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# WEEKEND

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Olympian ANNALISE MURPHY on her greatest ever sailing challenge

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Ship to shore: Annalise Murphy aboard 'Turn the Tide on Plastic' in the mid Atlantic on Leg 2 of the Volvo Ocean Race, from Lisbon to Cape Town

PICTURE: SAM GREENFIELD/  
VOLVO OCEAN RACE

# Annalise's GREATEST race

With no shower or fresh food, minimal sleep and battling dangerous conditions at sea for up to 24 days at a time, Olympic medallist Annalise Murphy is actually enjoying herself. It's all part of the gruelling around-the-world Volvo Ocean Race, she tells **YVONNE GORDON**

**I** have the back bottom bunk, which is the darkest one with the least room at the back of the boat, but you have your own little bit of space back here. People don't tend to wake you up. It's probably quieter than the front bunks," says Annalise Murphy. "Once you get used to it, you start to think it's pretty roomy. You're so tired, you just sleep straight away. I don't have any problem sleeping because I'm always exhausted. I just lie down and I am out cold."

We're on a Volvo Ocean 65 racing boat in Lisbon, Portugal and Annalise is showing me the bunk she'll be sleeping in for nearly nine months. Like the bunk above it and the walls, it is totally black. There is no daylight except the tiny amount that makes it through from the hatch in the next compartment. It takes my eyes a few minutes to adjust to the darkness.

You'd be forgiven for expecting to find an Olympic medallist living in more comfortable surrounds, but the plush life is the furthest thing from the mind of the Dublin woman. Instead, Annalise is taking part in



Clockwise from left: 'Turn the Tide on Plastic' in Lisbon; Annalise works with skipper, Dee Caffari on Leg 1 in October; The boat makes a splash en route to Melbourne in December

PICTURE: BEAU OUTERIDGE



PICTURE: JEN EDNEY



PICTURE: JEREMIE LECAUDEY

the Volvo Ocean Race — a 45,000-nautical-mile race around the planet. The 27-year-old is part of a crew of 10 sailors on 'Turn The Tide On Plastic', one of seven boats in the race. When we meet, they are just about to depart from Lisbon to race to Cape Town over 20 days on Leg 2 of the race.

In the past few years, teams in the race have been mostly all-male, and the only women taking part were on all-female crews. This edition of the race, there are mixed male/female teams, and 'Turn The Tide on Plastic' has a 50:50 male/female crew, with many of the sailors under the age of 30.

There are 12 bunks on the boat, six on each side, but sleep is a luxury. The crew operate on a watch system — four hours on and four hours off, and even when they are off watch, they can be woken up to help. When the boat changes direction they have to move all of the sails — and themselves — to the other side of the boat. Annalise shares her bunk and sleeping bag with the person on the opposite watch to her — when one is sleeping, the other is on deck, and vice versa.

This is the first experience of offshore sailing for Annalise, who won her silver medal in the Women's Laser Radial dinghy class in 2016's Rio Games. The Volvo Ocean Race is one of the most prestigious, but most extreme, races on the planet. When Annalise was asked if she'd be interested in joining this team early last year, she jumped at the opportunity and after a week's try-out, she was taken onto the team.

For many people, the idea of sailing around the world on a yacht is the ultimate idea of glamour — but doing the Volvo Ocean Race is more like the ultimate endurance

test. The longest professional sporting race in the world — it started in Alicante, Spain, on October 22, 2017 and will finish in The Hague in June — is gruelling. The crews race through the world's oceans, including long spells in the Southern Ocean, in either very hot or freezing temperatures.

For Irish offshore sailor Damian Foxall, who is from Co Kerry, the challenges are familiar — this is his sixth Volvo Ocean Race and he is competing on the boat 'Vestas 11th Hour Racing'. He knows his stuff, having been on board the race winner 'Groupama' in 2011-12. Also from Kerry is Brian Carlin, who is the team

leader for the race's onboard reporters (OBRs). Each boat has an OBR responsible for producing video, photo and blog posts. And there's plenty of drama to capture. The seven boats, each with crews of between eight and 10 sailors, face storms, accidents, gear failure or even death. They encounter everything from icebergs and whales to floating debris and busy shipping lanes. For weight reasons — to keep the boat as light and as fast as possible — everything is kept to a minimum. The inside of the boat is black as that is the colour of the carbon material. To paint it would add too much weight.

There are no creature comforts. Between the rows of bunks there's a small camping-type stove and a sink. Fresh food weighs too much to carry, so they eat freeze-dried

food rehydrated with sea water, purified by a water maker. There are no showers — instead they use wet wipes. Keeping the skin clean and removing salt is vital to avoid infections and rashes. There's a toilet in the boat but it's in an open plan area and the crew use biodegradable waste bags which are then put overboard. In good weather, the outside back of the boat is the bathroom.

For weight reasons, they don't bring personal items on board. And as outside help is banned, phones are either sealed away or left on shore. "It's really tough going," says Annalise. "There's things that you take for granted in life — like being able to sit down on the couch and watch

TV for 15 minutes. All you do is sail the boat as fast as you can when you're working, and on your time off you're trying to look after yourself. When I am really tired I don't really want to eat. It's a bit of a process making your food, because it's freeze-dried meals. It's 15 minutes boiling the kettle and waiting for it to be ready. I make sure that I keep myself clean. I have some baby wipes and face wipes, and spray some fresh water on my face. If you go to sleep with a salty face, you wake up and your eyes hurt. Also, I make sure I put on sunscreen. If you don't, you get hammered by the sun."

Despite the tough conditions, she is enjoying the race so far. "I am enjoying it more than I thought I would. I was really terrified that I was going to hate it," she says.

"It is scary though, the boats are dangerous, things can happen. I have to remember that I am not invincible. You have to watch out for yourself all the time and everyone else. You are so far away from anything. In some stages of the race, you could be 10 days away from land. Nothing can come and get you, helicopters can't come and get you, you're too far away."

For this reason, Annalise did a medical course — she is one of the crew appointed as onboard medic, so in the event of an emergency, they have skills in skin suturing, inserting IVs and even giving dental fillings.

The race is divided into 11 legs, and the sailors have stopovers of a week or more in 12 cities. In between, however, they spend up to 24 days at a time at sea, all the time racing as fast as they can against the harsh elements and the other teams. As shore assistance is forbidden, they have no contact from family or friends. Two of the teams, including 'Turn the Tide On Plastic', were still at sea on Christmas Day on the leg from Cape Town to Melbourne.

Damian Foxall thinks his team, which includes many race veterans and former winners, has the people and tools to win the race. The boat won the first leg from Alicante to Lisbon, and with a third place in the following two legs, is lying joint second overall. There are eight legs still to go. "It's fully engaging. There is no other event like it in any other sport. It's nine months from start to finish, without even including the lead-up," says Damian, whose team started training a year ago. Damian (48) agrees that life on board is tough. "The boat is the bare minimum. It's like we're







All aboard: Damian Foxall, left, on 'Vestas 11th Hour' with, left to right, Jena Hansen, skipper Simon Fisher and Charlie Enright

PICTURE: WILL SUTO



Tight squeeze: The crew below deck on 'Vestas 11th Hour'

PICTURE: WILL SUTO



Making waves: OBR Brian Carlin took this photo of the action on 'Turn the Tide on Plastic' as it sailed for Melbourne earlier this month

» camping for nine months. Our galley has a camping gas burner like you would when you're out in your tent on the mountain. The sleeping conditions are similar.

"To do a Transatlantic or an oceanic race is demanding and you normally take a couple of weeks to recover. The challenge with the Volvo is that you're doing this back-to-back for nine months so that is really the challenge, the duration," he says.

Damian's team is sponsored by wind energy company Vestas, which works to promote ocean health through various platforms. With a new sustainable approach being put into place not only in the race but in world sailing, Damian says they want to be not only the most competitive boat on the water but the most sustainable boat in the event. Part of his role on the team is sustainability manager, which includes tracking the team's carbon footprint and making sure there is no single-use plastic.

Ocean conservation is close to Damian's heart. "I have been working for nearly ten years promoting ocean health and well-being through connection with nature, and now inseparable from our sport is the notion that we need to promote the importance of our oceans," he says.

The mission of Annalise's team is also an ecological one. 'Turn The Tide On Plastic' aims to raise awareness on the use of plastic which is ending up in the world's oceans, as part of the UN Clean Seas initiative.

Brian Carlin (33), from Tralee, is OBR on the boat for Leg 4 of the race. It began in Melbourne, Australia on January 2 and the boats are expected in Hong Kong this Tuesday, January 16. He is also OBR team leader, responsible for training the squad of nine OBRs, as well as organising the equipment and camera kit.

Brian likes life on the ocean. "When you're at sea there's no communications and nobody can bother you. The only way they can get to you is by email, but it's just to do with the story of the race," he says. "Life is simple at sea, it's much simpler

than it is on land, but at sea it has its own challenges, too. It's not easy living on a boat with seven or eight other guys and girls in extreme conditions."

Brian was the OBR for 'Team Vestas Wind' in the last race in 2014/15. The boat crashed into a reef in the Indian Ocean in the middle of the night in November 2014, just weeks after the race start. They were out of the race for six months while they rebuilt the boat. Brian filmed the aftermath of the crash and then rejoined the boat as it completed the last two race legs the following June. Is he nervous going back out into the ocean after what happened?

"A lot of people asked me when I got back on in the last race would I be nervous and, yes, a couple of bangs of the winch drums or you hear strange noises and I didn't quite settle into it. But by the second night, it was back to normal," he says. "It's amazing how the brain forgets about trauma and puts it in the back of your mind. Now, it wouldn't bother me. I've done a lot of sailing on these."

A couple of days after I meet the sailors, they set off from Lisbon to Cape Town, in high winds. Photos and video footage of the boats powering through the waves at full speed, with the crews facing the equivalent of a constant firehose of water over the deck, went viral on social media. During Leg 3, from Cape Town to Melbourne, the boats spent time in the Southern Ocean, with two weeks of rough, cold and wet conditions, before the warmer climes of their current leg.

Annalise says that, compared to her Olympic racing, it is a totally different sport — one that she is still learning. "With offshore sailing, you're looking at how to get somewhere in two weeks' or three weeks' time, the fastest way to do that. Whereas in dinghy racing, you're trying to get around a small little race course close to shore. It's still sailing but with offshore sailing, the sailing bit is the easy bit. The rest of it — living — is the hard bit."

Follow the race at [volvooceannrace.com](http://volvooceannrace.com)