

Hurricane Luis demolishes couple's dreams and hopes

EMILY EDSON

Staff Reporter

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TWO years ago Viqui and Duncan Pooley boarded their yacht Intaka at the Royal Cape Yacht Club and set sail for the wealthy and romantic Caribbean island of St Martin — only to have their dreams dashed.

Today the wealth and romance lie devastated in the wake of Hurricane Luis which savaged the Caribbean earlier this month — and the Pooleys are struggling to rebuild their yacht which Luis hurled onto the beach.

Until two weeks ago, the extended vacation had gone wonderfully. Viqui and Duncan, a Cape Town property developer, had settled in the harbour of St Maarten, the Dutch side of the French/Dutch island.

While they were hoping "to make a bit of money", says Viqui's father Peter Stevenson, "they were mainly just having fun and enjoying it all."

The fun came to an abrupt halt with the dramatic entrance of Luis into their lives. Carrying gusts up to 240 km/h and swells reaching 2,5 m, Luis battered the resort island for hours, ripping entire neighbourhoods apart and wreaking havoc on the hundreds of unprotected boats.

According to Mr Stevenson, who has been able to talk to his daughter briefly by telephone, the Pooleys decided to ride out the storm aboard their 53 ft yacht Intaka.

"They knew the hurricane was coming so they holed up in the lagoon. They stayed on the boat as did most yachtsmen in hopes that they could be of assistance to the yacht."

Throughout the ordeal, sailors struggled to keep their ves-

sels safe by adjusting anchors and running their engines into the wind. In spite of these efforts, almost all the yachts, including Intaka, were ripped from their moorings and flung like toy boats onto the beach, where they were smashed by other vessels and flying debris.

On an island where at least nine people died in the storm, hundreds are missing, and more than 20 000 have been left homeless, the Pooleys have emerged relatively unscathed.

In spite of the loss of the entire deck house and most of the rigging, the steel hull of the Intaka saved the yacht from complete destruction.

More than a week after the hurricane, both the island and the Pooleys are struggling to recover.

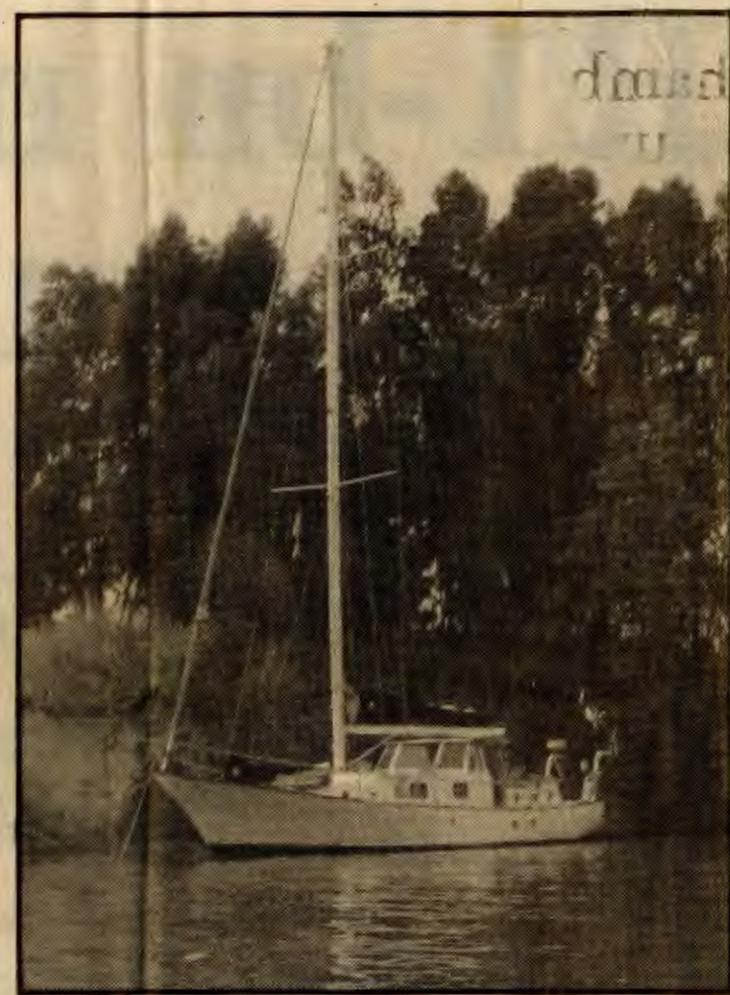
"Viqui and Duncan are both in a state of great excitement, anxiety, and relief — all of the emotions one would expect from this sort of experience," said Mr Stevenson.

For now, "the only thing they can do is hang out, wait, and see what they can salvage. There is an awful lot of confusion. The damage is on such a vast scale that it is not something that can be sorted and analysed in a couple of days."

■ At least one other Capetonian is known to have survived the storm. Yvette Hemmens of Cape Town also clung to her yacht while Luis roared around her.

She believes her survival is due in large part to Tom Higginbotham, pastor of the St Maarten International Baptist Church, who used his powerful radio to provide communication between the vulnerable boats and, more importantly, a voice of calm in a situation that was anything but.

"He's been absolutely unbelievable. If not for him, some people wouldn't be alive", she said.



□ **BEFORE THE STORM:** The Pooley's yacht Intaka in calmer days before Hurricane Luis got hold of her.



□ **YACHTSWOMAN:** Viqui Pooley — lucky to be alive.