



LEFT: Off to a quick start from Grand Baie — AFI Fibreglass Warrior, MSC Donna Mia, Kiga, and UFA.

CRYSTIC CROSSING

'Beer-and-bikini cruise, it's not'

SINCE its inception in 1985, the Crystic Beachcomber Crossing race — from Grand Baie, Mauritius, to Durban — has evolved into one of the toughest ocean races on the calendar.

Many people have the idea that a passage between the two ports is a beer-and-bikini cruise. It's not. The yachtsmen taking part in this gruelling 1 600 nautical miles race are tough, dedicated sportsmen — they have to be.

Although several of the yachts are sponsored, many yachtsmen have sacrificed much in terms of money, time and family life to complete. Blue-water yachtsmen are a special breed, and this is a special test in which they face hardship, deprivation and danger.

This year 18 yachts are competing, considerably down on the last race fleet of 38. The economic climate is behind this, with sponsorship difficult to come by. Nevertheless, what the fleet lacks in quantity it more than makes up for in quality.

It was a blow to this year's fleet that the Cape yacht Spilhaus was sunk off Flat Island just before the race began, luckily with no injury. The company of Spilhaus skipper Ted Kuttel in the race is

NORMAN SHERIFF, on board the Meiring Naude

sadly missed.

The race began off Grand Baie with excellent conditions, with the Cape entry Coldcor, as expected, taking an early lead. The boat was previously known as Get More Fun and was the winner of the last race in record time.

This year they had high hopes of breaking the record. Two days out from Mauritius, however, the wind dropped, putting paid to any record-breaking hopes and making a frustrating time for the yachtsmen.

Two days later the wind picked up to almost gale force, with huge swells running. Several yachts revelled in these conditions, especially Coldcor, and she hoisted all sails for Durban, where she is expected tomorrow.

The smallest boat in the race is Durban yacht Susanna Maria IV, currently the tail-end-charlie, more than 600 miles behind the leaders. In between the two there have been some major surprises. The performance of the two Reunion yachts, 12 DU BTP and UFA, has been excellent and for several days they were leading on handicap.

Another star is Shandrani, skippered by Ian Martin, and the radically-designed AMC Classic Challenger from Cape Town. Little was known before the race of their capabilities and both are being sailed to the limit. They could spring a surprise.

As expected, in the L34 section of the fleet there has been a neck-and-neck battle between Durban's AFI Fibreglass Warrior and Cape Town's Suburban Hardware Dulux, with rarely more than 20 miles between them.

Keeping watch over the fleet is the communications ship Meiring Naude, chartered for this race under the captaincy of Captain George Fowlis.

On board are a doctor, in case of emergency, and two radio operators, who do a position check on the yachts every morning, organise messages to and from home and generally keep the fleet supplied with news and weather information — a vital job with the yachts spread over so wide an area.

The Crystic Beachcomber Crossing races is an ocean classic worthy of the traditions and heritage of sailing.

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IT was all hands on deck for COLDCOR, last year's winner under a different name, when winds picked up almost to gale force after a disappointing lull two days out from Mauritius. The Cape yacht, which took an early lead, revels in these speedy conditions and she is expected to reach Durban tomorrow.