

# Flotilla welcomes oldest woman to sail the world

JEANNE SOCRATES



John Gleeson photo

Jeanne Socrates, who in July became the oldest woman to sail solo and nonstop around the world, stands onboard her sailing yacht, Nereida, during her one-week stay at Gibsons Marina.

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**JOHN GLEESON/STAFF WRITER**

A flotilla of sailboats and a bevy of admirers converged on Gibsons Harbour last week to welcome a star of the international sailing world.

Jeanne Socrates made history this summer by becoming the oldest woman to sail — solo, non-stop and unassisted — around the world.

The 70-year-old grandmother from West London spent a week tied up at Gibsons Marina, visiting friends, sorting out the “chaos” in the cabin of her 38-foot (11.4-metre) sailing yacht Nereida and receiving kudos for her amazing accomplishment.

“I broke two records, actually,” the retired math teacher said in an interview on Sept. 3. “I’m also the first woman to have gone around the world from Canada or the States, non-stop. That’s a pretty important one.”

But it’s the title of oldest woman to sail the globe that will give Socrates a place in the Guinness World Records.

“To my mind, I must have it by about 30 or 40 years. Most of the women do it as part of the races and they usually stop at 40,” Socrates said.

In fact, Socrates would have been the oldest person to circumnavigate the world had it not been for legendary Japanese yachtsman Minoru Saito, who completed his first solo trip at 71 and his eighth voyage two years ago at 77.

Socrates sailed into Victoria Harbour on July 8 after spending 259 days at sea, covering some 40,250 km (25,000 miles). It had been her third attempt since 2009, the year after her husband and sailing partner died from cancer, and Socrates decided to carry on sailing single-handed.

“It just grew as a challenge from small beginnings, if you like,” she said.

Engine problems stopped her in South Africa during her first attempt. The second attempt in 2011 ended near Cape Horn when the Nereida was knocked down by a wave, sustaining major damage.

The third attempt was successful, but not without challenges.

"The most difficult time was climbing to the top of the mast to fix the wind instrument," Socrates said. "That was well before Cape Horn, and I climbed up with great difficulty, but couldn't do the job."

Instead, she jerry-rigged a makeshift instrument and fastened it to a stanchion on the stern, but it worked for only about three weeks.

"So from Cape Horn on I had no wind information at all. And the radar was out of action from before Cape Horn."

Socrates, however, took the setbacks in stride.

"It didn't often feel perilous," she said. "Of course, this was my third time in the southern ocean. You have to go in a boat that you're confident is OK for the job, and this is a sturdy boat."

Socrates' visit to Gibsons was her third, and she said she enjoyed being greeted by the five-boat flotilla organized by Robyn Hume of RCM-SAR Gibsons, whose rigid-hulled inflatable boat led the Nereida through the gap into the marina.

"Jeanne is a true gem," Hume said of the intrepid sailor.

"It was really nice to get that welcome here," Socrates said. "B.C. is certainly a place I feel at home in. I've spent more time here the last few years than I have in England. I have lots of friends here."

Socrates was scheduled to sail out of Gibsons on Thursday for Vancouver and then Salt Spring Island, where she will give a presentation on her marathon voyage.

In mid-October she will be Mexico, getting the Nereida shipshape, and possibly return north next summer.

Since taking up solo sailing, Socrates has been raising money for Marie Curie Cancer Care, a charitable group in the United Kingdom that provides free nursing care to terminally ill patients. For information on the charity, or to donate online, go to [www.mariecurie.org.uk](http://www.mariecurie.org.uk).