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GO YOUR *own* WAY

Jeanne Socrates is the oldest woman to sail solo around the world, and her message to *The Weekly's* readers is to up anchor and follow your dreams.

Jeanne Socrates, a very lively 83-year-old – the oldest person to have circumnavigated the globe, solo, nonstop, via the five great capes – is having trouble choosing her happy place. There are so many, she explains, but she finally settles on two. The first is this: “It’s daytime in the tropics, the wind’s good, the sun’s shining and maybe a whale comes by, or a pod of dolphins. Dolphins are beautiful – the way they all jump together in twos or threes or fours, or when they’re riding your bow wave and you look down at them and they look up at you.”

If she sees a pod of dolphins in the distance, Jeanne will bang on the side of her yacht, *Nereida II*, “and they always swim over. They’re so sociable. They keep me company.”

Jeanne’s second happy place is half a world away. “I’m in the Southern Ocean,” she begins and her eyes light up at the memory. “The sun is shining, the seas are ginormous, but the peaks are well separated, so you can just sit there and watch the ocean in awe. Perhaps there’s an albatross gliding by and looking me in the eye, and storm petrels dancing on the sea. Oh, it’s wonderful.”

She is not religious, she says. “Not as such, but I do feel that being in the Southern Ocean is a very spiritual experience. You’ve got these amazing seas, amazing cloudscapes, and then there are the birds. You’re thousands of miles from anyone and anything. It’s just you in your little bubble – your boat. You’re totally self-contained, but you are in this enormity. You get an immense respect for nature when you’re out there. You have to be at one with it.”



Solo adventurer

Jeanne did not begin sailing until she was 50, but she has always been courageous. Her mother was a Londoner. Her father, an Australian, had joined the RAAF, been posted to Yorkshire and was killed in a training exercise just five weeks after Jeanne was born.

“We were living in London in the Blitz,” she tells *The Weekly*, one blustery morning on the NSW Central Coast, where she and her yacht have taken a pause while she works on her memoir. “I have these recollections, as a tiny tot, of my mum dropping me off at a nursery, so she could go to work. She worked in a fashion shop in Regent Street, but my mum was struggling, so she put me into an orphanage just before I turned five.”

Jeanne was lonely at first and there weren’t a lot of comforts. “But I was lucky,” she explains. “I was in a little group of girls my own age, and there was a very kindly house mother who was forever darning socks.”

Just shy of Jeanne’s ninth birthday, her mother appeared at the orphanage with “a very kind, caring man”, who became her stepfather, and they lived together happily through the rest of her childhood years.

Jeanne went on to study physics at University College London. At a Hellenic Society wine tasting, she met George Socrates, a handsome young man whose forebears hailed from Crete and who was working towards a PhD in nuclear medicine. They married and had two children, Ann and Nicholas, and Jeanne now has three grandchildren as well.

Jeanne taught mathematics, first at university, then in a boys’ school. And while she was teaching at the school, she took part in a summer sailing camp. George joined as well, to make up the numbers. “That’s how we got onto a yacht ... And oh my gosh! I just fell in love with it,” she says.

Sailing holidays and sailing courses followed. Jeanne and George had always hoped to retire early. Now George was coming up to his 60th birthday, Jeanne was 55, and they decided to take the plunge. They had

just enough savings to buy a yacht.

The couple travelled to Sweden to collect a brand new 36-footer, and in the summer of ’97 they sailed it home – the long way.

“I remember coming across the English Channel, back to Dover from Calais. It was early September, blue sky, lovely wind, and I looked at my husband and said, ‘All our colleagues are back working, and here we are, sailing under blue skies.’ That was pretty wonderful.”

The following year, they cruised the Mediterranean and time rolled blissfully by. “We crossed the Atlantic in 1999 and got to North America and



Canada, up to Nova Scotia, down to the Caribbean.”

Then, in the first week of September 2001, life pivoted.

In Grenada, George developed a backache. “It was incredibly painful,” says Jeanne. A local GP made the likely diagnosis of cancer. They flew home to London to see a specialist, who told them it was prostate cancer that had metastasised to George’s bones. He went through treatment, but it was a matter of time.

“We got George back on the boat early the next year,” Jeanne says. “We sailed across to Venezuela, and visited

places we’d not been before, which was wonderful. He loved snorkelling, swimming, being in the water.”

But gradually George became less mobile, and his pain increased. A doctor said to Jeanne: “‘You know, if he dies on the boat, that’s where he wants to be.’ And I was devastated,” she says, “because I hadn’t really got my head around that – that we were heading for death. That really shocked me.

“We went back to England for Christmas, from Bonaire in the Dutch Antilles, thinking we’d return, but he never made it.” George died in England in March 2003.



“If there’s something you really want to do, make it happen ...; get on with it.”

After George’s death, Jeanne flew back to the yacht. “I went out and scattered his ashes there with his cap. I definitely felt cheated, and that he’d been cheated of his life.” People expected her to stop sailing, “but it didn’t occur to me to stop,” she says. “The sailing life is beautiful; I liked the community. I also felt as though I was, in a sense, sailing for him ... After George died, I adopted the motto: Life is precious – make the most of it. You have this gift of life – don’t waste it. If you’re thinking you’d like to do something, get on with it and do it while you can.”

Jeanne’s first solo voyage was from Bonaire to Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “It’s quite a distance,” she admits. “And I was worried about doing the overnight passages by myself.” A fellow sailor came with her for an early section, “which helped me get my confidence back”, but from Panama to Texas (via Honduras, Belize, Yucatán and Cuba) she was entirely alone.

Next, Jeanne sailed the Pacific coast, north to Alaska, south to Mexico, and joined a race from San Francisco to Hawai’i. Sometime in 2006, she set her sights on sailing solo around the world.

Jeanne started out from Mexico in March 2007. It was an extraordinary journey, sailing through the tropics, across the blue Pacific, along the east coast of Australia, past the tip of South Africa, and back through the Panama Canal. She was just 12 hours from her final destination when Nereida ran aground. “I was lucky I survived it,” she says, but the yacht was not so lucky. Undaunted, and thankfully insured, Jeanne bought Nereida II and set sail again.

A nonstop circumnavigation was foiled again in 2009 by mechanical problems, and another attempt ended in a serious knockdown west of Cape Horn in 2010.

By then, however, Jeanne was determined to meet this challenge, and between October 2012 and July 2013, she did. At 70, she became the oldest woman to circumnavigate the globe solo, nonstop and unassisted via the five great southern capes (Cape Horn in South America; Cape Agulhas, South Africa; Cape Leeuwin, Western Australia; South-East Cape, Tasmania; and South Cape on Stewart Island, New Zealand).

Then, in 2019, aged 77, she did it again, to become the oldest person to achieve the feat. Jeanne has now sailed nonstop and unassisted around the world twice, and she is still sailing today, with no plans to permanently drop anchor any time soon.

There have been setbacks. In 2017, she took a near-fatal fall, breaking her neck and suffering major internal injuries. “It took some time to recuperate,” she admits, but she set sail again just as soon as she was able.

It adds a little extra spring to her step when she hears that her story has inspired others. “One man came up to me,” she recalls, “and said: ‘I was about to give up sailing because my family thought I was getting on a bit. But having seen what you’ve been doing, I’ve decided, to hell with that, I’ll keep going.’”

Jeanne shows *The Weekly* around the Nereida II, with its burgundy sail and warm wood panelling. While she’s on deck, a younger woman sailor stops by to pay her respects. We ask Jeanne what advice she’d give, both to her unexpected guest and to *The Weekly*’s readers.

“The fact that I started at 50,” she says, “I think that shows that if you set your mind to something, you can do it. It just requires a bit of determination.

“I don’t want to be sitting around in my carpet slippers, wishing I’d done something I couldn’t now do. So if there’s something you really want to do, make it happen. As long as you’re not harming anyone by doing what you want, get on with it.” **AWW**