view from the Thames by Deon Gouws

Nope, not a contender

Towards the end of 2025, I was invited to a client event and asked to comment on what was described as a tumultuous year in global markets.

It certainly felt like a pretty eventful 12 months, with US President Donald Trump's sweeping tariff announcement at the beginning of the second quarter leading to a dramatic collapse in share prices, followed by an equally rapid recovery.

More recently, every strategist and their dog started offering an opinion on the so-called bubble in AI stocks and when that might burst (a topic for another day). Amid all this, geopolitical risks seemed to escalate with each passing day (and continued to do so into 2026, with the kidnapping of the Venezuelan president by US armed forces, for example).

Ultimately, however, the record would show that global stock indices added healthy double-digit returns over the year, in spite of all the noise.

When I stood up to speak, I tried to put all of this into some historical perspective. I have just completed my third decade as an investment professional ... so how did 2025 compare to what I've experienced over 30 years?

The short answer is that the past year doesn't even compare to a number of other market events we have lived through since the mid-1990s.

It won't surprise anyone when I say that the gold medal for "most testing time yet" goes to the global financial crisis, just over 17 years ago.

I vividly remember one particular night in September 2008, sitting at home watching the late-night news of Merrill Lynch faltering and being taken over by Bank of America at practically the same time as the Lehman Brothers collapse. These were not only some of the most renowned names in the industry, they were also among the biggest players.

Apocalypse then

If that kind of business was not immune, what hope was there for the rest of us? Share prices of banks around the world crashed to levels I had previously considered unimaginable. It truly felt as if the financial world as we knew it was coming to an end.

The worst part was that equity markets would keep falling for a further six months until a bottom eventually formed in March 2009.

The second most stressful period in the market coincided with the inception of this column in March 2020. Wasn't it just the weirdest time when the whole world started to go into lockdown?

Share prices responded accordingly, falling more than 30% within weeks. It was not easy to keep believing that the glass was half full, with global supply chains being paralysed and many industries effectively grinding to a halt.

Yet the impact was relatively short-lived; equity indices started soaring as we all worked from home. But I certainly have no desire to live through something like that again.

Finally, in bronze medal position, I cast my mind back much further, to a particularly stressful time early in my career. Russia defaulted on its domestic debt in August 1998, leading to its banking system collapsing. This caused a ripple effect around the world, especially in emerging markets.

It also led to the demise of Long-Term Capital Management, the biggest hedge fund in the world.

I had just started managing money on behalf of clients. I still remember what it felt like as I stared at a portfolio on my screen, the overall value literally dropping by the second. It didn't help that I had a geared position in my personal capacity at the same time (also a topic for another day).

Suffice it to say that big lessons were learnt, and it ensured that I would become, and remain, much more cautious for the rest of my career.

This also meant that I did not find the bursting of the technology bubble a couple of years later too stressful, as my (and my clients') exposure to the sector ended up being relatively limited following the earlier scars. But I have no doubt that this particular period in the market would be right up there in terms of stress from the perspective of many of my peers.

So, coming back to last year ... did anyone say it was tumultuous?

Not so much, if you ask me — it doesn't even come close to the podium in terms of market stress or formative experiences.

Here's hoping that 2026 will be equally uneventful. x

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