

DURBAN — Former Durban shipwright Ray Cruickshank, 62, sailed into Durban harbour on Monday in a tiny 4,4 metre yacht after a 6 000 mile crossing from Australia which he said was safer than "driving to Johannesburg".

As Mr Cruickshank pulled into the yacht basin, he looked rather like the captain at the helm of a giant bathtub.

There were gasps from spectators when they learned he had come all the way from Darwin.

He originally hoped his craft, the Ahoy, would set a record as the smallest ever to make the Australian-Africa voyage, but he was pipped at the post while he was still building her.

Mr Cruickshank learned that an Austrian shipbuilder had accomplished the feat in a yacht only 4 metres long.

Mini yacht reaches Durban

"By the time I heard this, it was too late for me to make the Ahoy shorter, but I have now calculated that I could have made her nearly a metre shorter," he said.

Mr Cruickshank, who has a home in Gordon's Bay in the Cape, said he had designed and built the Ahoy in South Africa and shipped her to Australia.

"My idea was to prove you don't need to spend thousands on a boat for a long voyage. It cost me R7 000, including the diesel engine and the satellite navigator.

"If someone had come to me before and said they wanted to build a yacht of her measurements, I would have said they were crazy. But I made adjustments as I built her and realised what was possible.

"She's 4,48 metres. She's half as broad as she's long. She weighs two-and-a-half tons. Theoretically she shouldn't even float."

The Ahoy is fitted with only a single square sail, but she carries sufficient fuel to power the engine for 3 000 nautical miles in case of trouble.

Mr Cruickshank set off from Darwin at the end of August and was expected in Durban last Saturday, but he ran into a three-day gale which slowed him to one knot. His last few days at sea were also made more difficult when his autopilot failed. —Sapa