

ROWER COMPLETES 3450-MILE SEA ADVENTURE



FINISHING WITH FLARE
Elaine starts celebrating as she reaches the finish line



GET UP AND ROW Elaine in her one-woman boat at the start of her epic adventure



A SHARK, jellyfish, 60ft waves and lightning were just some of the hazards Scots adventurer Elaine Hopley had to face on her record-breaking solo Atlantic crossing.

The 45-year-old also came close to being stranded without drinking water in the middle of the ocean after a generator on her tiny boat broke.

Mum-of-two Elaine, from Dunblane, suffered severe sleep deprivation, sweltering heating and lost almost 20 per cent of her body weight during the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge.

Yet the endurance athlete, who risked her life competing in "the world's toughest row", described the experience as "totally epic".

She said: "It was extremely challenging and in unexpected ways. But I absolutely loved it out there on the Atlantic Ocean."

Elaine left La Gomera in the Canary Islands on December 16 and rowed single-handed in a boat measuring only 23ft long for 59 days, 19 hours and 14 minutes to reach English Harbour, Antigua, on Sunday.

Her time to cover almost 3000 nautical miles – the equivalent of 3450 miles – across the world's second largest ocean is the fastest of any solo woman in the 30-year history of the race.

Yesterday, the Ocean Rowing Society confirmed her world record as the "fastest female to row solo across the Atlantic, east to west in the open class".

Elaine said: "I'm delighted to have achieved the fastest ever solo female time."

The challenges she faced alone for the two months are almost impossible to imagine.

Elaine followed a routine of two hours rowing, two hours off through

Endurance athlete Elaine Hopley on burning 8000 calories each day, overcoming huge challenges and missing her family during record-breaking journey across the ocean

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day and night, with a scheduled sleep from 1am to 4am.

Heavy seas would reduce the time she slept and the accumulation of sleep deprivation took its toll mentally and physically.

With so much energy used at the oars, she also needed to eat more than 8000 calories each day.

Elaine said: "I aimed to have five rationed meals of at least 1000 calories each but I ended up losing quite a lot of weight during the challenge."

Drinking water was supplied by a generator for most of the challenge until a bolt broke.

Elaine said: "I spent two days trying to fix the water maker and was forced to give up and use a hand pump."

"For the final two weeks, I was living off rationed water because it's much harder to create drinking water by hand, while also trying to row single-handed."

As for the weather, Elaine said: "It was so variable and the forecast often seemed to be wrong."

"I found it physically exhausting trying to fight the wind to stay on course."

"It also rained almost every day and the race was plagued by terrifying thunderstorms. At times, the lightning

came so close I had to switch off all safety and communications systems in case it struck the boat. Without communication it felt very isolating."

At one point, Elaine's £80,000 hand-built boat was almost capsized.

She said: "The waves rose up to about 50 to 60ft. It was horrible seeing that coming towards me."

Elaine also suffered a jellyfish sting and, scarily, was visited by a shark.

On top of the challenges and tough times, it was inevitable she would miss her partner, Ali, and their two sons back home.

She was away for Christmas and New Year and Guy and Harvey celebrated their seventh and ninth birthdays during her time at sea.

Elaine said: "It was hard to be away at those special family times. I tried not to focus on this too much."

"There were other times, too, when I felt a bit blue, such as after my two visits from the support vessel. It was lovely to have the chance to chat and I had valued their radio support so it was hard to see them sail away again."

Elaine's late mother, Jan, also played a poignant role in the Atlantic bid.

She had cared for Jan following the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Her boat is named in memory of her mother and the rowing challenge has raised more than £6000 for Alzheimer's Scotland.

Yet despite the hardships and stresses, Elaine revealed some highlights of the Atlantic row.

She said: "The wildlife was spectacular including whales, dolphins, flying fish and so many birds."

"It felt good to be achieving such an immense goal on my own. It is fantastic to be reunited with my family and I'm able to reflect on the epic experience."

● To support Elaine's charity see www.justgiving.com/fundraising/Elaine-Hopley1. Also see www.eh-oceanrow.com

WHAT IS THE TALISKER WHISKY ATLANTIC CHALLENGE?

THE idea for the Atlantic Challenge race came to Sir Chay Blyth while he was rowing the Atlantic Ocean in 1966 with John Ridgeway.

It was a 92-day battle against hurricanes, 50ft waves and near starvation.

Thirty years later, the race from east to west across the Atlantic is legendary. Rowers can apply to qualify to compete in fours, pairs or solo. Known

as the world's hardest row, competitors are faced with challenges including blisters, salt rash, sharks, sleep deprivation and unpredictable weather.

Indeed, more people have been into space or climbed Everest than have rowed the Atlantic.

In 2017, the overall winners were Anglo-American quartet Latitude 35, who finished in just under 36 days.

● See www.taliskerwhiskyatlanticchallenge.com

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ELAINE HOPLEY