
ISABELLE AUTISSIER

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- First woman to sail around the world solo



During a decade of competitive marathon sailing, Isabelle Autissier demonstrated nearly supernatural sailing prowess and unmitigated bad luck. She is the first woman to sail around the world alone and she piloted a yacht from New York to San Francisco by way of Cape Horn in world-record time. She also capsized and barely eluded death—twice—in violent, remote seas near Antarctica. Autissier retired from the sport as a national heroine in her native France and is widely regarded as the best woman ocean racer ever. “When you get down to it,” *Cruising World* magazine concluded, “there is no one else on the planet like Isabelle Autissier.”

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After graduating from college in 1978 with a degree in nautical engineering, Autissier taught at “fishing schools” in France where local fishermen learned better techniques and gained a background in research and marine sciences. For three years, she spent her nights and weekends welding together a 30-foot, steel-hulled cruising boat called *Parole*. In 1986, she sailed *Parole* across the Atlantic single-handedly. “When I returned to France,” Autissier recalled, “I decided to try racing, just to see what it was like, to have the experience. I thought it would help me know more about the sea and sailing.” In 1987, she won her class and finished third overall in the *Mini Transat*, a solo race across the Atlantic. She finished fourth in *La Solitaire du Figaro* in 1989. “In the beginning, I said I would race just for the experience and then go back to my job, (but) racing and trying to go fast in a small boat was such fun.”

Autissier entered the 1990-91 running of the BOC around-the-world yacht race, the first woman to compete in the contest. The grueling race, which has been renamed *Around Alone*, is run every four years and requires sailors to travel 27,000 miles over eight months. It begins and ends on the East Coast of the United States, with stops in South Africa, Australia, and Uruguay. During the second leg of the race, Autissier’s 60-foot yacht, named *Ecureuil Poitou-Charentes*, lost its mast in rough seas and high winds as she neared Australia.

She fashioned a makeshift rig, limped into port, made repairs, and set out again. She completed the voyage, finishing seventh. It was the first time a woman sailor had circumnavigated the globe alone. “It was wonderful because I discovered everything: I discovered sailing alone for a long time, the Southern Ocean, everything,” Autissier said in a *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service* article. “It was really a wonderful experience.... I came back to Newport (Rhode Island) and ... I thought: I did what I have wanted to do in life. Since I was a little girl, I wanted to sail around the world, and now I have done it. The rest of my life is extra.”

Autissier again displayed her sailing prowess—including expert understanding of weather patterns, currents, and navigation—while setting a world record in the spring of 1994. She and a three-man crew piloted her new yacht, the *Ecureuil Poitou-Charentes 2*, around Cape Horn from New York to San Francisco in just sixty-two days, five hours, and fifty-five minutes—beating the old record by two

weeks.

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