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Trailing: Mpumalanga to Mossel Bay

by Heidri Saayman



"Are you going to participate in the Around-the-Island race?" a stranger asked us around about noon on New Year's Day as we were rigging our boat for a sail. "The one on the Vaal Dam? We do it every year," I replied. "No", said the stranger, "the race that is taking place here today around Seal Island in Mossel Bay."

"Sure" we replied. We were planning on taking friends out to sea and might just as well participate. We did notice an unusual number of boats sailing in the Santos Bay area but it never occurred to us that they might be getting ready for a regatta. It was after all a perfect day for sailing – clear, warm with low swell and moderate winds.

Then the all important question: "What time does the regatta start?" "Half past twelve," the friendly stranger replied. Without much conference, we decided to enter. Only problem was it was five past twelve already!

A frantic scramble ensued and the crew were all multi-tasking to get the boat ready in time. By the time the first siren sounded, we were launching our Cape Cutter 19 from the Mossel Bay Yacht Club slipway. By the time the regatta started, we were fumbling with ropes and knots which were rigged incorrectly in our haste to get on the water. As a result of the late notification, and in no small part our inexperience on the sea with our little boat, we started off dead last. In fact, the regatta started without us. With some dismay we saw the larger keel boats unfurl their spinnakers as they sailed on a run to Seal Island. We watched them carefully and consulted the hastily drawn map of the regatta course.

Two hours later, after battling the south-easter head on back to the starting point, we finished the race with a somewhat green-looking novice crew. Finally the regatta results were out and we found that we had finished in seventh place. We were told that eight keel boats and 12 catamarans participated. So we were not dead last. That was some consolation. Until we found out that the eighth keel boat never left the harbour due to engine problems! So we did end up last.

Another 'consolation' was that we won the lucky draw and received a t-shirt and pen! Well, that was a worthwhile sailing experience for sure!

But it was a summer holiday to remember. After trailing our trailer-sailer from Mpumalanga to Mossel Bay, we hoped for good weather and the opportunity to take *Aquila* on to the open seas. She has known only the waters of the Vaal Dam since August 2005 when we bought her from her second owner in Knysna. This 19-ft gaff-rigged cutter designed by Dudley Dix was initially built for the export market and fits on her trailer into a shipping container. Unfortunately, *Aquila* was the last such boat to be built in South Africa. Due to the persistently strong Rand, the manufacturer closed down and the mould and licence to build the Cape Cutter 19 was transferred to Britain. *Aquila* is one of only three Cape Cutter 19s remaining in South Africa.

Some enthusiasts agree that this is the future of sailing – a light trailable boat you can take anywhere. Due to the retractable fin keel and shallow draught, this beauty can be beached and can be easily launched by a bakkie from a slipway.

We came to know *Aquila* over the two week holiday in Mossel Bay in a whole new way. The boat is very stable and in strong winds the main sail has two reefing settings. Having just the jib and main sail up in strong winds results in a bit of weather helm. A better combination in strong winds was a reefed main sail and full or partially furled genoa. The Cape Cutter points much better than most boats we have sailed and by heading into the wind we can make up for some time lost due to the lack of a spinnaker on

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a downwind leg.

A member of the Mossel Bay Yacht Club enquired about *Aquila* and said: "I was admiring your seamanship the other day when the white horses were out on the bay." Little did he know we had only acquired our Day Skipper tickets from Sunsail in Durban in November 2005! Since then, we have learnt an enormous amount. Most importantly, if you are sailing a trailer-sailer, you need to take cognisance of the tides, lest you get stuck on the water at low tide, unable to get the trailer out of the sand and onto the hard surface of the slipway.

It took some time to learn the ropes, but by the end of our holiday we could rig the sail boat and launch her in 30 minutes. Recovery is even quicker. *Aquila* was just the right boat for the conditions at MBYC. When we started enquiring about mooring space in the docks or swing moorings late in 2005, we were told that there was no space available in Mossel Bay for December and January. As a result, we got plenty of practice in rigging and launching the boat! I even got my sea legs and found an efficient way of combatting sea sickness. While the three foot swells made me very nervous during our first outing in Mossel Bay, by the end of the two weeks I managed to helm in four to five foot swells without being daunted by the big blue in the least. The Vaal Dam will never be the same now that we have tamed Mossel Bay.

Mossel Bay must be the best sailing bay in South Africa. Yet, in spite of the excellent sailing conditions, we saw very few boats on the water during our two week stay. We found the MBYC temporary membership fees a bit stiff considering the fact that there was no launching vehicle and no mooring available for visitors, and the information on weather and tides at the club was sketchy and posted infrequently outside the clubhouse.

Nevertheless, we had an excellent sailing (and trailing) holiday. The next holiday project will be to trail *Aquila* to Mykonos and Langebaan and explore the West Coast. We may be dam sailors out of necessity, but *Aquila* gives us the opportunity to become salty sea dogs every once in a while. ⚓

