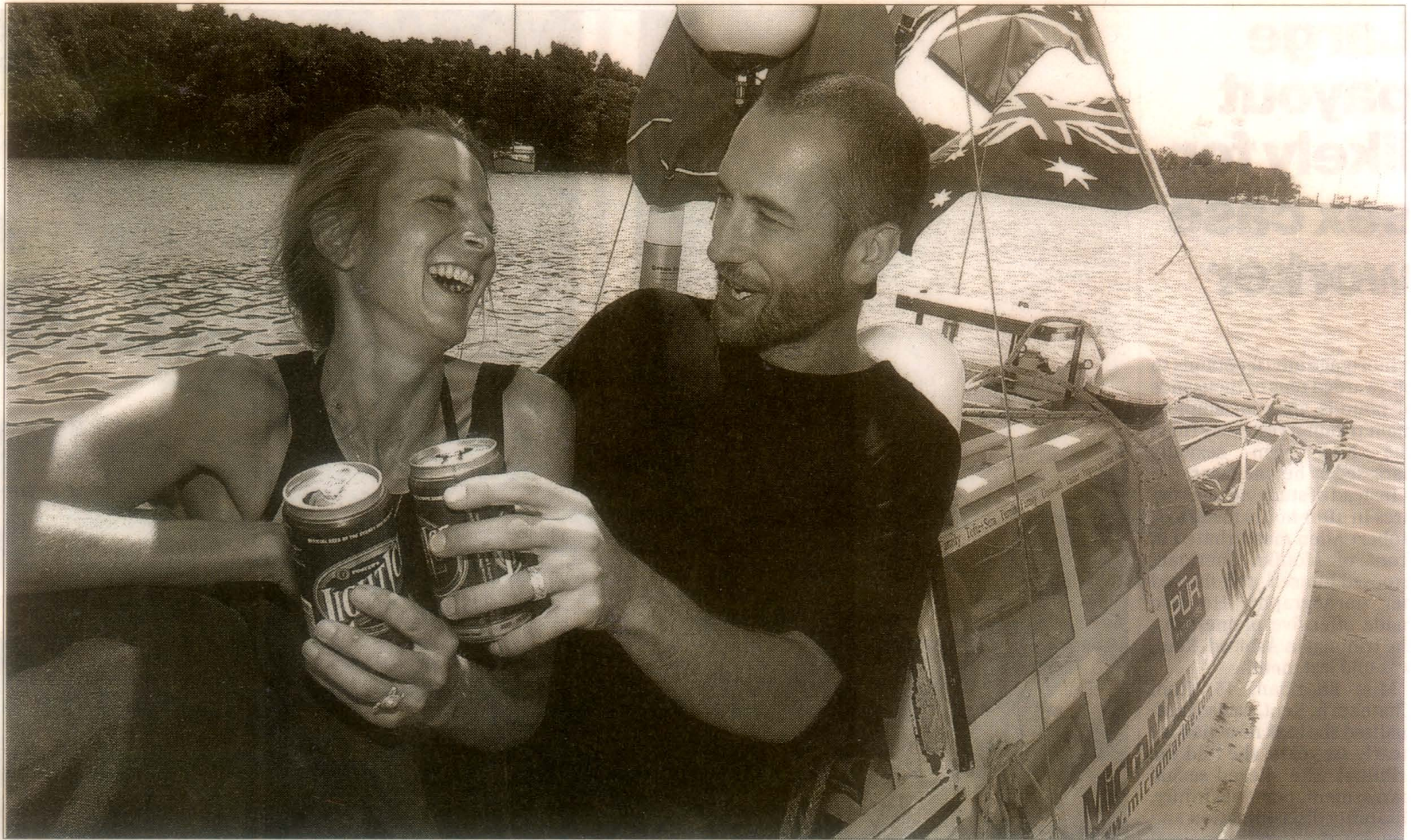


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Jason Lewis shares a celebratory drink with his seagoing partner April Abril, of the US, after berthing in Port Douglas yesterday Photographs: Brian Cassey

Peddalling Briton tames Pacific

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Global traveller leaves storms and gunmen in his wake

Keith Perry

He has battled storm force winds, 20ft ocean swells and sharks, but when Jason Lewis spotted gunmen approaching his pedalo off the Solomon Islands he knew drastic action was needed.

He stripped off, stood up stark naked and waved wildly at the militiamen. They dropped their automatic weapons, turned their speedboat around and fled.

Yesterday, Mr Lewis celebrated completing a near 7,000-mile pedal boat voyage from the United States to Australia. The 32-year-old from Bridport, Dorset, and 42-year-old teacher April Abril pedalled the 26ft craft into Port Douglas on the Queensland coast at 6am BST yesterday.

"We had a great reception on the final run in, with every boat which passed us shouting, waving, honking horns

and lobbing beers at the boat," said Mr Lewis, who admitted he was having trouble walking because of salt water sores from being permanently wet.

He made landfall with Ms Abril, from Rye, Colorado, who rejoined the £26,000 wooden self-righting vessel, Moksha, for the last eight or nine miles of the 1,100 mile voyage from Tulagi in the Solomon Islands. She had been transferred off Moksha for a medical check-up after the craft was towed through the Great Barrier Reef to prevent it being smashed.

With no charts for the area, the pair accepted an 11-mile tow through the treacherous reef following a hair-raising week of adverse tides, huge seas and 30 knot winds which blew the expedition 130 miles north of its target, Cairns.

Speaking from Port Douglas, Mr Lewis, a musician, said: "It is so great to be off the boat, but it is only just sinking in what has been achieved.

"It is a huge deal, we have just crossed the biggest ocean in the world by human power. Three or four days ago we faced a pretty serious situation and were getting blown on to the reef itself in 30 knot winds.

"During the last 10 days we were pedalling full bore southwards against the trade winds but we were slowly going backwards so we had to use a sea anchor, which is like a giant parachute, to check our drift."

The voyage was part of Mr Lewis's 35,000-mile, human-powered circumnavigation of the world, which began in London six years ago. But the expedition is in desperate financial straits, and Mr Lewis said he hoped the Pacific crossing would generate sponsorship.

Ms Abril, for whom the trip was her first sea voyage, said: "I am really happy and excited to have had the chance to do it. It was such a test of perseverance to hang in there. I lost quite a bit of weight, but I never lost my desire to pedal."

During the journey the pair had little chance of privacy, but working as a team, which included fighting off a marauding 14 ft shark which tried to eat their propeller, the pair overcame any shyness.

Mr Lewis's journey began from Greenwich in July 1994, and he has travelled more than 20,000 miles in his vessel, which is equipped with a satellite phone, global positioning system and desalination plant.

He started with Steve Smith, from Wolverhampton, who left to pursue other projects after helping to pedal the Moksha from San Francisco to Hawaii on the first 2,200-mile Pacific leg.

Mr Lewis then went solo for the next leg — a 2,200 voyage to Tarawa, in the Kiribati Republic.

He was joined for the 1,100-mile leg from Tarawa to the Solomon Islands by 34-year-old Chris Tipper, from Brighton, who built the Moksha but had never sailed it. Ms Abril, who had helped with the expedition's schools education programme, joined him for the final leg.

Now he is in Australia, Mr Lewis plans to cycle and roller blade across the country before heading back towards Europe across Asia — another three or four years and 15,000 miles of travelling before he returns to Greenwich.

Describing a cramped and cold life on the ocean waves, eating mainly porridge, supplemented by M&Ms and Mars Bars, Mr Lewis said the pedalo offered little shelter from the elements. The only moments of comfort were during the gruelling 12 hour pedalling shifts. Because they were permanently damp, with waves constantly drenching their sleeping bags, pedalling was the only way to keep warm. And Ms Abril suffered sea sickness.

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Lewis, on board the Moksha, his 26ft pedal boat, approaching Port Douglas in Queensland yesterday