

PROFILE



Steve Morton, founder/owner of Visions East Inc. Staff photo/Susan Stocker

siderable. A similar job would cost more than \$1.6 million in labor and materials if done manually, Morton estimates, while a Visions East robotic system could do it just over \$511,000.

In 2004, Visions East sold a system to a boatyard in Sweden for about \$4.5 million.

Robert Bolderson, who is developing a high-tech project to build luxury aluminum and titanium yachts in New Orleans, **BoldMar Inc.**, plans to acquire another.

"As our yachts are finished, we'll use Steve's process for smoothing and painting," said Bolderson, who's based in Sunrise. "It's an advanced, environmentally friendly process that will produce a world-class yacht finish in less time with less waste."

"It's taken a little longer than we expected" to generate sales, said Morton. "We kept the other [marine coatings] company ... it's a good thing."

Vision East's systems, which use robots made by a Japanese company, are customized according to vessel size and job requirements. They start at about \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million for equipment that can handle a 90-foot boat and can reach as high as to \$10 million to \$12 million for a vessel measuring about 500 feet.

"We offer a true turnkey operation," Morton said, including designing a system to the client's specifications, setting up and testing the equipment on site and providing training to operators. "We don't just ship a box of robot parts and an instruction sheet."

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HIGH-TECH ON DECK

Lauderdale firm employs robotics to paint yachts.

BY JOSEPH MANN
BUSINESS WRITER

Under a blazing South Florida sun about two decades ago, Steve Morton and three co-workers struggled for hours with a 12-foot sanding board, pushing it back and forth across the hull of a 122-foot yacht that was being prepared for a paint job.

"After having my brain fried in the sun that day, I began thinking about a better way to do this," said Morton, who has been painting yachts in South Florida since 1977. "This was like building the pyramids. We needed 21st century technology, and I began thinking about making a fully automated system for marine painting."

The founder and owner of **Performance Marine Coatings Inc.**, a successful Fort Lauderdale firm that paints and finishes yachts worldwide, realized that the auto industry had been using robots to paint cars for decades, while the marine industry is still

using costly, labor-intensive techniques to prepare finishes on newly built boats and to repaint existing vessels.

Morton learned all he could about robots and computerized laser mapping of surfaces. He began developing a system that combined robots and specialized tools that could be used to finish and paint boats.

In 1994, Morton set up **Visions East Inc.** and began a long and costly entrepreneurial journey. So far he has invested about \$750,000 of his own money in the project (he had to sell his own house to help pay expenses), and has received \$2 million from an "angel" investor.

Morton first designed a robotic system and specialized finishing/painting processes that can be applied to yachts and larger vessels — both commercial and military — at the end of the manufacturing process and when they need maintenance.

He built a prototype robotic painter in 2003, obtained patents in the United States and overseas and began marketing his systems at trade and technology shows, yacht builders and shipyards worldwide.

VISIONS EAST INC.

Business: Sells its own patented robotic systems and processes for preparing and painting surfaces on yachts and ships.

Headquarters: Fort Lauderdale

Owner/Founder: Steve Morton

Employees: Two full-time plus two consultants

Established: 1994

Comments: "You can't start your own business unless you're willing to work twice as hard as anyone else," Steve Morton, owner and founder.

SOURCE: VISIONS EAST INC.

Vision East's robotic systems use computer programs and specialized tools to map the surface of a hull, spray on an epoxy surface, cut, smooth and sand the surface to the ideal shape then add primer and paint. "With traditional methods, it would take about a year to fair [mill and smooth] and paint a 50-meter [164-foot] new construction yacht," said Morton. "We can do it more precisely in less than half the time."

And the cost savings are con-