



Gael Force owner to sail final 7,000 miles of world voyage single-handed

A businessman from the Highlands of Scotland who has already broken his back and had to avoid pirates on a two-year round the world voyage, is to sail the final 7,000 miles of the journey from South Africa back to the UK single-handedly.

Father-of-two Stewart Graham, 47, owner of Highland-based marine equipment, supply and engineering group Gael Force, is to sail his Discovery 67 mono hull yacht the *Rhiann Marie* through the South Atlantic winter, hopefully avoiding the hurricane season and being battered by huge seas as he returns home.

If all goes well, Stornoway-born Stewart, who lives in Inverness, expects to make the journey in two months. But if trade winds force him from West Africa across the Atlantic to the Caribbean it will be next spring before he can return with *Rhiann Marie*.

Stewart had eight nuts and bolts, two rods and a metal plate permanently fitted into his spine after an off road motorcycle accident in the jungle in Malaysia in February on an earlier part of his trip. However he was back at the helm just one week after the accident.

He has also experienced a number of "threatening encounters", including having the yacht approached at high speed at dawn by a boat with masked men wearing balaclavas, off Columbia. His yacht was hit by lightning in the Caribbean, which destroyed electronics including its essential autopilot system, and he has had to cope with high seas, ripped sails and damage to his rigging, plus the constant repairs required to keep a circumnavigation on track, with a minimum amount of sleep.

Throughout his journey, Stewart has managed to oversee the successful continuing development of his business, through on board communications including e-mails and conference calls by satellite link.

Despite suffering the set backs of a broken back and finding that his return route through the Gulf of Aden was a no go zone, due to the activities of Somalian pirates who have murdered other yachts people, Stewart refused to give up, showing characteristic grit and determination in continuing through a Southern winter on a 13,000 mile detour.

"I have been determined to carry on and see this journey through. After my accident I knew I was lucky to have the power of my legs again and I determined that if the operation was successful I would stop at nothing to get back to full strength and continue my circumnavigation of the world. This is no more than the determination I would like to think we have shown while building Gael Force over the years and I knew I would let a lot of people down if I quit the circumnavigation then."

When asked about his plan to sail solo from South Africa Stewart said, "I am also keen to experience a higher level of challenge, and although a lot has been achieved so far I want to raise the bar now and push myself even harder. I have been accompanied by family and friends on various stages of the voyage so far and they have acted as my crew – but now it's time to go it alone".

Stewart, who took up sailing 10 years ago and has more than 40,000 miles' experience, admitted the most daunting aspects of the single handed sail would be the physical challenge - particularly management of his sleep – and ensuring his yacht remained in a seaworthy state to make it to the end.

However he has already developed a lot of experience of sleep management and a novel way of cat napping to ensure he has sufficient energy to operate the vessel.

"The 7,000 miles is approximately a third of the circumference of the earth so it is going to be an enormous physical challenge for me. I'll have to be sailor, fisherman, cook, plumber, rigger, boat repairer, doctor and navigator and company director all in one. There are a number of risks including severe weather, or if I push the boat too hard and break it, or fire or flooding - but I'm very optimistic that I'll be able to complete it. If I take care of the boat then it will take care of me.

"It is important to have the stamina to be able to think clearly and keep the forward progress even when you are hugely tired. In heavy sea conditions, when any decent sleep is impossible, I have developed a knack of being able to cat nap while standing up. I lean against a bulkhead and wake up when my knees buckle which is after

about one minute, that is then repeated multiple times. It's not much but these minutes can give me a lease of life for an hour or so and this is very useful in tight situations."

The westward route has taken Stewart from Gibraltar to the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal, adventuring 10,000 miles across the many remote islands and countries of the Pacific Ocean to Australia, South East Asia, across the Bay of Bengal and to Sri Lanka. The thirteen thousand mile detour to avoid the Somalian piracy threat then took him south to the Maldives, Chagos, Mauritius and Reunion Island before reaching South Africa.

Though Stewart has never been directly experienced an encounter with piracy he has had several "hairy" moments when he thought his yacht may be about to be attacked.

"There were two occasions off the coast of Columbia when vessels came out of the dawn mist at high speed and I could see that the people on board had balaclavas on, and were heading straight for us. However they passed us by at extremely close quarters without so much as an acknowledgement. Also, sixty miles off west Africa we had a boat wanting to hail us over with a red flag but you don't know if they need help or whether their intentions are hostile. There have been many such incidents as these and because of the piracy threat they are all nerve-racking"

Stewart admits that his wife, Trish, and two adult children were against his plans to sail home solo, but knew him too well to try and change his mind.

"Initially my family were not happy about it, but they know that when I set myself to do something it is pretty pointless arguing. I felt I needed to do it. I asked them for their support and they have given it to me.

"I started Gael Force when I was 18 years old and running a successful business is a long, hard slog. I wanted to sail round the world some day, but I realised some day often never comes, so I decided to do this while I was in the fortunate position of being able to do it and still had the physical strength to enjoy the experience – otherwise it may never have happened.

"But I was also determined that my business would not be affected and it has taken a lot of planning to make sure that my commitments remain at the same level, wherever I am. I am in constant contact with my colleagues through e-mail and satellite phone, I receive our monthly reports and I conference call in to meetings – and on occasion that has been in the middle of the night for me while on the open ocean.

"I am under no illusions that, while the journey so far has been challenging, the hardest part awaits me. My route will take me north-west from Cape Town about 2,000 miles through the South Atlantic and their southern winter, so there may be extremely big seas to face. The other thing is that as you go further north you come to the hurricane belt in the Mid Atlantic. My aim will be to keep to the east of this area but that is very much against the prevailing trade winds which will try and push me towards Brazil and the Caribbean and right into the hurricane area.

"I know I have raised the bar in terms of the determination I will require, the risks I may have to undertake, the difficult decisions I may have and the courage I may need – but this is how I live my life and some of the values by which I run my business.

"I also know that I am in a very fortunate position and, even though it will not be plain sailing, I will make sure I remember to enjoy the experience."

Stewart is writing a blog of his two-year journey which has attracted more than 11,300 readers so far. Visit his blog at <http://blog.mailasail.com/rhiann.marie>