

and about

TAKE 5

Great, once you're safely back in port

Mother Nature must have a serious grudge against deep sea yachting, as **GREG KNOWLER** found out during last week's race from Durban to East London

THE best part about ocean yacht racing is impressing your buddies in the pub afterwards with tales of derring-do on the high seas.

You see, most people are scared of huge walls of water crashing around them, and don't really come into contact with this nasty trait of Mother Nature while driving to work.

I arrived at this conclusion after being invited to sail on the 76-foot yacht Meditech Computers during last week's Wilbur Ellis Da Gama race from Durban to East London.

Meditech was expected to easily break the record of 30 hours, set a couple of years ago.

Before I left everyone was saying silly things like "it will be an experience" and it certainly was. But then so is being hijacked or held hostage by a gang of crazed gunmen.

The pre-race weather predictions were bad, and even a climatic klutz like myself could identify the jagged edge of an approaching cold front. Wind predictions also happened to be on the shipwreck side of gale-force.

When I clambered on the boat on race morning the wind was already blowing like crazy.

By the time the race started it had reached house-destroying strength.

You know, there's something no one tells you about yacht racing which leaves a lasting impression and basically sums up the sport. It's always freezing cold and is probably the second wettest sport - second only to swimming.

Even with the set of borrowed wet weather gear I couldn't get warm or dry, and I personally believe it's designed to keep you wet in weather, hence the name.

Meditech's skipper, Neil Bailey, decided to head out to sea - way, way out to sea.

As the land became a memory and I sat perched on the weather rail getting drenched about twice every minute, things became very miserable.



THE BEST PART OF YACHTING: Master cook Buggy Grant prepares to conjure up another magical meal



MASTER MARINER: Greg Knowler ponders what heroic tales to tell his buddies in the pub afterwards

About that time I began to really appreciate the landlubbers little comforts, like a hot shower or an armchair, and seriously considered emigrating to a land-locked country - Burundi for instance.

It felt like we had been at sea for hours, but when I looked at my watch I despaired: only 45 minutes had passed since the race started. That's when I cursed Richard Crockett for arranging the trip, although it was some consolation that he was also on board.

But yachtsmen are a strange bunch. I looked around and they actually seemed to be enjoying themselves. Perhaps I was missing something, but when I bounced that question off young crewman Dirk Schroeder he said no, it was always cold, wet and miserable. I rest my case.

I have another bone to pick with Crockett. As president of the Cruising Association of South Africa he should have organised the rum and Coke intravenous drips for those of us on the weather rail instead of suggesting it only after we arrived back in Durban.

As night fell so did my spirits. The skipper was serious about sailing to East London. But sails began to tear, people bruised and broke things, and then late that night a mighty wave swamped the boat. I considered lashing myself to the mast until someone pointed out that I would be underwater most of the time.

Sleeping was a bad joke. Most of the time I was airborne before coming down with a bone-jarring crash as the boat did its best to self-destruct.

Going for a pee also had its problems. Harnesses had to be worn on deck and, with only two hands, try and imagine bracing your feet on a bucking deck, clutching the rail and fumbling with an unco-operative weather suit at the same time.

That mighty wave I mentioned earlier broke the fore hatch off the Wild Coast and the skipper decided to turn back. This I only found out at 6am when, emerging from below decks, someone said we were off Umkomaas. Oh, happy day.

It could have been worse, I suppose, but don't ask me how. At least if we sank we would have been flown back to Durban by helicopter and nothing beats into a headwind like a 15 Squadron Puma.



HAPPINESS IS: Meditech Computers gets ready to sail the high seas in search of glory. Obviously knowing what was coming, there were no smiles from experienced yachties (from left) Richard Crockett, Joe Boy and Steve Honey, but rank amateur Greg Knowler (right) seemed to think yachting was fun. Boy, was he ever wrong . . .