



# Mike Harker



## rounds the southern tip of Africa

*Mike has company as he sails the horn of Africa. But does it prove to be the Cape of Storms or the Cape of Good Hope?*

The apprehension I was experiencing just one day before departing Durban, South Africa to sail west along the continent's most treacherous coast line towards the "Cape of Storms" (or Cape of Good Hope depending on whose sailing stories you listen to) was certainly diminished with the last minute addition of two new crew members, even though they were youngsters.

It was summer school vacation time in the southern hemisphere and two fifteen-year-old schoolboys had volunteered to sail up the 750 miles of rocky coast as crew members on my Hunter 49. Of course they knew about the Agulhas Current and the possibility of numerous countering Southern Ocean storms that always beat from the SW into the SW flowing current. These storms can have up to, and over, 50 knots of wind, as they had been during this last week. But they have a consistent pattern of lasting only a few days with a few days calm in between, sometimes up to a week of each.

Although I was running with this potentially treacherous current I had read up on the Agulhas prior to venturing out, not necessarily to give me any more confidence, but just to know what I was taking on. The narrow, swift, strong, warm Agulhas Current runs south and west from the Indian Ocean pushing against the near-freezing waters of Antarctica, before meeting the cold Benguela current off the Cape of Good Hope. To sail against the Agulhas Current can be trickier than sailing with it!

Apparently it takes its name from the point of the cape, called Cabo das Agulhas, named by Portuguese seafarers as Cape of Needles. There are two dominant views on why this name was chosen: the first claims that the sharp rocks and reefs offshore were often described as needles which, combined with the treacherous currents, claimed many ships. Among Portuguese sailors, this cape also became known as the Graveyard of Ships. The alternative explanation contends that the name is derived from the discovery that at the tip of the Cape, the compass needle points due north with no deviation between true and magnetic.

My two young crew had never been out in this current flowing SW along the coast and, naturally, were feeling apprehensive, but also excited at the prospect of a few days at sea. They were experienced day sailors; Marx was a champion sailor winning the Laser class in the South African contest whilst Pieter had been out sailing frequently with his parents. His mother Patricia had even booked a sailing leg with her son in the famous "Clipper Round the World" event. They would sail together from Hawaii to Panama aboard one of these race boats in only a few short months from now. Prior to this trip Patricia thought it would be a terrific experience for her only son to come along with me for the next leg, and talked Marx's mother into letting the boys spend the next six weeks with me aboard *WanderLust*. ▶



I let Pieter steer over the sand bar behind the breakwater into East London Port and we tied up to the Yacht Club dock in the early afternoon. I learned that the other two boats were arriving the next morning. I got out my little boat bike and rode around town while the boys called their parents before they met up with some school friends early in the evening. It would turn out to be similar in each of the seven ports we were to enter during the next few weeks. The boys would call their parents when we arrived in each port then show off *WanderLust* to their friends in port.

We followed the consistent weather pattern schedule, two or three days in port while it stormed out in the current, then two or three days of calm when we

The first leg would also be the longest. From Durban SSW the only possible retreat from bad weather for more than 180 miles was the small river mouth on the rocky coastline, opening up into the only deep harbour marina and port of East London. This would be our first test sail together and I let Marx sail out the bay. We left with two other boats heading in the same direction. They each elected to stay along the coast line; I wanted to take advantage of the 3-4 knots of positive current out in the Agulhas. It was only 20 miles due south until we got into the current and sure enough we were moving along at 12 knots toward East London, 4 knots of that a "free ride".

After an overnight of consistent winds and no misfortunes we were still at over 12 knots. We three agreed to take two hours of skipper duties, then four hours off-duty each. I had promised the parents that I would be safety conscious with the boys but not easy on them, so I did not let them use the auto helm for their watches. I was alert down below but let the boys feel out the characteristics of my boat for themselves on deck. I don't think they slept at all staying out in the cockpit during both their watches. My watch was easy, of course, on auto helm.

would choose our safest day to sail to the next port. Unlike the first leg our stop-off points were regularly spaced about 65-85 miles apart so that an easy morning departure would always get us into safe harbor the next morning or early afternoon.

I got a very pleasant surprise the following morning after arriving in Port Elisabeth. Four beautiful young girls came walking down the dock arm in arm carrying a big wrapped bag singing "Happy Birthday, Happy Birthday, Mike!". The four



After leaving Durban (above), Pieter and Marx are put on skipper duty.



fifteen-year-old girls were greeting me on my 60th birthday! I met friends of the parents of my two crew while in Durban and somehow they found out my birthday would coincide with our arrival in their hometown of Port Elizabeth. Of course, after only a few minutes of talk and pictures, the young girls gave me my big bag of Cadbury chocolates and headed off with my young crew into town. We stayed four very pleasant days there.

There were similar ports of call along the way west. Knysna was our next stop, and the boys told me that the name is a Khoi word taken from the Khoi-Khoi tribes who settled in the region over 500 years ago, but it's uncertain as to its exact meaning. It could mean "place of wood" or it could mean "fern leaves", but its most probable meaning is "straight down" – an obvious reference to the Heads. Knysna Heads must be the most striking geological feature along the entire southern African coastline. They flank a deep but potentially treacherous channel through which the sea pours to flood the wide and breathtakingly pretty lagoon at the mouth of the Knysna River. Our next stop and also a favourite was Mossel, a gentle seaside town, about halfway between Cape Town and Port Elizabeth in the heart of the famous Garden Route – a town where you could really relax and slip into their "No Hurries, No Worries" frame of mind – but we had to move on and continued on our voyage to Marx and Pieter's home port of Hermanus.

As the boys sailed into port, their parents had gathered all their friends along the shoreline. Pieter and Marx took turns sailing along the cliffs and made a few turns into the little



fishing bays waving to the people lining the clifftops. Finally we got a call over the radio that they were moving some of the fishing boats moored along the only dock in town and that we could come and tie up for a few hours and have lunch up in the Yacht Club – an invite we could not refuse.

Marx had met with a few of his sailing friends and they talked one of the mothers into letting Marx's best buddy sail with us into the next bay, False Bay. This is the last bay before rounding the famous Cape but the yacht club was well into the deep bay with great protection from the variety of

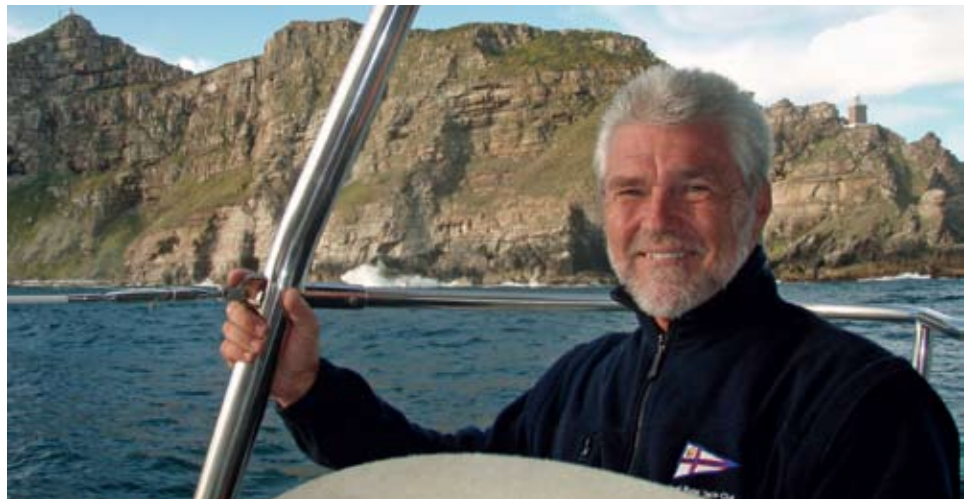


Port Elisabeth where Mike was treated to a surprise 60th birthday welcome (top).



weather patterns that swirl around the confluence of three major oceans and their currents, the Indian Ocean, the Southern Ocean and, just on the other side of the peninsula, the great Atlantic Ocean.

When we got into False Bay, the Yacht Club greeted us with open arms and invited us to dock front row and for free for the week. The commodore had heard that I had given my presentation in Durban and wanted his members to enjoy the same. We set up a date for an evening in the club's great hall then set out to enjoy the Cape area. Cape Town is only a few dozen miles away over the peninsula so I rented a Harley and set off to explore the area. I had been to Cape Town once before in 1975 when I was invited to fly my hang glider from the Table Top. I was able to meet some old friends from my flying days



and visit some really beautiful landscapes and wine vineyards.

The boys were near their home and had various friends come for the day and even overnight out on the deck. I got the dinghy down and the two kayaks for them to explore the bay. One day the fathers arrived unannounced from their



Rounding the Cape of Good Hope in good conditions provides a momentous photo opportunity for Mike (below left) and the calm conditions continue into the South Atlantic (below right).

business meeting in Cape Town and found the boys playing in *Wanderlust's* dinghy with three other young girls in their own dinghy, laughing and splashing like young kids do. The fathers knew this would be a lifelong memory for them and did not even bother to call them over.

The presentation in the Yacht Club was a tremendous success with over 120 guests, many over from the Royal Cape YC. I was able to meet some very amiable people and even some famous local sailors. The winds outside were in the 40-45 knot range for over a week so we were happy to stay in the protected bay. One afternoon the winds stopped. My on-board weather GRIB files showed a two day lull in the SW storms so I gathered the boys together for a very rushed late afternoon cast off. There was still one friend left on board, so he called his mom to ask if he could sail with us around the Cape of Good Hope. I do not know what mom said but he told me it was okay so off we went.

I let the three boys plot our course out of False Bay and up to the lee of the Cape cliffs. It was nearing sunset and the

weather was benign: no wind and a mild sea. We crept up towards the nearest rocks of the Cape and passed between some huge rocks and a narrow channel marked on my charts that would bring us within 50 meters of the actual Cape. We all took pictures and had a great time rounding one of the most famous points in sailing history.

I did the entire night watch alone; the boys were worn out from playing so hard the previous day! I only woke them when we were just about ready to toss dock lines to the guys at the Royal Cape Yacht Club. We were again invited to stay for free. I had explored the region during the few previous days on my Harley trip from False Bay so I was just waiting for decent forecast and the opportunity to seize it and embark on the next leg across the Atlantic. It was becoming boring anyway because my crew were picked up by their parents after inviting me for lunch on our third day at dock. Things were just not the same after having the exuberance of youth aboard for almost two months.

At the next possible weather window I was prepared to leave Cape Town, South Africa and head across the entire Atlantic Ocean, south to north, a distance of over 7,700 miles to Miami. My first stop would be about 1,000 miles out to a small rock of an island, St Helena. ■

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Next month – Mike heads west for the final leg across the Atlantic.

