

Sailing away on a dream boat to adventure

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WHEN the boats in the Governor's Cup sail out of False Bay tomorrow, a Cape Town couple and their two daughters will be among the contestants. And, once the race ends in St Helena, Leon James, Nicola Mulholland and their daughters, Zoë, 7, and Nina, 3, plan to continue sailing – around the world for the next five years.

They have been living on their 38-foot catamaran, Iza, (Xhosa for "come") moored in Simon's Town for a year, preparing for their sea adventure to exotic places such as Trinidad, Tobago, the Galapagos Islands, French Polynesia, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

Leon, 39, who is originally from Margate in KwaZulu-Natal, started sailing in 1995, and came to Cape Town in 1997 in search of someone needing crew to sail to Brazil.

He has since crossed the Atlantic five times to deliver new catamarans to their respective owners in the US.

However, it will be Nicci's and the children's first crossing.

Nicci, 34, met Leon in 1998 when she went on a family holiday to the Caribbean and stayed on the yacht Leon was working on.

It must have been love at first sight, because six weeks after Nicci returned to South Africa, she hopped back on a plane to join Leon in the Bahamas. He was skippering a boat – and she joined as first mate "or maid", Nicci says with a chuckle.

She soon shared Leon's passion for sailing.

"I always loved the sea but fell in love with boats and sailing when I met and fell in love with Leon," she says.

In the Bahamas, they met many families with young children living on boats – a lifestyle they found appealing and "knew that one day we would do this".

Nicci and Leon were married in 2002 and Zoë was born in 2003,

Romance is what it's all about – a couple taking to the seas with their children so they can travel the world before everyone is too old, writes

DIANA CULLIS

followed by Nina in 2007.

They have decided to go on their epic journey while the children are young because if they were to wait until Zoë and Nina had finished school, she and Leon "would be older and possibly not fit enough to do it", says Nicci.

Also, the grown-up children might not want to go.

For Nicci and Leon, a big part of the trip will be about spending time together as a family.

"It's about us as a family, doing things together, things that we take



NEW HOME: Leon James and Nicola Mulholland, with their daughters Zoë, 7, and Nina, 3, aboard their catamaran Iza. The family is leaving tomorrow for a five-year adventure at sea.

PICTURE: BRENTON GEACH

for granted. Travelling with them at this age will leave a huge impression on their lives."

Nicci and Leon say the first thing on their agenda while they prepare for a trip with young children is "safety first".

The girls must wear safety jackets at all times with harnesses that attach them to lines running aft and fore of the boat and from side to side. If they were to fall overboard,

they would still be attached to the boat, says Nicci.

"The girls know the rules. It's like a car seat; they have to buckle up.

"Living aboard the catamaran, which is moored at the False Bay Yacht Club, and sailing almost every weekend for more than a year has taught them the rules," says Nicci.

Nicci and Leon also completed an STCW 95 course in July.

It covered first aid, fire-fighting

and personal safety at sea.

"This course gave us a good deal of confidence. The life raft practice was good. We have a life raft on board, but we had no idea what it looked like inside.

"It will not be the most comfortable place, but it could save our lives," says Nicci.

The first aid component of the course covered things such as resuscitation, broken bones,

bleeding and even suturing.

"I can't promise a pretty job, but it'll hold," laughs Nicci.

The first aid kit they will take with them includes antibiotics, pain medication, antihistamine, eye drops, ear drops and malaria medication – "pretty much everything that we would need before we could get to medical facilities".

As for the children's education,

Nicci will be home-schooling.

"The schooling seemed daunting at first, but now that Zoë has completed Grade 1 (at Springfield Convent in Wynberg), Leon and I have enough confidence to teach her.

"Everything on board will be shared – Leon will do some teaching, just as I will be doing boat duties.

"I am following the South African curriculum for the moment. I have bought textbooks for Grades 2, 3 and 4 for Zoë, and for Nina I have bought Grade 1 books which she will need in three years' time.

"The school work will be done on a daily basis, weather permitting, for about two hours.

"On rough days, there will be no school, so we need to teach as much as possible on the calm days for the unforeseen bad days. If we dock somewhere for three months or more, we may put them in school for short periods."

The Governor's Cup will end with the family celebrating Leon's 40th birthday on St Helena on December 22, and then it's on to Ascension Island and then Brazil, where they plan to spend three months travelling.

Next in line are visits to French Guiana, Venezuela, Trinidad, Tobago and Grenadine Island.

After visiting a few Caribbean islands, they will go to Panama, transit the canal and visit the Galapagos and Marquesas islands, French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, Tonga and Fiji.

Then, it's on to Australia, Indonesia, the Andaman Islands, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, the Chagos Archipelago, Seychelles, Madagascar, and finally back home to South Africa.

"Our plan is to travel for five years. We would like to spend most of our time (at least three years) in the Pacific islands.

"This is the plan for now.

"Things could change along the way," says Nicci.