

The trials of Socrates

Jeanne Socrates entered the record books last May when she completed her first solo circumnavigation, via Cape Horn, at 68 years old. She is now preparing for her third non-stop solo circumnavigation attempt. Jan Dodd caught up with her in South Africa



Jeanne Socrates discovered yachting in 1994, when she and husband George strolled into a Competent Crew course on the Solent. The couple had taken up windsurfing and dinghy sailing a few years earlier, and Jeanne thought yachting would be boring by comparison. By the end of the course, she was hooked.

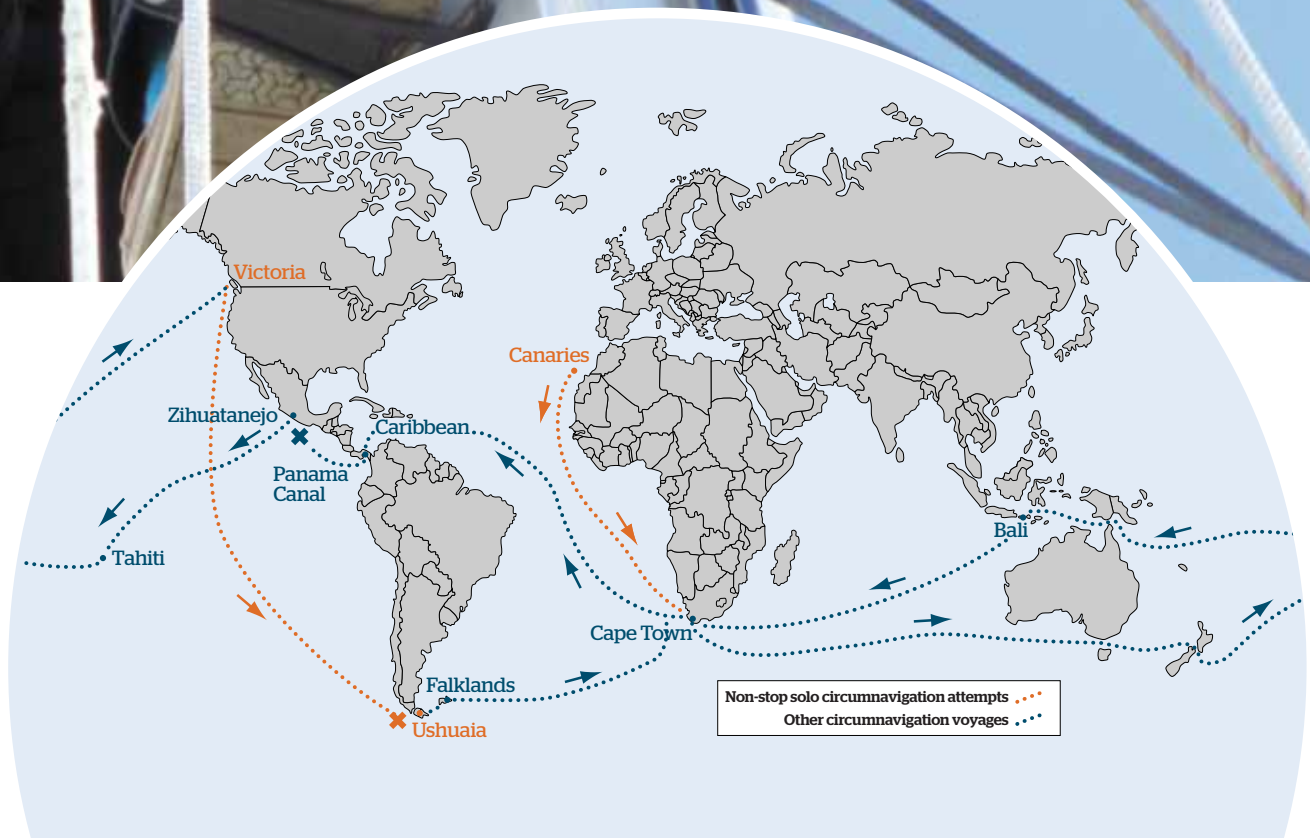
'It was way different from what I was expecting, often very exciting,' Jeanne recalls. And the other aspects of yachting, such as navigation and living onboard, which she had not considered, simply added to the attraction.

Her initial enthusiasm was confirmed during a week's flotilla holiday in Greece that summer. She then worked her

way up through the various RYA courses and qualifications, from Day Skipper to Yachtmaster Offshore in 1997.

It was during the summer of 1997 that Jeanne and George began early retirement and took delivery of their first yacht, *Nereida*, a Najad 361, built in Sweden. They sailed her back to England via Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands, and then began planning their next big adventure: sailing from the Hamble south to Spain and Portugal, before heading across the Atlantic in November 1999. En route, Jeanne completed her Yachtmaster Ocean qualification.

The next two years fulfilled every sailor's dream, cruising up the coast of the Americas from the Windward Islands to Nova Scotia, then back to the Caribbean. In September





2001, however, tragedy struck. George was diagnosed with cancer and, sadly, passed away in March 2003.

But Jeanne wasn't ready to give up sailing. She loved the life onboard, exploring new places, the friends and the undoubted challenges. She decided to carry on alone.

'It was quite a daunting task, getting to know the various systems onboard *Nereida* and dealing with a variety of problems,' she wrote later. But, with the advice and support of boating friends, in 2004, Jeanne plucked up the courage to set sail. As she headed north to Fort Lauderdale, completing several extended passages, she gradually gained confidence, learning as she went along.

A string of disasters

The next big step came in 2006, when Jeanne joined the Singlehanded TransPacific Race from San Francisco to Hawaii. The three-week race was Jeanne's longest solo ocean passage, and a really good learning experience, she remembers.

Later, as Jeanne sailed from Alaska down to Mexico, the idea of doing a solo round-the-world trip began to take hold. It was partly for the challenge and the chance to see so many places, but Jeanne also felt it was the right time.

'My husband had died of cancer, and other friends, too had passed away, so I began to think, what if?' she recalls. As much as anything, a solo circumnavigation was simply something she wanted to do, to tick off the list.

Jeanne embarked on her first attempt, from Zihuatanejo in Mexico in March 2007, heading westwards via Tahiti, Australia, Bali, Cape Town and the Caribbean before transiting the Panama Canal. She was only 60 miles from

Zihuatanejo again when disaster struck. Just before dawn on 19 June 2008, Jeanne was taking a short nap in calm conditions while motoring a few miles off the coast, when an electrical problem caused her autopilot to stop working. *Nereida* changed course – and ran aground on a steep surf beach in the middle of nowhere. Jeanne was woken by waves breaking over the boat.

Struggling to get the anchor up the beach to secure the boat, she came close to drowning a couple of times. 'If I had not lowered the chain, so I was able to hook my arm around it, I would have been swept out to sea,' she recalls. In the end, she escaped with a few cuts and bruises, but *Nereida* was doomed. But she had no thoughts of giving up. 'By the time I realised my beloved boat was lost, I was already thinking about the next one,' she remembers. And, by mid-August, she was signing a contract for her next boat, a Najad 380.

While the new boat – also called *Nereida*, in honour of her predecessor – was being fitted out in early 2009, Jeanne wondered what to do next. She thought it would be fun to join the 2010 TransPacific, but how to get to San Francisco? Aware that she had narrowly missed success in her first circumnavigation attempt and inspired by the Vendée Globe round-the-world race, Jeanne decided to try for non-stop this time.

After a false start from the Canary Isles, which she had to abandon 61 days later in Cape Town to carry out urgent repairs, Jeanne eventually set off on an official non-stop attempt from Victoria, British Columbia, in October 2010. This time she managed 75 days at sea, arriving in Ushuaia, Argentina, for repairs after being knocked down on

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5 January, while lying hove-to about 100 miles west of Cape Horn, waiting for bad weather to pass. In winds of up to 40 knots and six-metre seas, a far bigger wave knocked *Nereida* on her side, before she slowly righted herself.

By a stroke of luck, Jeanne was below when 'all hell let loose'. The knockdown snapped the boom in two, smashed the windscreen windows, broke the washboard, staysail furler and carbon pole, and ripped away the sprayhood. Everything was drenched and thrown into chaos.

'It was devastating,' Jeanne recalls. 'Normally, I can cope with things, prioritise them, but in this case there were so many things that were really bad.'

Overcoming obstacles

Nevertheless, Jeanne picked herself up. The good news was that most of the instruments, radio and engine were still working. She also got a huge boost from being able to talk to the Falmouth Coastguard. Jeanne eventually sailed round Cape Horn under genoa and limped into Ushuaia.

After a couple of frustrating months getting *Nereida* repaired, Jeanne set sail again in March 2011, stopping briefly in the Falklands before heading to Cape Town. As she approached the city, Jeanne realised that she was going to cross her 2009 track from the Canaries to Cape Town, so completing a singlehanded circumnavigation, which she did on 6 May.

Since then, Jeanne has been working on her boat, now moored in Simon's Town, already preparing for her next solo non-stop attempt, which she plans to start from Victoria next autumn. In the meantime, she is making sure the boat is properly watertight, the instrumentation working well and everything stowed more securely.

From left to right: Jeanne on *Nereida*, preparing to leave Hamble; moored at Harberton, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina; at anchor after rounding Cape Horn, Chile; *Nereida* at Port Townsend, Washington, USA

But first, she has to get to Victoria. If all goes to plan, Jeanne will leave South Africa mid-January, sailing via Perth and Hobart and then on south, hoping to round the two Great Capes she has not yet passed by – those of Tasmania and New Zealand. On the way, she will work on improving her storm-weather tactics; she wants to continue experimenting with heaving-to under mainsail only, without using a headsail.

When asked what makes a good singlehanded sailor, Jeanne reckons determination is the number one criterion. Being fairly petite, Jeanne has also learnt to anticipate situations; she also trusts her boat implicitly; planning is equally important, and Jeanne has found her RYA courses extremely useful. But perhaps the most vital attribute is the ability to cope with whatever is thrown your way.

'You have to be able to fix things, or find another way through using lateral thinking,' Jeanne says. 'You might as well give up if you can't.' All her determination will undoubtedly be put to the test as she continues the quest to complete a solo non-stop circumnavigation, but Jeanne says she never thinks of giving up.

'I will keep going as long as I can, as long as I am physically able,' she asserts. Besides the challenges, every voyage brings its highlights, too, whether it's 'being exhilarated in the middle of the ocean, with the boat sailing beautifully', or watching 'a wandering albatross gliding by the boat, fixing you in the eye, as if to ask what you are doing there'. No doubt, the albatross will be keeping an eye on Jeanne as she heads for the record books once again. [You can follow Jeanne's progress via her daily logs, posted on her website www.svneraida.com, and sign up to sponsor her in aid of Marie Curie Cancer Care.](http://www.svneraida.com)