

SAILING

Needed: some madness and a strong stomach

ALAN SIMMONDS 'took the salute' on the opening day of the False Bay Yacht Club sailing season at Simon's Town.

THE observation that the weather is "nice and fresh" has, I have discovered, different connotations.

To the neighbours passing the time on a Sunday morning stroll it could mean there's a nip in the air; to the cold shower enthusiast it might mean bracing.

But if you'd gone to sea, as I did, with the False Bay Yacht Club last Saturday to celebrate newly-installed Commodore Alvin Kushner's inaugural sail-past, it would have meant a Force 8 gale on the Beaufort Scale!

There is no doubt that for those who go down to the sea in boats any old weather is just fine, as long as there's wind about. And, sure enough, before you could say Lord Nelson, there were craft of all shapes and sizes beating, luffing and reaching all over the 40-knot-blasted bay.

The only reaching I saw was from a couple of guests in a spot of bother on the commodore's spanking new Saldhana-built ocean-going 36ft Ocean Lines 365 catamaran Brackets, which boasts appointments that would not be out of place on Donald Trump's yacht.

The FBYC, now in its 33rd watertight year, boasts among its illustrious sons Bertie Reed and John Martin, who are much in members' thoughts as they ply their dangerous routes single-handedly around the world.

But nearer home in calmer waters, the 600-odd members whose 300 boats enjoy the waters of False Bay for anything ranging from R350 to R700 a year membership, depending on boat ownership (R350 more for mooring rights) or age status, enjoy superb sailing conditions around the year.

'We're very fortunate, there's always wind from one quarter or another,' said Vice-commodore Dr James Rawling, as he fussed over welcoming arrangements for guests.

The sepia photos on the clubhouse wall present yachts in full sail, their crew proudly wearing club colours on their blazer pockets. Today, however, members — no doubt reasonably affluent members of society — insist, it appears, on wearing the oldest, most threadbare, dirty or dilapidated clothing possible — yet their sleek craft are gleaming clean.

Their gear is as weatherbeaten as are the men's bearded craggy faces; the womenfolk, sensibly trousered, make small talk, children bound everywhere, anxious to get out.

Tea and coffee, cake and grog are hastily poured down throats, boots and waterproofs are pulled on — it's time to put to sea.

Merril Kushner, the commodore's wife and former WP table tennis star, and their two sons crew the big 'cat' as we head into the stream, the wind buffeting.

On board are the day's dignitaries, among them the MP for Simon's Town Jannie Myburgh and his wife, and the Mayor, Vicky Holderness (her stepfather was the late John Wiley).

It was not only Mr Myburgh's hair that was ruffled by the tempest; his conversation with former Simon's Town mayor Harry Dilley — the National party candidate whom he defeated — was also animated.

I sat in the sumptuous cabin and quaffed champagne and canapes. Outside the wind howled through the rigging and yachts ploughed in all directions, their sails billowing and straining, their crews fearlessly heading into the teeth of the storm.

Modern radio brought them to heel and obediently like hounds under the whip they filed past the now-anchored Brackets, the hurrahs for their commodore borne by the blast over white-tipped waves.

Later, back in the haven of the FBYC jetty, I thanked my host and strode away.

The verdict? A wonderful way to spend a weekend — if you have a strong stomach and a touch of madness about you.