

# THERE'S NO MANDATORY AGE LIMIT FOR OCEAN SAILING

## Jack van Ommen

(Although born in the Netherlands, Jack emigrated to California in 1957 at the age of 19. His home port between voyages is Gig Harbor, on Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest.

For more background visit his blog at [www.ComeToSea.US](http://www.ComeToSea.US), or look for his videos/slide shows on YouTube – check under his name.)

It is 28th February 2020, my twin brother's 83rd birthday. *Fleetwood* is at anchor at St Barts in the French West Indies and OCC geriatric sailors are in the news – Bill Hatfield has just bettered Jeanne Socrates' solo non-stop circumnavigation record.

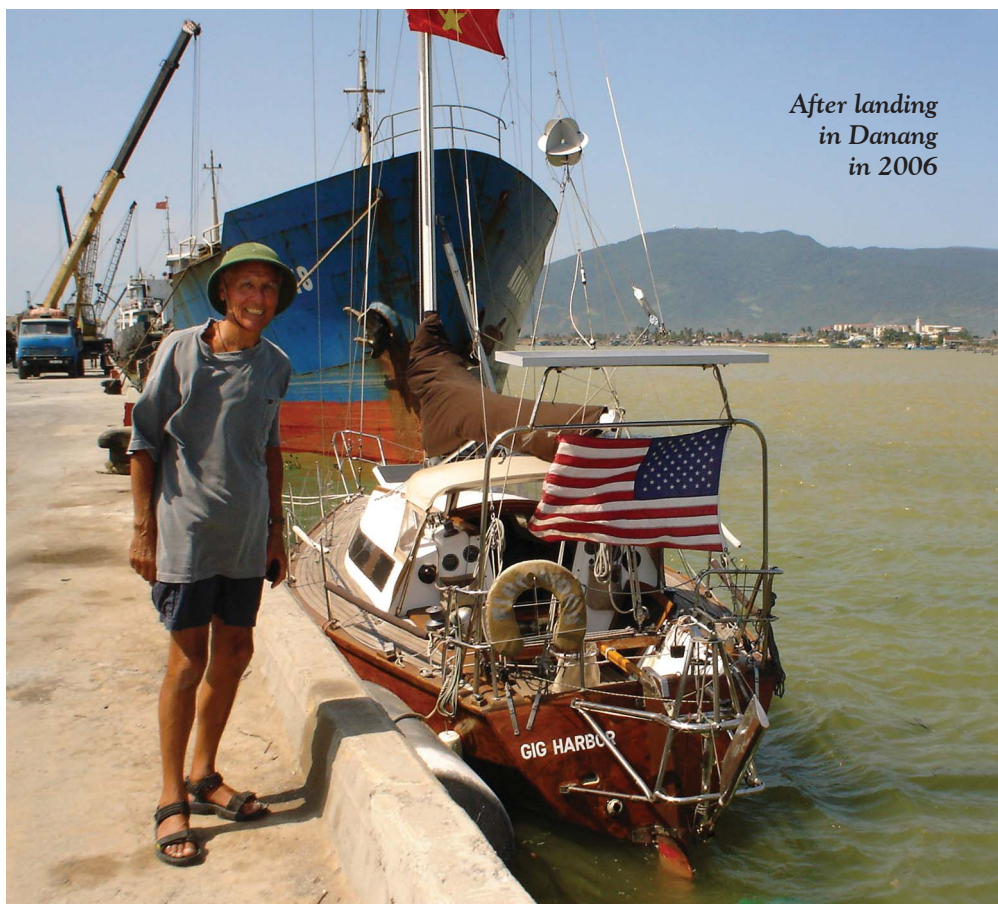
When I congratulated my brother on his 70th birthday 13 years ago, from Simon's Town, South Africa, I told him that when he turned 75 I'd be 65, because ocean sailors drop a year for every year at sea. He has a sense of humour and replied that I'd better slow down soon otherwise he'd have to tag along to buy my adult beverages.

I started my solo circumnavigation in 2005 from California aged 68 and – following a few long detours and visiting sixty countries – finished it in 2017, a month after my twin's 80th birthday. Shortly after that, on 23rd June 2017, I had my second shipwreck while leaving Chesapeake Bay en route to New England.

It took 18 months to repair *Fleetwood* at Cape Charles, Virginia but in the process the anchor started to get too familiar with its new surroundings. I did not want to spend another winter on the Chesapeake but due to family holiday obligations was not able to leave Cape Charles until 15th January 2019. I took off into the Atlantic from Beaufort, North Carolina on 3rd February and sailed into the anchorage at Marigot Bay, Saint Martin, on the 17th. It was a very rough trip with gale-force conditions and I prayed a lot, but all's well that ends well.



Leaving the  
Golden Gate



It is amazing how quickly one reconditions when the need is there. At the beginning of the passage I was stiff and had to use my hand to lift a leg up high enough to clear the companionway entrance. Not any more. In 2017, before reaching the Panama Canal, I compressed a vertebra by being thrown against the chart table in rough seas off Cabo Malo. I had an operation and ever since have had a problem straightening my back, while walking has been a tiring and painful exercise. Most of my errands are done on my folding bicycle. But recently I have done a lot of walking and climbing to lookouts and I am doing much better.

I have a suggestion for anyone contemplating an extended ocean cruise but with concerns about age limitations. I have observed many couples quit prematurely because of the size of the boat and the complexity of the equipment. Keep it simple – large sails, bow-thrusters, watermakers, hydraulics, air conditioning etc are wonderful, but they tend to keep you tied to your mooring at the most inopportune times. I ended up at the very low end of comfort and simplicity, which works for me as a solo sailor. My choices became very limited when, after years of running a successful wood export business, I ended up in bankruptcy in 2000. I lost my house, my 401-K savings\* and my wife. In 2002, at age 65, Social Security came to the rescue.

\* An employer-sponsored pension scheme popular in the US.

*Fleetwood*, the 30ft Naja plywood kit-boat that I had purchased from Whisstock's Boatyard in Woodbridge, England in 1979 had sat on its trailer since 1993. It was a great boat for sailing out of my home port on the Puget Sound in the Pacific Northwest, and I had sailed it from San Francisco to Hawaii in the Singlehanded TransPac in 1982. It was not exactly what I had intended for an around-the-world voyage but it just had to do. Now I had the time and resources to finish the maintenance and reinforcements.

The hull is triple-chine and built of ½ inch plywood, displacement is a mere 3 tons, there is a 14hp 2-cylinder diesel engine, Monitor wind vane and a 12 volt Tiller Pilot for steering under power. There is no anchor windlass, no roller-furling and no outboard for the inflatable dinghy. It is usually the smallest boat in the anchorage.

In February 2005 I trailered it to Alameda, California where I sold the trailer and the pickup truck. When I left Santa Barbara on the 28 day, 3000 mile passage to the Marquesas, I had \$150 left in my bank account and the assurance that there would be another \$1,450 Social Security deposit on my arrival. It became the start of an incredible experience. After my financial setback and failed third marriage there was peace and a spiritual renaissance. The subtitle to the book *SoloMan\**, which I wrote after my first shipwreck in 2013, is *Alone at Sea with God and Social Security*. The Dutch version also rhymes – *Alleen op Zee met God en AOW*. I rediscovered that the best experiences are God's free gifts, like friendships, family, sunsets, starlit skies, the breathing of a dolphin alongside in the night while I am half-awake in my berth. In my busy working life I took these for granted, but now I recognise the source again. I am convinced that peace and happiness also add to my physical condition – no home, no car, no bills, no worries.

\* Reviewed in *Flying Fish* 2016/2.

*Fleetwood in De Lemmer in 2010*





*The same location a century earlier. Left to right: my great-grandmother, mother, grandmother and grandfather (with an aunt on his shoulder)*



I had two particular goals for the voyage – visiting Vietnam, where I had spent time from late 1961 until early 1963 in the US Army, although still a Dutch citizen.

My first wife joined me in Saigon for a year, a very meaningful part of our lives. My second goal, which I achieved in 2010, was to moor *Fleetwood* in front of the mastmaker's business in De Lemmer, a Dutch-Frisian seaport, where my mother had been raised.

Being Dutch means that you need to know a few more languages to travel abroad, which allowed me to communicate with many different nationalities during my circumnavigation. I am fluent in French and German and get *complimenti* from Italians (they were my best customers for my wood export business). *Español: mas o menos, mas menos que mas ...* still working on it. Over the years I have accumulated small talk in a number of other European and Asian languages. It is heart-warming to see the reaction and hear the response from a Muslim sister or brother when I greet them in Arabic.

Instead of the more standard South Pacific 'coconut milk' run, which includes a southern summer layover in New Zealand or Australia, I chose to keep sailing through Micronesia and the Philippines. The main part of the circumnavigation was accomplished by June 2007 when I reached the US Atlantic Coast. Then, after a winter visit to the northern Caribbean in 2009, I crossed the (North) Atlantic again and spent four years in Europe, crossing from the North Sea to the Black Sea in 2010/11 and thence into the Med. Having sailed north through France to Holland in 2012, and south again in 2013 intending to make my way back to the Americas, in November 2013 I was shipwrecked on the island of Tagomago northeast of Ibiza. Ten hours later nothing was left of *Fleetwood*. I figured that God had a new plan for me and that my sailing days were over.

**My circumnavigation, completed on 30th March 2017, included 60 countries, 569 locks and 54,325 miles at sea**





*The remains of Fleetwood at Tagomago. Photo Maria de los Angeles Peña Milla*

Instead I ended up purchasing an exact copy of *Fleetwood* which had been built from a kit that I had sold and had been launched in Tacoma, Washington in 1987. I repainted it the same colour and again named it *Fleetwood*. I lived aboard in Gig Harbor, Washington State, from April 2014 until I left in early September 2016 to complete my interrupted circumnavigation by making the connection from the Pacific through the Panama Canal to connect with my 2007 inbound track from Trinidad to the Chesapeake.

It is now 10th March 2020 and I am back in Sint Maarten\*. On 26th February I was treated to a very nice birthday dinner at Eddy's harbourfront at St Barts by Richard and Dona Spindler. Richard started the very popular monthly sailing magazine *Latitude 38* in the San Francisco Bay area and has been a regular here at St Barts for the past 35 years. Before dinner he introduced me to a group of his friends in the bar at Le Select – one of them was Luc Poupon, the younger brother of Philippe Poupon.

Luc has crossed the Atlantic 60 times. He started his trophy collection when I jumped into my new passion in the mid-1970s, and I remember reading about his and his older brother Philippe's sailing accomplishments, most but not all in *Fleury Michou*. He started *Les Voiles de St Barth*, which has become one of the world's most sought-after events for top racing boats. With us at dinner were the skippers of *Bolero* and *Juno*, both beautiful traditional sailing vessels built in New England yards.

\* Marigot Bay is on the north (French) side of the island, where it is spelled Saint Martin. The south side, where the Heineken Regatta takes place, is part of the Netherlands Antilles where the island's name is spelled Sint Maarten.



*With Luc Poupon at  
Le Select in St Barts.  
Photo Richard Spindler*

I returned to Sint Maarten on 29th February to meet three couples from my homeport of Gig Harbor, Washington. They sail a catamaran, and from 4th until 8th March we watched the 40th Heineken Regatta. A fourth home port couple joined us and I took the opportunity to be hoisted to the masthead to replace my tricolor bulb and the Windex that had blown off on the rough passage south.

Back on my soapbox for simplicity, I am often asked how much water I carry on long passages. I filled my 12 gallon bladder and a 6 gallon spare jerry can before I left Cape Charles on 15th January. Two days ago I rowed to the Sint Maarten YC and refilled my 6 gallon spare water tank. On departure from Beaufort, NC – the last time *Fleetwood* was tied to a dock – I topped off my 12 gallon diesel tank and a 5 gallon jerry can. I still have 9 gallons in the tank and the 5 gallon container. I have not used shore power since 15th January and my last shower was on 3rd February, the day I departed from Beaufort. I take saltwater cockpit baths and use a cup of fresh water to rinse my hair.



my adopted away-from-home port since my June 2017 shipwreck on the nearby Barrier Islands. My youngest daughter also lives nearby.



*Working at the masthead in  
Sint Maarten. Photo Janet James*

**Postscript:** The COVID-19 lockdown cut short my intentions for visiting the islands south of St Barts and my plans to stop at Puerto Rico and Cuba on the way back to Florida. The US Virgin Islands were the only option, so I stopped in Saint Croix and Saint Thomas. They felt like uninhabited islands. On 2nd June I reached Cape Charles, Virginia,

