



Conquering the Strait

Customs officer Barry at the helm in challenging conditions.

Photo: Zen team member Brooke Payton

By Merran Teale, Sydney

Usually surrounded by aircraft and passengers, Sydney International Airport officer Barry Ryan also knows about the high seas. A veteran yacht racer and nine-time Sydney-to-Hobart crew member, Barry prepares each year to take on Bass Strait while others relax at home and watch the action on TV.

As one of the crew of Sydney 38 class yacht *Zen*, Barry knows the familiar sight of Sydney Heads as the first landmark on the ocean trek towards Tasmania. The only landmark that really matters to him, though, is Constitution Dock in Hobart.

Designed as an offshore one-design class yacht, *Zen* carries a crew of 10 and races in all major offshore events in Australia and overseas. It is governed by class rules, which are strict - from sailcloth material weight and strength to the type of sailor on board.

The vessel is 38 feet long and about seven wide. She weighs 5.5 tonnes and is weighted by the manufacturer to insure no one tampers with her.

"If conditions are right, we have a top speed of around 20 knots and average the Sydney to Hobart course at around seven knots," Barry said.

The yacht entered the last Sydney-to-Hobart in the Sydney 38 division, which Barry says is "the hottest division" in the race. There were 14 other yachts in the division.

To prepare for the event, the boat was rebuilt from the mast to the rudder and all sails were either repaired or replaced. Barry said the logistics involved in the Sydney-to-Hobart event are enormous.

"The regulations we need to follow and the seamanship required to make the journey makes it difficult because a simple item that breaks at sea could put the boat or crew in trouble," he said.

"It takes about three months of work on the boat and to train the crew to follow simple tasks in trying conditions." *Zen* operates with an inshore crew and an offshore crew with only four people who do both and a crew support network of around 25 people.

In last year's event, Barry was the most experienced crewmember with a Cat 2 rating, the second highest possible. He was one of two sailing masters to lead their team on respective watches.

For the crew of *Zen*, the lovely little seaside town of Eden is no heavenly sight. It was here they retired to in the 2004 event after turning back halfway across Bass Strait.

"We were getting sleet on us in the middle of Bass Strait and a lot of the crew succumbed to the cold," he said. Two women and Barry were the only ones not down with seasickness or hypothermia.

"The worst thing is for the boat to be retired," he said. "The crew heads are down and no one is keen to talk.

"Most of the crew were suffering from the cold, so as soon as we could cook, we did. We gave everyone hot food and drink.

"I jumped on another boat and went to the pub and bought a bottle of rum back with me. Drinks were had and pledges were made to do this race again." But only five of the 2004 crew signed up for the 2005 event.

"In 2005, we set a target to finish and not break the boat," he said. "Another sailing master and I drove hard when we could."

Barry said team *Zen's* strategy was to stick on the current as the breeze was strongest on the verge of two currents - the Great Southern current that comes from Cairns and the Southern Ocean current that comes from the Antarctic. When these two currents meet, storm cells develop. "That strategy worked for a while because there was no gradient breeze offshore, but because the front was coming from the west, we had to be west of the rhumb line for us to do well," Barry said.

The two boats that followed this strategy placed first and second.

"The winners were smart and tough and proved it on one of the toughest bits of water in the world," he said.

"In the tricky light to moderate winds off the NSW coast, we were running second to third most of the way and overtook *Lexus* (a professional outfit with a race journalist on board).

"This was good as it put some pressure on the front runners who later told me that they were a bit unsure of sailing their own race and changed their tactics after that," Barry said.

As the conditions got worse there was a need to preserve the boat. The call came to back off. At that stage, the top speed was around 18 knots.

"We were going for it," Barry said.

With waves over five metres, the crew felt every one and found it hard to keep the boat upright at times.

"It is cold and it's hard," Barry said.

"There is a bond that develops between people who do the race. To stay together and not break up crossing Bass Strait does make you respect one another and gives you a confidence and satisfaction with the crew and the boat.

"To do well in this race is about the crew and how they stay together. It is not just about the elements but also the human mind to be pushed beyond normal behaviour - not just to survive but to complete and try to win."

Last year's crew was developed from a base and network of people involved in class racing within the Middle Harbour Yacht Club in Sydney. There were also crew from outside the yacht club, originating from Sydney and Hobart.

"Last year's crew was a mixture as most crews are," he said. "A couple of hard heads, technocrats and young guns. All have a job to do and all are important."

They get only eight to ten hours sleep each over the whole event and a little rum to egg them on.

"I think everyone should do a Hobart once," he said. "It really gives a feeling of worth and gives you the ability to appreciate life a little better.

"Mother Nature always puts on a show that makes you respect the sea and everything on it."

Zen was sixth in its division and 47th overall out of 85 vessels. Five vessels retired.

"To finish a Hobart is an incredible feeling," he said.

"Everyone is cheering as you enter Constitution Dock in Hobart. Even if you come last, the applause is fantastic and, all of a sudden, you know you can relax."



Team Zen.