



# ADVENTURE 77 AND SOLO NON-STOP AROUND THE WORLD

*Jeanne Socrates battled equipment failure during her record circumnavigation. She tells Katy Stickland how she overcame adversity*

Words Katy Stickland Photos Jeanne Socrates & James Holkko

“The further I got, the less likely it was that I’d give up,” explained 77-year-old Jeanne Socrates, “Not that I was ever likely to, if I could help it!”

Sailing non-stop around the world solo and without assistance pushes the limits of any sailor. Throw endless equipment failure into the mix and you begin to understand what a special kind of sailor Socrates is. Resourceful, yes. Determined, definitely.

During 339 days at sea in her Najad 380, *Nereida*, the British skipper, who now holds the record for the oldest person to sail solo around the world non-stop and unassisted, had to endure periods becalmed and problems with many of her instruments, including the chartplotter and autopilot. Broken reefing lines and lazyjacks, badly damaged windvane steering, and a shredded genoa also had to be overcome, as well as a badly torn mainsail which took months to repair. While some might balk at these sorts of trials, Socrates seems to thrive on them, even though they added four months to her voyage.

“The challenge of managing to keep the boat going all the way around successfully and dealing with any number of unknown problems that were sure to crop up – that was the attraction, with the record resulting from my age being by-the-by,” she explained.

A former maths and science teacher, Socrates starting sailing aged 48, with her late husband, George. She qualified as a Yachtmaster Ocean after the couple had retired early to cruise extensively in their Najad 361, *Nereida*, before George was diagnosed with cancer, eventually losing his battle in 2003. Alone, Socrates continued their cruising dreams, first sailing solo in July 2003 to spread George’s ashes at sea. Three years later she raced in the 2006 Singlehanded TransPac from San Francisco to Hawaii before her first solo round the world voyage in 2007-08, which ended in disaster when *Nereida* ran aground on a beach north of Acapulco in Mexico, less than 60 miles short of the finish at the port of Zihuatanejo. Unfazed, she commissioned her cutter-rigged Najad 380, also named *Nereida*, and two years later started her first non-stop attempt around the world, which ended in Cape Town due to

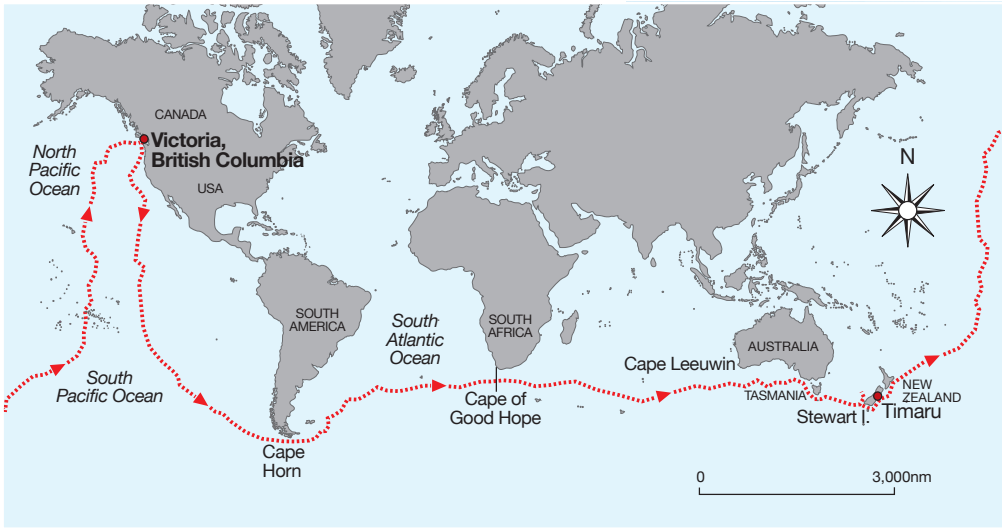
**RIGHT:** Jeanne spent 339 days alone at sea, four months longer than she expected due to weather and gear failure

**INSET:** Waving to her fans as she arrives back at her start port of Victoria, British Columbia

rigging and other issues. A knockdown off Cape Horn put paid to her second attempt, causing her to stop in Argentina to make repairs, although she continued sailing, circumnavigating via the Five Great Capes of the Southern Ocean – Cape Horn, Cape of Good Hope, Cape Leeuwin, South East Cape of Tasmania and the South Cape of Stewart Island. Her third successful attempt took 258 days and earned her the world record title in 2013 of the oldest woman to sail single-handedly around the world. She was 70. ➔







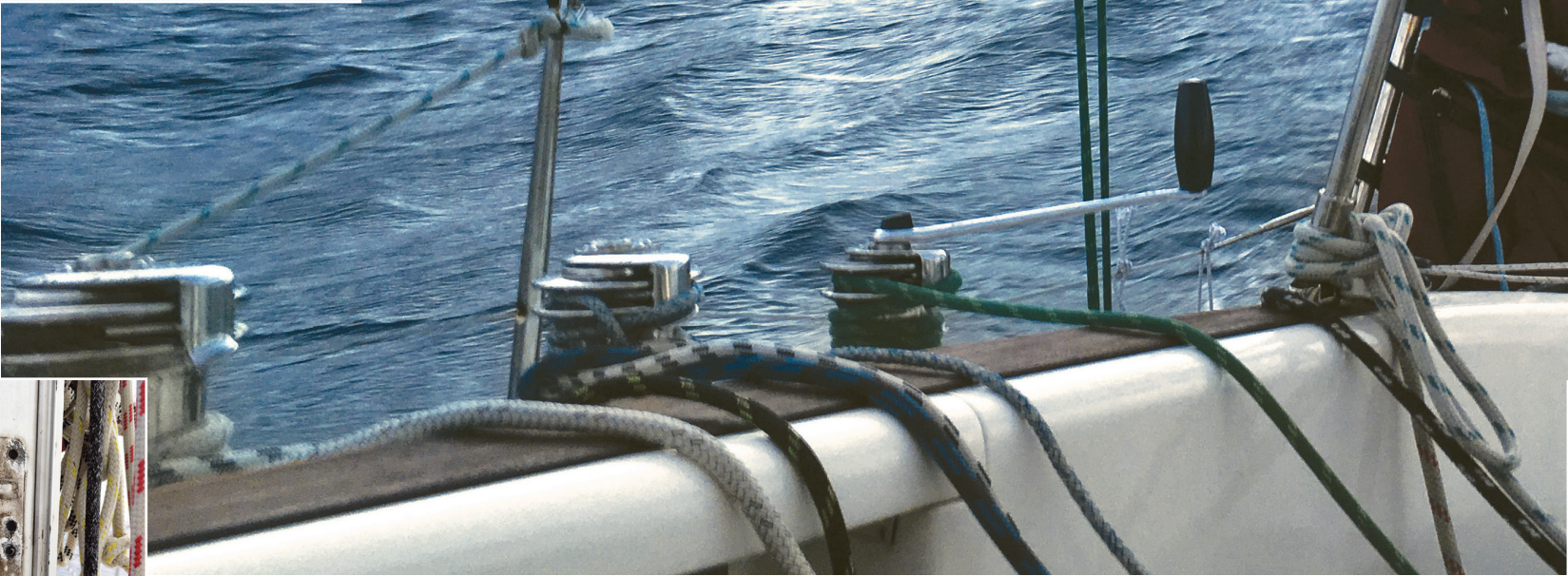
Three years later, and she was ready to do it all over again, although it would once again take several attempts. Storms and broken gear ended two attempts in 2016. A fall from a ladder while *Nereida* was on the hard ended plans until 2018 while Socrates recovered from a broken neck and 11 ribs.

So why make a fourth attempt? ‘I really wanted to experience the Southern Ocean again; it is a very special, remote place with wonderful, though sadly threatened, birdlife. I also wanted to make some long ocean passages again as I had missed those over the years since my last record attempt. A friend pointed out that if I went around solo now, I’d become the oldest person, rather than the oldest woman, to do so,’ is her reply.

THE BEST LAID PLANS

Prior to leaving, she removed the bunk bedding and cushions from the forepeak and aft cabin bunks to improve access to the batteries, computer and compass, steering quadrant, and wiring – a move that was to prove prudent. The two-part companionway washboards were replaced with a well-sealed one-piece Lexan panel, which improved light down below and visibility. A clear, zippered storm screen was attached to the underside of the hard top over the companionway to give Socrates protection from the elements. Sections of running rigging were also replaced. The main sail, new in 2016, was reinforced with batten pockets, and she carried plenty of spare rope for sheets, reefing lines and braided Spectra, as well as a spare vane cover and rudder for her Hydrovane steering.

She admits that while she had prepared for some gear failure she hadn’t expected so much to go wrong.



‘I felt I had a guardian demon on this trip rather than a guardian angel as everything that could possibly go wrong with the boat and the weather did,’ she noted.

The problems started early on. Seven weeks into her voyage, in the middle of the South Pacific, *Nereida*’s boom kicker strut came away. Having removed the remaining protruding rivets with a hammer, Socrates decided to lash the strut baseplate around the mast using Spectra line. She then noticed the gooseneck mast fitting was in the same state and so lashed that to the mast too. Without a working gas-strut on the vang, with the mainsail either reefed or down, the boom was hitting the bimini metal work, so Socrates added a topping lift to the end of the boom though that also later parted after rough conditions in the Southern Ocean, so she then had to use the spinnaker halyard instead.

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ABOVE: Jeanne found there were more stormy weather systems and frequent deep lows compared to her 2013 voyage

LEFT INSET: The boom kicker strut came away and had to be lashed to the mast

BELOW LEFT: Like her 2013 circumnavigation, Jeanne removed the bunk bedding and cushions from the forepeak to improve access

Socrates also wrestled with *Nereida*’s sails. She went for months without a mainsail while sailing the Southern Atlantic and Indian Oceans, after it ripped badly while hove-to in strong winds in January off the Falkland Islands. A length along the leech was torn and had separated from the body of the sail between the top two battens.

‘I’d not expected my mainsail to tear as it did, probably due to the many times I’d heaved-to to keep safe. It would have been useful to have learned how to sew and repair sails and to have had more sail repair material available, along with a good flexible adhesive,’ reflected Socrates.

MISFORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

Realising she was unable to remove the sail from the mast to take it down below for repairs, she tried to work on the sail in situ on the boom, but the perpetual swell made it difficult. She initially used Gorilla tape, but soon decided it would probably give way in strong conditions so she continued without her main and pondered on a better plan for repair. Her lack of mainsail slowed Socrates down, with the threat of winter getting closer and weather patterns changing for the worst as she sailed on.

Two months later, when conditions had finally improved, she removed the sail slides from the track and managed to bring the 9ft section down onto the deck to sew. It was a long job, and it wasn’t until 25 May that she finally raised her main sail again.

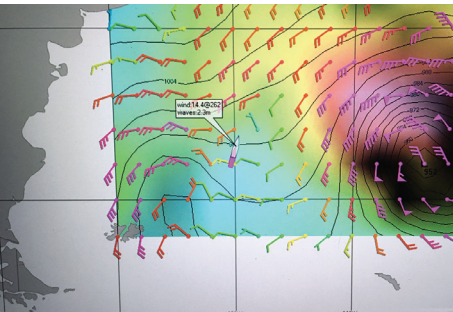


LEFT: The gooseneck mast fitting lashed to the mast to prevent it following the kicker strut

It would later need further repairs, with tears lower down the sail being repaired with Gorilla tape while making her way back up the Pacific. The repairs held well enough for her to complete her circumnavigation at Victoria, British Columbia in early September.

She didn’t have much better luck with her genoa, which she nearly lost overboard off the South American coast two months into her circumnavigation, after the end of the furling line became disconnected from its drum.

‘The big headsail rapidly unfurled itself and began madly flapping in the wind, with its sheets lashing out at everything around. It was a nightmare. I heaved to and pulled in on the upwind genoa sheet to keep as much of the sail inboard as possible. The problem with getting it down was that it could all end up being blown into the sea,’ recalled Socrates. Out on deck, she released the halyard bit by bit, going forward in





## NOTABLE SOLO NON-STOP CIRCUMNAVIGATORS\

There are many to choose from but here are just some of the solo skippers who have inspired others to offshore adventure

### Sir Robin Knox-Johnston

The first solo sailor to sail non-stop around the world, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston sailed from Falmouth on 14 June 1968 aboard his Bermuda ketch, *Suhaili*, returning on 22 April 1969 (pictured) as the only winner of the Sunday Times Golden Globe Race.

Fellow competitor, Bernard Moitessier, ended up sailing one-and-a-half times around the world before making landfall in Tahiti, 10 months after leaving Plymouth in his ketch, *Joshua*.

### Sir Chay Blyth

A former 1968-69 Golden Globe Race entrant, Sir Chay Blyth, became the first person to sail non-stop around the world east to west in the high southern latitudes, aboard his 59ft ketch, *British Steel*. He left from Southampton on 18 October 1970, returning 292 days later.

### Dee Caffari

In May 2006, Dee Caffari followed in Sir Chay's footsteps, becoming the first woman to sail solo and non-stop around the world against the prevailing winds and currents. It took her 178 days in her 73ft yacht *Aviva*. Caffari went on to become the only woman to have circumnavigated the globe, non-stop, three times after finishing the 08/09 Vendée Globe and the Barcelona World Race in 2011.

### Kay Cottee

In June 1988, Australian skipper, Kay Cottee, became the first woman to sail solo, unassisted and non-stop around the world via the Five Capes of the Southern Ocean in her 37ft yacht *Blackmores First Lady*

### Tony Curphey

In April, Tony Curphey (pictured), 74, completed The Longue Route in his Nicholson 32, *Nicola Deux*, sailing solo and non-stop around the world in 308 days.

### Minoru Saitō

The Japanese offshore sailor claimed the oldest person to sail around the world non-stop and unassisted title in 2005, following his seventh circumnavigation at the age of 71 in his 56ft 1989 steel-hulled cutter-rigged sloop, *Shuten-dohji II*

### Jon Sanders

Currently preparing for his 11th solo circumnavigation around the globe, Australian skipper, Jon Sanders, 80, has completed a double non-stop solo west-to-east circumnavigation via the Southern Ocean in 1981-82 and a triple non-stop solo circumnavigation in 1986-88



Jeanne Socrates

between to grab as much of the sail as possible and lashing it down with line and sail ties. With daylight fading, she managed to get most of it in, although some of it ended up in the sea, becoming impossible to retrieve with all the seawater it held.

Without all of the sail on deck, she also couldn't continue sailing. Two days later, with the wind at a fairly constant 18-20 knots, she sorted out her lashings so she could bring the genoa in without it becoming tangled. After attaching further lines, she winched the sail back onto the boat, a process which took hours, not helped by the seas washing over *Nereida's* deck. Once safely stowed, Socrates started sailing again. 'It was all very tiring and I was soaking wet, but it was great to be underway again and brilliant that the plan worked so well,' she recalled. 'Not until 7 January was it possible to undo the lashings, get the genoa off the deck and untwist it as it was hoisted on to the forestay foil and furled up – without it ending back in the sea!'

### SOLO BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS AT SEA

The genoa served her well until a Pacific storm in mid August left it shredded. Well and truly wrapped around the forestay, Socrates continued using *Nereida's* storm jib on the inner forestay.

'It was impossible to unfurl the tattered genoa from the forestay. It was too tangled in place around the foil for the material that was torn away from the edges (leech and foot) to come undone,' she explains. Two days earlier, Socrates had celebrated her 77th birthday, indulging in a rare shower and enjoying a sundowner made with the last of her precious mango juice and a good slug of gin.

Instruments and batteries were another big headache, and could have been 'show stoppers'



Jeanne Socrates

**ABOVE RIGHT:** This was Jeanne's fourth attempt to become the oldest person to sail solo non-stop around the world without assistance

**ABOVE LEFT:** Enjoying offshore sailing – a rare moment with the endless gear breakages she had to contend with

**BELOW:** June 2008: disaster in Mexico with the loss of her Najad 361, *Nereida*

## I was able, by approaching the problems calmly and logically, to overcome the instrumentation and autopilot challenges

for the circumnavigation. The plotter circuit breaker tripped several times early in the voyage, but a thorough clean got it working again, although it was to cause problems later on, leaving Socrates without any instruments at all for parts of her voyage, and no autopilot on occasions. At the same time the batteries were not charging properly and she thought she might have to stop at Melbourne, Australia, to make repairs just after Easter. She needed well-charged batteries to run the water maker and her autopilot. This was essential after a storm in April off Australia left her windvane irreparably damaged.

'Fortunately, one by one I was able, by approaching the problems calmly and logically, to overcome the instrumentation and autopilot challenges, helped by having certain spares and cable on board and also by discussions with friends,' she says.

She had time to focus on solving the battery charging issues after a knockdown in 45 knot winds and 8m seas on 15 May on approach to Stewart Island forced her to stop in New Zealand. Under non-stop and unassisted rules, she could moor or anchor as long as she didn't touch land or seek assistance.

The batteries were badly sulphated, a problem solved by disconnecting each battery and

charging it at high voltage via a small generator.

The knockdown also left her without her specially modified drill, which had been adapted to work in place of a winch handle, making sail handling easier. Instead, she had to make the most of *Nereida's* self-tailing winches as she sailed back up the Pacific, crossing the Equator into the Northern Hemisphere on 23 July before dodging tropical storms off Hawaii.

Socrates doesn't see her age as a barrier, although she has ruled out another record attempt. She thinks she is perhaps 'unusual' as although there are many female solo skippers, many do not sail long distances.

It is telling of Socrates that the final entry on her circumnavigation blog is titled 'Life is precious, make the most of it'. That is her philosophy, having just sailed 27,911 miles around the world, enduring knockdowns, calms and gear breakages, but also experiencing the joy of ocean sunrises, sightings of albatross, rounding each of the Five Capes and the warm friendships she's forged with members of the Single Side Band (SSB) radio network, her lifeline to the outside world.

With plans to refit *Nereida* and cruise to the likes of Fiji and Polynesia at her own pace, it seems Socrates will continue to 'make the most of it'. A lesson for us all, perhaps.

**LEFT: Recognition** from the Ocean Cruising Club for her feat



James Holkko/Maritime Museum of BC

Tony Curphey

Bill Rowntree/PPL