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South-easter chop changed our plans

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GRANGER BAY traffic was at a peak when I chugged in on a rusty crawfish boat to watch the last-minute scrambles of the 58 Rio race yachts dodging one another and vying for a flying start at the boom of the smoky gun of the SAS Mosselbaai.

From the choppy bay we could see the land behind the spinnakers patterned with thousands of observers. On the water, numerous cruisers, motorboats and small vessels pitched in the steady south-easter, often lurching within feet of the Brazilian-bound yachts circling around the bay waiting for the third and final blast from the gun.

While our radio blared news of people killed off Mossel Bay and honky-tonk piano music, flags fluttered and boats pitched, while passing yachtsmen waved, manned sails and looked bravely efficient as they rushed about balancing their craft which glided unpredictably in the nippy wind.

We had all been vowing to get into practice for the next Rio race during our trip from Hout Bay to Cape Town, but after a quarter of an hour of south-easter chop and general biliousness, some of us felt that in spite of the beauties of Rio, home on dry land was better.

While helicopters and small aircraft buzzed overhead, seagulls and gannets screamed and the odd penguin and seal ducked among the boats.

The girls of Sprinter, easily distinguishable in their red gear, move confidently among their male counterparts, while Tabarly and Dalling made impressive turnabouts in preparation for the starting gun.

Within minutes of the signal, the yachts had crossed the starting line and at that point, as they sailed into the sun, our skipper murmured something about them being "too fast for us," and we headed steadily and uncomfortably back to the fishmeal-smelling haven of Hout Bay harbour.