

RACE AROUND THE WORLD NON-STOP

Compete in the Vendée Globe, the ultimate sailing challenge

The Vendée Globe is known as the Everest of sailing, but this doesn't do it justice. Climbing the mother of all mountains is certainly hard and extremely dangerous but hundreds more people have stood atop Everest than have sailed solo and non-stop around the world.

The yacht race known simply as The Vendée is named after the region of France where it starts and sees a fleet of brave men and women sail into the North Atlantic at the start of a three-month sprint around globe. They sail Open 60 monohull yachts that are built with speed rather than safety as a priority. The designers will disagree, but the number of dismastings, keel failures and ripped sails is undeniable evidence that these vessels, just like Formula One cars, are built to be fast and not to last.

The Vendée course is simple. Head south from the start at Les Sables d'Olonne and then east around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa. Keep going around the world until you see Cape Horn to port then head north, back up the Atlantic to where you started. Skippers will cover between 40,000 and 43,000 km before the finish and have to pass through a series of imaginary gates to keep their course clear of the worse of the icebergs that drift up from Antarctica into the Southern Ocean.

Dodging icebergs is just one of the many problems that Vendée skippers must overcome. Sail changes on these 18.2-metre yachts take a superhuman effort and trips to the top of the towering mast are routine. The boats may be big but they lack almost all creature comforts in an effort to reduce weight and maximize speed. A bucket replaces a toilet and dog bowls are used for crockery. Food is dried and some skippers drink neat vegetable oil in an attempt to load up on calories as efficiently as possible. An average of five hours sleep a day is maintained during the three months the sailors are at sea.

Modern communication means that these solo sailors must become authors and TV stars as well as driving the boat as quickly as possible. Blogs must be updated and video broadcasts beamed back via onboard satellite systems. There is also constant maintenance and more than a third of the fleet usually drop out because of failures of boat or equipment.

The race takes place every four years and although the most modern boats cost many millions of pounds, it is possible to buy one of the older generation boats for a fraction of the price. You need a sponsor to help fund the refit and new sails will be essential, but you can be assured of plenty of help from the special band of fellow solo ocean sailors. You're unlikely to win in an old boat, although recent races have shown that the tortoise is often more likely to finish than the hare.



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