

The grandmother who's sailing around the world solo



Jeanne Socrates set sail on her third attempt to sail solo, unassisted, non-stop around the world in October last year. Michael Robertson witnessed her departure

Imagine yourself newly retired, set to follow the blue-water dream on your own yacht with your spouse. Fast-forward five years: you have many wonderful miles under your keel, but your spouse has just lost the battle with cancer. You're alone and your boat sits in the Caribbean where, as a couple, you left her, full of memories. What do you do?

This was the scenario faced by Jeanne Socrates. 'I never considered not continuing to cruise and live aboard,' she recalls. 'It was my life.' And continue she has – since a blustery afternoon in July

2003, when she first sailed solo to spread her late husband's ashes at sea. Now she has more than 50,000 miles solo, living a hardy life afloat that has culminated in three attempts to sail singlehanded, unassisted, non-stop around the world.

The third is under way as you read this, with Jeanne celebrating her 71st birthday at sea aboard *Nereida*, her Najad 380.

She left Victoria, British Columbia, on 22 October, 2012, and has been sailing non-stop and alone since then. Ten days before she departed, I met her for the first time in the Victoria suburb of Oak Bay.

10 Days to Departure

I found *Nereida* in the marina, tied up amidst a sea of yacht. It felt odd that there wasn't a cordon between this boat, days away from an epic voyage, and the others, most of which only take to sea a few days a year. People walked past *Nereida* without a glance, unaware that this boat is special.

And yet, at the same time, she isn't that special, just another modest cruising boat.

'She's not really right for this voyage,' Jeanne would later tell me, 'I'd prefer a racing boat with watertight bulkheads and a seat at the nav station I could strap into.'

I knock on *Nereida*'s hull and Jeanne emerges from down below, smiling broadly: 'I've just received some very good news,' she said. 'A friend came through with eggs! Ten dozen at \$4 a dozen. Seems like a fair price, right?'

I smile back. She had put a call out for eggs to friends living on Vancouver Island.

PHOTO: JEANNE SOCRATES



June 2008: disaster in Mexico, just 60 miles short of a circumnavigation

PHOTO: JEANNE SOCRATES



'It was tough trying to smile as she sank into the sand,' recalls Jeanne

Jeanne is taking on her latest epic voyage aboard Nereida, a Najad 380 built in Sweden

PHOTOS: MICHAEL ROBERTSON UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED



‘A hundred and twenty eggs as fresh as possible and never refrigerated will keep for months – provided I remember to turn them regularly!’

She has prepared for this solo non-stop sail around the world twice before.

Tools, parts and papers lie strewn around the cabin, stuff is spilling out of every locker, and boxes, bags, and cans of provisions fill the companionway, yet Jeanne remains sanguine. For her, getting done what needs getting done is simply a practical matter of completing tasks and crossing things off lists, nothing more.

Underlying her calm pragmatism is an urgent and giddy desire to get under way. Adding ten dozen eggs to the *melée* puts Jeanne one step closer to her goal.

‘The Southern Ocean is addictive. Once you’ve sailed it on your own, thousands of miles from anyone, with only the albatross for company, you can’t wait to return.’

Standing there with Jeanne, aboard her boat, I can imagine the allure.

Like her many friends who stop by to visit *Nereida* before the departure date, I offer my time. We do everything Jeanne asks of us – inspect *Nereida*’s rigging aloft, reattach a loose monitor bracket, run chandlery errands, loosen frozen sheaves,

attach jackstays, install and repair wind generator blades, prepare food provisions, vacuum-seal clothing, secure access panels, string netting, install hard points, and diagnose electrical glitches.

Every one of us is inspired by the dogged determination of this extraordinary woman.

9 Days to Departure

I was nervous when I first contacted Jeanne for an interview. I’d read about her in the sailing press for years. This grandmother of three seemed to be larger than life. She had raced in the 2006 Singlehanded TransPac from San Francisco to Hawaii, and a year later lost her boat – and nearly her life – running aground in Mexico, 60 miles short of completing a circumnavigation.

Only weeks before our meeting, she had arrived in Victoria, closing the loop on a circumnavigation via the Southern Ocean, making her the oldest woman to complete such a voyage. She had also recently visited Buckingham Palace to meet the Queen, so



Fresh eggs stowed in foil: ‘Turn regularly and they last months!’

I imagined that her ‘people’ would ask me for my credentials and list the topics we couldn’t discuss.

But Jeanne is her people. She replied right away: ‘My schedule’s tight, but we can make it work if you don’t mind picking up my new wind generator blades?’

Jeanne was in her mid-fifties when she and her late husband George accepted

early pensions, rented their home out and took off cruising. Her voyages have become increasingly bold since taking up singlehanded sailing, and she is embarking on this adventure in the same way she completed the Singlehanded TransPac – through sheer willpower, yet graciously accepting help from the friends she has made around the world. ‘Anyone who’s been sailing a lot learns that you have to treat people with respect. Be good to people and they’ll be good back.’

8 Days to Departure

‘Look at this,’ she insists, handing me a heavy metal part. ‘Do you see the angle?’ It’s a connection arm for





Jeanne gave herself just eight weeks to fully prepare and provision the boat for her solo non-stop circumnavigation

attaching the autopilot ram to the rudder post. She explains why it was a poor design that put undue stress on components, then shows me the improved design she had fabricated and installed.

Enamoured by the nuclear age, Jeanne earned her 1963 degree in nuclear physics from University College London. She married, had two kids, and wound up in the classrooms of London, teaching the maths and science she is so passionate about. 'Physics is maths in action!' I'd heard her proclaim a couple times already. Her science mindset prevails aboard *Nereida*.

She reinforces anything she thinks may not be fit for the Southern Ocean, and sees chafe as her long-haul enemy, combating it proactively and relentlessly. Her detailed and functional focus gives her terrific peace of mind. She trusts her boat, in any weather. And it doesn't hurt that she oversaw *Nereida*'s construction in Sweden. When she saw Najad running non-tinned copper wire, she had spools of tinned wire and heat shrink connectors sent to the factory for use on her boat.

7 Days to Departure

To my eye, much remains to be done. No doubt the list in Jeanne's head is even longer. Why give yourself only eight weeks to prepare the boat? She smiles: 'Because I'm not getting any younger.' Now in her eighth decade, she knows this will be her final attempt. It's a personal quest, she'll remain frustrated until it's accomplished.

It may be a personal quest, but it's definitely not a solitary one. The irony isn't lost on me. Jeanne's quest demands time alone at sea – and she seeks this solitude, craves it – yet to an equal extent she needs and enjoys the contacts, friendships and attention that her endeavour brings.

She even started a website several years ago after a boat show encounter. 'I bought a pair of Musto sea boots and they nearly fell apart after a year in the tropics. So I took them back to the Musto reps at the boat show. We began talking about my sailing plans and they were keen to give me free clothing. That's how I realised I needed a website, so I could tell people that I'd put them on my sponsor page.'

6 Days to Departure

She rubs her eyes, more distracted than I've seen her before. 'I got very little sleep last night, I was on the phone. Daytime in the UK is the middle of the night over here.'

Her tenants have moved out of the London flat she rents for income. 'Terrible timing, I'm scrambling to coordinate inspections and painting. It's a shame my daughter is away, she'd sort it out for me.'

Jeanne's undertaking doesn't exempt her from the hassles of everyday life.

5 Days to Departure

Seeing the massive red and black bolt cutters Jeanne has affixed to the inside of *Nereida*'s companionway, I ask her about the circumstances that prompted her to

about her last attempt at a non-stop, solo circumnavigation, in 2011. She had *Nereida* hove-to for several hours, weathering a storm 180 miles north-west of Cape Horn. She was in the heads, leaning against a bulkhead when 'all hell let loose'. A large wave broke over her ten-ton vessel, putting the port-side spreaders in the water.

'After she righted, I had to get topside quickly because the staysail was loose, shaking the rig violently,' she recalls. The companionway hatch was jammed shut. Jeanne crawled over debris and climbed out through a hatch. *Nereida*'s boom was snapped in half, her dodger was gone, and two of the three glass panes on her windshield were smashed to bits.

'I was stunned, but I just went about doing what needed to be done.' She then motored on to Ushuaia, Argentina.

'Looking back, I would now heave-to under mainsail alone, because it narrows the angle between *Nereida*'s bow and the waves,' she says. 'There's plenty of windage forward with the two headsails furled. If I'd been hove-to like that, I wouldn't have presented so much beam to the seas, and wouldn't have been knocked down.'

With a trip around the Horn under her belt, I imagine it's easier to go again – but how was it the first time? Where does anyone get the gumption to head deep down, singlehanded, below 55 degrees latitude to the oceans that are the subject of the most foreboding sea tales ever written?

'I never thought I couldn't do it. Other people had sailed down there – so why on earth shouldn't I?'

4 Days to Departure

On deck, working to secure jackstays, I ask what she has learned from other sailors about Southern Ocean sailing. ➔

PHOTO: COURTESY LADONNA BUBACK



Leaving San Francisco for Hawaii at the start of the Single-Handed TransPac race in 2006



Jeanne's methodical approach and fastidious nature is evident throughout the yacht



No time for reading: managing a round-the-world yacht is a full-time job, insists Jeanne

'Ellen MacArthur told me to remember to eat. In fact, Mike Golding told me he became ill on a voyage because his meals didn't have enough calories.'

Jeanne is petite, fit and alert. Her eyes are clear, grey-blue. I ask if she does any exercise or strength training in preparation for her trip – or just to stay in shape. Her smile is slightly embarrassed: 'No, nothing really.' Then she quickly adds that on passage she will repeat the steps in her companionway 'whenever I think of it'.

She knows very well that it won't be physical strength that gets *Nereida* around the world non-stop, but her knowledge of the boat, her careful planning, her anticipating each step of an activity, and carrying tasks out methodically.

'And determination, you see the cards I have hung up over there?' Inside her cabin hang two cards with quotes celebrating the power of perseverance.

Jeanne's progress

As we went to press, Jeanne Socrates was several hundred miles east of Australia, hoping to arrive back in British Columbia by June. For up-to-date information, and to read about Jeanne's previous voyages, go to: <http://svnereida.com/>



CHART: MAXINE HEATH

3 Days to Departure

I sit at *Nereida's* table, prepping 70lb of potatoes and 30lb of onions. Across the saloon is a shelf with books by Dana, Roth, Moitessier and others. I wonder if we have any favourites in common.

'Oh, I haven't read those,' she says. 'I never read many sailing books really – I'm always too busy. It's a full-time job managing the vessel, preparing meals, rearranging stores, accessing and analysing weather, navigating, cleaning, and trying to sleep. Any free time I get is spent writing – friends tell me they want to see a book.'

After this voyage, Jeanne is eager to get back to regular cruising, perhaps to Mexico or French Polynesia. 'I'd like a nice warm place where I can go for a swim in the sea every morning, that would be lovely.'

2 Days to Departure

A jubilant Jeanne greets me when I knock on *Nereida's* hull. 'Come aboard! I downloaded the GRIB files last night and it looks like we may have easterlies on Monday along with a mid-morning ebb tide, can you believe that? Monday it is!'

Departure Eve

My wife and I join several of Jeanne's many other friends aboard *Nereida*. We all help out with the last odds and ends, and *Nereida's* cabin lights burn on late into the night.

Departure Day

A cold and overcast morning, with the promised easterly blowing steadily. In the final few minutes, friends run lines, stow fenders and add more chafe protection. Then it's time to go, the ebb won't wait.

Nereida's engine has been disabled for the voyage, so a bright yellow RIB from a local whale watching company tows her out of her berth in front of the Empress Hotel.

Outside the busy harbour corridor, the two boats separate. With the mainsail up, Jeanne unfurls her genoa and accelerates across the starting line at seven knots.

With a big smile on her face and a jolly wave, she is finally on her way. ▲



A thumbs-up as Jeanne finally leaves British Columbia, heading for the Southern Ocean...