

# Time machine

## A visit to the nerve centre



**S**outh Arm 4 quay is the epicentre of South Africa's deep sea fishing fleet. *Fishing Industry News Southern Africa* decided to pay a visit.

To the uninitiated it looks like a madhouse. Men shouting, seagulls squawking, sparks flying, a crane the size of spaceship hoisting fish bins through the air like blocks of Lego. Welcome to Cape Town's 'ship airport' – South Arm 4.

"The busiest quay in the harbour," says Andries de Vries of his bustling workplace, striding past a pile of ocean-churning propellers in front of Viking Fishing's giant storeroom. "We run 18 vessels off this quay. There are always ships at sea."

We are on a tour of the bowels of South Africa's deep sea fishing industry. Nets, gangways, trawl doors and miscellaneous jumbles of metal sheeting lie around us like props in a high-budget Hollywood movie. Workmen in hard hats hail other men in hard hats. A soundtrack of clanking tools and chugging engines fills the air. Any minute Jackie Chan will leap out from behind a forklift and karate kick a villain into the sea.

Instead De Vries appears again, guiding us into the storeroom where we start to appreciate the quantum of investment needed to keep this show on the road, and on the water. "We have refrigerator spares, gearbox spares, pump spares – you name it," says De Vries, one of a staff complement of about 120. "Most work is done in-house. Our vessels are a little older and we maintain them ourselves. We have retained the knowledge needed to do that."

In effect this means keeping a shipshape warehouse that would put a smile on the face of any navy admiral, particularly one from Simon's Town. Brake spindles, net rollers, and cable sheaves lie side-by-side with auxiliary engines. Valves, pipes, nuts and bolts of all shapes and sizes, all arranged in little trea-



sure chests of maritime capability. The storeroom is ground zero for ship repairs – and not just for Viking vessels says De Vries: "We regularly get a propeller enquiry. Those cranes outside work more than any crane in the harbour."

It's a one-stop-shop for vessel maintenance, in other words – everything except electronics and hydraulics. The buzzwords are efficiency and turnaround time. Explains De Vries: "If a ship has a problem with her auxiliary, I would get her back to sea in a day. It's like an airport for ships." He points to the vessel tied up outside the door: "They're moving her for discharge and repairs. I've got another one docking this afternoon."

You don't need an engineering degree to see that time is money on South Arm 4. A ship in port is a ship not fishing at sea; if it's not making money it is burning it – a lot of it. This explains the slightly frantic tone of De Vries as he shepherds us through Viking's several workshops, starting with the machine shop and fitter shop; precious minutes are ticking past and De Vries has the nervous energy of somebody expecting the bank manager for tea.

By contrast the man stooping over a shiny hunk of

metal in the machine workshop seems almost impossibly happy - Lloyd Mulder, who is showing off a new home-made cylinder head. "Being able to make this ourselves saved us a lot of time," beams Mulder, brimming with pride. "We make a lot of spares that would cost a lot of money. We have a nice compliment of mechanics who can handle about 95% of our work."

Lloyd's workshop is the epicentre of South Arm 4. In-house tasks range from refurbishing valves to engine repairs, and a matrix of overhead tracks is testimony to some heavy-duty machinery. The atmosphere is affable and cheery, not Chinese sweatshop, with Lloyd calling the shots at the centre of it all. There is a kind of shifting spanner camaraderie that is a welcome relief from the seismic political tensions playing out in the higher echelons of the fishing industry.

Next up for us is a whistle-stop tour of the Boiler-makers workshop, where a work team wearing protective eye-ware, beanies and regulation safety boots is scrumming down over an unidentified glob of metal. From there it's into the refrigerator and electrical workshop, and then to carpentry, where a skipper's chair awaits a repair job atop a pile of wood.

It's hard not to concur with De Vries that Viking is a

hands-on manual operation imbued with a kinship not dissimilar to half time at a Saturday afternoon rugby match.

No visit to South Arm is complete without a trip up the gangway of an awaiting trawler, and there are plenty to choose from. Viking has 27 vessels, about 25 of them 'wet fish'. De Vries leads us up to the trawl bridge for an idiot's guide to deep sea fishing: the chart table, the echo sounder, rudder indicators,



Technicians at Viking's mechanical workshops are highly prized for their hands-on skills

net sounding equipment. "Everything has its place," he says of the ship – and so it would seem.

The same applies next door at I&J's operations room, where one of several large TV monitors reveal the company's entire fleet spread out across the southern ocean. Coloured icons move around a screen, three freezer and nine wet fish vessels, dwarfed by swirls of synoptic and barometric information. Just off the continental shelf a huddle of Chinese long-liners raises our suspicions, but at least they are there for all to see. "Management are in constant communication with the vessels," says one of the managers, tapping a screen. "The gang who sit here are the link between the vessel and the shore personnel. We can monitor everything on a daily basis to give everybody a feel of what the fleet is doing."

Vessel speed, catch tonnage, fuel consumption

and climate data can be accessed and compiled into detailed reports, which form the basis of vessel planning regimes. By anybody's standards it's an impressive stash of information, one that helps explain I&J's longevity in the deep sea game.

After a brief visit to the I&J's flagship trawler, *Umlobi*, we visit a giant trawler net store where a team are busy with mechanical splicing of a giant length of cable. Nets lie piled up like exotic fabric, with a few sleeping workmen on top. Rubbers, cables, hopper gear and hosepipe streamers create a mysterious backdrop of undersea mechanics.

The overall impression is one of attention to detail and dedication to the intrinsically human obsession of scooping fish out of the ocean.

A quay that at first sight looks like absolute chaos turns out to be a recipe for plain sailing.



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