

Terror and discomfort aboard Da Gama favourite

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LIKE most of the annual 240-mile Wilbur Ellis Da Gama yacht races from Durban to East London, the predicted weather conditions started out badly and progressed well past the shocking mark as the race continued.

The race started at 11am on Thursday and I boarded the 76-foot yacht Meditech Computers earlier that morning. This super-fast boat was expected to shatter the 30 hour record and the 21 crew and I all looked forward to a good pub lunch at East London.

However, this idea was soon forgotten as the huge yacht cleared the harbour entrance ahead of the race fleet and felt the full force of the gale-force south westerly.

As the wind increased, so too did the discomfort level with the skipper, Neil Bailey, ordering most of the crew to sit with feet their dangling over the weather rail to keep the weight to one side.

Meditech ploughed through

the heavy swell and the 35 knot wind whipped back the spray, drenching everyone.

For several hours crewmen sat with our hoods up and heads down, as the water and wind pounded the yacht. Conditions were extremely unpleasant as the yacht flew through the air before coming down with a teeth-rattling crash on the next swell.

It is difficult for an inexperienced yachtsman like myself to understand how the boat did not break in two and sink, but according to the skipper it could take far more punishment before giving up the ghost.

The day dragged on and on, and the helmsmen tacked back and forth, putting miles between the yacht and their nearest rivals, but slowly moving down the coast.

Then a halyard broke, followed by the number three head sail as the unrelenting gale battered the yacht.

Crewman Dirk Schroeder had his nose broken when the torn sail whipped about uncontrollably in the wind, and another

man broke a finger.

The gale brought with it seas reaching four metres, and waves were crashing over the yacht at chest height.

As night fell it was even more frightening, with visibility limited to a few metres. The regular cry "big wave, big wave" had everyone grabbing ropes or railings to avoid being swept overboard to almost certain death.

Then suddenly the boat plunged down a huge swell 20 miles off the Wild Coast's North Sands Bluff and two metres of water swept over the deck.

The fore hatch was destroyed and tons of water poured below decks, forcing Bailey to call off the race and head for home.

"This yacht could easily beat the record to East London and that's where we would be now if the hatch hadn't gone," Bailey said.

But I must admit that when the engines were fired and the shore lights moved from the starboard side to port as the yacht turned north, I was a very happy man.