



CAREER DETAILS

- **Current role:** CEO at Tansu Yachts. Operates from a headquarters in the Bosphorus suburb of Kanlıca, with a busy boatyard in Tuzla, Istanbul's shipyard district.
- **Work experience:** Graduated from Middle East Technical University in 1985 to become his own boss. After running an interior design business and selling an acclaimed restaurant, he started boatbuilding in 1996.

The interview

Riza Tansu

Riza Tansu | CEO Tansu Yachts

The CEO of Tansu Yachts talks success, expertise and respect for his competitors in the growth and development of his business

INTERVIEWED BY TRISTAN RUTHERFORD

Riza Tansu is a larger-than-life character. The Tansu Yachts' boss embodies the A-list lifestyle he is able to pitch to his clients so successfully. Think sailing holidays in Villefranche, Mykonos, Capri, Porto Cervo. A succession of striking girlfriends. A private pilot's licence. Plus a series of business interests topped off by a fleet of pioneering yachts that make him the 'Elon Musk of the East'. Tansu is far from the first company owner I've interviewed. But he may be the most interesting.

Yet as I step off the water taxi to Tansu Yachts' Istanbul HQ, paradoxes abound. Riza Tansu has developed a winning superyacht formula, yet he reveres his rivals across Turkey and Europe. The company is the recipient of three major superyacht awards (most recently at the World Superyacht Awards in Amsterdam),

yet it maintains a base not in Monaco but above Tansu's apartment in a sleepy Bosphorus suburb. Tansu Yachts has five contractually sold boats under construction, but the firm's pricing structure far undercuts the market rate. As we install ourselves at Tansu's boardroom table – suffused with sunshine and surrounded by portraits of Brigitte Bardot – a dozen questions spring to mind.

To understand Tansu's current success we need to turn the clock back 30 years. "I started my professional life in 1985 after graduating from Middle East Technical University," he says. Previous alumni include a former prime minister plus dozens of leading designers, editors and sportsmen. As his degree was in industrial design, founding an interiors business seemed appropriate. Thanks to his inherent confidence and designer's eye the venture was a success. "For seven years I was really at the top of my game," he says. 

At the same time Tansu developed an interest in single-seat aircraft, "Cessnas and the like". He's also a self-confessed classic-rock fan. "So I thought, why don't I design a restaurant decorated with aircraft memorabilia and rock music?" Such logical bravura epitomises Tansu. That was in 1991, a year the Turkish economy started to awaken from its protectionist slumber into the export powerhouse it is 25 years later. "I also thought the restaurant would support my socialising and my design business." It ended up doing far better. "It was such a success that I had to quit doing interiors. I was making unbelievable amounts of money," he confirms. Enough, in fact, to fund the third act of Tansu's career.

Aged 35, Riza Tansu had money in the bank but no job. "I sold the restaurant but my former competitors in the interior design field had surpassed me. So I looked for something else," he says. The combination of Tansu's design background and Turkey's burgeoning boatbuilding industry sparked an idea. "Twenty years ago there was a tendency in yacht design to utilise a work-boat style. Some guys were converting navy ships, minesweepers. Others used a fishing boat look to create a modern yacht," he explains.

In 1996, Tansu threw his lot into building a Pacific Northwest Trawler. American naval architect Steve Seaton, a man with 400 designs in his portfolio, was commissioned to produce the blueprints. A German buyer bought a larger version of Tansu's first boat 'off the bat' allowing him to experiment further. Tansu says, "From 1996 to 2006 I tried minesweepers, pilot boats. Literally everything to market to my clients to see which



one works best. After ten years of R&D we ended up with a design we knew would be a success." But before Tansu Yachts inflicted their killer fleet on an unsuspecting press their 'optimum indoor space' concept was tested one final time – on a smaller scale.

Floating beach house

The result was CV70, an urban-chic 'carrier vessel' built to ferry beach toys and Hendricks gin to the hottest harbours, from Bodrum to the Balearics. Tansu's idea was clear, as the vast majority of mid-size yacht charters are in the Mediterranean, "guests don't need three salons on top of one another, just one to use pre-season or on an occasional cool night". This vision was described as 'a beach house at sea'. An alfresco den for dining, dancing, swimming and stargazing. "I literally built it for myself to test the concept for my clients, a form-follows-function boat. It's a place you don't need to wear a blazer – you can do that in London or Paris – but an area you enjoy with shorts and bare feet. Our attitude was like that," he says.

TO THE POINT

Is China the next big market for the superyacht industry?

Not for me. There are apparently many millionaires in China but I have a small profile. If a Chinese visionary wants to come to Istanbul then of course we'll talk.

European Union – is it good for Turkey to join?

I think yes. In the boatyards in Tuzla we already employ all the EU safety directives. I don't know about the Euro, I'm not an economics expert.

Turkey is currently the world's third largest yacht producer. When will it overtake Holland to take second place?

I really don't know. Northern Europeans have this fabulous work ethic than keeps them on top though it's not a concern of mine.

What is the key to your repeat custom?

Producing a quality yacht on budget and on time. It's no good, even if you're the world's best designer, if you wake up at noon and your client can't reach you.

Any mistakes with your builds?

I've paid for them. On an early yacht I projected a build of €3m, but it ended up costing €3.2m. I have never asked for a single penny more from a client, as this would damage my reputation. That time I settled the overspend out of my own pocket.

Why won't Tansu build 60m and 70m yachts?

We can design them for sure. We could build them too. But if one of my five current contracted clients for the 40m yachts I have under construction calls me with

a financial problem, I can finance the build myself. It would be pointless to exert pressure on that customer. I can even take over the construction of two of my projects in Tuzla until the problem passes or we resell. But I won't take over the construction of a 70m giant as I could go down.

How has business been since you won at the 2015 World Superyacht Awards in Amsterdam?

Of course it was a prestigious award, especially as you have a jury who understands their subject. It all helps. It was also great when *Nomade* was the winner at the 2012 ShowBoats Design Awards, then *Only Now* won the 2013 World Superyacht Awards. But we've had a busy telephone for five years now.



The Bosphorus stretches behind Riza Tansu outside his company's HQ in Kanlica, Istanbul

The key date for Tansu Yachts' current success was September 2011. Two groundbreaking vessels, 35.2m *Ceylan* and 36.4m *Nomade* sailed into popular consciousness, the latter at that month's Monaco Yacht Show. Both resembled gunmetal destroyers, ready to take aim at fusty superyacht stalwarts. "In a lot of professional people's opinion, *Nomade* changed the direction of the industry," comments Tansu. At the time many boats afloat were prosaic and 'samey-samey'. He continues, "The interiors are sometimes like a grandmother's house. They choose wool as a fabric, which you can't sit on in shorts. Who wants that in summer?"

Both boats eschewed complex accoutrements like hydraulics and extendable balconies. "Guests want to relax and have fun, not to push buttons in a James Bond way. These things excite some people, but our clients are impressed with simpler, workable ideas." Not only that, if complex mechanics stick after a bumpy journey they

are a devil's job to fix. The same form-over-function ideals are distilled into the five Tansu yachts currently under construction in Tuzla (the gritty industrial quarter where Turkish giants Proteksan Turquoise, RMK Marine and Perini Navi Yildiz produce their craft). Tansu drives out three times a week to inspect the progress of 39.3m *Cutlass*, 38.4m *Tigershark*, 43.7m *Cyclone* and 39.1m *Echo-R*. The other mornings he's in the design studio above his apartment from 9am, "if I'm not jet-lagged," he laughs, "which is often."

Corporate history lesson over, Tansu calls for a round of Turkish coffee. It's a chance to stretch the legs – and take in the CEO's private space. There's a Technogym on one side of his personal apartment, which is used daily. A photo gallery is bedecked with Tansu at play – sailing

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the world, swimming in the Turkish Aegean, partying with his dazzling friends. The coffee table groans under a mix of design and photography books and copies of *National Geographic*. All are well read – this is a working studio not a PR exercise. Other than that there is no clutter. Objets d'art like the twin telescope, which peeks over the Bosphorus, is exquisitely functional. There appear to be no press clippings or awards tacked onto the walls. Tansu is a man comfortable with his own confidence and doesn't require a daily reminder to boost his conviction.

Visionary clients

I wonder if such a superyacht lifestyle helps Tansu to understand his client base? "It's not a help, it's a must" he says. He claims that all his customers are "very visionary people who have actually created something, like scientists or musicians. They're not tycoons who can only give you ten minutes of their time." Tansu says that the way to work is to maintain a close contact with his clients, "otherwise you deal with only middlemen – assistants, lawyers and so on."

Has the customer base for superyachts changed since he started building? "Definitely. Say 20 years ago guys were coming from a yachting background. They started with a rowing boat then went bigger and bigger," he explains. Now, says Tansu, you can find a visionary client who sold his business for \$200m – and he doesn't want to buy a rowing boat. Here Tansu's confident charm, an attribute not present in every CEO you meet, puts those who have only seen his product in a design magazine at ease. He is on their wavelength as they discuss destinations, favourite escapes, desires and dreams, before finally pinning down a brief. He continues, "That's why I always have to own a yacht. That's why I need this lifestyle."

For better or for worse, the unique design that makes a Tansu Yacht is in danger of being diluted. Tansu tells me that some recent designers have blatantly poached the Tansu look. "There's a saying of Frank Lloyd 



Tansu's mantra is 'to be on budget and on time'



Above the interior of 39m *Alyssa* and right 38m *So'mar*



Right: *So'mar* was a winner at the World Superyacht Awards



Wright," he explains, "imitation is always insult – not flattery." Copying used to upset Tansu, he says, "but industry people can see what's a Tansu imitation and what's not so it honestly doesn't bother me anymore."

However Tansu's respect has been won by the design goliaths. "Briand is a great designer. Espen Øino, Tim Heywood, Bannenberg & Rowell, all greats with their own distinctive style." Credit also goes to Tansu's Tuzla rivals at Turquoise Yachts. "They were the first Turkish guys to produce a true superyacht, 50m

Our slim design also requires less maintenance and crew, typically just a captain, first mate, deck hand and a great chef

Turquoise in 1990. Mehmet Karabeyoğlu is a connoisseur and he knows how to build boats." But not a rival? "It's a different market," explains Tansu, especially as Karabeyoğlu has teamed up with Oceanco owner Mohammed Al Barwani to focus on yachts up to 80m.

A key Tansu USP is his interior-design background. This allows him to package décor into the build. He explains, "For example, we had a client who wanted to install a €125,000 artwork in the salon. I told him to spend the money on fuel and I'll give you a centrepiece instead." Tansu pulls out a glossy book detailing the design he did gratis for *Alyssa*. It's a vast interior wall styled like a Miami Beach lifeguard hut with the words 'No lifeguard on duty' stencilled on top. Like Tansu Yachts themselves, the project was relatively inexpensive but enormously original. "I believe in high

taste, low cost. As we can do the interior and the joinery in-house, it can save €2.5m per boat."

Such financial talk brings us to the nitty gritty. Do clients telephone Tansu as his yachts are such a steal? Does a base in Turkey mean you can produce boats for peanuts? "Of course it's not half price in Turkey. We import the best of the best from abroad, like Caterpillar engines," he says. No corners are cut. The electrics aboard Tansu Yachts are subcontracted to the team behind the 88m *Maltese Falcon*, hitherto the largest yacht manufactured in Turkey. Tansu concedes that labour is more cost effective outside the EU. Which, coupled with justly famous local craftsmanship, makes an attractive package. "My clients are rarely billionaires, or money-is-no-object guys. These people know they don't have to spend €30m when €10m will get them what they want."

What are Tansu's future plans? "Our latest boats like *Cutlass* and *Cyclone* have a master suite on the top deck," says Tansu. Imagine a Maldives beach cabana floating above the superstructure and you're halfway there. "When you get sleepy you don't have to go downstairs to bed. Then you wake up to sand and sea." All new designs still maintain Tansu's vast open deck, which becomes a beach-above-the-blue once the standard 6.5m tender is over the side. "You are so close to the water on our yachts. It's the same sincere feeling you get on a day boat in Sardinia but obviously far more luxurious," he explains.

Even on Tansu's 40m-plus boats, which his repeat clients are now demanding, gross tonnage is kept to a minimum, 300 tonnes or less. "Some other 40m boats are 500 tonnes, like an apartment building!"

Tansu Yachts therefore require smaller engines than others in their class, which improves fuel efficiency. "Our slim design also requires less maintenance and crew, typically just a captain, first mate, deck hand and a great chef. As long as you don't mind taking a water from the refrigerator yourself rather than having it served to you on a platter. Fortunately all my clients are practical people like this," continues Tansu.

Anything he won't do? "Some people call wanting a 70m yacht. I say call Espen instead. Some people call wanting a sailing boat. I say call Philippe Briand instead. Both are masters in their field." But for modernist yachts that wow the Mediterranean for €10m a time Tansu's telephone hasn't stop ringing. **SB**