

## Dame Naomi James in EXPRESS CRUSADER

At the age of 28, having got the idea into my head, I was fortunate enough to be given the chance to sail around the world solo, at the same time as my husband, Rob James, was participating in the second Whitbread Round the World Yacht Race as skipper of Great Britain II, the 77 ft ketch.

Key facilitators for the attempt were Chay Blyth, with whom Rob worked in an adventure sailing business, and a private sponsor who provided the initial funding. Chay lent me one of his yachts, *Spirit of Cutty Sark*, and additional commercial sponsorship was obtained from the Daily Express, hence the yacht was renamed *Express Crusader*. Of course, many others contributed hugely with time and effort to enable the project to materialise - a bare five weeks from the go-ahead to departure, to be timed for the end of the summer weather window at Cape Horn.



The choice of boat was made for me and could not have been bettered at the time. *Express Crusader* was a Gallant 53, designed by Van de Stadt, and heavily constructed in GRP by Tyler. A long fin keel and skeg hung rudder for good windward performance and downwind control, plus medium displacement, resulted in an easily driven hull able to carry the stores and water load for the (potentially year-long) voyage without compromising speed. The cutter rig allowed for variable sail configurations of manageable size, although hanked-on sails, while durable, made for plenty of hard work, compared to today's roller furling. Slab reefing, operated at the mast base, completed the wardrobe; a trysail system was not used, nor was a spinnaker, but I did use downwind poles to boom out the headsails.

Ancillary equipment was sparse (less to go wrong) and the pumps were manual.

As I had no fridge, food for the whole voyage was carefully planned, drawing on the vast experience of Chay and Rob. Basically, it comprised tinned and dried food.



I navigated using dead reckoning, a sextant and sight reduction tables and a quartz clock for reliable time. I also had RDF for helping near coasts.

Communication (once a week at best) was via SSB radio, plus VHF. An off-course alarm, which should have been useful, failed early in the voyage, as did the SSB radio, one of the reasons for an unplanned call into Cape Town.

Engine usage was minimal except for battery charging. The Perkins diesel proved reliable and remarkably trouble free.

Self Steering gear: I chose a relatively new system at the time, the Swedish Sailomat, which was the beefiest on the market. However, a 53 foot yacht turned out to be near its upper limit. It consisted of a wind vane connected to a servo blade which powered an independent rudder and coped extremely well with all but the worst conditions. In extreme weather, the aluminium stock and blades were prone

to breakage. I was able to repair the blades to a large extent; but they eventually required replacement at Cape Town. The problem continued but was solved by the time of the scheduled rendezvous off Tasmania, when beefed up blades arrived just in time. I continued to disconnect it in heavy seas, when *Crusader* could steer herself down wind with storm jib sheeted amidships. The independent rudder proved the worth of this system when the main rudder bearings started to seize on the last leg.

### Routes and stopovers:

My intended non-stop route was via the great capes and the southern ocean, with strategic at-sea rendezvous points to offload film and copy for the sponsor. The Canary Islands, Cape Town and the Maatsuyker Islands south of Tasmania were used. This enabled delivery of more spares and very welcome mail, but the intention was for no outside assistance. Unfortunately, the failure of the SSB radio and the need for self-steering repair necessitated a three day stopover in Cape Town, and later a rigging failure of the lower shrouds, which endangered the mast, forced a call for repairs at Port Stanley, Falklands.

On the leg from Tasmania to Cape Horn I took the longer route, remaining north of 48 degrees South, not dipping further south until the final approach to the Horn. This added about 2000 miles to the optimum track, which is closer to the great circle route, but too dangerous for a single hander due to the presence of ice.

### Highs and Lows:



There were many highs and lows, but the lowest point had to be the time at which the voyage nearly terminated, due to two events in close succession. The lower shrouds parted at the crosstrees fitting midway between Tasmania and Cape Horn. Working aloft to jury rig the lower shrouds over two days restrained the alarming mast bend, but the wire stop which I had to rig around the mast prevented the mainsail from being hoisted above the crosstrees. At this point I had decided to head north and return to New Zealand for

repairs, but three days after the rigging failure, hurricane force winds capsized *Crusader*. To my amazement the rig remained standing, and although some frantic bailing was required, and some equipment was damaged, sailing ability was not compromised. Strangely, this restored my confidence, and I resolved to press on to Cape Horn and effect repairs in the Falkland Islands. Steering through a hurricane for the next six hours was the most harrowing experience of the voyage. Other low points, like frustration crossing the doldrums, pale in comparison.

One of the great highs, of course, was rounding Cape Horn and entering the South Atlantic. I received tremendous help from the friendly and resourceful Falkland Islanders and the crew of HMS *Endurance*, whose workshop fashioned the essential new mast fitting.

Departing Port Stanley was exhilarating with the realisation that the voyage could indeed be achieved.



I was not a seasoned sailor before I set out, in fact I'd never sailed single handed before. I must also confess to confusing latitude with longitude with respect to measuring my distance run, a mistake Rob was able to rectify over the SSB radio from a bar in Auckland. Actually, it didn't matter a jot. One of my guiding principles was advice from Rob, a very successful racing skipper, and also a great seaman: "If you're thinking about reefing, do it." This meant a cautious approach that kept sail damage to a minimum. The other principle I followed, every single time I went on deck, was "watch what you're doing".

The unavoidable port calls negated the chance of a non-stop record. I did beat Francis Chichester's time for a single-handed circumnavigation - but he stopped in Australia for some weeks. Nevertheless, the sense of achievement and self discovery resulting from a nine-month sea voyage was life changing, as all who undertake such journeys discover.

Departed Dartmouth 9th September 1977  
Returned Dartmouth 8th June 1978  
272 Days  
Distance sailed 28,000 miles approx.

