



...sail round the world for the sixth time

Dee Caffari, the first woman to circumnavigate the globe solo, non-stop, against the prevailing winds and currents, has just set off yet again — this time with a young crew in tow

THE LONG WAY ROUND

45,000

nautical miles, the length of the Volvo Ocean Race 2017-18

When you're miles from land and racing as fast as possible — at speeds reaching 30 knots in the Southern Ocean — the wall of water hits you in the chest as it rolls down the deck. Spray whips off every crest of every wave. Your fingertips have gone numb in the freezing temperatures as you grip the wheel and wrestle with the surf to keep the yacht at speed. Your eyes sting from the saltwater, and yet

you feel exhilarated. This is why you've signed up for the race. You are experiencing some of the best sailing there is: a wet and wild, fast and furious ride in the most hostile environment in the world with only your fellow competitors and the albatrosses to keep you company. This is why we keep going back.

I didn't start out as a sailor. I grew up in Hertfordshire and for five years was a PE teacher. It was

a job I loved, but I felt I had settled into a career too early; I had a thirst for adventure and travel and, after I went on a sailing holiday one year, decided to set my sights on the marine industry.

From there I haven't looked back. I signed up for an amateur sailing race in 2004 as a skipper — the Global Challenge was Chay Blyth's 10-month round-the-world yacht race taking the westabout route, against the prevailing winds

and currents — the so-called "wrong way" round.

Next I became the first woman to sail solo and non-stop around the globe taking a westabout route, completing the Aviva Challenge in 2006 after six months alone at sea. I missed carpet, I missed sofas, I missed tea in a china mug. I always want fresh fruit and Diet Coke when I get in. My "offshore meal" before I leave is always a pizza.

You miss what you can't have, like a shower, putting on moisturiser and a fluffy towel to dry yourself with. People think it will be something big, but actually it's the little things in life that you really yearn for when you don't have them.

There have been other events since — I've done five circumnavigations now — but the Volvo Ocean Race, a round-the-world race held every three years, was always at the back of my mind. For me, it is the pinnacle crewed offshore pursuit, the longest professional sporting race in the world. I took part in the 2014-5 edition as part of a female team,



and I was keen to go again. I was applying to all the teams when the Turn the Tide on Plastic project came together — a 50:50 male and female crew, backed by conservation charities — and I became a team skipper, the only female skipper in the race. The project's aim is to encourage people to cut down on their use of plastic — about 8m tons of plastic are swept into the ocean each year.

I signed up in June and I haven't really been back to my home near the Solent since. I miss my dog, Jack, a springer spaniel. I should say I miss my partner, Harry, but I know I'm going to see him at the stopovers between the 11 legs of this race, so it's not so bad. The longest we might be out at sea is three weeks. We set off on the first leg of the epic journey on October 22 from Alicante, in Spain, and we will finish the race eight months later, in June 2018.

There are a number of young sailors on board. Their energy and enthusiasm is refreshing — they're keen to learn and they want to do better and prove that they should be out here. Other teams have sailors with lots of experience who have done numerous Volvo races, so it feels like we're on the back foot, but I'm looking forward to the year ahead. We definitely want to be competitive on the water.

The journey sounds very beautiful, endless horizons and sunsets and sunrises, but the reality is that everyone shares a bed with another sweaty, salty sailor. People's feet start to smell in their sailing boots or

FULL TILT
Above: the race start at Alicante. Main picture: Dee Caffari, second from left, and her crew training for this year's Volvo Ocean Race

shoes and the weather is intense: it's either wet and cold or hot and stuffy and sweaty, but very rarely anything in between.

There's a beautiful view from the lavatory — because it's outside, off the back of the boat, so long as weather conditions allow.

Wet wipes are your friend for personal hygiene. Kitchen-wise you have a stove for a kettle to boil water and the food is freeze-dried. So you get nice fresh sandwiches and fresh fruit... for the first day — and then reality hits. Typical for me would be porridge for breakfast, a freeze-dried meal for lunch, a freeze-dried dinner and then a chocolate snack, an energy bar, a protein bar and dried fruit and nuts to graze. We make fresh water from the sea with a device that uses reverse osmosis, and we have electrolyte tablets.

The team operates a watch system — generally four hours on, four hours off. The four hours that you're on, you're on deck making the boat go fast. Your four hours off includes your eating and drinking, your personal hygiene, fixing anything you need to — and sleeping. If there's a manoeuvre or a sail change to be done, you're woken up to help.

In your four hours off, you probably get two hours' sleep on average and can end up feeling a bit grumpy, but some days are better than others. You get a nice four hours in your bunk, and you'll feel like a new person again ■

Leg 2 of the Volvo Ocean Race 2017-8, from Lisbon to Cape Town, starts today, volvoceanrace.com

Interview by Yvonne Gordon

