

SHIPWRECKED 60 MILES SHORT OF TRIUMPH

Jeanne Socrates describes how the failure of an electronic autopilot stranded her 36ft yacht, *Nereida*, on a remote Mexican beach ending her circumnavigation



The isolated beach on Mexico's Pacific coast where *Nereida* met her fate



Jeanne Socrates: 'I was dragged underwater and nearly washed out to sea'

I woke in darkness as a wave broke over the boat, splashing water onto me through an open hatch in the cabin. It was Thursday, 19 June, 2008 and I was just 60 miles and half-a-day from completing a 15-month, 25,500-mile, solo circumnavigation in *Nereida*, my Najad 361.

I rushed into the cockpit to find the yacht stranded inside the breakers of a surf line.

When I tried to turn the wheel, to motor away from the beach, there was no response. The wheel turned so easily, I wondered if the steering cable had broken. We were aground and I was completely helpless. There was no sign of life ashore. We had grounded on Playa Michigan, an isolated beach on the Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Guerrero, between Acapulco and Zihuatanejo. It was a desolate, sparsely populated area of coastline.

'Was this nightmare really happening?' I asked myself. Especially in what had been calm conditions, under a full moon and a bright, starry sky with little wind or swell. Having organised

my 'celebratory party' for that very same evening, I wondered if fate was just laughing at me.

While I had been taking a catnap with a kitchen timer alarm to wake me every 40 minutes or so, the electronic autopilot had lost power, gone into 'standby' mode and the yacht went off course while motor-sailing.

Nereida heeled one way and then the other

'Es mi casita, mi vida' - 'It's my home, my life' - I told them'

as she was gradually pushed up the beach by the force of the waves as I clung on. The only good thing was that we were being taken away from breaking surf which threatened to sink the boat. There was no RNLI or Coastguard here. I dropped the mainsail but kept the engine running in neutral, thinking it best not to lose engine power or battery power. I needed my radio and instruments and all the water sloshing around in the saloon was bound to affect the

electrics or engine at some point. I tried calling on the VHF radio in both English and Spanish, but there was no reply. There was no one else around. There hadn't been since I left Acapulco, which had been busy with local fishing boats.

I activated my EPIRB (Electronic Position Indicating Radio Beacon) thinking the authorities somewhere would pick up the distress signal

and someone might come to help me. I later learned that Falmouth's Marine Rescue Co-ordination Centre received no distress signal despite the unit having been

regularly tested and the battery being well within its service life.

I tried pumping the water out of the bilge from the cockpit hand pump, but soon realised it was having little effect. I urgently wanted to stop the boat's violent motion and keep her heeled towards the beach. I needed to deploy the anchor on the beach. On the pitching foredeck it was a struggle to loosen the chain on the windlass. But, bit by bit, I managed. Then I climbed from

the sloping sidedeck into the water and stepped onto sand. Twice I was dragged underwater by the unexpected power of the waves. At one point, I was nearly washed out to sea, but I'd managed to lower enough chain so I could hook my arm around it and avoid being swept past the bow. If I'd been swept away, there was no one to help me.

Later, in the pre-dawn light, I spotted a fisherman standing on the beach nearby, gazing at me in astonishment. Javier (I later learned his name) was soon joined by an older fisherman, Isaiah, who both helped dig deep holes in the sand to bury my anchors and hold *Nereida* steady in the surge of surf crashing on the beach. My slim hope was that *Nereida* might be saved by being towed off the beach, back into deep water.

But the waves continued to lift the yacht and slam her onto the sand. The pounding soon took its toll.

The starboard side of the hull began to crack. It was difficult to keep the anchor chain and lines taut enough to stop her motion in the rising spring tide.

The day continued as though I was in an awful dream, but I was surrounded by kind-hearted, sympathetic people who responded to my plea: 'Es mi casita, mi vida!' ('It's my home, my life!')

Two students, Esteban and Miguel, on a camping holiday from Mexico City, kindly helped translate for me. They spoke excellent English, far better than my limited Spanish.

A local Army captain, summoned by someone from the nearest village, arrived around noon with a squad of troops in a truck. There was no boat and no sign of a possible tow off the beach. My hopes were fading, though he tried his best to help, directing his men, at my request, to dig holes and place a post in the beach to stop *Nereida's* stern swivelling around. The captain eventually took me on a long, bumpy, cross-country ride in his truck, first to his base camp and eventually to the nearest town, to make phone calls to Acapulco. He also posted guards over *Nereida* for several days to stop any looting.

The captain said I would have to go to Acapulco (three hours away by road or boat) if I

wanted the Navy to help. I had to prove the boat was mine, despite having checked in to Mexico two days earlier at Acapulco YC. When I phoned the Navy, they said they didn't have a boat big enough! A phone call to the Acapulco Port Captain produced a similar response.

My only hope now lay with Señor Marquez, Acapulco Yacht Club's harbourmaster, who had been very helpful when I checked in. He also spoke some English. I phoned him and he invited me to stay with his family that night while he tried to organise a fishing boat to tow *Nereida* off the beach.

Dressed in just shorts, tank-top & flip-flops, I took a two-and-a-half hour bus-ride to Acapulco,

anxious about *Nereida's* fate. Snr Marquez's family took me under their wing and tried to help me in so many ways. Their neighbours also tried

to cheer me up at someone's Saturday night birthday celebrations. They were typical warm-hearted Mexicans. I realised I was lucky to be alive and uninjured, apart from a few cuts and bruises.

Next morning, I learned that the option to tow *Nereida* off the beach was not feasible. Also, during the night, her stern anchor cable had snapped and she had swung around and now had a 12in hole in her port side. I finally faced the sickening realisation that she was doomed.

Over the next week or so, I made several long overland journeys to salvage what I could from the yacht before she was too damaged or inaccessible as sand and water filled the hull. All the electronic items were soon rendered useless by water damage. Everything was coated in a film of diesel and a mess of paper pulp. The broken hull soon caused further damage to fixtures, fittings and furniture. Access to some areas became difficult or impossible, especially with the extreme angle of heel.

I had only my passport, about 300 US dollars and one debit card. My credit card had been washed out of my pocket earlier while trying to set an anchor in the breaking waves. I lost all my address and telephone records and all the logbooks in which I'd recorded so

'Everything was coated in a film of diesel'

Jeanne had safely sailed *Nereida* singlehanded for thousands of miles before the shipwreck



much, so painstakingly, over the years. Thank goodness I'd sent a log report every day or so to my website (www.svnereida.com) during my circumnavigation. These survived as my main written record of my voyage, along with some emails. All my photos would have been lost, too, but a data recovery firm retrieved most of them from my laptop computer's hard drive.

Of course, it wasn't all good news. I found my personal possessions, clothes and books scattered on the beach with strangers turning them over with, seemingly, no thought for my feelings. Some people understood, but there were also 'vultures' who descended and cut



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NEREIDA'S 'FAST' SOLO CIRCUMNAVIGATION

On 26 March, 2007, Jeanne began her singlehanded circumnavigation from Zihuatanejo, Mexico, across the Pacific to the Marquesas, Tahiti, Tonga, Fiji and Vanuatu. She arrived in Cairns, Australia, on 11 July and stopped to make repairs and anti-foul the yacht. Sailing north, inside the Great Barrier Reef, she rounded Cape York to stop in Darwin, before sailing to Bali and across the southern Indian Ocean. She island-hopped to Christmas Island, Cocos Keeling, Rodrigues, Mauritius and Réunion, before arriving at Richards Bay, north of Durban, South Africa. From Namibia she headed across the South Atlantic, stopping at St Helena and Trinidad before transiting the Panama Canal and heading north for Zihuatanejo. 'I frequently made 150 miles a day, logging more than 180 miles several times,' she said.



The road to Tenexpa Lagoon



Waiting for the bus to Acapulco

away every single line on deck and looted my possessions. I didn't mind giving away food and anything else of use to the local families who were clearly quite poor.

The scene of my shipwreck turned out to be a beauty spot, with a lovely long lagoon (Laguna Tenexpa) full of birds and waterlife beyond the beach where *Nereida* lay stricken. Several families would come from Tenexpa, the nearest village, during the daytime to serve food and drinks from their *palapas* (palm thatched umbrella 'bars') to occasional campers and day trippers. They also insisted on giving me some food and drink in between my frantic efforts to

salvage my possessions.

The nearest town, Tecpan, was a 90-minute journey away across the lagoon by *panga* (small open fishing-boat), with a dusty track leading to a proper road past coconut palms, banana trees and grazing cattle.

My insurers sent an assessor from San Francisco a few days later. He organised the removal of the remaining diesel from the tanks, to avoid pollution. The insurers finally met my claim of £186,000 for total loss in full. Another cruising yachtsman, Skip, whom I had met in Colón whilst awaiting my transit of Panama Canal, arrived a week later. He helped me by taking my salvaged

gear to San Francisco in his yacht, *Annamarina*. Sailing friends and complete strangers sent me emails of support and sympathy. They helped me through a very distressing time.

A year later I am sailing my new 'home' – a Najad 380, also called *Nereida*. I took delivery of her early this year. She is similar to my old 36-footer but slightly larger. In June I set off from the River Hamble on a shakedown cruise to the Channel Islands. After 11 years of cruising, I know what works for me and I'm looking forward to a second solo circumnavigation, this time non-stop, via the Cape of Good Hope and Cape Horn, starting from the Canaries in September. ▲

Jeanne with her brand-new Najad 380, also called *Nereida*



JEANNE SOCRATES

A retired teacher, Jeanne bought *Nereida* in 1997 with her husband, George, for long-term cruising after their early retirement. They cruised from Sweden to the Med and crossed the Atlantic to the Caribbean and east coast of America. In 2001, George was diagnosed with cancer and died, aged 65, in 2003. Jeanne carried on cruising the Caribbean and America before shipping *Nereida* to Canada and sailing singlehanded south to California and Mexico. She shipped the yacht to Alaska and cruised there before joining the 2006 Singlehanded TransPac Race to Hawaii and back to Alaska.

