

ON BOARD WITH

Bob Giles

The Giles Automotive Group CEO tells *Cécile Gauert* how his Nordhavn yacht *VivieRae* is more than a match for his adventurous side



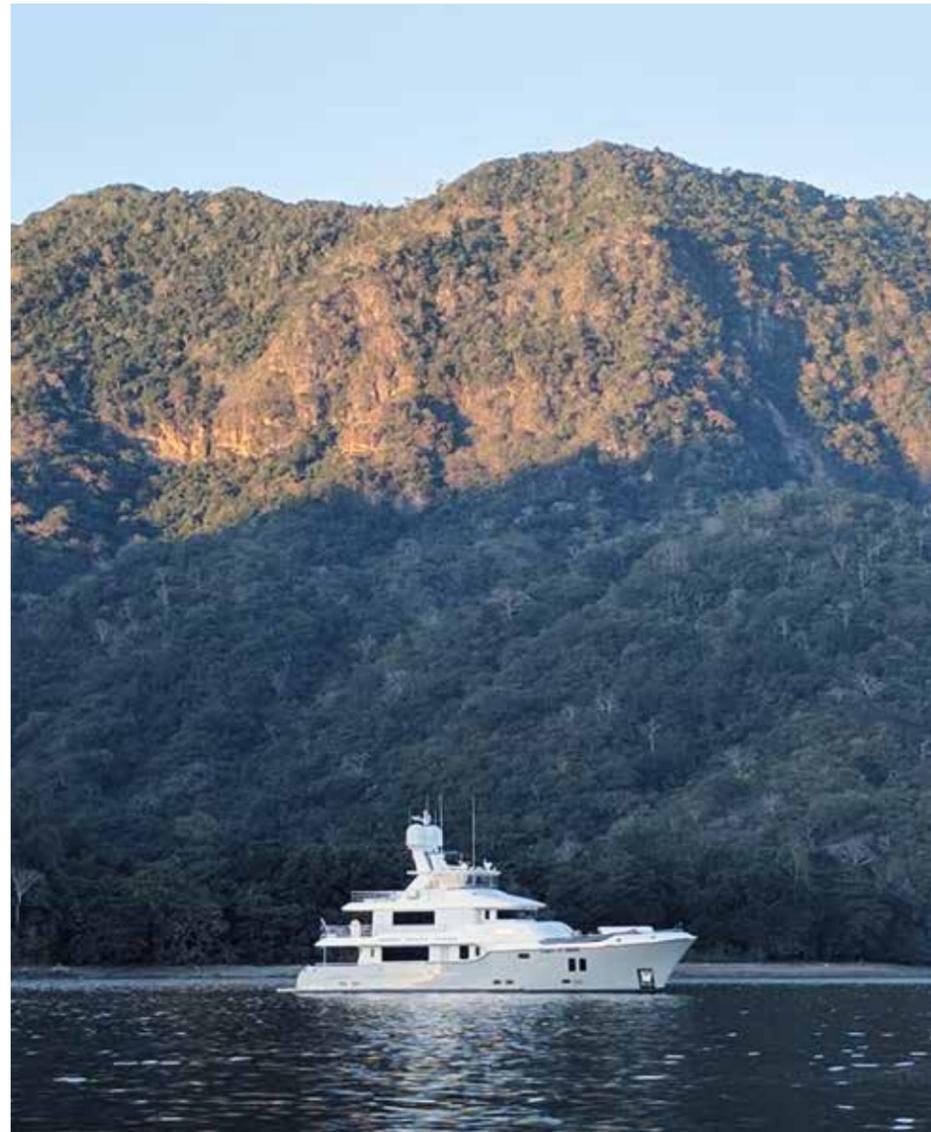
In the first boating experience that he remembers, Bob Giles hit rock bottom, quite literally.

"My dad had an Owens runabout, like an old Chris-Craft. We lived in Houston and he had the boat in Galveston Bay. He ran over something and I noticed the boat filling up with water. He had to run it up on the beach; that's my first memory," Giles says.

It was a somewhat inauspicious start to a lifelong love of boating and of the water, which Giles took to a whole new level when he got into expedition yachts four years ago.

His newest boat, *VivieRae*, a 96ft Nordhavn, took her sweet time reaching Dana Point, California, from Xiamen, China, where she was built and floated. And that's the way he wanted it. The shakedown cruise alone was around 2,800 nautical miles to Bali, and in its first six months the explorer logged about as many miles as his previous *VivieRae*, an 86ft Nordhavn, did in three years – around 21,000 nautical miles.

"He is by far the most active owner I have seen, he



^ Bob Giles's Nordhavn 96 *VivieRae* in Indonesia

is always planning his next trip," says Trever Smith, Nordhavn's project manager on *VivieRae*. "Twenty thousand nautical miles in 10 months, it's insane." He says it approvingly, adding, "The big superyachts don't do that."

Giles is CEO of the Giles Automotive Group, a car dealer in Louisiana with about 200 employees and \$140 million in sales – that's after he scaled back from running 15 dealerships, including Nissan, Subaru and Volvo, across the US. His grandfathers and his father all had car dealerships in Texas, and he began working in the family business, washing cars for his dad, when he was 11 years old. When he decided to follow in his family's footsteps, he earned

> *VivieRae*'s main salon has all the comforts of home no matter how far the yacht travels



a degree in accounting at Texas A&M University.

I meet him in Lafayette, Louisiana, where he lives and works. The dealership, a squeaky-clean group of gray buildings behind palm trees, is at the intersection of two busy roads. Although we've never met, I recognize him immediately when he comes out of his office to greet me. His life-size picture stands among the shiny new cars on the rutilant floor of the showroom, and the trim and youthful-looking man standing in front of me has the same engaging smile. I follow him as he walks briskly to his office, a room with solid, carved wood furniture and a desk large enough to handle a heavy load of responsibilities.

Clean-shaven, well-dressed and sitting in front of three computer screens, Giles does not look the archetypal adventurer – he is neither Crocodile Dundee nor Indiana Jones – but I soon find out that he loves nothing better than to trade his sport jacket for sport gear, preferably a wetsuit and scuba tanks. I am curious to find out how this disciplined businessman with a good head for numbers became so adventurous.

"I've always been this way. I like pushing the limits," he says. He was young when he learned how to ski and, perhaps not unexpectedly for someone who makes a living selling cars, he likes driving fast cars – he even drove a McLaren around Lafayette for a time – but many of his early adventures revolved around the water and boating. He was right out of college when he bought his first boat, a luxury he was able to afford by working every day, six days a week for his father, and the seventh as a dive instructor. "I loved diving and it helped me pay for the boat." He

often ran the 22ft boat to the Flower Garden Banks National Marine Sanctuary miles off the Texas coast to go diving. "It was kind of crazy, looking back on it."

He says his wife, Sandy, tells him he is missing the gene for fear; this appears to have served him well in business. He was 26 and working at his father's Volkswagen dealership in Houston when he decided to approach Volkswagen about becoming one of its dealers in the US. "I can't believe I thought they would consider it," he says, but they told him about a location available in Lafayette, and with financial backing from his father and uncle, he set out to start his own business, moving everything he owned from Texas in a U-Haul truck. He arrived in what is now his hometown in February 1982, on his 28th birthday.

He remembers it well, in part because the city's

v Giles at 26 with Warsaw grouper fish he'd speared in the Gulf of Mexico



SHIP'S LOG

1 XIAMEN

June 8, 2017

Fly in for yacht's completion. We load everything on board – a whole warehouse full of stuff. The city has a population of 12 million – modest by China's standards! Lots going on

2 HONG KONG

June 20, 2017

Pick up some tables that were made in the Philippines. We provision for the trip and take on fuel

7 FIJI

November 10, 2017

Huge highlight – we catch a 200lb tuna!

6 VANUATU

October 26, 2017

Go to one island formed by a volcano and sail straight into its center. We drop anchor and 10-20 dugout canoes appear and surround us

10 TUAMOTUS

March 1, 2018

Friends fly in and we do some amazing diving at passes into atolls. At Fakarava we witness the "wall of sharks" – hundreds and hundreds of sharks stacked up

3 BALI

July 15, 2017

Rejoin *VivieRae* in Bali. I was here four years ago, so we don't stick around. We get to the boat and immediately take off for more remote places

4 KOMODO

July 24, 2017

We put a treadmill out on deck – it's the most beautiful workout of my life! I love the remoteness. Invited to a wedding (actually seven or eight weddings). We drink local moonshine and feast on roasted pig

WHITSUNDAYS

VANUATU

FIJI

8 9 10

TAHITI

BORA BORA

TUAMOTUS

Xiamen to Tuamotus 11,002nm

"My wife looked at me and said, 'Are you going to buy it?' I almost fell off the boat"

people made him feel so welcome. "By chance I ended up in Lafayette, which is one of the friendliest, most welcoming places in the world," he says. He settled in quickly, opened his first dealership in April, met Sandy and they got married.

The way the city adopted him so readily is one of the reasons he started Giles Gives Back, which supports local community organizations. He lists the charities and causes they've supported over the years on his website and likes to be creative about gift-giving. In 2009, he sold 99-cent-a-gallon gasoline, a quarter of the price of gas at the time, from a tank at this new dealership, taking turns at the pump as cars lined up for miles from 6:30 in the morning until after 11 that evening. He donated all proceeds to a local outreach program. He got plenty of press coverage for this good deed – and marketing points.

As much as he loves his hometown, however, he's always wandered away. By his early 30s, he owned a used, single engine, long-range Roughwater trawler. "You would think a 32-year-old would want some kind of speed boat, but I wanted something that could go long distances. I would go 100 miles offshore at eight knots. I'd leave on a Friday after work and come back on Sunday night. I ended up taking this boat from Louisiana to the Virgin Islands and left it down there and eventually sold it."

He had several sportfishers before he began to think about stepping into something much larger. His 60th birthday was two years in the future when he decided to start looking for a bigger boat, something around 100 to 120ft. It was a broker who talked him into looking at a Nordhavn 86, which he thought would be too small based on length alone. He was very impressed but not ready to buy. However, he agreed to charter the boat for a few days around Martha's Vineyard, to see what it would be like.

"My wife had always wanted to go there, and so I figured, 'OK, well, we can accomplish two things. She can take one thing off her bucket list, and we have an opportunity to see what it would be like to own a boat like this,'" he says. "I'll never forget that day – we were coming in back to the marina, the boat

had a really nice sunpad on the top deck, and it was a beautiful day, it was July, so the weather was perfect. And my wife looked at me and said, 'Are you going to buy it?' I almost fell off the boat."

He got Sandy to commit to one week a month on the boat and he rewarded her with naming rights. "I was trying to come up with a name, and I had this list of very masculine names, like *El Toro*, and all this kind of stuff." Sandy had another idea: they named the boat *VivieRae*, after their granddaughter.

The step to the bigger Nordhavn also came a bit sooner than he expected. His long-time captain got him thinking about it, but the tipping point was when his broker told him he had an offer for his boat. "The deal never came through but at that point I said, 'What the heck, this is going to take two or three years to build; I'll put the other one on the market and sell it and go ahead and build the 96.'"

With the first *VivieRae*, which he did end up selling, he had explored the Bahamas, the Caribbean, South and Central America and crossed the Panama Canal, but he wanted to reach remote areas of the world.

During the construction of the new *VivieRae*, he made frequent trips to Xiamen, usually weekend trips, and when the boat splashed, they headed straight from there.

He had a list of places he wanted to see and top of the list were the Great Barrier Reef and the Tuamotus. The Great Barrier Reef disappointed him and what turned out to be his favorite so far is Indonesia. "We all agreed that Indonesia was the most incredible destination that we could have imagined," he says. "The geography was beautiful, the people were incredible and the diving was spectacular."

One afternoon, a group of kids approached the boat in dugout canoes. They were invited on board, but were reluctant. Eventually, with some coaxing, they became more confident. They sipped some Coke, perhaps their first ever beverage, peeked into the engine room and ended up jumping off the boat's ▶

v
The Nanuku Auberge resort in Fiji. Bottom: local children on Ngau Island, Fiji



▼
Giles with friend Aaron Allen on Reef Island in Vanuatu. Bottom: curious Indonesian boys were invited to peek into VivieRae's engine room

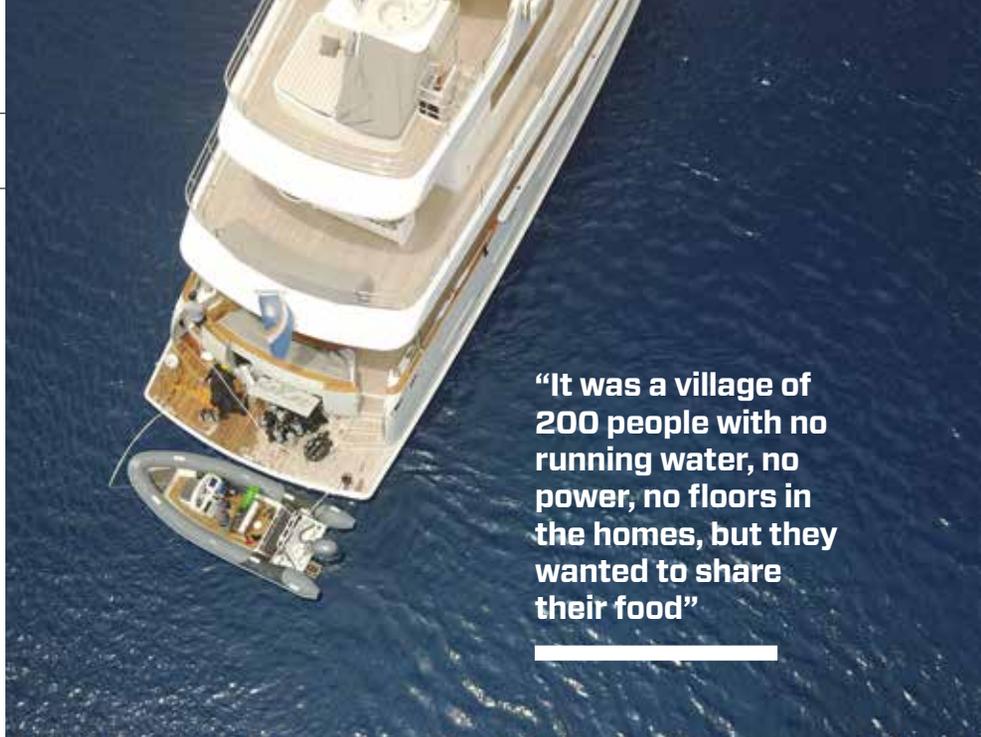
tall bow all afternoon.

The translator on board had heard the children talking about a wedding, to which Giles and crew were invited. When the boat party reached the village sometime later, they discovered eight wedding parties going on all at once. "It was a village of maybe 200 people with no running water, no power, no floors in the homes, but they wanted to share their drinks and their food. How do you say no? So, there I was, eating I don't even know what - I think it was pig - and drinking whatever they had. They were so friendly," he says.

The Tuamotus also made the top of Giles's list because of the diving. One night, he followed a guide to a pass known as a shark hangout. In the dark,

torches offer limited visibility and soon he began wondering about the sharks he could not see behind him. Already unnerved, he became worried when the sharks began fighting over a fish, bumping into each other and against a column of coral with such force that they broke it off. "The hair on the back of my neck went straight up," he says. When the guide finally signaled to go up, he was relieved. However, back in his office, among familiar surroundings, he doesn't hesitate when I ask if he'd do it again. "That was a wonderful experience," he says.

He already has upcoming trips planned and is keeping a spreadsheet of destinations and available dates when friends can join him. The miles are sure to increase, but who is counting? Adventure is not a numbers game. ▣



"It was a village of 200 people with no running water, no power, no floors in the homes, but they wanted to share their food"

QUICKFIRE
Bob Giles

Chef or chauffeur?

A chef who cooks healthy food

Speed or style?

Speed



Favorite beach?

A beautiful beach on Conception Island in the Bahamas

What's the first thing you pack?

Probably my flip-flops



What is your idea of luxury?

Flying private



How many watches do you have?

I don't know. I would say over 15. My favorite is a Ulysse Nardin

Your favorite car?

I drive a Volvo XE90, which I truly love. But of all the cars I've ever driven, my favorite is the McLaren Spider

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY; ADOBE STOCK