



**SUPER SCIENCE YACHT:** The yacht Antarctica, which was recently featured on the television programme *Beyond 2000*. The dome-like windows, covered by a highly insulating material which has a hothouse effect, can be seen clearly.

# Yacht at home in icy Antarctic seas

**WILLEM STEENKAMP**  
Staff Reporter

SCIENCE fiction has sailed into Table Bay harbour in the shape of the Antarctica, a 120-ton aluminium yacht, on its way back from a three-month scientific research voyage to the icy waters around the Antarctic continent.

According to the French captain, Didier Gainette, the Antarctica is fitted with highly sophisticated computer banks for storing, processing and sending scientific and other data back to France via satellite.

Besides research, the crew also produced many educational programmes for national French television.

The Antarctica, designed and built in Brest, France, in 1989 has been the subject of the well-known television programme *Beyond 2000*.

According to Captain Gainette, not only is the design of the yacht unique, but it has some features specially designed for the treacherous waters of the Antarctic.

It is built entirely of aluminium, which ensures it is light

enough to be pushed to the surface should it get trapped in ice. For that reason the bottom section of the vessel's hull is flat and it has two retractable keels.

The onboard biologist, Mr Christophe Verheyden, told of a near-disaster off the coast of Chile, where the crew were filming whales.

"We were sailing close to the coast where no rocks were indicated on our charts. Suddenly there was a loud tearing noise and we realised we had struck a rock.

"We lost one of our keels — a sudden loss in weight of more than a ton. Luckily the hull was not ruptured and we were able to continue sailing with just one keel," said Mr Verheyden.

The Antarctica is fitted with dome-like windows, specially strengthened and covered by a transparent but highly insulating material. With even the little heat generated by the sun in the polar regions, the material on the windows creates a hothouse effect.

In the three months the yacht spent south of the Antarctic Circle it was never necessary to use its heaters.

The Antarctica sailed from France in August and was forced to leave the southern latitudes by a thickening ice pack.

It then sailed to the treacherous waters south of Cape Horn, where the crew made television programmes on the sea life in the region.

The crew of eight have produced more than 50 educational TV programmes of about 15 minutes each during the past six months.

The yacht is owned by Dr Jean-Louis Ettienne, who gained fame in 1990 when he crossed the widest part of the Antarctic continent on foot and with sledges with a Russian, a Briton, an American, a Japanese and a Chinese.

While they were crossing the ice, the Antarctica sailed the roundabout route, providing Dr Ettienne with communication facilities and satellite links.

The Antarctic Foundation, which runs the Antarctica's programme, charters the vessel from Dr Ettienne and is sponsored by a large oil company, French national television and the French Ministry of Education.



**HOMEWARD BOUND:** After spending three months in the icy waters of the Antarctic seas the eight crew will soon fly back to France. A new crew will sail the vessel back to France. The crew are, from left, Eric Ringenbach (second engineer), Claud Rio (mate), Hélène Rio (cook), Didier Gainette (captain), Christophe Verheyden (scientist) and Vann Danguy (engineer).