

AN ODYSSEY

More people have been into space or climbed Everest than have rowed the Atlantic. A 3,000 nautical mile row from San Sebastian in La Gomera to Nelson's Dockyard English Harbour in Antigua is a trip usually undertaken by cargo ships carrying Japanese

cars or cruise liners full of the over-60s. Not by men and women in a rowing boat living off ramen-noodles and line-caught fish.

Yet there are those daring people who want to test the limits of their physical and mental state. It is these people who undertake the annual Atlantic Challenge. The idea of the race came to Sir Chay Blyth whilst he was rowing the Atlantic in 1966 with John

Ridgeway, where they battled for 92 days against hurricanes, 50-foot waves and near starvation. Incredibly the risk of blisters, salt rash, sharks and three-month sleep deprivation doesn't put off rowers such as Blyth to give such a grueling marathon a try.

The annual grueling trial takes approximately 90 days with participants typically rowing two hours on, two hours

WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU WERE IN THE MIDST OF THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, AT THE HALF-WAY POINT OF A 3,000 NAUTICAL MILE EXPEDITION, AND POSEIDON'S WAVES AND GALE-FORCE WINDS WERE STRIKING YOUR EIGHT-METRE FIBRE-GLASS BOAT? WITH AN INKY INDIGO SEA CRASHING OVER YOUR CABIN AND ROLLING BLACK SKIES BEING LIT UP BY LIGHTENING WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'D LEARN ABOUT YOURSELF? STAUNCH BRAVERY AND STEELY DETERMINATION OR WOULD YOU BE SCREAMING TO WAKE UP FROM THIS SEA-FARING NIGHTMARE? TO TAKE UP THE ATLANTIC CHALLENGE, THE WORLD'S TOUGHEST ROW, IS TO FIND OUT.





off, 24-hours per day. Physically, they will burn around 8,000 calories each day and lose around 20% of their body weight before they see land again once leaving the Canary Islands. Mentally they have to cope with the small confines, sweltering heat, fear and lack of rest; the psychological stresses of dealing with such a dangerous and unpredictable environment. Their only assistant is each other and a support boat, which follows the crews during the crossing, but can be up to three days away. In short, those who endeavor to tame the Atlantic, are attempting so alone.

Bobby Melville, was one of a four-man team who completed the race in the winter of 2013/14, during one of the toughest years since the event's inception – his side were also second overall and winners of the four-man section. The CEO of IGO, an adventure company, which sets challenges to push the limits of human physical and mental ability, and a former professional polo player, Bobby tells SWR his story.

"We first heard of the Atlantic Challenge through a mutual friend, Julia Immonen, who completed the row three years ago and also holds two Guinness World Records. She was very inspiring and upon further investigation we realised this was an adventure, as much as a challenge. Something we could really test

ourselves in doing, mentally and physically; it had it all. As professional sportsmen we were looking for something that would take us out of our comfort zones and this certainly ticked all the boxes!

"For the majority of teams, the journey to the start line is a 1-3 year period of planning, training and fund raising. However, in fitting with the mantra 'last to the start line, first to the finish', which became the boat's motto, we actually only confirmed the boat builder, Cris Rossiter, to build 'Tiny Dancer' in April 2013 - seven months before the race! It was very tight getting the boat to La Gomera in time; she didn't even touch English water to try her out!

"Aside from the frenzied construction, we also had a very short time frame to completely change our bodies from those suitable for polo to those suitable for rowing an ocean. Every week we had a new day-by-day training programme and targets ranging from 5,000, to 12,500 meters on a concept two ergo rowing machine, as well as interval training of eight x 500 meters with 1 minute breaks. Diet was also critical in preparing our bodies for the wastage that would happen at sea and putting on weight nearer the time was crucial. We each had to put on 20 kilos, which is an awful lot of protein shakes!

"Training aside there were many elements

to getting prepared for an adventure of this magnitude. They say that getting to the start line is half the battle. No truer words have ever been spoken! The costs of the trip are greater than an Antarctic exploration trip. Sponsorship plays a key role in supplying kit for the team, food for the journey etc.

"Two weeks before the start date (3rd December), 16 teams comprising of one to five-man teams from Australia, Sweden and the UK, to name a few, descended upon the small island of La Gomera in the Canaries to finish the final preparations for the race ahead. All the equipment was scrupulously checked by the duty officers (similar to military police) and once power anchors, 75 days of rations, wet weather gear and enough Sudocrem to lather an army were packed in tight, batteries checked etc etc etc ad infinitum, we were lowered into the water for race start.

"There was a buzz amongst the crews with a mixture of trepidation, excitement and confusion about whose idea this was. The army quartet, including a double amputee and single amputee, likened it to when they went to Afghanistan for the first time. The feeling of not knowing what was out there and what was going to happen was very strange; knowing that your fate was by and large out of your own hands. To this extent, when we were well



into the trip and in one of the worse storms we had encountered, and after two members of the crew had been thrown overboard, I saw a very non-religious crewman praying! There is a great line in 'Any Given Sunday' where Al Pacino says; "There are no atheists in foxholes." I found this very apt to our situation.

"When the 40ft waves abated and we were left with small rolling seas from trade winds, sometimes giving our boat Tiny Dancer an extra 3-4 knots of speed, we

enjoyed listening to audiobooks and music. There was much chatter on deck in the day-time shifts, but at night tiredness would get to you. We would burn 6,000 calories per day so the team would need to focus on each team member making sure they put this back into their bodies. After a month and we realised moral was low and body weight was decreasing we made 24-hour planned schedules in terms of water intake, food and sleep. This is all geared towards survival

THE ATLANTIC CHALLENGE BY NUMBERS

- 3,000 nautical miles
- 7x2metre rowing boat
- 90-days only of fresh water
- 20% of body weight lost
- 3 months average completion time
- 6,000 calories burnt per day
- 18,500 euros minimum starting price to enter

and getting the most out of our bodies when we were on the oars. We shared jokes and stories from time to time but with nothing to think about other than our arrival in Antigua, collectively we became very competitive and focussed on our closest threat to winning the race – the Army team, Row to Recovery.

“We landed in Antigua on the 21st January 2014, 48 days and seven minutes after the fog-horn went off in La Gomera. It is difficult to describe the feelings we felt after such a prolonged period at sea with so many near-death experiences and mental meltdowns! We were relieved, but also sad, knowing we were leaving the boat and the ocean behind. The ocean, which had played with us continuously, but in the end delivered us to land and our loved ones safely.

“Boats were tooting their fog-horns as we meandered the winding inlet of Nelson’s Harbour to the final curve when we saw our family and friends on the dock. Adrenaline and heightened emotions powered those last strokes to the waiting embraces of the people who had filled our minds for the last two months. I would do it all again for the arrival alone.” ■

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