

FLASH FISH

This is the age of aquariums: young men are paying a fortune to “aqua-scape” their indoor fish tanks—and parting with up to £250,000 for a single fish. Why?

We’re waiting for the suicide fish. It is Monday night. We’re in expensive territory—Notting Hill, west London—and we’re staring at a huge aquarium roughly 14 feet long and three feet tall. There’s water and there’s rock in there. Not much else.

“When they due?”

“Pretty soon.”

“What are they called?”

“I don’t know, man.”

The protein skimmers whirr and hum in the intervening silence. “You have to feel for them,” I say, after a while. “I mean, if you’re going to be a fish, then you don’t want to be one of these suicide guys. You want to be... second wave.”

“Yes. But we’re trying to prevent wipeout here. That’s what it’s all about. If you don’t use the suicide guys to test the water, and something goes wrong, you could have a very expensive mass extermination event on your hands. Could be carbon dioxide, could be pH balance, could be salt, could be temperature, could be anything—but you lose the whole tank.” He draws slow and sober breath. “Wipeout.”

I’ve known this guy almost 20 years. For the last ten or so, we have trusted one another with the stuff of closest friendship. And yet this is the first time we’ve talked tank. I feel the need to have a reciprocal secret. (A tortoise hatchery?) I daren’t ask him how much it’s costing; my guess is easily £15,000 with upkeep north of £500 a month.

Welcome to the booming world of high-end aquariums. Latest figures show that sales have doubled in the past year at aquarium sellers from Lancashire to Southampton. There are rumours of oligarchs and Premier League footballers frantically trying to out-tank one another, with items such as a £3m aquarium made from solid gold and mammoth tusk. But it’s not just the super-rich driving the new aquarium explosion. It’s also the “glamour boys” on the “planted tank scene”: well-groomed middle-income professionals—stylish, savvy, suave – for whom the submarine flora are just as important as the fauna. Then there’s the internet chatroom frenzy, the busy democracy of the forums, the YouTube channels: 623,000 hits on Dave Saxby’s Reef Aquarium alone. From all corners of the land, men are talking fish tank again. Not since the underwater-chic begun by the Bond films of the 1960s and 1970s has there been such interest and demand. But where has this revival come from? And what does it mean?

“The whole fish thing used to be a bit naff or strange,” admits Jeremy Gay at *Practical Fishkeeping* magazine in Peterborough. “But now it’s not. Now, it’s young men between 25 and 35 and it’s suddenly become cool. A lot of these men have serious disposable incomes and they are ordering big.”

“How big?”

“You can order fish worth up to £250,000—take the Platinum Arowana. We flew out to Singapore to see it. The irony is that Arowana are prone to jumping out of the tank and dying. So you have to put a lid on, which makes them very vulnerable to a disease called dropeye. It’s crazy. But you’d be surprised—some of these football players have a lot of money and they have to spend it on something. Talk to Roland.”

Even if the Platinum Arowana stays deformity-free and is good for ten years, that’s £25,000 a year, which is a lot of money to spend on a pet that doesn’t love you back. I call Roland: Roland Marcelin-Horne, creative director at Aquarium Architecture (London, Manchester, New York).

“I can’t talk,” he says. “I’m putting a tank in at the house of a Newcastle player. He’s very high profile. Very. Wait a second.” I listen to him walking outside (crunchy gravel, massed Bentleys circumnavigated). “Right, sorry, that’s better. We did an Arsenal player before. And Stephen Ireland at Manchester City—before he moved clubs—it was way more than the £100,000 that was reported. Maintenance alone.”

“He pays maintenance?”

“It’s all about the maintenance. We did Belgravia Square at nearly half a million—sixth most expensive house in Britain. Later this year we’re doing a really big one, for a Russian oligarch. Huge. You guessed it—him, I mean. No I can’t say. Then we’re back to Newcastle for another of their players. It’s insane.”

Practical Fish have also pointed me in the direction of the bespoke aquarium makers Aquavista (“we add life to art”); specifically, the Aquavista Dinosaur Gold, the monster £3m aquarium. The brochure tells me there are only going to be three in the world and they will each comprise: “a massive amount of pure solid 24ct gold, two extraordinary side veneers made from mammoth’s tusk with a unique piece of dinosaur bone from the T-Rex diagonally shaved into the tusk.” My friend in Notting Hill will have to step it up. I note that the Aquavista Dinosaur Gold is not without practical attributes: it is “low maintenance—designed to simplify your life” and it is available at 5ft, 6ft, 7ft and even 10ft for those who want to “bring their walls to life.”



A luxury tank by Aquarium Architecture in a London townhouse

What is going on? “Maybe it’s *Finding Nemo*. Or *Blue Planet*,” suggests Sue Church, director of Aquariums Ltd (Lancashire). “Or it could be the whole planted tank scene. All I can say is that we’ve doubled our turnover in the last year. Speak to the Takashi Amano men.”

The Amano men are the new and growing cadre of Daniel Craigs on the “planted tank scene.” They are aquascapers; they arrange plants, rocks, wood in their aquariums in an artistic form. Think *GQ*; think glamour; think art. To these people, the fish are secondary. Takashi Amano is their high priest, and his temple is the Nature Aquarium Gallery in Niigata, a city two hours north of Tokyo. On the scene, it’s well known that Amano pioneered the whole iwagumi thing—an intersection of zen, feng-shui and bonsai—but taken to the tank. And so his school is usually more asymmetrical, minimalist. The rival Dutch school, meanwhile, is more about heavy planting—layers, colours, textures, terracing—and they tend to hold their own competitions through the likes of the Veni Vidi Vissie organisation. (“Vissie” is Dutch for fishes. Thus: “I came, I saw, I kept fish.”)

The man to speak to in Britain about the planted tank scene is Dan Crawford, one of the founders of UKAPS: the United Kingdom Aquatic Plant Society. Crawford is an Amano disciple and the beating heart of British aquascaping. “We’ve got 6,500 members on our forum,” he says. “The numbers speak for themselves.”



A telephone booth transformed for the Lyon Light Festival

I’ve been on the forums: UKAPS, *Practical Fish Keeping*, *Tropical Fish*, *Tropical Fish Finder*, *Aqua-Fish*. This is where men get together to discuss their problems—algae, parasites, how to go marine. It’s busy and it’s emotional. “I think it’s because we do the aqueous art movement,” Crawford continues. “Art incorporating aquascaping. We had a big exhibition in London. Packed out.”

“But why are so many men into it?” I ask. A few conversations back, I’ve heard that more and more women like to get their toes nibbled by *Garra rufa* fish. Maybe it’s something similar but non-contact. “Is it about calming?”

“No.” He is emphatic. “No no no. It’s stressful and hectic. Sure, what I do might be nice for you to look at. But, for me, it’s stress, panic, high energy. If anything goes wrong, it goes

crazy. There's so much to get right, look after, deal with. I have to keep everything in absolute balance. It's got to be perfect."

"We're talking competitions?"

"We can do. For example, we went over to Hanover and they gave us six hours to aquascape. We had to choose plants, choose landscapes: rocks and wood. So we do all that—fine—but it's not easy. It's pressure. It's tension. And then... well then we find that the Germans have grown most of their stuff beforehand. So they have a huge advantage. We had no idea pre-growing was allowed! We thought it was supposed to be a level playing field!"

I can hear the hurt in his voice. But for me this is just generating more questions. The most prestigious competition is in Japan. It's called the IAPLC: the International Aquatic Plants Layout Competition, and it's run by Amano's Nature Aquarium Gallery. They had nearly 2,000 entries from more than 50 countries last year. (You have until 31st May.) But how do they get their tanks there? It must be chaos at security: all that water slapping about; jet-lagged fish; airsick coral. Jeremy Gay at *Practical Fish* puts me straight: "They email photographs."

I'm shocked. "But what about...?" I can't say it. "Photoshop?" He sucks his teeth. "Photoshop is the fish keeper's friend."

He advises me to check the rules for the IAPLC. There's a whole section on how to take the pictures. But, then, in the "contest grading guidelines," I become further confused. They tell me that "since the planted aquarium hobby involves various forms of life, we don't just appreciate the beauty of a layout shown right after its completion, we pay careful attention to observe how long the layout has been kept in a healthy condition." How can they know?

I go back to my oligarchs man, Roland Marcelin-Horne. "Listen," he lowers his voice, "marine is where the top end is really at. That's what's driving it. The rich start it, then you get trickle down. Personally, I think the whole aquascaping thing is a storm in a teacup. I know those guys. I like them. But I haven't sold a single tank because someone wanted to grow underwater cabbage. That's not what it's about."

"What about women?"

"No. You can watch the rich wives losing interest the minute you explain it's hard work—with the feeding regimes and cleaning schedules and maintenance and keeping the balances level. Plus you can't take your aquarium out and about. Female customers are like hen's teeth. It's men who feel the need for fish."

"Right, so it's about men and fish and sublimated emotions?"

"Yeah. What I do is 70 per cent counselling men and 30 per cent fish welfare. It's like a marriage—these men get into it and they've spent all this money and they get scared."

"Of wipeout?" I suggest.

"Sure. So here I am: a shoulder to cry on. I'm the fish emergency service. I get calls day and night from men who are in a right state. They've spent a lot so they think they can ring me whenever the hell they want, and it's not like they can go anywhere else when things start to—"

“Tank.” I say, helpfully.

“Exactly.”



You've been tangoed: a Yellow Tang from Hawaii can cost £3,000

I've heard the men thing from everyone I have spoken to. Sure, some cite Disney's 2003 film *Finding Nemo* as the moment when aquariums started coming back. Some say it is Barbados and the rise of scuba diving. Others say it's the 1970s revival: chest hair, bad shirts, aquariums. Others again say it's the Cheltenham & Gloucester pearl-diving commercial that was on television for so long. Some say it must be the Maldives. Some say it's to do with urban claustrophobia and the lack of outdoor gardening space. Others cite Brit art. Others say it's to do with the interior design extravaganza. Some say bling, some say gadgets, some say calm and some say creation. Others speculate that it's because aquariums have everything: art, science, nature. But be it aquascapers or oligarchs or footballers or hobbyists, tropical tanks, marine, planted or cold water, the forums or YouTube, everyone agrees: it is about men.

What are they getting back? Off the record, some shop owners point out that fish never know their keepers and that this is not the usual human-pet relationship. Others go deeper and say that it's about creating a parallel universe over which you have total control. Some outsiders go darker still and say that it's about keeping pretty things in total dependency in a see-through cage. But I've heard the opposite too: that men like to stare at fish for the same reason they become amateur astronomers, because it is a pastime which carries them into a world untroubled by gender politics. Make of this what you will. As for the suicide fish—the ones they send in first to test the water, to “stabilise” the tanks, to live or to die—well, it is oddly beautiful and tragic to report that they are called clownfish.