

Rock 'n' rolling on a goodwill mission

Sarah Baartman is buoyant and proud in her new role as patrol ship protecting South African waters

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THE original Sarah Baartman may have been taught some slow, genteel dances during her unhappy sojourn in early 19th century Europe, but her namesake is entirely modern and seems to know just one dance: rock 'n' roll.

And boy, can "she" move to the music of the ocean.

That was the consensus of most of the handful of passengers and some of the crew at the end of the first official mission of the Sarah Baartman, South Africa's new deep-water environmental protection vessel.

The 83m ship, officially welcomed last month as one of four new vessels making up the modern patrol fleet, was named after the Khoi woman who was taken to Europe at the turn of the 19th century and paraded as an anthropological freak before dying a lonely exile's death in France in 1817.

In August 2002, Baartman's remains were finally returned to South Africa for ceremonial burial in the Eastern Cape's Gamtoos River valley.

The ship bearing her name sailed at short notice recently from Cape Town to Marion Island, 2 000km away, to pick up a sick member of the annual expedition team that spends a year there doing research.

Alan Robertson, who is managing the acquisition of the four new environmental patrol vessels for the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, explained that the mercy mission to the remote island was a good opportunity to test the ship's performance.

One of the key people among the 26 aboard was warranty engineer Johannes Bensik from the Dutch shipbuilding company which built the vessel.

The Sarah Baartman is particularly fast and was soon up to its cruising speed of around 19 knots (about 35 km/h) in calm seas.

But on the second day it hit bad weather and huge swells, and quickly demonstrated its

ability to "rock 'n' roll" in what seemed like massive seas to the landlubber passengers.

However, master Jon Klopper reported that the seastate (a standard nautical scale) was only about seven with winds gusting to 45 knots (about 80km/h) – bad but not terrible – and his ship was still making good progress although it slowed for a while to about five knots (about 9km/h).

"I'm very happy that we're doing this because we wanted to see how she handled in bad weather, although we're still waiting for the big storm."

"She can still maintain a relatively high speed in bad weather, when other ships would have had to slow or stop, but she takes a lot of water, so there's a bit of a pay-off."

Because of its lines (design), the ship had a completely different motion to the older vessels in their

fleet, Klopper said.

The second day at sea also saw the first of a number of niggling breakdowns and malfunctions on the voyage.

In a subsequent humorous voyage report in the form of a long poem, second engineer Philip Gillon wrote:

On the second day things took a turn for the worse,

The port main engine fuel pipe decided to burst ...

The waves were so high that they came down the funnel,

Ran out the crank-case doors and into the shaft tunnel.

Monday started off fine, with only a black-out or two,

And finding out that the best way to shower was sitting on the loo.

Most of the passengers – including this writer – made an intimate acquaintance with these loos, spending some time on their knees "worshipping" at the new white porcelain bowls.

Particularly alarming for the passengers were the repeated, loud, banging noises

coming from the ship's hull as it slammed through the huge swells.

It was a worried-sounding fisheries control officer, Leonie Roux, who asked chief engineer John Cosnett whether the noises were dangerous.

Cosnett laughed: "No, if it were, I wouldn't be here!" He explained that the noise was water slapping up against the ship's hull which is extended more than usual in a ship of this size because of the helicopter deck.

"The water's not dangerous when it's outside – it's when it's inside that you've got a problem," Cosnett quipped.

The voyage back was as rough, particularly on the last day, as Gillon recorded in his poem:

The fire box, which was on the fore-deck, upper,

Broke loose from its moorings and landed on the mess-room table at supper.

The Sarah was fighting the waves at every turn,

The only problem was, we were sailing at five knots astern!

Klopper confessed to being frustrated by the number of teething problems, although he said they were "more just an irritation factor, as things go".

"We've resolved as much as we can at sea, otherwise the contractors will have to sort it out in port."

And he ended with an upbeat quip: "It's not all doom and gloom. If we started seeing the plates beginning to buckle, then we'd be worried. At least the ship is structurally sound!"

The Sarah Baartman has a vital task to protect South Africa's rich marine resources in the future and when its crew and the fisheries control officers who serve aboard get used to the ship's lively dance steps, they're going to be performing an environmental *pas de deux* that will take some beating.



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Rock 'n' roll: South Africa's new deep-water patrol vessel, the Sarah Baartman, crashes through heavy seas in the Southern Ocean during its first official voyage to Marion Island recently.



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Old hands: the master of the Sarah Baartman, Jon Klopper, right, discusses a point with his chief engineer, John Cosnett, left, on the ship's bridge.



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Forty winks: a young fur seal catches up on some sleep in the sunshine on Marion Island.



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High and dry: passengers are hoisted onto Marion Island after being transferred from the Sarah Baartman by one of its rescue craft, in the background. The new environmental protection vessel visited the island during a recent mercy mission.