

Close-quarter compatibility can make or break a crew

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ARGUS



AROUND about now, the leading yachts in the Portnet Dias Race are arriving in the Azores and one can imagine there must be some relief among crew members that they have arrived safely.

With boats and crew in fine fettle, these men and women can relax after the stress of on-board racing conditions and take time to explore the fascinating island group.

However, what of the interaction of crew during the long weeks at sea?

Living together in almost matchbox-sized yachts creates tensions. A good crew is not selected only for sailing ability. One of the most difficult tasks any skipper has is to select a compatible team.

Months, or even years, of careful planning can be spoilt if one chooses a crew not able to withstand the rigours of long-distance voyaging in close confinement.

Far from the commonly-presented picture of sailors lounging on deck in sunny weather, it's not all fun and games, especially when it's bitterly cold and vicious winds pile the sea apparently more on deck than under the keel.

SMALL niggles become amplified after long periods at sea. Little habits become unbearably irritating. Tempers fray easily and some tension between skipper and crew is inevitable during any long voyage.

Everybody aboard has an unspoken duty to keep relations good between the crew. On one voyage from Uruguay to Cape Town we found

that compassion was a vital attribute of a good crew member.

If anybody felt out of sorts, some one else would take over his or her cooking duty or volunteer extra helm duty.

At one stage, I developed a kidney infection and was almost bunk-ridden for a few days. The boat ran smoothly around me and everybody aboard took over my duties until I was able to resume my work.

It's all a matter of give and take.

Strong bonds are formed at sea and these can last a lifetime. After all, it's an unusual way to choose to live.

CRAMPED and soggy conditions are never pleasant. Strength of character and the willingness to share are all-important. Above all, a healthy sense of humour works wonders in keeping up morale.

It is always interesting to see just how crews have fared after a long-distance race. It's not uncommon to find that some crews split up as soon as the yacht is tied up and members set off to find another boat, muttering about the dreadful voyage.

On the other hand, crews that have worked well often become a happy shore-going family, sharing new experiences and exploring new places together.

There can be few friendships as strong as those forged at sea.