

YANNICK VEREERSTRAETEN AND NICOLAS DE LAET

They set sail towards entrepreneurship

After around ten years in consultancy, Nicolas De Laet and Yannick Vereerstraeten, both enthusiastic sailors, decided to launch Sailsense Analytics. A start-up that could revolutionise the recreational boating sector.



Yannick and Nicolas are on a boat. They are throwing their promising careers to the winds. What remains on board? The start-up Sailsense Analytics.

This is the short version of the path followed by these two former SBS-EM students... But let's go back to the start of the adventure, one fine day in September 2002. Newly arrived in college, they soon got to know one another and have been friends ever since. "Right from the first few weeks, we started to share a great many things, both on and off campus," Yannick Vereerstraeten remembers. At the time, sailing was already an integral part of the life of Nicolas De Laet, who was "virtually born on a boat". A passion that he passed on to his fellow student. In no time at all, the sailors were regularly to be found on the bridge. "I remember my first experience, during the Student Sailing Cup in 2005, an inter-university competition. That was a turning point..." Yannick says enthusiastically.

All hands on deck!

Once they graduated, the two friends went into consultancy. "At the time, it was still essential to build up a career with a big company," Nicolas declares. "But we were already thinking about entrepreneurship. To the point where it often came up in our discussions and our plans." Until the winter of 2016, when they took the plunge. With all sails set, they went on board a Hallberg-Rassy 40, a 12.4 m monohull yacht, to cross the Atlantic to St Lucia and Martinique. "Our start-up idea revolved around a connected navigational aid and fleet management system," explains Nicolas, who had just resigned from his position in the Delhaize Group. "This transatlantic crossing →



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provided us with a unique playing field on which we could refine the project and take the leap." A vision shared by Yannick: "Base had been taken over by Telenet and I had come to the end of a cycle. It was the ideal challenge..." The two captains reached their final destination and simultaneously embarked upon a new adventure. The decision was taken: Sailsense Analytics was to occupy them full time.

First miles

The start-up raised anchor in early 2017, aiming to "connect" boats. "From the beginning, the idea was to make navigation easier for pleasure boaters and to enable hirers to monitor and secure their fleet," Nicolas explains. Backed up by their respective experience, the partners used their know-how to produce a business plan, market analyses etc and soon decided to take on board other skills. "Our comparative advantage comes from our maritime knowledge, but we have no expertise in electronics or programming," Yannick goes on. Hence the decision to join forces with Bruxellois de Productize, an agency that specialises in the Internet of Things, based in the heart of the Co.Station business village, which is also the home port of the two Alumni. "Alongside the technical development, we skimmed all the nautical fairs to get to know our competitors better and refine our view of the market needs," Nicolas adds.

CV Express Yannick Vereerstraeten

1985

Born in Brussels

2002-2007

Master's degree in Business Economics at SBS-EM

2007-2011

Strategy consultant at PwC

2011-2016

Strategy & Value Manager at Base Company (Telenet Group)

2017

Co-founder and COO of Sailsense Analytics



Ready to set sail

Navigation is often seen as a real can of worms. So Sailsense Analytics is rather an audacious undertaking. "Given the technical complexity of our solution, it was fairly ambitious. We took up the challenge and we aim to make sailing a more accessible discipline," Nicolas states. The two start-up captains faced another difficulty: convincing the first clients in a sector that tends to be conservative. "Getting the message across obviously involves a huge effort and depends on one key element: the ability to provide tangible added value. If our instrument is not quite up to the mark, if it is too complex or simply provides the user with a theoretical benefit... we've missed the boat!" A nightmare that Sailsense so far seems to be skilfully avoiding. The start-up has the wind in its sails, because having raised € 1.3 million in early 2018, it is preparing to conclude a new round.

A VISION: sailing as a service

The two captains of Sailsense Analytics share a real passion for sailing. A discipline which they believe helps people connect with nature, establish strong links within the crew and escape both physically and mentally. A hobby involving experience which attracts many people but which needs to transform if it is to survive...

"The new generations have a very wide range of activities but they don't have the time to become specialists. Technology has a role to play in making navigation more accessible and boats more autonomous," Nicolas declares enthusiastically. A view upheld by Sailsense, which could promote the emergence of boat-sharing, in the same way as car-sharing systems which are based on using rather than owing vehicles.

“ WE AIM TO MAKE SAILING A MORE ACCESSIBLE DISCIPLINE ”



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1983

Born in Brussels

2002-2007

Master's degree in Business Economics at SBS-EM

2007-2011

Consultant at Eurogroup Consulting

2011-2016

Supply Chain Programme Manager at Delhaize Group

2017

Co-founder and CEO of Sailsense Analytics

Astrolabe and compass 4.0

Data analysis is Sailsense's key feature, thanks to algorithms which provide users with a series of information. And the hardware? An onboard system consisting of two types of casings: a hub (the brain) which centralises the entire operation, supplemented by one or more pods. "Those devices are connected to the boat's instruments so as to collect as much data as possible," Yannick explains. "But the heart of our activity is data processing, i.e. what we do with all the information. How we supplement it with other data, such as the weather conditions, and transform all that into useful information." Thanks to an adapted software layer, their solution meets the needs of everyone in the pleasure boating sector, from boat hirers to occasional helmsmen. Hirers, for example, can anticipate an engine problem or be informed of any incident that might arise while their boats are out



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If you'd like to suggest an alumnus or alumna or present your project in this section, write to us at sbs-em@elixis.be.

OUR TIPS as entrepreneurs, sailor!

- **Add to your "toolbox":** "Even if we have the wind in our sails with entrepreneurship at the moment, our careers in consultancy have proved very useful. It enables you to complete your training, equip yourself and learn to evolve in a disruptive world."
- **Join up with others:** "It helped enormously that there were two of us. What's more, we very quickly sought advice from well-informed people from different backgrounds. It's essential!"
- **Get out of the building:** "It's vital to go into the field and confront reality, to check your hypotheses and move your ideas forward."
- **Follow your passions:** "That may seem like a cliché, but passion gives rise to the desire and the energy to progress."

on hire. Not forgetting all the statistics made available to them. For pleasure boaters, whether experienced or novices, everything is made easier at the helm as their smartphones become cruise companions.

Wind in their sails

Artificial intelligence, machine learning and the Internet of Things are at the centre of the tool developed by the two former Solvay students. "The challenge at the moment is to define as accurately as possible the navigational state of the boat at a given moment: sailing, engine-powered, in port, doing manoeuvres etc. The higher the degree of certainty, the more advanced the functionalities. The potential is enormous..." says Nicolas, who recently joined up with the software.brussels cluster to share his expertise in the field. "Assisting and advising users are the first steps. But it is possible to imagine a boat that takes control if an incident occurs, such as a yacht at anchor that drifts off or a man overboard." Increasingly autonomous sailing boats, even capable of piloting themselves? This is no longer science fiction. "Our solution is already unique on the market, but we want to go even further. Particularly since manufacturers pay close attention to innovations like ours." A technological storm that could turn the recreational boating sector upside down. Meanwhile, the two captains are taking great care to bring Sailsense safely to port. ■