 whose interior was designed by Jon Bannenberg, as were the yachts



Malcolm Forbes relaxes aboard *The Highlander*



James D Robinson, Claudia Cohen Perelman, Malcolm Forbes and Ronald Perelman

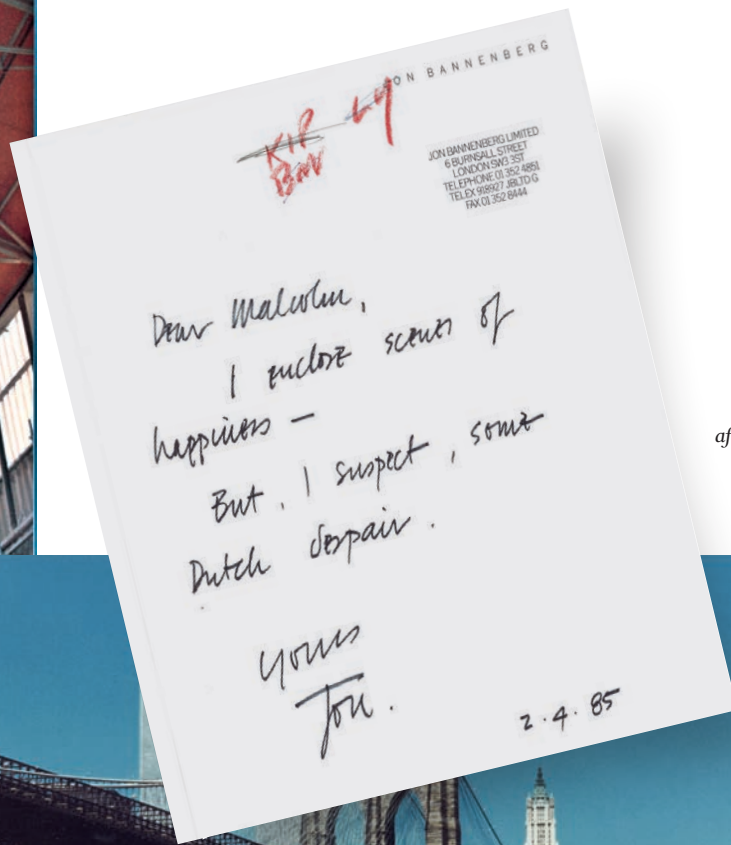
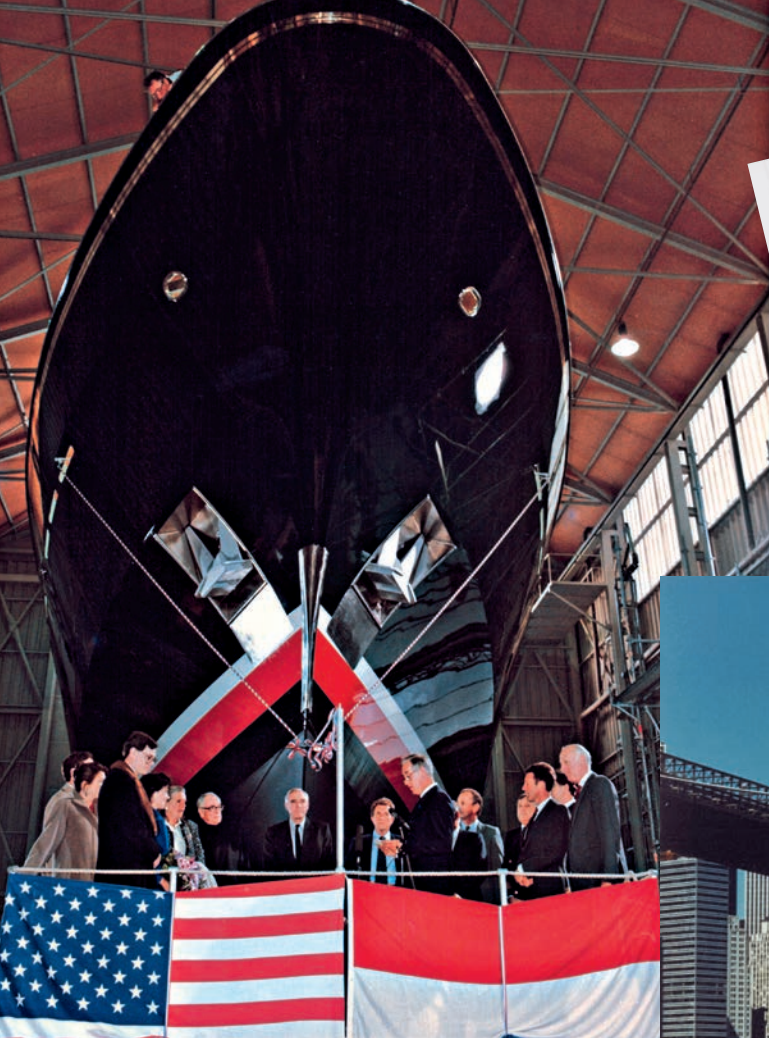


Above: the dining table on *The Highlander*. Left, Elizabeth Taylor with *The Highlander’s* crew, many of whom were “steadies”

“I hear a bang-bang-BANG underneath. The crew are pulling up the floorboards and frowning. Half an hour later they’re donning wetsuits”







Far left: The Highlander about to leave Feadship's Netherlands base. Left: a note from designer Bannenberg to Malcolm Forbes. Below: in New York after her launch in 1986



and a Purple Heart for service as a machine gunner in Europe during the Second World War. Hot-air balloons, Harley-Davidsons; helis and a 727; acquiring Fabergé eggs and other collectables, not to mention homes in Manhattan, New Jersey, London, France, Morocco and Fiji: this was a man who lived life to the full. Traversing the Amazon by pleasure yacht was unheard of at the time but that did not faze him. In undertaking such adventures, he never forsook comfort. He ruled "comfort in its widest sense – for guests and crew alike – is as important as the engines and navigation equipment".

Buckley paints a vivid picture of the vessel and how it functioned. "The topmost deck is a solarium, as if a *Bateau-Mouche* had been grafted on top. [On the lower deck] there are four guest suites in addition to Malcolm's master suite, with its whirlpool and steam bath and Spanish-galleon rear picture window. I draw Burgundy. Others are Blue, White and Gray. The king of Bulgaria says: 'It's clever. This way no one is offended by being given 'cabin number four'."

Meals in this most remote of locations included one with slices of beef rolled around horseradish cream on fried toast, caviar atop blue cheese, brie en croute, fresh cakes and "a beautiful split of icy cold German dessert wine", specified Buckley.

## *"Villagers would flock to the Amazon River at dawn to watch the second steward practise his bagpiping"*

And yet key was the crew, whom Buckley summed up as being "without exception, exceptional". He singled out Glenn Ellison, the bagpipe-playing second steward who turned out to be from New Jersey. Ellison got up every morning before dawn to practise his bagpiping on the top deck. "He says the villagers come down to the water's edge and clap and dance. It's really something."

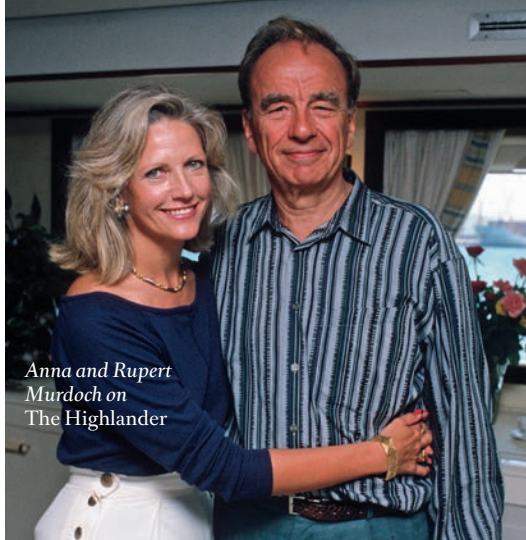
Buckley would conclude: "Malcolm is an antidote to the horror stories about extreme wealth. He's generous as hell and he likes to have fun." Says Kip, today: "The whole point was that if you could afford the yacht, you could afford the time. The idea was not to go fast; it was to share and savour the experience."

It was paradoxical therefore that the fifth *Highlander* grew out of Forbes spotting the

Bannenberg-designed *Azteca*, commissioned by media baron Emilio Azcárraga Milmo at Feadship's yard in the Netherlands. Feadship CEO Henk de Vries recalled an awestruck Forbes saying to his father Bieb de Vries, "I think I want one like that." Azcárraga was a man who enjoyed speed; he went on to commission *Eco*, which also drew on the design of *Azteca* and remains one of the fastest yachts of her size.

Two other features made *Azteca* (and so *The Highlander*) such a statement, besides the beauty and strength of line (for which Bannenberg was renowned) and the length (*Azteca* 47 metres, *The Highlander* 50 metres). One was the way in which the hull stepped up amidships to form the bulwarks of the upper deck, allowing for full beam – around nine metres – interior space. The other





Anna and Rupert Murdoch on The Highlander



Above: Liz Smith, Shirley Lord, Barbara Walters and Henry Kissinger at JFK Airport on the way to a Forbes party in Morocco. Left: Carolyn Roehm and Gayfryd Steinberg attend Malcolm Forbes's 70th birthday party in Morocco in 1989



through which you could see New York City - the meeting place of the world, certainly at that time."

It wasn't only about high living and power projection. She proved a remarkably effective way of driving advertising sales at Forbes. Many of the guests were CEOs of the biggest corporations and these high-powered gatherings were also family affairs, with Malcolm Forbes's sons stepping up to meet and greet guests. "One time, I looked up and saw CEOs of six different US airline companies talking together," says Kip. "Where else would you find that?" He adds: "Pop used to say that guests would come aboard with their own ideas of why they were there but, once on board, they were ours."

For the arriving guests, quilted ceilings and fat Plexiglass handrails competed for attention with historic panelling and clan tartan. Yet the real genius of Bannenberg's design lay in his ability to envisage, and provide for, the way in which the world's most powerful and famous people enjoyed moving around this space. "Six people aboard was comfortable," recalls Kip. "Yet 60 would feel spoiled." Concur Tim: "Of course, a yacht is its own special environment, very different to any boardroom or hotel function room, but there was something about the way that boat was designed

for circulation. It had these smaller seating areas and private spaces that weren't too conspicuously private, where people could linger while never prompting the reaction: 'Look at those two off there on their own, talking.' It was about bringing interesting people together and then letting serendipity take over. It made business and socialising lively, relaxed and distinctively pleasurable. People wanted in."

Much was happening behind the scenes, seamlessly. "We had a lot of 'steadies' on the crew," says Paul Engle, who captained the boat in the late 1980s. "They'd done it before and knew exactly what they were doing: how to behave, when to be available to guests and when to give space. The dining room could be closed off with pocket doors for a private meal, or opened up for a buffet service, in which case it removed the constraints on how many we could accommodate for an evening function. Although the galley was below, we had a pantry on the main deck next to the dining room. Everything always seemed to run very smoothly."

All the people interviewed for this article recall the "tour". There were different versions of the tours given to guests, varying according to the guest's interests, but what they all had in common was that they flowed, like the space itself. Says Engle: "There were certain features guests were always interested in: the models in the fantail salon [where the ex-king of Bulgaria made his observation about the propellers], or the light box in the ceiling of the dining room - in fact a stained glass door from the Royal Yacht Osborne."

was the use of glass on the upper deck, letting light flood in and equally letting guests see out.

The design choice for the fifth *Highlander* was all the more noteworthy because the previous *Highlander* yachts built by Feadship had conformed to such classical shapes. These, too, were beloved by the Forbes family. The third *Highlander*, launched in 1967 and featuring a "canoe stern" that scooped out of the water, "is as pretty a yacht as you'll ever see", says Tim, the youngest brother. "The stern of the fifth *Highlander* remained slightly rounded," points out de Vries - a man adept at understanding his clients' longings.

She also had the closed transom. Combined with moving the main galley and the owner's stateroom to the lower deck, it created an unusual amount of space on the main and upper decks for her true purpose, as "a platform for Forbes", remarks Andrew Winch, who was part of Bannenberg's London design team at the time of the build. "The *Highlander* was like a greenhouse





Above: guests at Malcolm Forbes's spectacular 70th party, held in Tangier, Morocco. Left, Calvin Klein, Liz Smith, Fran Lebowitz, Kelly Klein and Jann Wenner at the party

## *“The helicopter was dispatched to pick up 50 bottles of Elizabeth Taylor’s perfume from Bloomingdale’s as gifts for a party”*

The photo-filled rose gallery near the guest entrance proved popular, too. “The portraits there were pretty diverse: Malcolm with the widow of General MacArthur, or with Mick Jagger, or with the King of Jordan... It set an engaging tone as people entered the boat,” Engle says.

If tours descended to the lower deck, it was usually to see the master stateroom with its five-person marble steam room and galleon picture window, which had prompted a fun exchange between Kip and Johan de Vries, Henk’s uncle. “We were arguing in favour of a window at the back there, and the Feadship team didn’t think it architecturally sound,” recalls Kip. “I then

pointed out the large oil painting, hanging in the office in which we were meeting, depicting the capture of the Dutch fleet by the French army in 1794, and observed that at some point the Dutch knew how to fenestrate the stern of a ship.”

Executives from the nascent tech industry enjoyed seeing the engine room, with its twin GM power units, while celebrities – including Harrison Ford at the height of his *Indiana Jones* and *Star Wars* megastardom – preferred the upper level wheelhouse.

The toys, dramatically arranged in different parts of the boat, added to the sense of adventurous fun. There were the Harley-Davidsons that

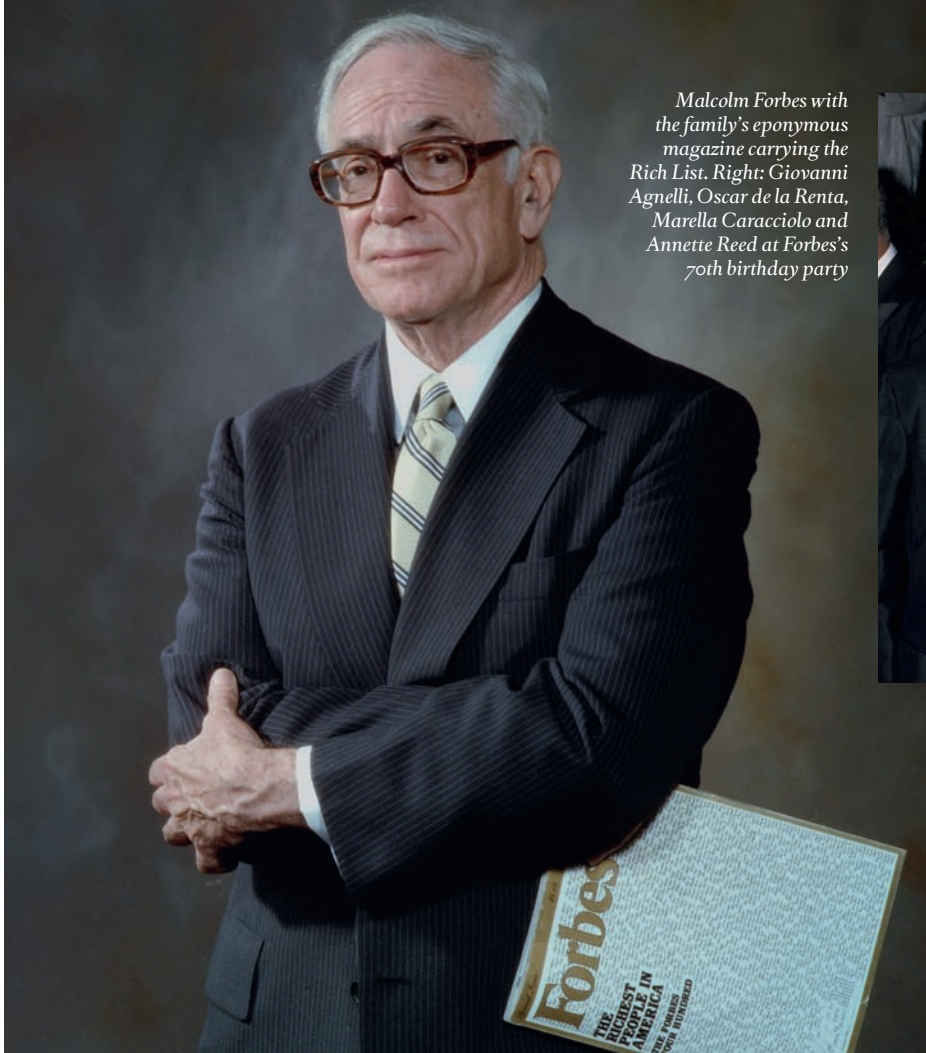
Malcolm rode frequently, and the Cigarette and Donzi speedboats that had been lowered on to the Amazon, prompting Buckley to fear that his excursion party might be mistaken for a band of drug runners. But the coup de théâtre was a gold-and-green coloured Bell Jet Ranger helicopter named *Highland Fling*. “Uplit, it lent the boat a particular night signature, backdropped by those lights of Lower Manhattan,” says Winch.

The *Highland Fling* wasn’t just for show. Recalls Engle: “One time it was dispatched to pick up 50 bottles of Elizabeth Taylor’s Passion perfume from Bloomingdale’s so as to provide impromptu gifts for a party aboard, for which Taylor was the guest of honour.” The helicopter deck had been added almost as an afterthought. Kip recalls Malcolm having the idea while staying at Amsterdam’s deluxe Amstel Hotel, the day after the Feadship contract was signed. This first change order required rapid recalculations of the superstructure’s strength. In the early to mid 1980s, helipads were still relatively rare on yachts. Feadship’s naval architect Frits de Voogt worked closely with Forbes’s pilot, developing the platform. “He gave me a lot of feedback, especially on the need for platforms to be situated higher up,” says the 96-year-old de Voogt.

The yacht’s dark green colour was considered from the beginning. “Because the fifth *Highlander* had a bigger superstructure, it was important for the profile not to look top heavy,” says Kip. “All the previous *Highlanders* had been white, so we really were breaking with tradition, but Jon Bannenberg







Malcolm Forbes with the family's eponymous magazine carrying the Rich List. Right: Giovanni Agnelli, Oscar de la Renta, Marella Caracciolo and Annette Reed at Forbes's 70th birthday party



## *“As we purred down the Hudson River in Forbes’s floating crib, billions of dollars stroked each other’s egos”*

presented a series of hand-rendered drawings to Forbes at the 60 Fifth Avenue boardroom, showing that all white wasn’t going to work. He did it so calmly and logically that it was never a question.”

Forbes embraced the dark green colour, the same colour as dollar bills, and Bannenberg burnished his sales credentials. “The guy was just never off-key,” says Kip. “We wished we had him as a Forbes sales executive, working on the boat.” Bannenberg would separately design Forbes’s stunning green-and-gold liveried Boeing 727 bearing the ironic words “FORBES Capitalist Tool” on the tail.

Forbes was at the peak of his entertaining powers in the mid to late 1980s. *Forbes* magazine had become a powerhouse brand, thanks in no small part to its Rich List, created in 1981. The list fitted perfectly with the wealth-focused mores of the times. It answered irresistible questions – who had it and how did they earn or get it? – and it

would help the magazine earn a fortune in advertising – making money from the phenomenon of making money. It also elevated Malcolm to the position of ringmaster among an initially reluctant super-rich who couldn’t afford to ignore the list any more than they could afford to ignore the functions aboard *The Highlander*. New York’s social elite was entranced.

“Went to Malcolm Forbes’s birthday on board his party yacht *The Highlander*,” recorded Tina Brown, in her book *Vanity Fair Diaries*. The *Vanity Fair* editor described how “as we purred down the Hudson River in Malcolm’s pale mahogany floating crib, billions of dollars stroked each other’s egos over lobster and champagne”.

That evening, the *Highland Fling* made a star turn. “Malcolm’s son, Steve, landed on the boat in a helicopter. We all went on to the upper deck to watch it come in, our hair whipped by its landing. The propellers whirled dangerously,” wrote

Brown. “You go first,” [her husband] Harry [Evans] said to Murdoch, and Rupert laughed. Some of the guests (Barbara Walters, Larry Tisch, Betsy Bloomingdale) were very much of that time; others were timeless, namely: “Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall,” wrote Brown. “He sat on Fran Lebowitz’s knee, singing ‘Happy Birthday, Dear Malcolm’ in that insanely famous croak.”

Forbes would die three years later in 1990, in New Jersey, of a heart attack – but not before staging the biggest party of his life: a 70th birthday weekend in Morocco, for which guests were flown in by chartered Concorde, a 747 and a Lockheed Tristar, as well as “The Tool” (727); 300 Berber horsemen performed a cavalry charge, ending with them firing their muskets into the air.

The boat stayed in the family for another two decades. “I have great memories of working with Dickie [Bannenberg, Jon’s son] when we ‘redecorated’ *The Highlander* in the late 1990s,” says Kip. In 2012 it was finally sold by Bradford Marine Yacht Sales (where Engle went on to work) to investment banker Roberto de Guardiola and his wife Joanne.

Much has changed since the late 1980s. While there’ll never be another showboat like *The Highlander*, its legacy lingers on. De Vries says its ethos of impeccable service is still found on boats today – “like on some of the Eastern airlines, where service seems to be more of a vocation or a calling. You get a similar feeling on a boat such as *Savannah*: that feeling of stepping into a warm bath.”

And there’ll never be another Malcolm Forbes. The way in which he saw the world was unique. Tim concludes: “Pop didn’t see business as an end in itself. He saw the purpose of business as being to bring pleasure and reward, to the more people, the better. To him, that was the point of capitalism, and indeed that was the point of it all.” ■