

Gugs sailor pulls off thrilling African yachting odyssey

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Gugulethu man Theo Madayi returns from the voyage of a lifetime – sailing right around the coast of Africa – and being welcomed by a rainbow continent of people as they taught them about caring for the environment

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FROM Gugulethu comes a young man who has turned dreams into a reality. Theo Madayi stepped off an ocean-going yacht on Saturday after circumnavigating the African continent.

The yacht was Inspial Yacht 2041, sponsored by Coca-Cola. The vessel was part of British Arctic explorer Robert Swan's mission to spread the word about saving the world's environment – a voyage of more than 23 000 nautical miles.

Madayi's entry to the world of sailing came while he was working at a youth centre in Langa run by loveLIFE, an Aids awareness organisation.

Madayi is the type of guy kids instantly look up to – tall, athletic and as friendly as any young boy could ever hope for in a hero.

So it was perhaps appropriate that he was rewarded with a series of extraordinary opportunities.

He set sail on his first major voyage on January 11 last year, aboard the loveLIFE vessel Clan MacKenzie – part of the Cape to Rio fleet and skippered by Marion Cole, who had put the development mission together with loveLIFE.

Madayi and his fellow loveLIFE youth counsellors had been thrown into what can only be described as "the deep end".

A lack of wind didn't help. But after 27 days at sea he and his fellow crewmen sailed into Rio and the sailing bug had bitten.

His next trip was again from Cape Town to South America, this time to El Salvador, on the Cape Town Clipper with a mainly British crew. This time the crossing took just 19 days.

By then he was ready to join Inspial in Durban at the beginning of August.

The bright red yacht had a permanent crew of just six. The others were skipper Derek Shuttleworth, first mate Richard Dennison of Simon's Town, Eric Bafo and Sithembele "Joe" Cata of Khayelitsha, and Karen Stewart of Johannesburg.

But they were joined along the route of their circumnavigation by various representatives from Coca-Cola – two or three at a time per leg.

From Durban they stopped at East London, Port Elizabeth, Mossel Bay and Cape Town before heading up the west coast to Namibia's Walvis Bay, Angola's Luanda and the port of Tema in Ghana.

At each port the nearest Coca-Cola bottling company had arranged a seminar involving government, the private sector and NGOs, with which the Inspial team tried to help forge partnerships for various environmental programmes. Particular focus was placed on waste management solutions and HIV/Aids awareness.

So Madayi and his fellow sailors would step ashore and transform from sailors into inspirational motivation speakers urging everyone from heads of state down to the man on the street to embrace their unique environmental challenges – a task they carried off with aplomb.

They were overwhelmed by the reception from schools in particular.

"In Luanda, the kids, the teachers – everybody – had been on their hands and knees and had cleaned up the whole town," he said.

What was it like arriving at each new Africa port?

"Well, just seeing land after so many days at sea was the main thing! But it's not like flying into a country, you have the approach, the anticipation; the curiosity ... What is there? Who is there? What do they speak like? And then we'd be welcomed with such warmth! It's a feeling you can't describe, like a sunrise or sunset."

His visit to Ghana was particularly emotional. After docking in a modern harbour, they were bussed up to the carai Asere. "We'd be welcomed. The same warmth! It's a fit of course but describe, like a sunrise or sunset. Different from



Dream come true: Theo Madayi in his sailing gear after reaching Cape Town, an epic mission accomplished.

dence," he said. "I knew so much about it from history at school, about Dr Kwame Nkrumah and his dream of a United States of Africa. Standing in Freedom Square looking at the black star on their flag gave me such a sense of accomplishment to be right there where the liberation of Africa all started."

From Ghana was the tough, 3 246 nautical mile journey around Africa's "bulge". The trip lasted 21 days and began with a huge scare.

"It was night and we were about four hours off Ghana," Madayi said. "Derek and Richard were up on deck watching the lunar eclipse and the rest of us were sleeping below."

"Suddenly we heard Derek screaming 'all hands on deck!'"

The area is notorious for pirates and it appeared they were about to become victims.

"We rushed up on deck, half naked, into this string of eyes. They were holding on to our boat's handrail, but we fended them off and they

'The welcomes were so warm – like a sunrise'

disappeared as soon as they saw us. Maybe they were just fishermen taking a chance. But maybe not. It was pretty scary."

After waiting for the right weather in the Azores, at the island Horta, they sailed north to catch the westerly winds storming into the Straits of Gibraltar and the Mediterranean Sea.

It was uncanny, Madayi said. "You turn your head left and there's Europe, right and there's Africa! And the traffic was hectic in the Straits."

Their next stop was Estapona in Spain, where the boat was hauled out of the water for a service while the crew flew back to South Africa for Christmas.

Back on board, they headed for the Moroccan port of Casablanca.

"Oh, the flavours, the colours," Madayi recalled.

They all took turns to cook, "so we all got the chance to poison each other!"

They stuck to the same basic meals, but of course found that even rice and sausage tasted different from port to port.

"It made cooking an adventure," Madayi said. "I like experimenting in the galley. So to the people who had stomach aches – sorry!"

Sharing a small boat with the same crew for eight months was its challenge.

The basic adventure was "I like

"There's nowhere to hide when you're mad at somebody. You can't just go for a walk or refuse to speak to someone. You have to work together. We had to learn to become immune to the things that ticked us off. We had to learn to accommodate each other."

Rounding Cape Horn off the coast of Somalia was the most terrifying – it is regarded as the real piracy capital, not just of yachts but far larger vessels.

"We had to sail with stealth," Madayi said, "no navigation lights at night, unless we saw a much bigger vessel heading straight for us on the radar! But anything smaller, you dodge it!"

In the Seychelles and Eritrea, he encountered "the most beautiful women in the world ... (er, apart from South Africa, that is)."

"But in Eritrea, I felt so much pain. You can see the aftermath of war on the landscape, and in people's eyes. And the poverty. But generosity! People had practically nothing, yet gave everything. It made me realise how lavishly we South Africans live compared with them."

"Prostitution is known and accepted. Very few women at the port don't do it. If they don't do it full-time they do it for extra money."

In the Comoros he was astounded by the vibrant diversity represented by a wide array of African nations mixed together in the former French colony.

"You hear them speaking three languages at once," Madayi reported. And the natural beauty was nothing short of splendid.

They ran out of wind on their next leg to Maputo, Mozambique, and Madayi admitted that the unfamiliar drone of the motor got to them.

And their next stop, Port Elizabeth, marked the completion of his circumnavigation.

"That Cape Afrikaans accent – I knew I was eventually home," he said.

Which port did he most enjoy sailing into?

"Cape Town. It's home – everything that's familiar – family, friends I grew up with, everyone who knows how important this trip was to me."

The port he felt saddest leaving? "Eritrea, for sure."

What's next?

"I don't know yet. But I would love a trial on Shosholoz (South Africa's entry for the next America's Cup)."

"I'd still like to travel more, to meet more people, to preach the positive message. I wish more people could be as lucky as I've been. And I'm going to make sure there are! Don't worry – I'm on to it!"



African adventure: returning from a circumnavigation of Africa is the Inspial Yacht 2041, seen in full sail in Table Bay.



Crew with mission: Inspial crew, from left, Joe Cata, Karen Stewart, Theo Madayi, Eric Bafo, Richard Dennison and Derek Shuttleworth.



VIP guest: crew members João Viseu and skipper Derek Shuttleworth, chat to Graça Machel during her visit to their yacht in Maputo.