

Offshore yacht racing is not about 'beer 'n bikinis'

LET me start by saying how envious I am of all the competitors in the Mauritius to Durban race which started on Saturday. I'd just love to be there myself.

It is probably worth giving the landlubbers who read this column an insight into what life at sea aboard a racing yacht is really all about. Let me tell you right now, it is not all 'beer 'n bikinis'. On most boats there is no booze, and women are hard to find.

Having now spent two nights at sea, and if the winds have been strong and squally, many of the crew are probably asking themselves what they're doing out there anyway. They've been wet and cold, they've been without sleep, and they've certainly been without the home comforts.

Watches are usually divided into four hour cycles during the night, and six hour cycles during the day. The dog watch is just that, the early morning shift from 2am until 6am, and it's a drag. No one gets more than four hours sleep at a stretch at night, or six hours during the day. In fact you get a lot less. Sail changes are always made when I'm off watch having just got warm and just fallen asleep. It's a real rude awakening to hear the cry of 'all

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hands' in the middle of the night, and to get on deck with all hell breaking loose. In heavy weather this may happen two or three times a watch, so in fact you get little sleep.

And for those who can-

not sleep in anything but silk pyjamas and satin sheets, try this for size. In heavy weather most crews sleep in their wet oilskins and seaboots, knowing full well that once they change out of them, they will just get called back on deck again. And the crew 'hot bunk'. As one crewman gets out of his bunk to go on watch, another coming off watch climbs in.

There are never enough bunks for everyone to have their own, and even if there were, hardened racing skippers insist that all off duty crew sleep on the windward side of the boat as it helps keep the boat flat which makes it go faster. When the boat tacks, all the off-watch

crew get out of their leeward bunks and move to the windward bunks.

In between this the 'household chores' still have to be done. The boat has to be kept clean and dry down below, wet sails have to be packed, clothes dried, crew fed and routine maintenance attended to. In between are navigating functions, radio schedules and personal hygiene.

On a long race the cook is the most important person aboard.

I love cooking aboard a yacht, while others would far prefer being on the bow of the boat up to their necks in water changing sails than venturing anywhere near the galley.

It is not so easy mind you. One day try cooking with one hand tied behind your back with someone bouncing the pot all over the stove!

The beauty of cooking aboard ship is that everything is cooked in one pot where possible, so stews are normal. A few cans of this, some of that and a healthy dollop of curry powder can be really tasty. Even a hot breakfast, sometimes known as 'trainsmash', is cooked in a single pot.

Some skippers will not permit tinned foods as they increase weight and reduce performance, so they opt for dehydrated food. YETCH. You will eat anything when hungry, and long for mum's genuine home

cooking rather than 'Crockett's curry.

But there are good times, many of them. They are when the boat is going fast in good conditions with the spinnaker up, the sun is shining, crew morale is really high and the boat is warm and dry inside. On these occasions the two watches compete against each other for the fastest speed, the longest surf, the most miles in a watch. It's a gas, and you're getting to the finish in a hurry.

Why do we do it? It's probably like walking around with a stone in your shoe. When you take it out it really feels good!

**Richard
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