

Cruising

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20/04/2017 Karl J. Pojer is the boss of Hapag-Lloyd Cruises – and a racing driver. Porsche Classic met the high-level executive in Hamburg.

What ensued was an exciting encounter with an extraordinary person who makes his professional and private dreams a reality. Just a few hours later, he sent the cruise ship “Europa” off on a world tour of more than 74,000 nautical miles.

Douglas Ward is the author of the “Berlitz Cruise Guide”. The newest edition of this bible of the cruise industry has just been released. Ward considers the “Europa 2” and the “Europa” to be the best cruise ships in the world. He says this yet again. They are the only passenger ships to be honoured with a “Five-Star-Plus” rating by the “Berlitz Cruise Guide”. They belong to the venerable Hamburg shipping company Hapag-Lloyd Cruises. Its boss is – in private life – a racing driver. Karl J. Pojer, born 1954, is professional globetrotter. We have whisked him away, briefly enticed away from his job, for a quick spin in a 1997 993 Cabriolet. Because we had heard a lot about Karl J. Pojer and wanted to finally know

what he is like, this manager who races – the fastest "cruiser" in the world.

This man dreamed even as a boy of having his own Porsche

It is August 26, 2016. A day on which events are coming thick and fast for Hapag-Lloyd. The multilingual Pojer therefore apologises before we have even got started: "I'm afraid I'm running a bit late, but we've just set a milestone in the history of Hapag-Lloyd and signed the construction contracts for two new expedition ships." In 2019, they should put to sea and bring travellers to the most fascinating patches on Earth; Hapag-Lloyd already does this successfully today with the expedition ships "Hanseatic" and "Bremen". This man, who even as a boy dreamed of having his own Porsche, who battled it out for pole position in the Formula Ford with Michael Schuhmacher and the Formula Opel Lotus with the likes of David Coulthard, and who has just wrapped up an investment of millions, stands beside us totally relaxed.

"Let's get started," he says. For the clock is ticking. In just a couple of hours, he is sending the "Europa" out from Hamburg on a trip around the world. It is a new concept: an around-the-world trip in 337 days. The ship will dock at 200 ports. It is the first time the "Europa" is making such a journey, covering six continents and more than 74,000 nautical miles. Before that, however, the manager is now piloting the last air-cooled Porsche away from the quay of the "Europa" in the direction of the HafenCity district. Our destination is the Automuseum Prototyp, at Shanghaiallee 7. There, in the middle of this automotive treasure trove, we want to discuss what it is like being a manager professionally and a motorsport racer privately. Karl J. Pojer swings easily into the Porsche. Dives down into his alter ego, his second or perhaps third self.

Pojer starts up the black 993 and cruises in the direction of Shanghaiallee

There is the boss, who was CEO of Robinson Club, who was on the Executive Board of TUI AG, responsible for hotels and resorts (currently 210,000 beds), and who took over as Chair of the Management Board of Hapag-Lloyd Cruises in May 2013. Then there is the private man, married, father to a 17-year-old daughter. And finally there is the third self, the racing driver. It is always there in the background when you are speaking to him; but only really comes to the surface with the turning of an ignition key. Pojer starts up the black 993, darts out of the harbour and cruises in the direction of Shanghaiallee. As he gets out in front of the Automuseum Prototyp on this hot August day, he tells us about how it all began. With the racing cars, the hotels and the ships.

Originally he wanted to be a train driver, back then, as a little boy at primary school in Austria. "But then," says Pojer, "I noticed that there were 17 other boys in the class who wanted to do that. That was the end of that – from that moment on I only ever wanted to be a racing driver or a hotelier." And, to begin with, the signs pointed to racing driver. Earlier than many others, and perhaps as a result of that,

he became a Porsche driver.

Pojer bought himself a second-hand 912 Targa

The Hapag-Lloyd executive remembers the beginning of his life as a driver: “As a young lad, I had always saved all through the years, because I always knew: My first car had to be a Porsche. But my funds were barely sufficient. So I bought myself a second-hand 912 Targa with 46,218 kilometres on the clock. I will never forget it. I was so excited about this vehicle that, to begin with, I would go and walk around it in front of the house three times a day. That was my introduction to the world of Porsche. Then, later, I also drove 911s; I had a 944 Turbo, too, when that car was released.”

At the same time, things were progressing in the world of motorsport for the man who is now a citizen of the world. “There was a racing school in England, I went there. Then came the Formula Ford. It was around the time when Michael Schuhmacher was there and already driving light years faster than most others.” The Opel Lotus series followed. “With Heinz-Harald Frentzen, Rubens Barrichello and David Coulthard. At the time I was already older and had had to rein in my motorsport ambitions, because my hotel career had taken off. The Formula years were exciting, great times; you can see what became of these people.” And notwithstanding his fascination for ships and the booming cruise industry (a predicted increase from today's two to three million cruise passengers in Germany by 2020), the heart of a racing driver still beats in this manager: “I'll never forget – it was a rain race in Spa. And I was actually in front of Coulthard. In the qualifying round. That was really one of those moments where you think: Yes, I can.”

Synergies: Motorsport and managing

In the long run, however, it is rarely possible to keep up two high-end careers at once. His journey as a hotel expert took him to New York and other hotspots around the globe. According to Karl J. Pojer, who also gained experience in the diplomatic service as a consul of Austria: “For me, it was simply the moment when the hotel career gained the upper hand. When you live abroad, moving around in many countries, you have to keep starting again from scratch in motorsport: team check, search for sponsors – none of which is easy. And so I was always stopping and starting again. At some point, you say to yourself: ‘I have to prioritise.’” Nevertheless, the motorsport bug will never really let you go, not when you’ve been so close to the true greats on the scene. And thus he continued driving in his free time. “I was lucky in that I kept getting to drive for extremely good teams on occasion – like for Walter Lechner, who is still about and successful today in the Porsche Supercup, among others. And so I’ve always stayed active. Even if there's been the odd year or two when I’ve had to take a break.”

Motorsport and managing – for Karl J. Pojer there are plenty of synergies. First of all he finds that racing provides a balance: “For me, it is a totally different form of stress when you’re sitting in a racing car. Doing that, I switch off – you spend a weekend focusing on other things. And you meet people with similar interests. It properly recharges me.” Meanwhile, the sporting spirit rubs off on the world of work.

Pojer: “There are a lot of parallels between motorsport and things you have to deliver in this job. Focus; being present and bringing it in on time; making sure team members are with you; letting teamwork develop; defining common goals – those are all things that you can take from motorsport very well.”

The lights are green

He lives by all these principles, no doubt as a result of learning how people live in a wide variety of places around the world: “If I have learnt something from the many years I’ve spent on the move in various countries and cities of the world with people with hugely different ways of thinking, then it is this: You cannot simply expect that someone else will welcome you with open arms. You have to play your own part, adapt and be interested in people. You have to engage with the city, the language, the people. Then you notice how much more quickly you’re able to integrate.”

It is the wise perspective of a world citizen. Who reveals to us at the end that he might compete in the Porsche Sports Cup next year: “The racing calendar is laid out in such a way that you have two races at the weekend; and the circuits are within reach. In terms of organisation, it could work out.” We are sure that Karl J. Pojer will find a way to drive. The lights are green.

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