

Boat Journal – August, 2006

"My first singled-handed sail was to scatter my husband's ashes off Bonaire [an island off the coast of Venezuela]." Jeanne Socrates told me. "It was blowing twenty-five to thirty knots, but the water was calm in the lee of the island. It was the kind of sail that George would have loved."

Many thought that after her husband George died from cancer in 2003, Jeanne would give up cruising off-shore. "Never crossed my mind," she continued in a quiet voice as we chatted in a hotel in North Vancouver, BC, last October. "*Nereida* [her Najad 361] is my home and there are so many more places to see."

I first met Jeanne in late September 2004 at the Ocean Cruising Club Rally in British Columbia's Gulf Islands. As sailors do, we talked of boats and voyages. "I'm sailing to Mexico next month," she said. "It will be my longest single-handed passage."

The local saying about passages south from the Northwest--always in August, sometimes in September, occasionally in October but never in November—flashed through my mind. "What about the weather?" I asked. "I'll wait in Neah Bay [at the mouth of Juan de Fuca Strait] for a favorable weather window," she responded calmly. Later she wrote in an e-mail from San Francisco: "My first day out was under power in calm seas and fog, but I was soon running before the predicted thirty knot northwester, reefed down with a poled-out genoa. I made 514 nm in three days. Not bad for thirty-six footer." Her course was about sixty nm off-shore. At night she slept, but set the radar alarm and used a timer to wake her every twenty minutes for a visual check.

Jeanne's first venture with wind and water was learning to wind-surf in 1990 followed by dinghy sailing the next year, both in Cowes and on a reservoir near London, England. The thrill of small boat sailing led her to take charge of the sailing program at the boys' school in London where she taught math. In 1994, she arranged a week-long course for five boys to learn off-shore sailing on a Sigma 33. But only three boys signed up, so she and George filled the final two places.

"We were hooked," Jeanne said. Over the next winter, they took a series of week-end sailing courses and studied navigation at home. In the summer of '95 they chartered a Gib Sea 36 in the Greek Islands. On the first night out, the boom-car shattered. Rather than call the charter company for help, they fixed it themselves.

The seed was sown. They began to dream of owning a boat that could sail off-shore. They took more courses--both became approved Coastal Skippers--read

books and magazines and attended boat shows. "The more research we did, the more Swedish boats appealed to us," Jeanne said. "They were heavier, seemed more seaworthy and were well built."

In the winter of 1996 everything came together. A change in the teachers' contract meant Jeanne was able to retire early, while George, who was a professor at Brunel University, just outside London, could also take early retirement. After a thorough financial assessment, they decided they could afford the reductions in their pensions if they retired early to sail off-shore, maybe around the world. Searching for their dream boat became top priority. "In addition to a good sea boat, we wanted an aft cabin and a head that was easily accessible from the cockpit. At first we looked at thirty-three footers, but decided we needed more space." In January 1997, they ordered a Najad 361 at the London Boat Show, to take possession in Sweden the following summer. Jeanne's last day of school was July 3, 1997. The next day she flew to Gothenburg with George, then made her way to historic Henån that is now the home of the Najad shipyard but where Vikings once built their vessels, where they became the proud owners of *Nereida*.

After preparing *Nereida* for cruising—"we didn't realize how much work there would be to do in a new boat"--Jeanne and George explored the fjords and small fishing communities on the Norwegian coast as far north as Stavanger, then journeyed back to their home port of Hamble in the south of England via Denmark, the Kiel Canal and the canals of Holland, arriving home in September. "Right from the beginning, we worked as co-skippers," commented Jeanne, "though I focused on navigation and George on things electrical."

During the winter ashore, they worked on their Yachtmaster tickets. The practical included charting an overnight passage across the English Channel, an overnight man overboard drill at an undetermined time and picking up a mooring under sail. They also installed radar and an auto pilot on *Nereida*.

They set sail for Spain and Portugal in June 1998. "We had a rapid introduction to ocean sailing. It was too rough to make our planned landfall, so we had to beat west against gale force winds to round Ushant [the treacherous island off NW Brittany]. We were exhausted as we both stayed on deck until we found refuge in a port in the northeast of the Bay of Biscay." In their second passage, across Biscay, they faced storm winds from the southwest and were struck by lightning about thirty miles off the Spanish coast. With all instruments blown out, they reverted to dead reckoning. As the Spanish lighthouses in that area are situated high on the cliffs, they were hidden by cloud. It was impossible to get a precise fix so they decided to check their position with a Spanish fishing boat that came within hailing distance. "We spoke no Spanish and the fishermen spoke no English, but through arm-waving and sign-language we eventually found out that our calculations were pretty accurate." They spent four weeks in Spain replacing all their instruments.

They cruised leisurely down a foggy Portuguese coast, visiting harbors large and small, until they were finally greeted by warm weather when they rounded Cape St Vincent and sailed on past the site of the Battle of Trafalgar to Gibraltar where they stored *Nereida* on the hard.

For their first ocean crossing the following year, they chose to join the 237 other yachts on ARC [Atlantic Rally for Cruisers], leaving the Canary Islands in late November and arriving in St. Lucia twenty-five days later. "It was supposed to be an easy run in the northeast trades," commented Jeanne who appeared accepting of adverse weather conditions, "but Hurricane Lenny messed up the weather patterns in the Atlantic so we had lots of sail changes and at times had to beat against a southwester."

They cruised the Caribbean—"disappointing in some ways, too many hassling boat boys, quite a few unfriendly locals and expensive"—before sailing north, to New York via Bermuda then on up the coast. "We loved Nova Scotia, beautiful scenery, deserted anchorages and delicious mussels." After a trip home for Christmas, they headed south again, much of the journey via the ICW until they decided to head back to sea from Beaufort, North Carolina. "We spent twelve hours tacking off Frying Pan Shoal in a gale and made virtually no headway. It was the only time that I felt rather seasick." The next months were spent cruising the Caribbean. "We loved Cuba. The music was great and the people friendly." By July 2001, they were in Grenada where they did some boat repairs and both started work on their ham radio licence to upgrade their ability to communicate with the outside world.

George started to suffer from back pain. At first a mere inconvenience but as it worsened they sought medical advice—the diagnosis: prostate cancer. They went back to England in September for treatment. Once George was settled, Jeanne returned to Grenada to put *Nereida* on the hard. While she worked on the boat there, she passed the exams for her Ham licence.

2002 was a year of highs and lows. Although cancer had damaged George's spine, he appeared to be responding well to treatment and was keen to get back to *Nereida*. They flew back to the Caribbean in the spring, but soon after Jeanne had to return to England to take care of her mother for a while. In the latter part of the year, although George was in considerable pain that required Jeanne to inject his medication, they preferred to stay on *Nereida*. They experienced some idyllic cruising along the Venezuelan coast, but by December, George's health had deteriorated. They returned to England for further treatment, leaving *Nereida* in Bonaire. "For a while, I was convinced that George would get better and that we would return to cruising, but it was not to be. George was eventually admitted to hospital and died shortly after on Mar 17, 2003."

"I scattered George's ashes in the sea off Bonaire on July 4th, *Nereida*'s sixth

birthday, along with a glass of Calvados, his favorite drink, while a Monty Python skit that he loved played on the CD."

Ocean Cruising Club members had become both a source of companionship and assistance for Jeanne. "I wanted to go to the Pacific and thought it would be fun to join the OCC's Fiftieth Anniversary Rally in British Columbia's Gulf Islands. As I hadn't yet done any overnight singled-handed sailing, I decided that sailing there via Hawaii was beyond me so I arranged to ship *Nereida*, via Dockwise, from Fort Lauderdale. Friends advised me to sail direct, but there was so much more I wanted to see in the southwest Caribbean that I decided to sail via Columbia then up the east coast of Central America."

As she could not find crew in Bonaire, Jeanne sailed solo to Curacao, a day sail, where she found a young Dutchman who sailed with her to Cartagena, San Blas Islands and Panama. Being the sole skipper battling strong winds, that seem a regular part of her passages, gave Jeanne the confidence to go it alone. From Panama she sailed solo to Providencia, Honduras and Guatemala, from where she had company for a week-long cruise to Belize City. Then she was again on her own up to the Yucatan Peninsula and past Cuba to Fort Lauderdale via Key West.

After unloading *Nereida* in Vancouver, BC and a leisurely gunk-hole around the Gulf Islands with OCC friends, Jeanne sailed alone down the West Coast, to spend the winter of 2004/2005 cruising the coast of Mexico. Her innate curiosity led her to explore many deserted bays, but she also spent time in a several ports. "I've always found people friendly when cruising, but I seem to meet many more since being on my own." In March 2005, she invited a group of musicians from the Guitar Festival in Zihuatanejo for a day of sailing. Later, in May, she loaded *Nereida* on a Dockwise transport ship at La Paz destined for Ketchikan, Alaska, and flew back to London, England, to visit family and friends and plan future passages.

"Most of my time in Alaska was spent under power, either because there was no wind or it was blowing down a narrow inlet right on the nose." But Jeanne reveled in the spectacular wildness and wildlife that included dramatic whale sightings, both humpbacks and orcas, and enjoying the fruits of the sea. She spent *Nereida*'s eighth birthday in Elfin Cove participating in the July 4th celebrations that included many new and unusual activities such as slug races.

"They told me that everyone who cruises in Alaska eventually hits a rock and my turn came as I was leaving Glacier Bay." At first the damage appeared minimal, but when excessive water in the bilge shorted out the engine's electrical system, Jeanne arranged to take *Nereida* out of the water in Sitka. A local marine surveyor told her all would be OK if there was no side pressure on the keel. So began a long trip under power to North Vancouver where Jeanne moved into a hotel and *Nereida* into the repair yard.

As so often happens, repairs took much longer than anticipated, partly because approvals from the insurance company in the UK were slow, but also Jeanne decided that this would be a great opportunity for a major overhaul after eight years of cruising and many tough passages. *Nereida* finally returned to the water ready to head south once more on October 29, 2005, a grey, wet Northwest fall day.