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Holy Cowes! A Royal Cape Yacht Club Crew's Experience of Cowes Week

By Kirsten Veenstra



The South African crew aboard *Shadowfax*, the chartered Beneteau First 40.7.

For the last four years or so, Paul Maré and Lindsay Birch, President and former Vice Commodore of RCYC, had talked about getting together a crew from RCYC to do Cowes Week.

Proof again that many things get made to happen over a few drinks was that it finally and unexpectedly came together over a *Majimoto II* 'Tea and Scones Meeting' at RCYC on a Wednesday evening

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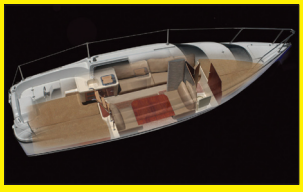




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Above. Tall Ships are a common sight at Cowes.
Inset. A tired skipper and helmsman, Paul Mare, relaxes after a hard day's helming on the Solent.

in April this year. (*Majimoto II* is the name of Paul and Lindsay's Farr 40 that we crew on at RCYC and 'tea and scones meetings' are our regular meetings over a few beers or glasses of wine and maybe dinner at the yacht club).

The Maji crew had got together to talk about pending races and regattas and general tactics on how to beat the rest of the RCYC Fleet (this part we are still working on!) and the subject of doing Cowes Week came up, again. Dave Immelman had sailed in Cowes extensively for 10 or so years up until 1999 when he had lived in England. Part time crew member Nick Leggatt also had much Cowes experience to bring to the table. Five other *Majimoto II* crew Members put up their hands and said "I'm in!"

So there we were, planning the entering of a regatta far bigger than anything RCYC or any South African yacht club had ever seen. We had two options: to take *Majimoto II* to Cowes or to charter a yacht there. A bit of research indicated that the costs were about the same and we decided to charter a yacht. This meant we would not lose a month of racing *Maji* before Cowes and another after Cowes getting her there and back.

On the subject of chartering yachts, well let us just say we learnt many lessons and can all give much advice on the subject, the best being that it is certainly advisable to deal directly with the owner and not a broker! But enough on that subject, otherwise some blood pressures may rise!

And so it materialised that nine South Africans found ourselves in Cowes on Thursday 2 August, two days before racing started. Our crew were: Paul Maré (skipper and helmsman); Lindsay Birch (mainsail trimmer); Nick Leggatt (navigator); David Immelman (tactician and crew boss); Fiona Matthes (halyards); Andrew Marsland (gennicker and spinnaker trimmer); Kirsten Veenstra (gennicker trimmer and guy); Mike Peper (gennicker and spinnaker trimmer); Rowland Stanton (mast).

Mike Peper has his own yacht at RCYC and although a friend to us all, was not part of the usual *Maji* crew and Rowland, a Vaalie, owns a J22 which he sails on the Vaal Dam.

We had one problem, and that was that we had no bowman! The only two members of our crew technically and physically good enough to fill this vital position were Nick and David, which was not ideal as they were vital as our only local knowledge as well as critical as navigator and tactician. But we sailed with them filling in as bowmen for the first two days.

After the second evening of racing, Mike and Rowland took a ferry across to West Cowes and found themselves being 'chaffed' by a cocky young Brit, David Feltham. After engaging him in conversation, he turned out to be free from any crew obligations for the rest of the week and a good bowman and local Solent sailor. So they invited him for an interview and if successful, to join us on Day 3, after which he was firmly a member of our crew, a flawless bowman, huge entertainment and invaluable for local knowledge!

On arriving at Cowes two days before racing started, we discovered that our chartered Beneteau First 40.7 was still in Southampton and so we went to fetch her and sail her back to Cowes. We found her to be fairly comfortable (which was good as she was our sleeping quarters for the week too!) and a lovely boat to race. Besides a really poor No 1 and poor light wind spinnaker (one of the potential problems of a charter boat, one is told, is that none have a perfect suite of sails), she seemed to be in great nick and we spent the Friday before racing practising with her, getting to know her nuances and trying to understand the Solent.

At RCYC a Beneteau First 40.7 would fall into IRC 1. In Cowes it falls into IRC 4, a division in which there were 55 yachts, 35 of them being 40.7s. The total number of yachts that entered Cowes Week this year was 997!

Our 40.7's name was *Shadowfax*, named of course after Gandalf's horse. We did not find this name as appealing or inventive as *Majimoto* (which means boiling water in Swahili) and so we considered changing her name for Cowes Week. At a Cowes Week 'tea and scones' planning meeting, Paul suggested the name *Yohmahse*. Although we neglected to get a war flag and decals made before we left, the name stuck with the crew and our supporters at RCYC!

Sailing in the Solent is a different ball game to sailing in Table Bay or False Bay, as we had been warned many times in the RCYC bar. To begin with, there are over one thousand yachts sailing around, a tad different to your average big regatta in Table Bay where one might find 50 entrants! So your start lines are a bit crazier! To add to this chaos, one finds the Red Jet passenger ferry and the Red Funnel car ferry tearing across the course every 20 minutes or so, not to mention a container ship or 10 per day (all accompanied by a high speed police boat and one just DOES NOT get between the two!) as well as luxury liners such as the *Queen Mary II*, and some beautiful chartered Thames Barges and tall ships out to watch the racing. The amazing thing is that everyone knows the rules, no one gets in anyone's way, there are no

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Our crew and hosts at the RORC cocktail party at the Royal Yacht Squadron.

unpleasant radio exchanges between port control and the Royal Yacht Squadron Bridge and all vessels get on with their various passages in peace and harmony!

And this is not all one has to negotiate: there are the sand banks and the tides! We had been warned that one must be prepared to kedge on the start line as well as in the middle of a spinnaker run; if one gets the tides wrong, that is. If one takes the wrong course on the Solent, one could find 3-4 knots of tide against you, clearly a serious problem in light winds! Thanks to Nick's experience of the Solent and great navigational skills, we did not once encounter a problem with the tides.

Bramble Bank in the middle of the Solent is famous for the cricket matches that are played on it at spring low tide! Another reason why it is vital to have a navigator who knows their stuff in the Solent.

At the East end of the Solent, there are three amazing forts, built in the middle of the water in Queen Victoria's day. There is also a huge underground wall, stretching from the shore to one of the forts. If one sails across this wall, one WILL chop one's keel off! So the only option is to go between the forts, which in Queen Vic's day meant that you would be taken out by the British Navy. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention that there are around 100 buoys that one can be sent around! One has to have a large piece of paper to write down some of the courses, which could take up to six hours to complete. Nick spent most of the afternoon prior to the start of racing programming 100 buoys' way points into his GPS. All in a day's sailing on the Solent!

We went to Cowes fairly intimidated by the level of sailing we might encounter there. None of us will deny that by half way through our first day of racing, we had seriously upped our game! Our crew work was slick and focussed, there was no idle banter on board and our tacks were flawless. We also discovered we were not bad at all! There are some real professionals sailing the Solent, but at the same time there are some real 'Muppets', as Dave Immelman calls them. We certainly saw some shocking tacks and on the one day when we had 20 knots or so of breeze, which is a pretty average day's sailing in Table Bay, we realised that many of the local boats in our class could not handle the breeze and on our pretty much prefect spinnaker runs we saw many spectacular hourglasses, shredded kites, kites trailing in mid-air behind yachts, sheets and guys flying with them, and terrible looking wraps!

One thing that amazed us was the huge fleet of Sunsail 38' yachts at Cowes Week who, in fact, have their own class. These yachts are all corporate charters and generally have different crew on the yacht every day except for the bowman and the helmsman, who run around doing everything, controlling their crew of 'Muppets'!

To illustrate the corporate 'Muppets' on these yachts and their crew experience level: Andrew came back from the showers one morning shaking with mirth. He had heard a conversation in the gents' ablution

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block which had gone as follows - Gent 1: "So what position are you doing on the boat today?" Gent 2: "Mast, I am told." Gent 1: "So, what does that entail?" Gent 2: "I don't know." Walking past these yachts on the jetty in the morning as the day's intake of new corporate crew are being briefed, one would hear the skipper briefing the crew: "... And when you wind a sheet around a winch, you always wind it clockwise, like this…" Amazing!

Then there are some really incredible yachts taking part, many of which fall into Division 0. There is Mike Slade's new 100' yacht *Leopard*. The Clipper Fleet joined us on the penultimate day of racing. The average size yacht in Division 1 is 60' and beautiful Reichel-Pughs, Open 60s and Farrs are a common sight. The owners arrive each morning from London in their helicopters to join in the day's racing. Ellen McArthur's trimaran, ex – *B&Q,* lies moored outside the Royal Yacht Squadron with a For Sale sign on her. We passed Dame Ellen many times, walking around the streets of Cowes with her dog.

Cowes Week is a regatta that is an experience of a lifetime for any South African. This year there were 997 yachts entered. That means that the sleepy town of Cowes is assaulted with 8000 or so yachties, who hit the pubs and restaurants every night. There is a massive beer tent set up at the Cowes Yacht Haven Marina, where we were moored. Here the bar is 40 metres long and holds 100 beer taps. Every night there is a mini rock concert next to the beer tent. Each evening, the nine yacht clubs in Cowes have cocktail parties for their members and guests and the dress code is, without exception, jacket and tie for the men and cocktail dress for the women. Every night the streets of Cowes are filled with yachties at their scruffiest mixed with elegant ladies and gentlemen in evening dress.

We were honoured to be invited to a RORC (Royal Ocean Racing Club) cocktail party at the Royal Yacht Squadron, by David Immelman's old RORC commodore and skipper. We had all packed our blazers, ties and cocktail dresses, bar Nick Leggatt who had joined us from the Transpac and who bolted to the next town after sailing that evening to buy the right attire, or he would never have been let in. Dressed our best after a day's sailing, we almost did not recognise each other! The cocktail party in question was a treat. As with all other guests, we were shepherded in the back gate of the Royal Yacht Squadron. No women, not even the Queen, are allowed in the front door. We sipped (slugged!) Pimms on the perfectly manicured lawns, admiring the picture-postcard sunset as a Tall Ship sailed past. That evening we all left for dinner agreeing that we need to instil some of the class that is traditionally attached to sailing in the UK at our yacht clubs in South Africa. It seemed sad to us that evening that we seem to have lost that over the years.

In addition to the 8000 or so yachties that hit Cowes during Cowes Week, thousands of tourists come to watch the racing. Many girls from nearby towns pay an entry fees of seven pounds each night to get into the party areas, tarted up to the nines, hoping to hook a handsome young sailor. Nick Leggatt calls them 'Bilge Bunnies'.



A typical scene in the High Street of Cowes at night.

As crew we found ourselves most out of fashion. Being at least 25 degrees Celsius each day, we wore our usual Cape Town crew garb: crew tee shirts, shorts, Dave and Nick barefoot, Mike and I in our trusty Crocks and the others in summery deck shoes. At RCYC, sailing boots and Dubarries (if one has a pair) seem to be generally worn in winter or in the wettest, coldest, stormy conditions. But in Cowes, despite the temperatures, it appears to be fashionable to wonder around the streets in shorts and Dubarries, even at midnight, seven hours after racing is finished! This amused us greatly.

If you have a comfortable yacht that is moored in the Cowes Yacht Haven and not on a swing mooring, we can highly recommend sleeping on the yacht. It goes without saying that after a hard day's sailing, every single night is a party night and the Cowes Yacht Haven is a stone's throw from the high street and all the action of Cowes. Staggering up and down a few jetties trying to find one's yacht after a few is preferable to a 15 minute climb up the very steep hills of Cowes. The only other downside is that one must put up with a fair amount of snoring in a confined space!

We had some really great and also interesting racing. We have to admit we DID hit a sandbank, and it was so tiny! We only sat on it for three minutes or so while Dave Immelman and Local Dave led the crew in some sort of weird rocking Solent Dance: "Everyone rock to the left; everyone rock to the right!" If only we had a video camera filming that!

Our fourth day of racing was very eventful. We had a fantastic start – that is, until the main halyard broke at the top of the mast as we crossed the start line and our mainsail came crashing down onto the deck! Nick calmly set about doing some repair halyard splicing while we hoisted the asymmetrical gennicker and caught the rest of the feet. This was the day we found ourselves dancing our yacht off a sandbank, and the day we completely lost wind half way through the course and a long distance away from the finish. Most of our class gave up that day, retired and motored back. We persisted, monitoring our ETA at the finish in relation to the cut off time, and sailed across the finish exactly two minutes and three seconds before the 19h00 cut off!

Some of our start lines were excellent and required being very bullish, especially when one has a chartered yacht! Helmsman Paul Maré was described a few times as "Looking like Bambi in the headlights", although I am sure that the mental figure of what we might have to fix, in Pounds Sterling, might have had something to do with this look!

Dave and Nick enforced the racing rules well and our protest flag was most active. We successfully won a couple of protests and in the process found the friendly Zeekoeivlei face of Geoff Myburgh running the protest office (not to imply that friends in high places would have had a bias towards countrymen!).

All in all, we can only describe the week as an incredible one, and as an experience, a MUST for any South African sailor who has the opportunity to take part. We ended up finishing 15th out of 40 Beneteau First 40.7's and 21st out of 56 yachts in IRC 4. Not bad at all for a humble South African crew!

The half-hour fireworks display that ended the week's sailing for us was certainly of a calibre that none of us had seen before, and standing watching this on the hill overlooking Cowes, getting rapidly pickled on our new favourite drink, Pimms, with the lights of thousands of yachts in the bay below us, was just the perfect ending to what can only be described as the best week's bay racing any of us had experienced. ⚓