



TRI AND TRY AGAIN

ADVERSITY AWAITS DONA BERTARELLI AND HER CREW AS THEY WORK TO BREAK THE AROUND-THE-WORLD SPEED RECORD ABOARD THE WORLD'S LARGEST RACING TRIMARAN.

BY [REDACTED]





Left to right: Yann shows the author his favorite place on board. The village of La Trinite-Sur-Mer may be small, but it's home to sailing giants. Dona has racked up the accolades while chasing this record, including the title of fastest woman to sail around the world.

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“Parlez vous Français?” An elderly man was addressing me over breakfast at an inn in the French seaside village of La Trinite-Sur-Mer.

“No, désolé, just English e un po’ d’Italiano.” I made an apologetic face.

He shrugged, and I poured myself some tea. The quilt of fog from the day before had blown out to sea, and we stared at the round October moon in companionable silence for awhile.

“Etes-vous en vacances? Vacation?” He tried again.

“No, I’m a writer.” He looked at me blankly, so I gestured like I was holding a pen.

“Ah! Une écrivain! Comme Agatha Christie!”

“Oui, sort of,” I laughed. “But I write articles.”

He gave me another blank look.

“I write for a magazine about sailboats.”

“Ah! Sailboat! We have a sailboat very big here. You must see it!”

“The trimaran?”

“Oui, oui, c’est un big, big trimaran,” he said it like tree-ma-rah-n. “You will be amazed.”

“I’ve come all this way just to see it!” I grinned.

An hour later, I was jogging down the docks to keep up with my escort, a French sailor who towered over me by at least a foot and a half and quizzed me on the semantic differences between the English words “port” and “harbor” as we walked.

“Anyway,” he said, “the town here is very small, especially in comparison to how many boats there are. In square meters, the port is bigger than the town.”

“I think you’d want ‘harbor’ there.”

“Ah, OK, yes, the harbor is bigger than the town.”

I wasn’t surprised. I had wandered for two hours the day before and saw six sheep, a horse, two cats, and no people—unless you count a far-off glimpse of a tractor roving its field.

So you can imagine my shock when he marched me right by the candy-apple-red hulls of *IDEC Sport*—the current record holder for fastest circumnavigation of the globe and, notably, not the trimaran I was there to see.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said.

“Yes?” He did not break stride.

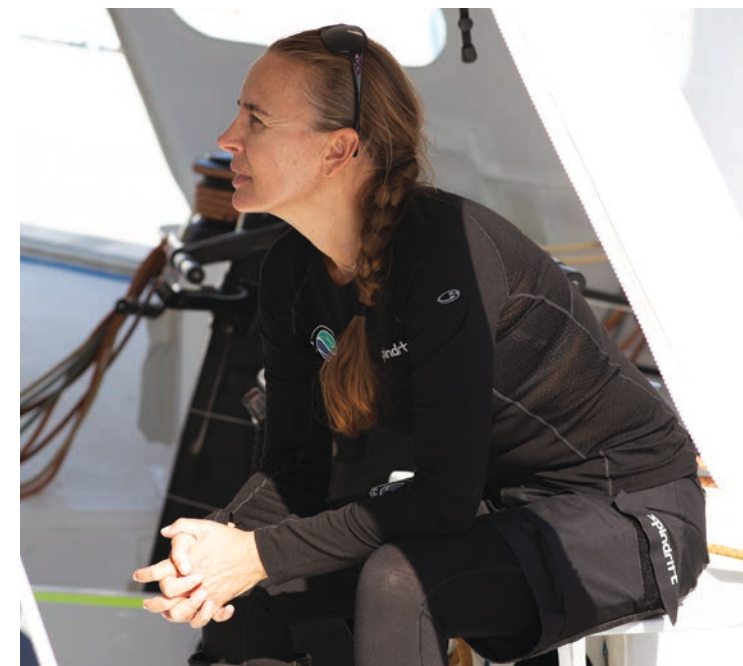
“That’s *IDEC Sport*. What’s it doing here—” and then I had to interrupt myself because on the other side of *IDEC Sport* was the maxi trimaran *Actual*. “What are they doing here, Grégoire?” I demanded with the cheerful panic of someone who’s just seen a movie star ducking into their local diner.

He shrugged as if we weren’t just breezing by legends and said, “This part of France is known for racing boats.”

I wanted to protest, because even in the most storied shipyards in America, you would never see three maxi trimarans docked next to each other, let alone in a hamlet surrounded by sheep and meadows. (I am not at all kidding; the region’s main attraction is fields full of ancient rocks.)

But I couldn’t push the issue further because we were finally upon *Sails of Change*, and if anything, it was the most impressive of them all. Three massive, gleaming hulls. Fresh teal and black livery. A mast that towered above the rest of the harbor, even above the other maxi trimarans. And Dona Bertarelli climbing down to greet me.

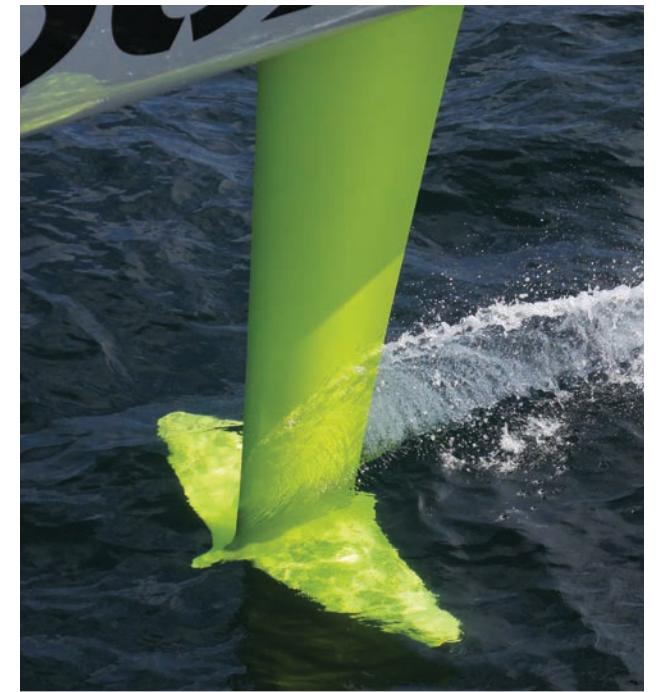
For the past 10 years, Dona has been the driving force behind the team called Spindrift and its campaign to break the record for fastest global circumnavigation—The Jules Verne Trophy. In reference to Verne’s 1873 novel *Around the World in 80 Days*, the trophy was first awarded to the boat that could break the 80-day barrier. It requires that sailors cross a start line drawn between the Créac’h lighthouse on Ushant Island, France, and the Lizard Lighthouse in the UK; leave the Cape of Good Hope, Cape Leeuwin, and Cape Horn to port; and then re-cross the line in the opposite direction.



PHOTOS BY [REDACTED]



Clockwise: Sails of Change's new livery celebrates the campaign's environmental commitments. Among the refit details were fins on the rudders. The author takes a turn grinding with the team.



In 1993 Bruno Peyron first took the prize, completing his circumnavigation aboard the maxi cat *Explorer* in 79 days and six hours. Since then, the record has been bested eight times.

Bruno's younger brother, Loick, was actually behind one of those records, setting it at 45 days and 13 hours aboard the maxi trimaran *Banque Populaire V* in 2012. Seeing the boat's potential, Dona bought it and renamed it *Spindrift 2* with the intention of refitting it and shaving even more time off the record.

"We're nearing the limit of how fast a displacement boat can go around the world," Dona said. "But the technology isn't there yet to make a foiling trimaran like this safe and reliable for a circumnavigation." So she went with a pre-existing hull that could be upgraded for their needs.

Her team shortened the central hull to match the LOA of the outer hulls (the amputated bow section now hangs in

their team base like a trophy). They also took several feet off of the mast to save weight. Fin-like foils were added to the rudders to give them a little lift, and the cockpit was enclosed to make sailing safer and more comfortable.

Decades of environmental advocacy alongside the sailing victories on Dona's résumé promised that sustainability was going to be a key part of this campaign, but she credits her children with suggesting that she focus the project around ocean health.

To that end, the team committed to gather data from hard-to-study areas of the ocean via sensors on board that measure surface temperature, salinity, chlorophyll, and carbon dioxide. This data can be used to better understand local ecosystems, human-impacted weather patterns, and ocean acidification. Additionally, the team developed the Spindrift for Schools program, working closely with educators to teach

PHOTO COURTESY OF SPINDRIFT / G. LEBEC

children about sustainability. They are also heavily involved with promoting the 30x30 initiative, which is an environmental advocacy program that aims to get 30% of the planet's land and water to at least highly protected status by 2030.

The refit process of the maxi trimaran emphasized a commitment to melding performance and sustainability, starting with the choice to upgrade an existing hull, rather than build a new boat and generate the carbon footprint inherent to such a project. The entire electrical generation system was replaced with fossil fuel-free alternatives, including nearly 400 square feet of solar panels, two wind turbines, and a direct bio-methanol fuel cell. Though there is no power propulsion allowed during a record attempt, the sailors still need electricity for their instruments and cooking, which is all generated through this system.

"We're not mercenaries," Dona told me. "It's never luxury

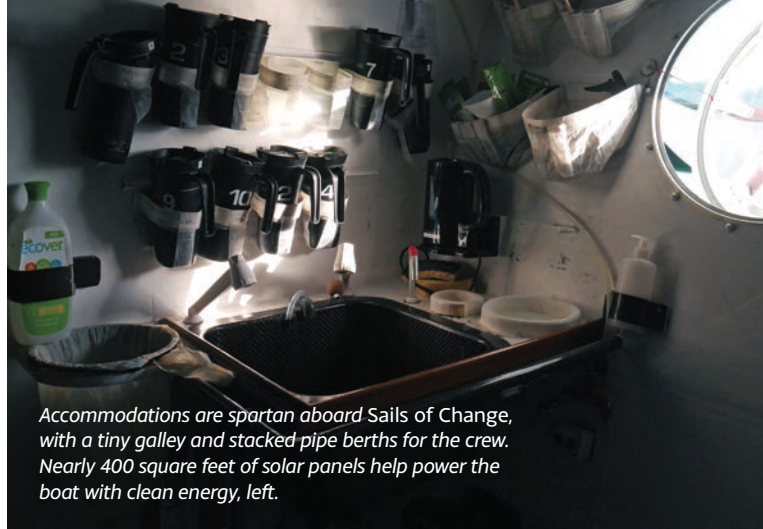
on these boats, but we're not going to sacrifice unnecessarily." But credit to how tough these sailors are, I think most of us would walk through the dark interior, past the portlights and stacked berths, and consider this roughing it.

With all these upgrades complete, *Spindrift 2* was rechristened *Sails of Change* and made ready for another go at the record. In 2016, they completed a circumnavigation that missed the record by just two days, but still earned Dona the title of fastest woman to sail around the world.

Soon after, French skipper Francis Joyon made things a little more difficult for Dona by cutting a massive five days off the record. Undeterred, Dona, along with the boat's skipper, Yann Guichard, and their team set to work analyzing every move of Joyon's passage.

"He had incredible wind in the Indian Ocean. He pretty much crossed the whole thing in one system. We won't have that kind

PHOTOS BY [REDACTED] (TOP), GAUTHIER LEBEC (BOTTOM)



Accommodations are spartan aboard Sails of Change, with a tiny galley and stacked pipe berths for the crew. Nearly 400 square feet of solar panels help power the boat with clean energy, left.



of luck, so we have to catch up elsewhere,” explained Dona.

The plan was to create their own luck by waiting for very specific conditions in the Southern Ocean that indicate favorable winds around the Cape of Good Hope about five days out. *Sails of Change* would then race south through the Atlantic to meet the system and ride it into the Indian Ocean ahead of Joyon’s pace. From there, the weather is all up to chance, but Dona was confident in her boat and her team.

The team established a standby window from October 24, 2022, to March 1 of this year. The dawn of austral autumn in March results in faster and more severe low-pressure systems, longer nights, and higher seas in the Southern Ocean. After February, it’s virtually impossible for this boat to maintain a high enough average speed to have a shot at the record, so the clock is always ticking. When I asked if looking for the right conditions was like looking for a needle in a haystack, Yann said, “No, it’s like looking for a needle in a field of hay.”

“I have a call every 12 hours with our navigator for the whole standby window,” Yann said. In addition to being the skipper, he is also Dona’s husband, which makes the stress of constant preparation and abrupt departure a shared effort.

Even with this perpetual vigilance, though, the weather is ultimately all up to chance. In 2021, the team waited out an entire weather window without an opportunity to leave, constantly needing to quarantine and test for Covid 19. One of the crew even decided to homeschool his child to avoid exposure risk. It was a long few months. In 2022, the logistics were a little simpler due to relaxed safety measures, but the question of a departure date still loomed large.



I arrived just a week before the standby window began and was treated to crisp blue skies and a pleasant but dying breeze on the day of our sail. Getting underway was a process because the boat is 37 meters (just over 121 feet) long with no engine. To take it out of the slip, the Spindrift team had to lash three dinghies to the hulls, and then Yann used a VHF to tell each driver “allez” in turn, like voice activated throttles. Eventually we were free from the dinghies, and it was all hands to the grinders to crank the sails up.

Suddenly we went from drifting to flying. The only sound was the air roaring by, and the waves made me weightless and clumsy in turn. My eyes stung, but tears were whisked off my face before they could spill over. A French crew member grinned at me and asked if I was OK by way of raised eyebrows and a thumbs up. I nodded enthusiastically.

Quiberon Bay was calm and the water flat, so it was a smooth ride (for a sailboat going speeds usually reserved for cars, that is). Dona gave me leave to explore, but before I had a chance to monkey around the boat, Yann asked if I wanted to drive. Yes, obviously.

PHOTOS BY [REDACTED]

He gave me the heading and stepped to the side so I could stand on the little platform used to see over the cockpit enclosure. And then I was driving the world’s biggest racing trimaran. If I’m being honest, there was very little happening in my brain, other than, *whoa!* And then Yann shouted something over the wind, accent too thick to understand. I glanced over questioningly, and he crowded onto the step with me, directing my gaze to the SOG reading just above the heading that my eyes had been glued to: 30 knots.

Despite my nearly paralyzing delight, I did manage to execute a few maneuvers to help the onboard reporter launch and land his drone. Dona joked that if she couldn’t go for some reason, they had found her replacement.

I steered for an hour or so until the wind got gusty and weird, and then gave the helm over to someone who knew how to handle it better. Yann took me to the bow of the boat, which involved a bouncy walk over a trampoline the size of a small parking lot.

He has this sort of active contemplativeness that you often find in ocean sailors. “This is my favorite place on the boat.

Just you and the ocean,” he mused, while the safety officer sprinted at us, bouncing like he was wearing moon shoes and waving a life jacket frantically at me.

The squirrely wind turned to no wind, and we drifted back to the harbor. I asked and was allowed to help the crew grind in the sails. Despite the language barrier, I could tell they were amused at my eagerness to try out the boat’s sweatiest job.

Coming back into the dock was as much of an endeavor as getting off it, but this time with slightly higher stakes because groups of people had gathered to watch. Not even to see the boat sail, just to see it coming into the dock. When I pointed out to Dona how many people had come to see her boat, she said, “It’s barely anything. On the weekends the crowd is five times the size.” During the week, it was mostly retired folks.

I scanned the crowd and sure enough, the gentleman I had breakfast with was among them. I waved, and he waved back.

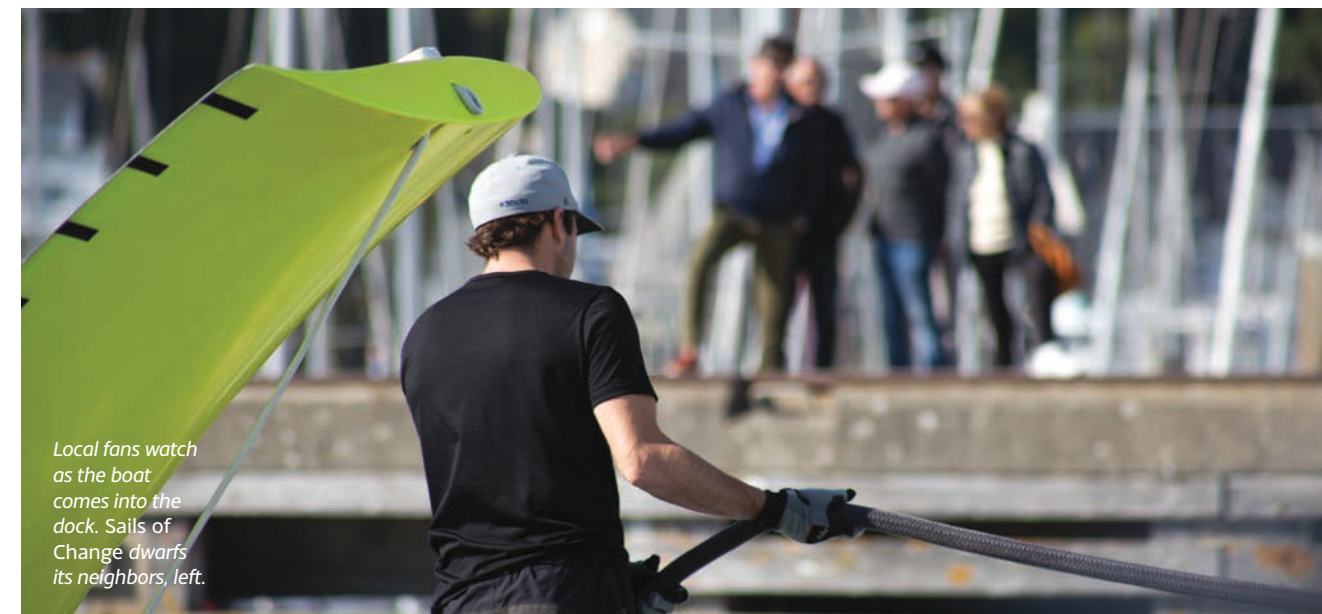
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On March 1, 2023, the team announced that they would be calling off their attempt for this year; it would be the second consecutive season when the conditions necessary to break the record did not materialize.

“We have been preparing for this Jules Verne Trophy for 10 years now, and at the end of each attempt or standby period, you have to know how to turn the page,” said Dona.

“Although we extended our standby period, there were no weather windows,” added Yann. “We have pushed the deadline as late as possible, but nothing is presenting over the next few days...it’s a difficult decision, but you have to stop sometime.” The team reset its sights on preparing for a new season of TF35 racing that kicked off in mid-May.

“You need to have respect for the boat and the people and the ocean,” Dona said, sagely summarizing the whole process. “But you also need to know the limits of the boat and the people and the ocean.” [REDACTED]



Local fans watch as the boat comes into the dock. Sails of Change dwarfs its neighbors, left.