Yachtsman sights strange icebergs

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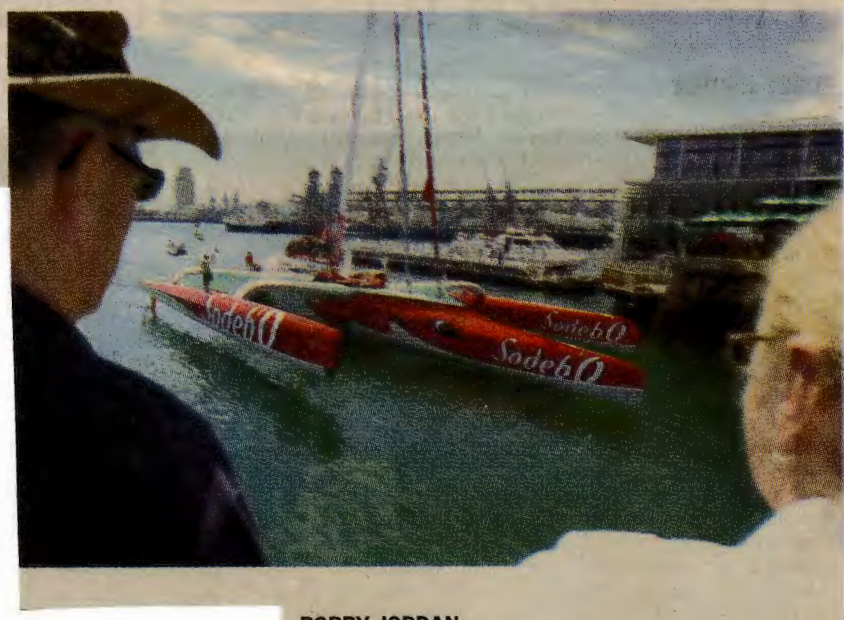

ANY PORT IN A STORM: One of the world's top racing yachts, the 32m 12-ton Sodebo, skippered by Frenchman Thomas Coville, limped into Cape Town yesterday after hitting a suspected iceberg about 1 930km southeast of Cape Point Picture: ESA ALEXANDER

BOBBY JORDAN

A YACHTING accident south of Cape Point has fuelled fears that Antarctic icebergs are drifting further north than ever before, posing a huge risk for seafarers.

Details of the collision emerged yesterday with the arrival in Cape Town of one of the world's top yachtsmen, Thomas Coville, whose 32m racing yacht Sodebo nearly capsized 1 930km south of Cape Point last Saturday, apparently after hitting a "growler" — a small iceberg. He had been trying to beat the record of 71 days to sail solo around the world.

Although Coville did not see what he hit — the collision happened in the dark at high speed — he had spent the previous two days crossing a bizarre "ice field" of between 60 and 70 large icebergs in waters that are normally ice-free.

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In October last year a South African fishing trawler reported a small iceberg floating 35 nautical miles south of Mossel Bay, but the sighting was never confirmed despite a massive sea and air search.

Speaking to reporters yesterday on the deck of his boat, a relieved-looking Coville said he suspected the rogue icebergs were a sign of climate change.

"I've sailed around the planet six times before — twice by myself and four times by crew — and I've never seen so much ice so far north," he said.

"Some of the icebergs were the size of buildings. In one day in 200 miles I saw about 60 or 70 of them. It was in pretty tough conditions. I was averaging 23 knots of speed. I'm just a witness that there is something changing for sure and very, very fast."

Despite the dangerous conditions the yachtsman set a new 24-hour world speed record — 1 794.4km at an average 25.8 knots (48 km/h). But he hardly had time to celebrate before the R25-million trimaran lurched dangerously out of the water at around 3am.

Coville said: "Less than 10 minutes after I knew that I beat that record I felt a touch — something that just hit the starboard bow — and suddenly the boat came up on the three hulls. The rudders were outside the water ... If you capsize where I was you're dead and nobody is coming to save you."

Fortunately the damage wasn't too bad — he lost the "crash box" on the starboard side — but Coville was forced to call off his record bid and head for shore. On his way to Cape Town he endured a three-day storm with winds of over 50 knots. He said he was overjoyed to catch sight of Cape Point yesterday at sunrise.

"Normally you never see it because one passes too far south — it's just a name on the map. But this morning when I saw it, for me it was more like meeting an old lady than an old man," Coville said with a sailor's smile.