

The Socratic method

Not much can deter this globe-trekking granny

Jeanne Socrates is not your average 60-something grandmother of three. She gets her kicks from sailing solo around the world, narrowly missing out on non-stop honours during her second attempt recently – but, in the process, she did become the oldest woman to circumnavigate the globe single-handedly.

This, following a pit stop near Cape Horn after a nerve-racking knockdown and resultant broken boom in typically heavy seas – putting paid to a prestigious record. But the determined Brit was unfazed, and completed her marathon journey – touching down in May in Cape Town for some well-earned rest and more repairs.

Not bad for a retired mathematics teacher. Her first attempt at a solo circumnavigation was back in 2005, leaving from Zihuatanejo in Mexico, going past Cairns

(Australia), Richards Bay (South Africa) through Trinidad via Panama, with the finishing line in Mexico. However, disaster struck just 60 nautical miles from the finish in Acapulco, after an epic 14 months at sea.

The plucky Socrates would not go down without a fight and was back for more in 2010, gunning for the elusive non-stop solo circumnavigation. This means no touching the land for repairs during the entire trip. She planned to achieve this without the use of engines during the entire journey.

In typical Socrates fashion, she chose the most difficult route, taking in the five great Capes of the South Oceans, sailing east from Cape Town.

Getting started

Socrates and late husband, George, had been keen boaters for years, spending summer holidays on their carefully hand-crafted boat Nereida, which was built in Sweden and had a crisp IKEA-like finish to it. They spent the best part of five years, from 1997, sailing around the Mediterranean, and over to the tropical Caribbean islands for some very memorable vacations.

They were living the dream of an ideal, relaxed retirement until her husband's body finally gave up following a long fight against cancer – while they were anchored in Bonaire.

Even though Jeanne had experience in dinghy sailing, captaining an ocean-going yacht alone is something completely different. But she was not interested in sitting around feeling sorry for herself, and decided that her passion for sailing should continue.

Socrates tells Leadership during an interview at the Royal Cape Yacht Club in Cape Town: "Firstly, my husband died of cancer while we were on a cruise in the Caribbean. I was already enjoying the boating experience with many friends because they understand what you're doing and what you're all about – the show must go on.

"I didn't want to stop what I was doing. If I get keen on something, I really go for it!

"Every time I went back to London to visit my family, I'd be hit with a year's worth of mail, and it wouldn't be long before I wanted to get back out to sea. I'd done all these courses and kept watch overnight while George was around, but it's simply keeping watch," she

says. "Later that year, The Ocean Cruising Club – which I'm a member of and (I) have a lot of good friends (there) – was having a rally in British Columbia. I thought that would be a great idea, and I started looking for somebody to help sail with me. I eventually found a good Dutch guy called Daan.

"But as it worked out, he did not pitch up at departure time: nowhere to be found. So I thought, 'If I have to wait around for somebody to sail with, this is never going to happen.' So off I went, leaving Bonaire, heading for Miami," Socrates relates.

"When you're out at sea solo, you have to learn on the job"

"But when I was leaving Bonaire, I got a VHF call, saying Daan was looking for me. I was not going to turn around, and told him to meet me at the next island in the Caribbean. Daan joined for the first part of the trip, helping me get familiar with my new role as captain."

She would continue to grow in confidence following a successful first semi-solo sail to British Columbia, taking in some of the breath-taking vistas along the way.

Into the deep end

The more Socrates sailed, the more she had to learn how to fix important instruments and equipment on the boat. Her background as a science and maths teacher would stand her in good stead, trying to fix things – often only with e-mail advice from manufacturers and fellow sailors.

She explains: "When you're out at sea solo, you have to learn on the job. One time I was sailing up to Alaska from San Francisco via Hawaii, bashing through the trade winds. The filler cap was not properly fastened, and water started leaking into the fuel. When I got to calm waters, I decided to turn the engine on – nothing.

"I could see the water in the sight glass, and knew then I'd have to change the injectors.

"There was a spare set, but I had never intended on changing them myself!

"After three days, I eventually got it partially fixed and crawled in for more repairs. This typical Alaskan mechanic said that, 'If you're sailing solo, you need to fix the rest of the engine yourself.' This burly chap stood over me and told me what to do, so next time I'd know. The downside is that I got a rash on my hand from diesel, but had learnt a valuable new skill," muses the sprightly Socrates.

It was not long before she would have enough experience to take on her first solo circumnavigation in 2007, with four years of going solo. And she almost made it back to her starting point near Acapulco in Mexico before disaster – and near death – struck in the middle of a balmy Mexican night.

Mexican malfunction

Socrates relates the terrifying experience: "The autopilot control ran out of power and went onto standby, which is the most irritating thing. Why could it not have just beeped at me?

"I was motoring through the calm; normally, you can feel the sails move if you turn a corner or wave action on the boat, and just wake up in your sleep and do something about it. I was taking a 40-minute nap, and woke up on the beach with waves crashing over my head!

"It had been a beautiful tropical night and I had the hatch open. I'd called up friends in Acapulco, who I'd seen 15 months before, to say that I was coming in," she continues.

"It was only a 100-mile journey, but I woke up on the beach. It was before dawn, in a deserted area. I remember being under water and seeing the light, and thinking that I'd better get toward that fast.

"After getting out, I tried to get the anchor up the beach, and almost got washed out to sea.

"Eventually, some fishermen came to help, but nobody had a boat that could winch it out, or (who had) the skill," Socrates notes.

"I spent the next 10 days staying at a local family's house, trying to retrieve whatever I could find and take to Acapulco. Luckily, I had hidden some money away before entering the Panama Canal, as my credit card had been washed away. You should always have money hidden away that people can find, and other stashes that they can't."

She could not afford to get emotional because it was her teammate – the boat – that had looked after her.

Socrates says the Mexicans on the whole were very helpful; the only thing that was stolen was the rope, "which the fishermen eyed".

Unbreakable spirit

Many a good sailor would have called it quits at this stage, choosing a cosy rocking chair and a DSTv subscription to while away the twilight years. But Socrates had other ideas, and purchased another boat with the insurance money from the wreck.

It is a common occurrence for equipment to break; things tend to have a short shelf life when exposed to the elements. She experienced a plethora of mechanical problems during her second non-stop circumnavigation last year.

Socrates recalls, "It was a mixture of things: I had a major rigging problem, with a lot of chafing on the reef lines. At the time, I didn't understand what the inside boom looked like.

"At one point, I e-mailed the manufacturers and said that I have this line that is close to breaking: Will I lose the line inside the boom?

"They e-mailed me back and said if I could get the end of the boom off, I could find out what the problem was. Which was all very well, but how the hell do you expect me to do that? I was sailing!

"Eventually, in calmer waters, I was able to climb up the boom and change it from a single to a twin line – which didn't turn out as difficult as previously thought," she adds.

Cape Town teaser

Socrates' engine also gave her problems on her second round-the-world trip, for which she had planned to use purely sail power, and she had left Lanzarote (the easternmost of the Canary Islands) by wind.

It was only when she was stuck outside Cape Town harbour in flat calm waters, starting at Table Mountain for two days on the final couple of metres of the circumnavigation, when she knew she would have to use her engines to dock. But nothing was starting, "and I knew this would be without the use of engines on this trip," she says with a laugh.

"Luckily, the wind came up. This all happened on a Wednesday evening, when there was a race happening at the same time, with

some keen racers coming from the opposite direction. I had a headwind and was flying into the harbour, and had to try and make the narrow inner entrance – fast-taking like mad and almost hitting the wall, and taking back furiously.

"I was getting a few yells and screams from the racers, which I pretended were welcomes.

"I remember one boat yelled out: 'Welcome to Cape Town!' As it turned out, there was another single-hander on that boat, who had been ahead of me and was following my progress," Socrates notes.

"When I came back into Cape Town again this year, it was on a Wednesday, too, so it was great to catch up with everybody at the bar that evening. I'm a bit of a chatterbox when back on land after a while. It's great exchanging stories and having a few too many drinks.

"That's the great thing about the sailing community: Somebody is always around for a helping hand and company. I get e-mails from people from around the world, inviting me to come visit," she adds.

"I really enjoy the botanical gardens at Kirstenbosch and the wine route, and have visited the Garden Route. On this trip, I should really see more, but there is a list as long as your arm of things that need to be fixed on the boat."

Single-hander escapism

Socrates has come into contact with several single-hander sailors, and has noticed a common thread between them: "Most of the single-handers whom I meet up with are in smaller boats, struggling to get by. A lot are escaping from life; I'm not – I'm just discovering a new life. We feel a bond between us, as we know the dangers involved."

So does she ever feel the presence of her late husband during the long days sailing through the world's great oceans?

"No, I am over that now; I'm doing this for myself. What else would I be doing with my retirement? I didn't fancy sitting in a cold house, wasting away my years. My hands have arthritis; but while I'm busy, I don't feel the pain."

Future trips

After a near-death experience, one would think Socrates – who is approaching her 70th birthday – would set aside ideas of a third attempt at non-stop race glory.

