

Jeanne Socrates - the Lymington sailor who became the oldest woman to traverse the world solo

PUBLISHED: 00:00 04 March 2020

Words: Rebecca Fletcher - Photos: Kevin Light Photography

Lymington's Jeanne Socrates is the oldest person to sail around the world solo and unaided – but her adventures aren't over yet.



77-year-old British woman Jeanne Socrates became the oldest person to sail around the world alone, non-stop and unassisted, landing in Victoria, British Columbia, on Saturday September 7th, 2019. Photo: Adrian Lam

Breaking records wasn't something which Lymington sailor Jeanne Socrates set out to do when she took early retirement. In fact, she had never sailed before. She started with dinghy sailing and windsurfing before finally completing a Competent Crew yacht course in the Solent in 1994. It didn't take long for Jeanne to be well and truly bitten by the sailing bug and soon she and husband George had taken delivery of their own boat, Nereida.

Spain and Portugal were swiftly swapped for shores further afield and their adventures over the next few years saw them land in New York, sail to Nova Scotia and explore the Caribbean. Not even George's cancer diagnosis in 2001 deterred them and, following treatment, George was back on board on Nereida with plans to head for Venezuela in May 2002. By December, they had reached the Venezuelan archipelagos of Los Roques and Las Aves but this was to be George's last voyage. Many might have given up at this point and started for home but despite the loss of her husband and the prospect of sailing solo, Jeanne remained determined to carry on the adventures she and George had begun together.

"I definitely adopted the motto 'Life is precious - make the most of it' after George died," Jeanne says. "A friend of ours who was supposed to come on the boat and enjoy it with us also died of cancer unexpectedly. Cancer can take people and suddenly they no longer have the life to enjoy as they thought they would. We're lucky to have life. We should make the most of it."

Adopting this new mantra, it soon became clear that Jeanne was going to have to learn to operate various systems onboard Nereida in order to continue to sail and live on board alone; never mind overcoming any concerns she might have about single-handed sailing on extended passages as well as overnight. Boat friends came to the rescue with advice and expertise and Jeanne became a consummate problem-solver.



77-year-old British woman Jeanne Socrates became the oldest person to sail around the world alone, non-stop and unassisted, landing in Victoria, British Columbia, on Saturday September 7, 2019. Photo: Adrian Lam

"I knew I could sail the boat so there was no problem with that. Every day I'd be in contact with other boats on the radio. I had people to talk to and if I had any problems there was always someone to ask for advice."

Taking part in a Single-handed TransPac Race in 2006 was to be the catalyst for Jeanne's next challenge. Despite facing big seas and strong winds which left her without an autopilot and a transmitting radio, she found her confidence en route in the face of many mechanical problems and set her sights on sailing around the world.

It wasn't all plain sailing though. Jeanne's first attempt to complete a non-stop sail around the world in 2009 had to be postponed due to rigging problems. Another in 2012 also failed. Doggedly determined, Jeanne went on to complete her mission in 2013 and was awarded a Guinness World Record for becoming the oldest woman to sail alone both non-stop and unassisted. Raring to go again in 2017, she fell off her boat in dry dock, breaking her neck and many ribs just days before her planned departure, meaning that she had to abandon the idea of completing another circumnavigation. However, warmer climes and physiotherapy meant that it wasn't long before Jeanne was back on track and ready to set sail again.

"I wanted to get my body back in action and fit enough for the next year," she describes about her recuperation in Mexico. "There's not much preparation needed for getting myself ready really, it's about making the boat ready. I didn't go to a gym put it that way. I'm relatively fit, well fit enough to sit on the boat and do the odd bit of winching from time to time," she laughs.

With circumnavigating the world nonstop in a yacht likened to taking on Mount Everest, it's remarkable just how easily Jeanne seems to take these gruelling feats of perseverance as well as mental and physical endurance in her stride. It's all about mind over matter.

"The further I went on the journey and the more time and effort I'd invested into it, the less I wanted to give up. I don't give up easily. If I can find a way around a problem or overcome a challenge in the moment to keep going then so much the better."

Testing all her resolve and problem-solving skills, Jeanne's latest 340-day voyage saw boat Nereida suffering damage to the mainsail and headsail as well as Jeanne losing vital solar panels overboard.

"There's always a time when things aren't going well," she says. "Coming down to the Horn this time in 45 knots of wind in the dark, I was not enjoying it but knew I had to

hang on in there. I had to keep going to keep safe. Times like that, I just kept thinking that it wasn't going to last forever, it's just a few hours and tomorrow will be fine."

Crossing the finish line and arriving in Victoria, Canada, on 7 September 2019, Jeanne's exhilaration and sense of relief must have been palpable.

"You have to be a positive thinker. I've always said it's we and not me. Nereida and I are a team. She's always looked after me."

Jeanne had not only made headlines but earned a place in the history books too. Having celebrated her 77th birthday during the voyage, Jeanne had completed her solo circumnavigation unassisted and set another record as the oldest person to do it. To Jeanne though, age is just a number.

"It's something you can't avoid - the numbers go on getting bigger and bigger," she says. "You're no different a person than you were at 37 or 57 mentally so if you want to do something and you have your health then, why not? I don't think that you should stop, look at your age and think I shouldn't be doing this."

There's no stopping Jeanne either. With Nereida needing major repairs over winter, she's already mapped out her next adventure - this time on dry land. Jeanne plans to hire a camper van and circumnavigate Australia giving her time to finish writing her book and visit a few yacht clubs on the way to meet many of the people she talked to on Nereida's radio during her voyage. When plans for the future fall into conversation, Jeanne's answer is characteristically straight to the point.

"I like to think I'm a little bit crazy. Doing something when everyone's telling you not to but why not?" she smiles. "I just think go for it. If you don't try something, you don't know if you can do it or if you'll like it. It's no big deal if it doesn't work out, it just means you can try something else."

Having sailed round the world and entered record books, it seems that Jeanne has no intention of putting her feet up. She's too busy making the most of life.