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SIR ROBIN KNOX-JOHNSTON



Sir Robin Knox-Johnston

The first man to sail solo around the world without stopping
might be 77 – but he’s lost none of his competitive edge

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Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, the first man to sail solo non-stop around the world, is taking a drag of a cigarette while deep in conversation with *Gentleman's Journal's* designer. We're huddled around, post-photoshoot, on a pontoon in St. Katherine dock, south-east London, and he's lamenting coming third in a solo transatlantic race he took part in some 18 months ago. His performance made international headlines because, at the age of 75, he deftly beat 18 far younger sailors in his class. Of course, he didn't expect to win, he rants, but he's still bloody annoyed he never snagged second.

'I couldn't win because the boat that came first shouldn't actually have been in our class,' he sighs, taking another toke of his Marlboro Light. 'It was a trimaran and none of us could touch it. But second? Oh I could have had the guy who finished second though.'

Some context is needed: he's referring to the Route du Rhum, a race widely regarded as one of the most dangerous in the world. Departing from St Malo, in the north of France, competitors travel 3,542 miles to the finish line in Guadeloupe in the Caribbean. During the distinctly unglamorous 20-day voyage, the grandfather of five ate freeze-dried food

defrosted on a camping stove and used a bucket dangling on a rope as his toilet ('It saves a bit of weight' he told the BBC before he set sail). He also had to contend with a host of problems and repairs that are commonplace when crossing the Atlantic, including tearing his sail in the dead of night on board 'Grey Power', the 14-year-old Open 60 yacht he patched up to race in.

He was, of course, the oldest competitor in the field, but reeled in the vast majority of his opposition taking a slightly longer route than was recommended – well, some 1,000 miles longer, though he doesn't mention that – using his experience to counter the opposition's far faster vessels. The man who he lost out to for that runner-up spot, Andrea Mura, is the Italian course record holder, no less, and Sir Robin only finished 17 miles behind him. That's a photo finish in sailing terms.

He really was almost, *almost* there, and his tactics were perfect: early on, while Mura became trapped in the light winds of the Azores high pressure zone, Sir Robin found the fastest winds to set up an unlikely dogfight. When a dumbstruck Mura recovered, the pensioner hit back yet again in the final days to haul him in by 200 miles, with only an unforeseen drop in the breeze denying him second place on the final 50 miles around the island of Guadeloupe.

'The trouble is that it's a 60ft racing machine and I'm of an age where I pull muscles,' he adds, sighing. 'I'm still fairly strong now, but not compared to when I was 30.'

'But, yes, I was cross I didn't get second.'

When the email first landed in my inbox to pitch for an interview, Sir Robin's press officer described her client as a 'madman and a gentleman' – a description that feels just right. His list of achievements is almost incomparable to all but the most famous of adventurers, and that he's still relatively unknown to the wider public is testament to his love of sailing and dislike of being a celebrity for celebrity's sake. He's circumnavigated the world four times, once as the first to make the crossing non-stop in 1968 and another setting the then world-record time alongside Sir Peter Blake in 1994; been named UK Yachtsman of the year four times; and created the Clipper Round The World Yacht race, giving amateurs the opportunity to experience one of the toughest feats in sailing. For fun, he's also been ice trekking in the deep frozen Frobisher Bay in the far north of Canada with Sir Ranulph Fiennes and gone mountain climbing with Sir Chris Bonington, a man who summited Mount Everest at the age of 50.

In person, the man the French call 'The Don' is everything you'd hope him to be: candid,



Sir Robin photographed at St Katharine Docks, days after crews from his Clipper Round The World Race reached the finishing line

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Sir Robin Knox-Johnston on board Suhaili, nearing Falmouth at the end of his circumnavigation of the earth – the first to be achieved single-handed and non-stop, 23rd April 1969

funny, bloody-minded. He's refreshingly unmedia trained, too, and sports a fabulously dry sense of humour. In fact, perhaps the only thing he loves more than the sea is cigarettes and whisky ('My doctor once asked me why I smoked and I just said, "Because I enjoy it," he quips). His bullshit radar is, as you can image, second to none, while his achievements were driven, he explains, as much by a desire to push himself to the limit as a huge 'fuck you' to all those that doubted him. Before he set sail on that famous first round the world voyage, for instance, he was told by a passer-by that it was impossible to finish. He snapped back: 'I hope you're not a teacher, because you would be bloody depressing for the kids.'

Yet the stranger had something of a point, too: circumnavigating the globe single-handedly and without stopping really was considered impossible by much of the world before he set sail nearly half a century ago. Even Sir Francis Chichester, the first to travel solo around the world, begrudgingly accepted he would have to stop off for supplies in Sydney, at the halfway point of his journey.

Setting out from Falmouth on 14th June

1968, the trip that made Sir Robin's name took 313 days and covered 30,123 miles. He was one of nine men drafted in to attempt the record, as part of *The Sunday Times* Golden Globe race, yet was the only one to finish, as one by one his competitors either quit, sank, or, in one sad instance, committed suicide. He did it all without the kind of modern satellite communications we consider standard today, with just a barometer, radio and look of the sky to guide him around. It was a trip filled with terrifying anecdotes, from diving into shark-infested seas to repair a leaking hull to having battery acid splashed in his eye and surviving 90ft waves. That he did it in his sluggish 32ft wooden ketch Suhaili, which he refurbished and made seaworthy himself, adds to the legend surrounding the journey.

'I was always asked by journalists how I coped on my own during that year,' he explains, now sat inside sipping a coffee. 'I always just said I had no idea. When you're out there you're so focussed you don't notice. Of course, every couple of months you have a bad day and you think, "I just can't stand anymore of this." But then I think of the me who got me to that point,

and not wanting to let that person down just because I was having a bad day.'

'But the great thing is that because it's not actually a world record it can't be broken. I will always be the first.'

He puts his success down to his background in the Merchant Navy. After signing up in 1957, he was based aboard Chindwara, a 7,500 tonne cargo ship, which was crewed almost entirely by a team of 40 cadets. Here he learned the basics: knots, splices, canvas work, rigging, even how to paint the vessel. He served three years there, running between London and East Africa, before ending up living in Bombay with his late wife Suzanne. It's here that he bought Suhaili.

'I had my boat in India and I was sailing it home. I was halfway to Cape Town when I heard about Sir Francis Chichester. I thought, "That's it. That's the one thing left to do: sail around the world but without stopping."

His love of the sea, though, starts from as far back as he can remember. Born on 17th March 1939, in Putney, London as the eldest of four brothers, he learned to read when he was seven and began to devour C S Forester's *Hornblower* books, which chartered the adventures of a



From left to right: A ship's crew welcomes Sir Robin Knox-Johnston home after his voyage; he raises his hands triumphantly as he takes his first steps back on to dry land



I was halfway to Cape Town when I heard about Sir Francis Chichester. I thought, "The last thing left to do is sail the world without stopping"



Royal Navy officer during the Napoleonic Wars. By 12, he'd read all 11 novels.

'At Christmas I got books about the sea as presents and from then on going out there was my life,' he says. 'By 10 the decision was made. Going to sea is all I have ever wanted to do.'

Perhaps his biggest legacy, though, is the Clipper Round The World Yacht Race, the reason we're here to interview him today. Devised by Sir Robin in 1995, the 40,000-mile

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nautical odyssey gives complete amateurs the opportunity to sail the globe. Crews of between 15 and 20 are provided with a standard 68ft yacht and an experienced skipper, and are given all the training they need before they set sail. A single, two-month leg costs £11,000 while the full year-long experience comes in at £50,000 – an amount designed to be accessible to most people who really want to do it. Recruits get to experience the highs and lows of being at sea: from visiting Cape Town, Southeast Asia, the Caribbean and New York to dealing with weeks of sleeping in sodden clothes in tiny bunk beds.

'I have a very good team that trains everybody before they set sail,' he explains. 'They are all professional yachtsmen and they all know what they are talking about. If anything comes up we will discuss it. When you are throwing ideas around you get a much better sense of things than being on your own.'

This year, however, the race suffered its first fatalities in its 20 year history. Sarah Young, 40, was swept overboard as winds reached 50mph in the Pacific while Andrew Ashma, 49, travelling on the very same yacht, was killed months earlier when he was hit by a sail. It

underlines that, however much you prepare, the ocean is an unforgiving place.

'It's tough, especially on the Pacific,' adds Sir Robin. 'There's big waves, strong winds and you get soaked. You take off your clothes and collapse, but then you have to get back on deck to help your teammates.'

'Everyone spends four weeks on a boat before they set sail, and that's the big test. If you're not sure you do the next week and see how you get on. If we're not sure we will tell them. We're not sending people to sea unless we're completely satisfied because it's a very dangerous place. We can't make them skilled sailors, but we try to make them safe sailors. But people don't realise what they are capable of until they are pushed. People come back more self-assured.'

As our time comes to an end, I ask Sir Robin whether he'll compete in the next Route du Rhum, scheduled for 2018 when he'll be 79. It transpires he's already sold Grey Power and is currently saving money to buy a faster vessel.

'I have a bit of money left to raise but I know what I'm going to get – a nice little trimaran.' ■ clipperroundtheworld.com