

## ENTERTAINMENT

# YACHTS TO CALL OUR OWN

**The Thai Shipbuilding Association** sets out to convince investors to establish boatbuilding yards in Thailand

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THE NATION

**H**ost to the King's Cup Regatta and home to a state-of-the-art marina, Phuket draws some 1,300 yachts every year, most of them cabin cruisers and mega-yachts measuring from 30 to 100 feet. Given Phuket's popularity, that number is likely to increase and experts surmise that one of the reasons is because Phuket offers great value repair and maintenance services. Now the Industrial Promotion Department and the Thai Shipbuilding Association are looking to take business one step further by drawing foreign shipbuilders to Thailand too.

Thailand has potential to host foreign shipyards in places from Samut Sakhon to Phuket, says Banchong Khunajit, who's on the committee of the Thai Shipbuilding Association. If that happens, we could see



**ALESSANDRO** Vismara of VSS Yacht Refit SRL, with his wife Chiara Benedettini, editor of yachting magazine, Connessioni.

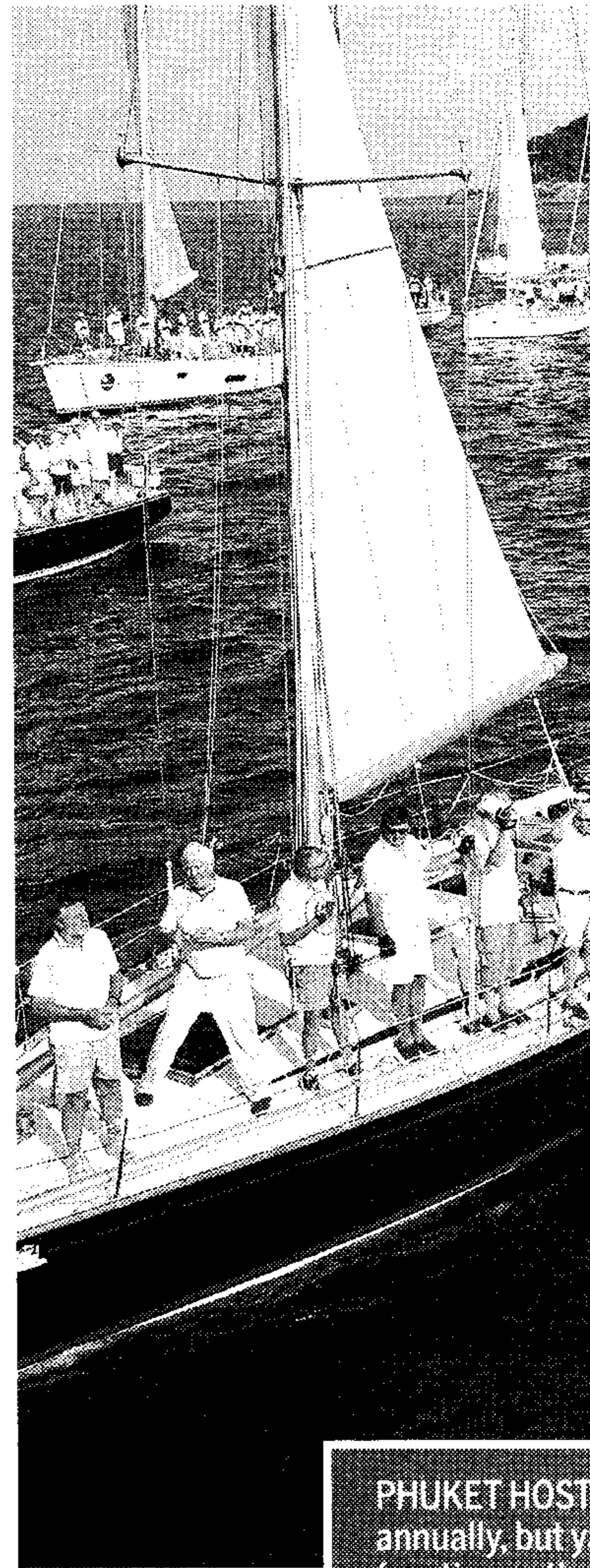
up to 5,000 yachts sailing to Thailand every year. With a little help from Ekkamon Hutasingh, the former president of the Thai-Italian Chamber of Commerce and now an adviser to his association, Banchong recently invited foreign shipbuilders to gauge Thailand's boatbuilding capacities. He also brought in some investors from Viareggio, a city in northern Italy that's famous for its shipbuilding industry.

Alessandro Vismara who owns VSS Yacht Refit SRL came with his wife, Chiara Benedettini, the editor of Italy's yachting magazine Connessioni. Vismara was impressed with

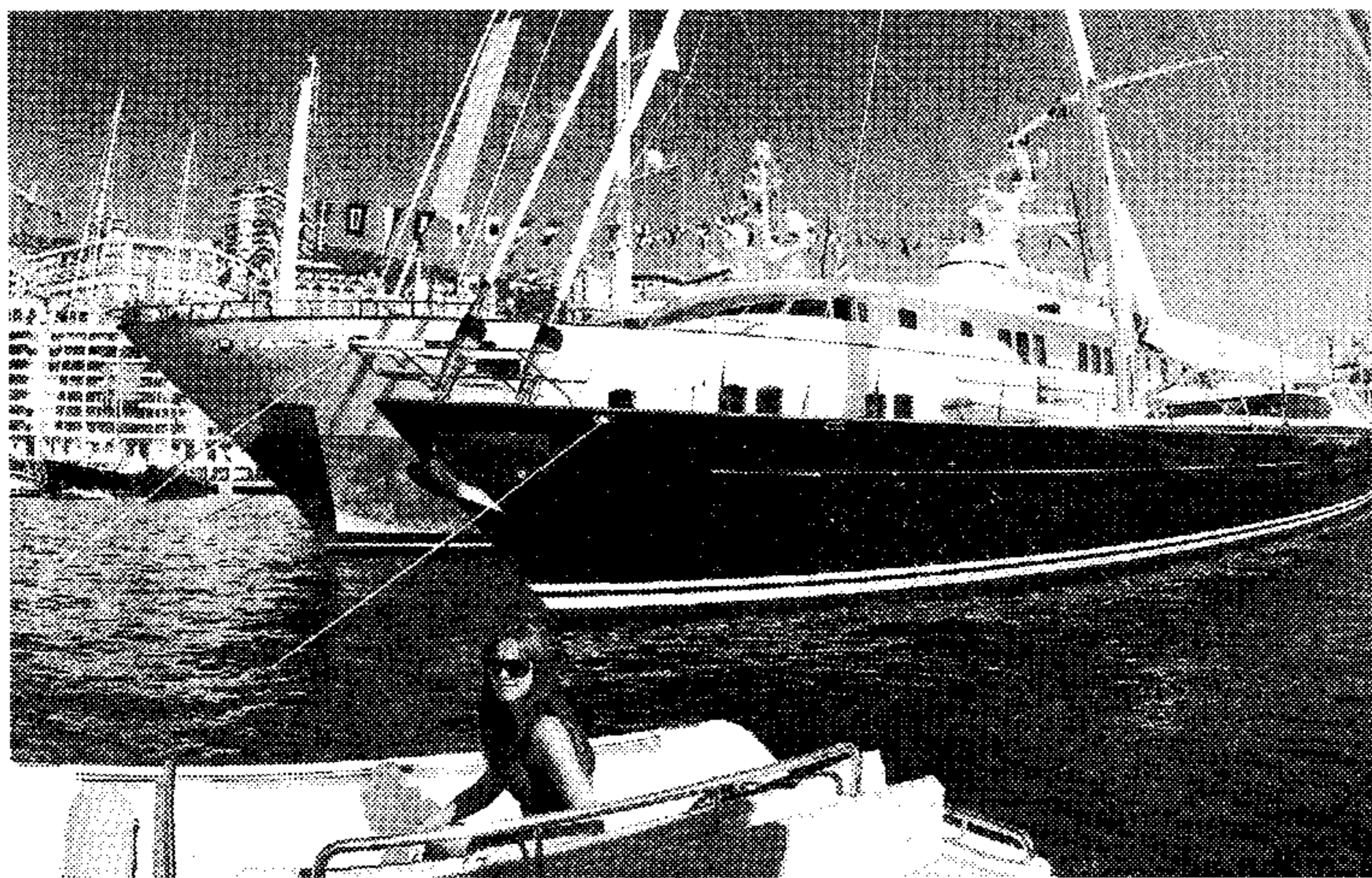
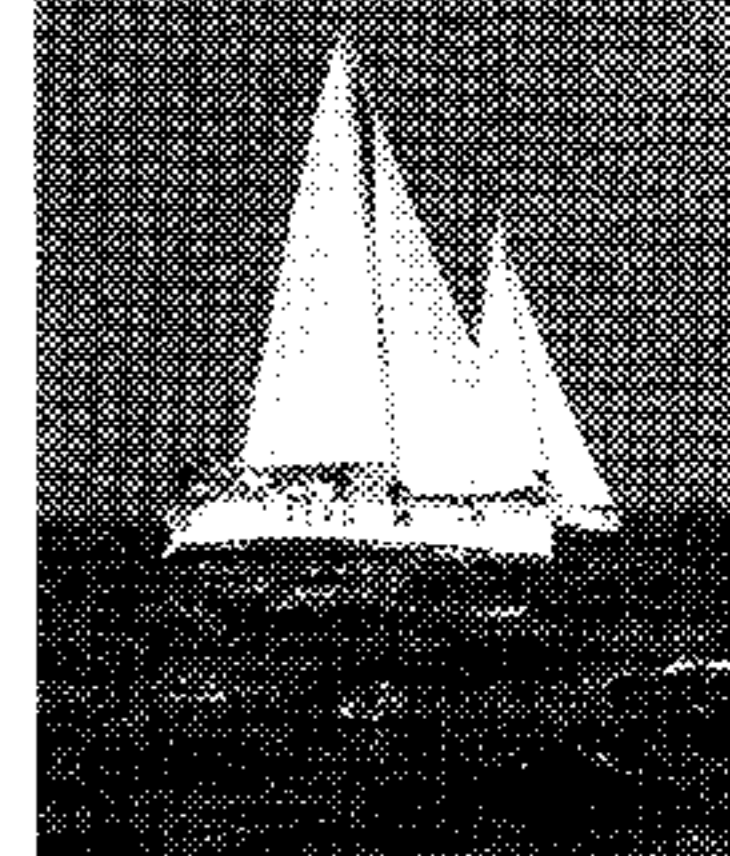
Thailand's facilities and top-quality shipbuilding skills and said he could be interested in building a shipyard here but remains undecided because of the string of tax regulations that include hefty duties for imported ship parts.

"Originally, I thought that Bangkok was not the best option but in the end I understood the possibilities. It's a good place to find people with expertise and the location is perfect. It is a place where it will be possible to build yachts and to present them to clients. Krabi could become a fantastic place in terms of shipbuilding. But I think it is a really big investment and it will take lot of time to convert all the area. Phuket is one of the best places for servicing yachts. Servicing is already present but it looks like the companies are struggling to get organised and attract enough tourists to keep their yachts there for major refitting works," Vismara said.

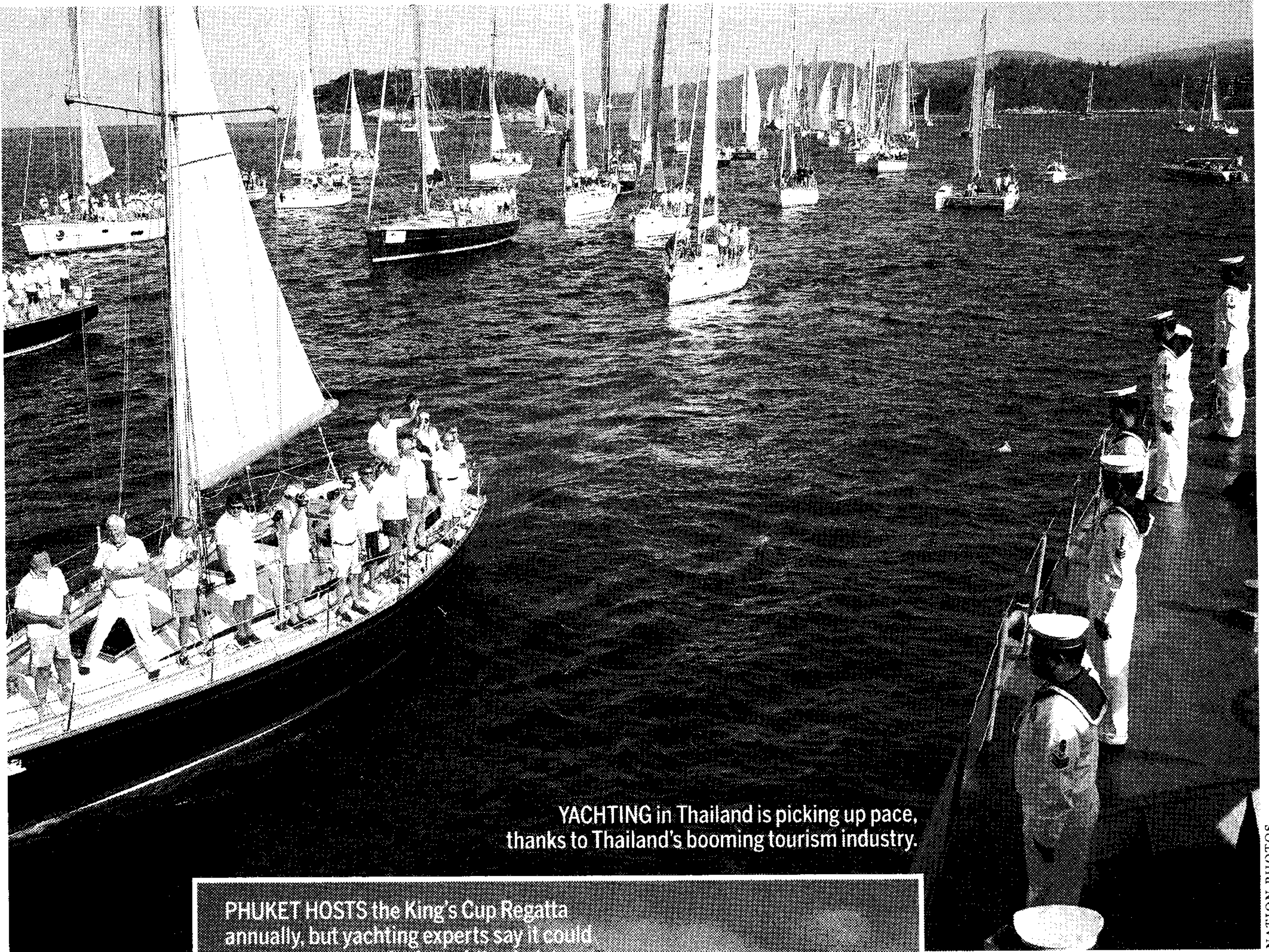
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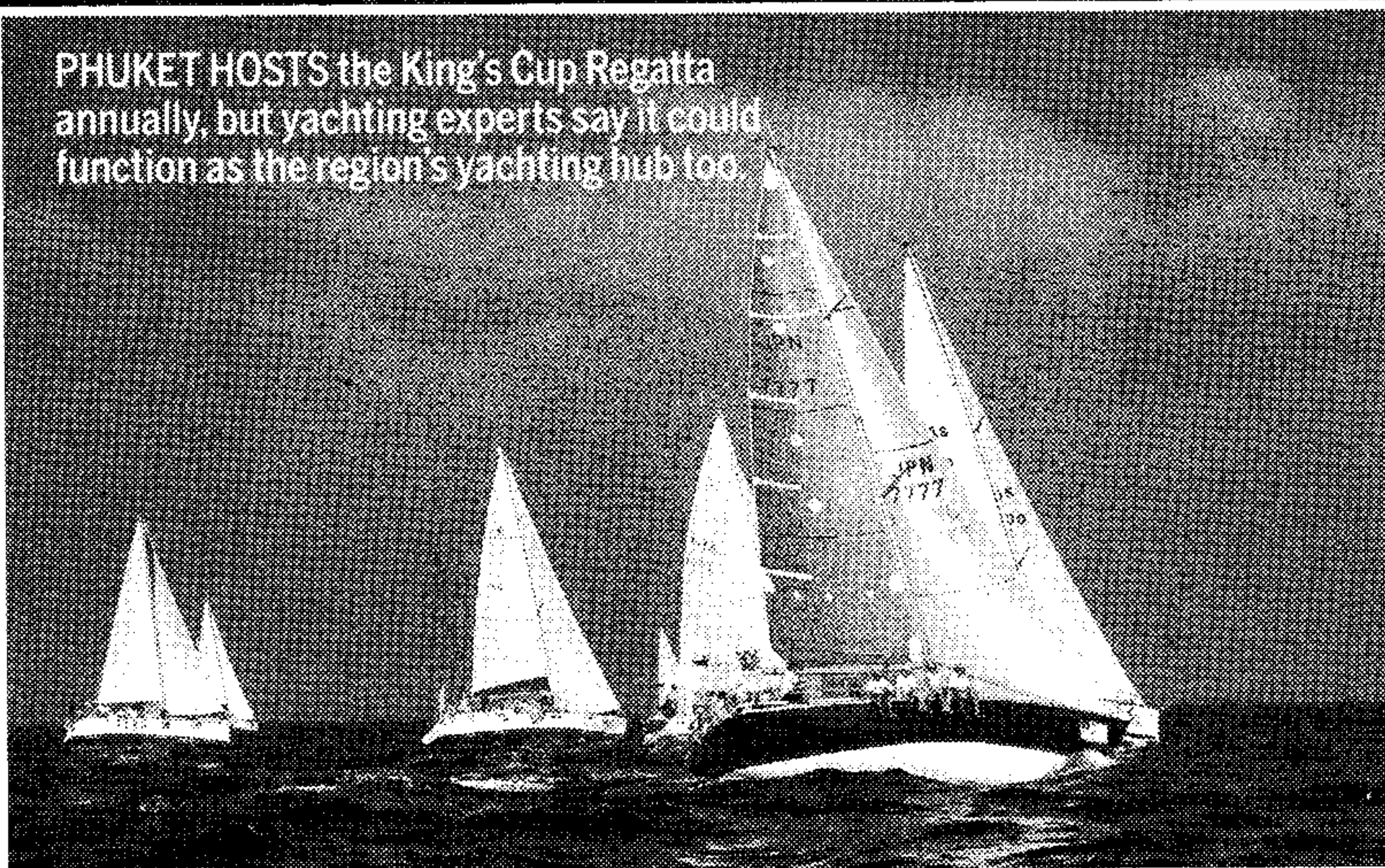
**PORT HERCULES** in Monaco showcases luxurious yachts during the International Monaco Yacht Show.



YACHTING in Thailand is picking up pace, thanks to Thailand's booming tourism industry.

NATION PHOTOS

PHUKET HOSTS the King's Cup Regatta annually, but yachting experts say it could function as the region's yachting hub too.



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In Thailand, Vismara observed shipyards that build aluminium yachts,

describing them "good quality, easy to work with and with the right attitude to quality." The refit yards he visited in Phuket were usual marina yards with third party skills brought in according to needs. "It is interesting to see that there is the substrate of craftsmanship that will be usable for construction," he said.

Indeed it's necessary to build yachts in Thailand simply because the water currents and sizes of waves in the seas around Thailand are different from those in the Mediterranean, says Nidhi Mayer, the president of Thai-Swiss Chamber of Commerce, and himself a keen yachtsman.

"To sail safely in the waters of Thailand, you need to adjust some components and equipment. Yachts built in Europe might not be the best to sail in this part of the world due to the different sailing environment," said Mayer.

A positive feedback from the Italian shipbuilder has helped reassure Banchong and his colleagues in the Thai shipbuilding association that

Thailand could one day be much more than just a yachting destination in Southeast Asia providing the government helps ease draconian tax regulations on the import of ship parts.

"For now, investors are deterred by the tax. You are taxed more for importing components and materials for shipbuilding than importing a yacht," says Banchong.

Banchong adds that in terms of shipbuilding facilities and expertise, Thailand is ready. But without government support, he adds, any thoughts the kingdom becoming a yachting hub will remain just a dream.