



**MAGIC:** Owner Bill Jones gives the thumbs-up for his aluminium racing yacht, Merlin.

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## Free as a bird — but flying over the waves

### Staff Reporter

THE philosophies of aircraft design have been applied to build a unique 65-ft aluminium racing yacht for the Cape to Rio yacht race which starts in January 1996.

Bill Jones, South African Airways pilot and owner of the yacht, Merlin, said the two skeg rudders and the lifting keel made it "one of the boats with the highest speed potential in the world".

The yacht was designed by Alexander Simonis, who also designed the last Cape to Rio race winner, Broomstick.

"The rudders operate like an aircraft control with the back part moving and the front part staying stationary. In extended position, the keel has got a deep draft of four metres for good racing performance and in raised position, a shallow draft of 2,2 m to enable the boat to anchor in shallow waters, like near the Indian Ocean Islands.

"The principles of sailing and flying are the same. The airflow of winds control both. Flying is more unforgiving though because you can't stop if you're in trouble," said Mr Jones, who, after 25 years as a pilot, says his job is "the best".

"It's just one of those jobs, you know, you just love it," he said.

He said Merlin had "excellent

cruising potential".

"I can't wait to see it float. I'm going to sail it to Rio and I haven't done the race before. We've got a full year to test it and to do modifications, if necessary," said Mr Jones, a Johannesburg resident who was in Cape Town for Merlin's launch this week.

"The twin steering wheels are connected, but if one fails, you can disconnect it and the other one will work completely independently.

"You can't fail because even if you hit a container at speed and the rudder breaks off, the other one still operates.

"All the interior furnishings have been covered with special plastic-complete wrap technology. It seals the ply tightly and it is nice-looking and durable," he said.

"We've used the highest quality materials throughout. The fittings are imported."

Asked how much the yacht was worth, Mr Jones said: "You get a little bit of change from R3 million".

He said he was introduced to sailing in Australia during one of his trips as a pilot.

"I had a couple of days off and I went sailing on a hobbicat for the first time — that was about 15 years ago. Yachting was the next step. I fell in love with sailing," he said.