

# THE YO SHOW

With Yo! Sushi, Simon Woodroffe revolutionised the way we eat. But will his new venture, Yotel, change the way we travel?

**Annabel Rivkin** enters the dragon's den

**T**he houseboats on Cheyne Walk are a gypsyish cluster of colourful vessels with an air of the commune about the chipped paint, pot plants and raggedy little dogs. Simon Woodroffe – the founder of Yo! Sushi, chairman of Yo! Everything Else and most recently creator of the hi-tech pods that make up his new international and very 21st-century travel venture, Yotel – is standing in the doorway of his grandly named boat, *The Trafalgar*, flashing his red loafers and impressive lamb-chop sideburns at the camera.

Shoot over, we wander into the saloon where Cheri, Simon's PA and cook, produces tea and various packs of business literature with discreet efficiency. Until a couple of months ago there were two Cheries in Simon's life. He dated the actress and Kenco coffee lady Cherie Lunghi for about a year and although a little bruised by the break-up, he is now a bachelor once more.

There is something Jaggeresque about his badly disguised public-school accent, his modish John Pearse suits, stripey socks and noisy footwear.

But he has lively blue eyes, perfect manners (army father, you see; more of which later) and an expansively open way about him. His gentleness is unexpected and his good nature evident. The trouble is, he's done so much inspirational public speaking since the launch and speedy trajectory of Yo! Sushi, in 1997, that it's hard to know where the motivational material stops and he starts.

'Maybe I'm a bit of a show-off,' says the man who sang 'Born to be Wild' as part of his speech to the Institute of Directors at the Royal Albert Hall. 'I

found out soon after Yo! Sushi opened that I enjoyed playing to the camera and I was an entrepreneur, not a restaurateur, so I wasn't really qualified to talk about food.' Yo! Sushi now has 30 outlets and Simon retained a 90 per cent stake until it was refinanced by the private equity firm Primary Capital in 2001, which earned him about £10 million hard cash. He retains 22 per cent of the shares.

Yet he lives on a houseboat, drives a second-hand car and doesn't seem to be in it for the money so much as for the sense of achievement and glory.

His message is all about being proud of what you've done rather than what you have. Yes, he has at least £10 million in the bank, a big sushi-funded income and earns thousands for each speech, but he is not yet a private-plane person. The Yotels, however, could make him seriously rich.

Simon's father, Brigadier Woodroffe of the Indian Cavalry Association, fully expected his two sons (Patrick is younger by two years and a successful lighting designer for bands such as the Rolling

Stones) to share his values and sense of duty. 'He was a conventional, charming, army person. My mum was slightly country-house aristocracy, so my dad married rather well. We were brought up in that Fifties world of visiting family at big country houses and being the poor relations. I remember thinking, "I wouldn't mind being one of them," and assuming I would be rich by the time I was 20, then getting to 20 and thinking, "Love and peace – I'll put it off till I'm 30." When I got to 40 I realised I had completely forgotten to become a millionaire.'

During his early childhood, Simon's parents were posted mainly in Germany and Singapore and he was sent, aged seven, to board at a prep school in Buckinghamshire called The Knoll. 'I tell you, that drove me to a lot of things, the loneliness

of being at school. My brother and I often talk about our different experiences of growing up. He felt very loved and secure and didn't mind boarding school, and I felt completely abandoned.'

He was sent to Marlborough College but elected to leave at 16 with two O levels. 'It was the end of the hippie dippy Sixties and I wanted to leave school. I went to Cambridge Tech and became a full-on hippie, then I was busted for drugs [cannabis]. I'm always wary of saying it, but I sold a few quid deals in my time. I wasn't a very good



Simon Woodroffe on his boat, *The Trafalgar*, on Cheyne Walk, Chelsea