

Officials play pirates

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TREBUKE

Caviar and champagne all the way as Mozambicans force yachtsmen to pay bogus fines

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ANGRY South African yachtsmen who competed in the recent Inhaca Island race say they were threatened and "ripped off" by corrupt Mozambican officials, and many have vowed never to return to the island.

The yachtsmen say they were harassed and made to pay trumped-up fines and a series of unscheduled charges and fees. Those who balked were threatened with imprisonment or having their yachts impounded.

Some said it was possible the harassment was retribution for the "Coralita Affair", in which the South African yacht, Coralita, a Zululand Yacht Club boat, escaped from Mozambican waters after being impounded by Frelimo for allegedly plundering a wreck off the shores of Inhaca Island.

The Zululand Yacht Club, which organises the annual Inhaca race, had faxed arrangements to Mozambican authorities, requesting four customs officials be sent to Inhaca from Maputo to clear the arriving yachts into Mozambique.

Mark Austin, commodore of the club, said the club had agreed to pay for the four officials to stay in the hotel on Inhaca for two nights to make things easier for the authorities and the arriving yachtsmen.

Twelve officials turned up on the island, many of them from departments totally unrelated to customs, but race officials managed to instruct the hotel to tell them there was only accommodation for nine. The nine stayed for five nights, running up an enormous bill.

"It was crayfish, caviar and champagne all the way for these guys," said one disgruntled yachtsman, who preferred to remain anonymous.

Trevor Shields, a member of the race committee, said: "These guys got drunk every night at our expense."

Only one of the officials could speak

English and most of them were just "hangers-on along for the ride".

Not having enough cash on hand to settle the hotel bill, the Zululand Yacht Club had to make arrangements with the owner to pay him once the race officials had returned to South Africa.

The ordeal for the South Africans did not end there. They further alleged that: ■ While being cleared into Inhaca by customs officials, many yachtsmen were fined up to R300 for a variety of "offences", many of them trumped-up, including not being in possession of a "skipper's ticket". This is a yacht master certificate issued by the Cruising Association of South Africa for skippering a vessel from South African ports, but it is not required in Mozambican waters. One yacht was "fined" a total of R700;

■ Crews who argued with officials or refused to pay were threatened with imprisonment or a "blockade" to prevent the yachts from leaving the port;

■ They were forced to pay R10 a day per crew member for the privilege of remaining at anchor in the port. All crew members had already paid R120 for a visa to enter Mozambique;

■ A fee of R20 a day was asked from each yacht for "refuse removal" by a barge. Boats which paid up-front for the whole period never saw the barge again;

■ Family and crew members who drove up to Maputo say they were stopped at roadblocks at 10 to 20km intervals and made to pay "toll fees" of up to R20 to be allowed to continue. One man is believed to have spent well over R1 000 to get to Inhaca.

■ Officials allegedly accepted bottles of whisky in lieu of cash as payment of "fines".

"Wherever we went, there was some guy there trying to take money off us," said Mr Shields.