

Worldspan rides the waves Article by Will Rankin

Say the words 'Vendée Globe' in sailing circles and you're bound to attract murmurs of appreciation, respect and wonder. The legendary single-handed, non-stop, round-the-world yacht race represents the height of endurance for boat and competitor alike.

And when a yacht race spans the world, you might think the best company name to handle the premium corporate hospitality on behalf of sponsor BT, would be Worldspan.

But UK-based Worldspan offers much more than an appropriate name - the company has eight years worth of hands-on experience in the exciting world of sailing event-related hospitality management. And that's on top of three and a half decades of global event management experience, during which time the company has delivered more than 3,000 events.



BT Open 60

challenges thrown up by pitting their strength and wits against everything the oceans can throw at them.

Jenny Eaves heads up the Worldspan team responsible for ensuring that "BT Team Ellen" enjoys the highest levels of hospitality when the sailors aren't out risking their lives for the sake of sporting adventure.

Fabled round-the-world yachtswoman Dame Ellen MacArthur is the 'Ellen' in BT Team Ellen, so BT needs to ensure that, with such a high profile name, they retain a high profile company to maximise the hospitality potential. MacArthur is an ambassador for BT's worldwide corporate social responsibility programme – a partnership which aims to win yacht races while underlining how enhanced communications and technology can help create a better world.

"We have actually been working with BT for eight years now," explains Jenny, "firstly with the USA firm Infonet, which became BT Infonet, and which has been acquired by BT Global Services. We started working with BT (that was Infonet) when it sponsored the Swiss Challenger 'Alinghi' in the Americas Cup, back in 2003.

"So when BT Global Services took sponsorship of Team Ellen in mid-2007, it was logical they turned to us to handle their sponsorship hospitality opportunities. We have the experience, the knowledge, the enthusiasm and the strong existing relationship."

Vendée Globe is just one of a long list of events that BT Team Ellen takes part in. The team – MacArthur, Australian Nick Moloney and Frenchman Sébastien Josse – are throwing themselves into some of the world's most prestigious and challenging yacht racing events in the world, including the Artemis Transat Plymouth to Boston race, the iShares Cup Sailing Series and the Vendée Globe, which has meant organising no less than nine global events for the Worldspan team in 2008.

"However there's a great deal of difference between the Americas Cup and the Vendée Globe, for example," says Eaves, "the BT Team Ellen sponsorship very much represents the 'grass roots of sailing.'"

Emotions in the sailing fraternity certainly run high as the fearless yachtsmen and women leave Les Sables d'Olonne in France on a journey that takes 80 days or more, and is fraught with danger.

But there's no time for emotions when it comes to ensuring BT Global Services' C-level clients enjoy world class hospitality.



“The launch party was a very technical event to handle – as the actual start of the race is dependent on weather and a number of other factors. Les Sables d’Olonne is not the easiest place to get to, there are a limited number of hotels, and it doesn’t have the sort of five-star accommodation that our guests are accustomed to,” says Eaves, who clearly



Thalassa in Harbour

“We had to fly in a group by helicopter, charter a plane from the UK and take over a number of TGV carriages on a train from Paris to Nantes”, she enthuses and then, with a proud smile, explains that for the launch party guests were treated to a first hand glimpse of the thrill of the start from aboard a traditional three-masted tall ship, which Worldspan had specially chartered and sailed up from the Netherlands.

“As anyone in the events business knows, the time for emotion comes after the success of the event. During the final few weeks of the run-up to the event, our team worked relentlessly to ensure everything went smoothly for BT – and we love it! Rising to the unique challenges such an unusual environment throws up is what we are all about.”

Jenny and her team, many of whom, naturally, are fluent in French to ensure the complicated logistical requirements are fulfilled, started planning the 2008 launch in mid-2007.

But the event marking the end of the race is a different occasion again. “You have to allow for the fact that our yachtsman in this race – Sébastien Josse – might not even make it, and then no-one will really feel like a party. There’s a lot riding on his success – success in even being able to complete the round the world challenge is worth marking, after all – but it makes the final preparations extremely difficult. Dates might move, and anything can go wrong out there on the ocean.”

And although Jenny and the team are not sailors themselves, they have become addicted to following the trials and tribulations of the race, especially having met the race team members. You can follow the progress of BT Team Ellen yourself at [www.btteamellen.com]

“Part of what makes the event great is that many of BT’s corporate guests were invited to go onto the yacht, meet the team in person and talk about the challenges of the race. It’s undeniably impressive, inspirational stuff,” she says.

Nathalie Quéré, who heads the sponsorship programme at BT Global Services, said: “Without Worldspan’s professionalism and dedication, we wouldn’t have reached such a level of excellence. More than 500 VIPs, customers, media and BT’s own executives have attended these events and feedback is always positive and enthusiastic.”

And while Worldspan is enormously enthused that its continuing expertise in providing yachting-related hospitality is recognised and rewarded by BT; Jenny is not resting on her laurels just yet. “The BT Global Services current sponsorship deal of Team Ellen is for three years, so we are already discussing what can be done differently, better or more efficiently next year. As an approved BT vendor – another achievement of which we are rightly proud – we are in a close relationship with BT, and have seven sailing events under consideration next year!

“One of our proudest achievements is that, in such a changeable environment, we kept within the established budget parameters – despite ensuring that everyone got there, had decent accommodation and experienced a remarkable and memorable few days with BT Team Ellen.

“For me, the greatest pleasure is knowing we’ve managed to create something that will long stay in the minds of the guests and, for BT, we have managed to underline its strong association with a great sport, with great sports people and to firmly stamp its brand identity on this incredible race.

“There’s an enormously satisfying sense of achievement when you successfully deliver the programme and exceed the client’s and their customers’ expectations,” concludes Eaves.

About Vendee Globe
www.vendeeglobe.org

More about BT Team Ellen
www.btteamellen.com

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