

SKIP NOVAK

BEING LOCKED DOWN IN SOUTH AFRICA CAN BE LIKENED TO A LONG VOYAGE... BUT WITH SOME GARDENING THROWN IN

I just made it down from the UK back to Cape Town in March before all flights in and out of South Africa were cancelled. I thought my two-week quarantine would be well spent in Langebaan, a west coast town on a pristine estuary at the end of Saldanha Bay, north of the city, where I keep my Laser and share a Hobie 16. What more would I need other than an internet connection in the cottage and a covert trip or two to the supermarket during my incarceration?

I had two marvellous days sailing. Mine was the only boat on the estuary and I was happy as could be. Then the government announced a lockdown with a three-day notice. I took the advantage of another day's sail and then bolted back to town.

Once there, I had to race around to get various supplies, although I was not too worried about food and, having travelled in the Middle East, I was certainly not hoarding toilet paper. Garden supplies were more of a priority and, by the time I got to the garden centre, all the seed packets were gone, same for potting soil and compost. With persistence and the clock running down, I hit every small outlet in town and managed to load up with everything I needed in that department. Many people obviously had the same idea.

The other priority was the liquor store. As of Thursday 23 March, all bottle shops in South Africa were ordered to close for the duration. Later that afternoon I drove over to my usual in Hout Bay, threw a line ashore and, lo and behold, I found a few yachting friends who were thinking the same thing. I managed to score the last case of Windhoek lager light, 12 bottles of red and a bottle of gin.

Don't get me wrong here, but this was a three-week lockdown, you understand, and most likely to be extended.

While milling around the parking lot we speculated on what this all meant. Louis said he wasn't worried at all, as we were all used to being in a confined space with a few people for weeks and possibly months on end – yes, from a lifetime of moving yachts around the world.

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He was dead right, of course. While housebound there will be inconveniences for sure, but when it comes to keeping our own company we sailors are pretty good at it. When we cast off on a long delivery it is a lockdown in the strictest sense (and generally no alcohol allowed!). But while I was hoping for a transatlantic, it now looks like it will turn into a full circumnavigation.

I always considered it a great privilege to be locked down, out of touch at sea, for weeks on end. The difference with this landlocked lockdown is that I have never been so virtually connected. Not only are there webinars to participate in, but all sorts of online forums to listen to.

Skype or Zoom calls to long lost friends to catch up with is a nice thing to do, but will we see each other ever again and press the flesh, if not just shake hands?

And of course, we have those endless WhatsApp clips of how

people are handling the incarceration, some inane, others amusing or pretty shocking, even for this old sea dog. Many of them you just can't help but forward on to so-and-so. All this fills up your day.

Unlike being at sea where a good book, some fishing gear and a stock of tinned beans was all that was needed for contentment, while at home we are all more than busy and the days go by alarmingly quickly.

In among this endless communication for one thing or another, there is much else to do. I've finally learned how to use the drone a friend gave me contra a reduced charter fee. The thing had been sitting on the shelf for three years.

The filing cabinet of old slide transparencies of racing and cruising, some going back four decades, is being whittled down to scan the 'good ones' when the photographic shop re-opens. I found it risky.

This can be an exercise in emotional self-control when those past girlfriends smile up at you from the lightbox.

Helping my son repair his surfboard and repeatedly losing to my daughter at chess are needed distractions from all those screens.

My runner beans are trained now and doing great. But they need to be talked to and listened to. Prince Charles was right, you know. ■

