

Enda O'Coineen hopes to be the first Irishman to complete the Vendée Globe solo yacht race, but first he needs to buoy up his brain for the mental challenge. By **Yvonne Gordon**

The psychological part is the biggest challenge," says Enda O'Coineen. We are on board the Kilcullen Voyager, the 60-foot carbon fibre yacht that will take him around the world in the Vendée Globe, the only non-stop, single-handed round-the-world yacht race. He will be alone and will not see land for months.

There is no doubt that as well as being physically gruelling, the conditions will be mind-testing. Half of the 40,075km race takes place in the treacherous Southern Ocean, where he will have to deal with high winds, huge waves and ice. At other times, he will experience the stifling heat of the Equator, tropical downpours, and no-wind doldrums. He will have to forecast weather and plan his route with no outside assistance. He will also have to survive on rehydrated food and sleep for just 20 minutes at a time.

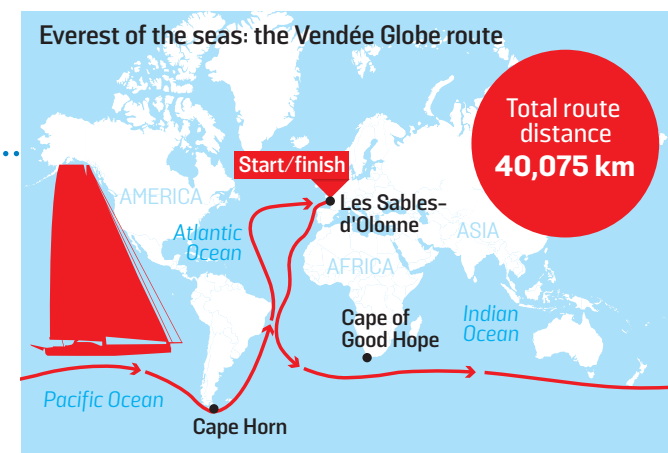
O'Coineen will be the first Irish skipper to compete in the Vendée Globe, when 29 like-minded souls from 10 countries set off from Sables-d'Olonne, a seaside town in western France, on November 6. The race is so testing, it is known as the Everest of the seas. Since it started in 1989, 138 sailors have taken part, but only 71 have finished.

Essentially following the traditional route sailed by clipper ships between Europe and the Far East, Australia and New Zealand, the race begins in France and heads south down the Atlantic Ocean, around Africa to the Cape of Good Hope, then continues round, across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, with the capes of Leeuwin and Horn on the port – left – side and Antarctica on the starboard. The fastest time anyone has finished it is 78 days; the slowest is 163. Race organisers say it is a "voyage to the ends of the sea and deep down into the sailors' soul".

British sailor Dame Ellen MacArthur, who came second in the 2000-2001 race and went on to break the record for the fastest solo circumnavigation of the globe, said the race is frightening but fear keeps you going: "It keeps you on your toes and keeps you alive. There are no second chances. You're on your own and nobody is going to help you."

That world of fear seems far away on a sunny day on Dublin Bay as we put the boat through its paces and O'Coineen shows me around what will be his home for three to four months. The large cockpit area, which on a cruising yacht would have cushions and a table, is full of ropes and two large winches. There is no room for sitting.

Entering the hatch to the lower cabin, there is a bank of electronics, with a central server and three satellite systems, for navigation. Weather information has to be downloaded constantly. There are three self-steering systems on board



sailing the high seas, he has a successful business career: founder and partner of investment management firm Kilkullen Kapital Partners, he created some of the first business networks in the former Eastern Bloc countries after the fall of the Berlin Wall. He is one of the creators of Afloat sailing magazine, and founded the Atlantic Youth Trust, a youth development charity that delivers education programmes on purpose-built tall ships.

He has little to prove sailing-wise. Last December he came third in the solo St Barth to Port la Forêt transatlantic race – even after starting a day late. He says that unlike younger sailors, he isn't trying to prove anything: the Vendée Globe is simply a good way to sail around the world. "If you set out to cruise around the world," he says, "it could take 10 years."

He accepts that it will be tough. "The Southern Ocean is kind of intimidating," he says. "It's down at the bottom of the world and the waves are non-stop. The wind chill is massive. We'll be about six weeks there – that's half the race, really. The Southern Ocean: that's the Everest."

O'Coineen has undertaken physical preparation, and to alleviate boredom, says he will write poetry and play music (on his last race, he brought a trumpet: "No one can hear you," he says.) But he believes his biggest challenge will be mental. "It's head-wrecking stuff. One day you're being kicked around, cold and miserable, another day you're on top of the world, literally and metaphorically. You're both of those extremes. It's also a reboot of the brain – like stepping out of the world. I'll be totally self-contained. The world might end and I'll continue on."

"The mind, that's the most absorbing part of it. We use so little [of our brain], and we've so many compartments. When you have long periods on your own, you

Set adrift
O'Coineen knows that tackling the route, above, on his own will be physically intimidating, but believes that his biggest test will be psychological. "It's head-wrecking stuff," he says. "I'll be totally self-contained. The world might end and I'll continue on"

dig out memories you weren't aware were still there; you form all sorts of fictitious things in your imagination. You've got to steer, you've got to navigate, but the psychological part is definitely the most challenging. It's also the most scary – it's where you're most likely to go over the edge. So it's about balance and perspective. You're in here [the yacht] and it's like a space capsule, you're totally confined, but yet you're in this vast ocean.

"I did training trips from Cork out into the Atlantic during the summer. Within a day, I was 200 miles out and just [experienced] the absolute vastness of the universe – it's that whole concept of eternity and the mind; what's internal and external, perception and reality."

He hopes his involvement will help raise awareness of sailing, particularly among young people. "Part of what I'm about, particularly with the Atlantic Youth Trust, is connecting young people with the ocean and adventure. It's a personal mission that's very important to me. There's a lot of work to be done. The marine doesn't get much weight in

Ireland – the farmers are much more organised. We spend more money on space [exploration] than we do on the ocean – we know so little about what's going on in the ocean. More people have been in space than have done this race."

The youngest skipper taking part in this year's Vendée Globe is 23, the oldest is 66. O'Coineen is 60. "Everyone else is crazy – I'm the only sane one," he laughs. "There's huge ageism; people put you in a box. I hate being categorised. People get inflexible and settled. This gets you out of your comfort zone."

"This is a stupid thing to do – there's no logic to it. It's the toughest sporting challenge there is. You go around the planet. It's the accumulation of a lifetime of experience."

"Yes, it's very demanding, but it's like eating an elephant: you just eat a little bit at a time. The thing about long distance ocean sailing is that you have time."

You can follow O'Coineen's progress at teamlreland.ie and follow the race at sevendeeeglobe.org/en



The loneliness of the long-distance sailor



(two are spares) plus logs, wind and speed instruments, control panels and a radio. On either side is a bunk. The galley is just a burner, a kettle and a pot. O'Coineen will have supplies for 120 days. For weight reasons, food is freeze-dried and he will rehydrate it with sea water made drinkable by an on-board desalination system and supplement it with nutrient pills. There is no shower or bathroom – the toilet is a bucket tied to a rope at the back of the boat.

Large posters of Galway, Kylemore Abbey in Connemara and a forest scene adorn the walls to take the "monotony" out of the boat's interior. Sleep will be in short bursts: the boat is going for 24-hours a day, so there is no stopping for rest. We climb through to the sparse bow area, where the sails are. "This is my wardrobe," says O'Coineen. He has 10 sails to choose from – they power the boat – but they can weigh up to 100kg each and every

time a sail is changed, O'Coineen will have to haul the new one up the mast. If one gets damaged, he will have to sew it up. He has even done a medical course in case he needs to sew himself up. Spending three or four months alone on the planet's toughest seas, is not for the fainthearted, but nobody was ever going to put O'Coineen into that category. In his youth, he crossed the Atlantic from Canada to Ireland single-handed in an inflatable boat. He was behind Ireland's first entry in the Whitbread Round The World Race in 1987 and was also involved in Ireland's Green Dragon racing team in the 2008-09 Volvo Ocean Race. When not

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