78 Days at Sea, But the Intel-powered classmate PC Stays Afloat

The first women to ever row across the Indian Ocean completed the perilous trip thanks to careful planning, sheer determination, and an Intel-powered classmate PC that kept them in touch with the world.

Challenge

- Ocean Angels*, a group of four extreme sports enthusiasts, set out to become the first all-female crew to row the Indian Ocean – a 3,100 nautical mile trip in a 29-foot rowing boat that would take nearly three months and push them, and their gear, to their limits.
- Inclement weather, 40-foot waves, cramped quarters, and minimal solar-generated power make the open ocean a hostile environment for sensitive computing equipment. Ocean Angels needed a rugged, lightweight, power-efficient laptop to keep them online throughout the trip.

Solution

- Despite the challenging conditions, an Intel-powered classmate PC worked the entire way, recharging on solar power and interfacing smoothly with an Iridium* satellite phone to keep the four women in touch with family, friends, and the world via blog, email and phone.
- The ability to get online throughout the trip – even when there was no land for 1,500 miles in any direction – kept team morale high by enabling regular contact with the outside world. They were able to easily share their progress, track changing weather conditions, and communicate with supporters around the world.

From One Continent to Another

Even though they had never been to sea before, in late 2007 Sarah Duff and Fiona Waller joined teammates Rachel Flanders and Clair Desborough to complete the biannual Atlantic Rowing Race, a 2,550 nautical-mile endurance event in which contestants row a boat across the Atlantic Ocean.

It was a major challenge that brought exhilaration – and exhaustion – but it wasn't long before Duff and Waller had committed to repeating the challenge on the Indian Ocean in the first ever 2009 Woodvale Challenge Indian Rowing Race*.

"It was such a rush to complete the Atlantic crossing," said Waller. "At the end of the journey there were a lot of things we had learned, and could have done better. It would have been a shame not to have put them into practice."

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The Indian Ocean event would eventually push Duff, Waller, and teammates Jo Jackson and Elin Davies to their limits as they traversed 3,100 nautical miles of open ocean with nothing more than their 29-foot boat, 'Pura Vida', and a pair of oars to propel them. After 78 days at sea, the team – dubbed 'Ocean Angels' – set foot in Mauritius having secured their place as the first all-female crew to cross the shark-infested ocean between Australia and Africa in a rowing boat.

Extreme ocean rowboat racing is an adventure pursued by a select few. Physically and mentally demanding, the trans-oceanic races involve great risk and months of exposure and isolation that have battered more than a few diehard adventurers in the past. Yet despite the challenge – or perhaps because of it – the women committed to the Woodvale race for the thrill of the race, and to raise £50,000 for breast cancer research in the process.

Months of planning included an effort to find a better way to communicate from the boat during its journey: problems with the solar-charged batteries during the Atlantic crossing had prevented the women from using the large, heavy, power-hungry ruggedized laptop they had dragged along. This kept them from being able to communicate with family, friends, and supporters from around the world – as well as being able to share their thoughts and pictures through a regular blog.

"It's a big, important part of an expedition to be able to communicate with people at home," said Waller. "When we crossed the Atlantic, we had a laptop on board but had massive power problems, and only had enough power to switch it on once. This time around, we wanted to find a system that was as rugged as the one we'd taken across the Atlantic, but lighter and easier to use."

In the lead up to the Indian Ocean crossing, the team learned about the Intel-powered classmate PC, a lightweight and ruggedly-built laptop that has proved its reliability in punishing desert races and humid jungles, remote villages and urban centers. A classmate PC with its sturdy design, small size and very low power requirements, was the ideal computing companion to support the team's efforts.

All Out at Sea

The 'Pura Vida' left Geraldton, Australia on April 19, 2009, with an Intel powered classmate PC and satellite phone aboard along with a solar-powered rechargeable battery system. The four Ocean Angels rowed 24 hours a day through extreme heat, high humidity, and waves that reached 40 feet high, working in pairs for shifts ranging from an hour in the stifling afternoon heat to four hours at night.

With such a gruelling schedule, the women looked forward to the mornings, when they would download emails and upload new blog entries using the fully charged classmate PC and their satellite phone.

Because of the netbook power-efficient design, its battery lasted long enough for the women to take it out of its waterproof pouch numerous times throughout the day, collaborating on blog entries that carefully documented their endeavor and helped pass the time.

"It was a massive morale boost to have all the people supporting us hearing about what was happening on board," said Waller. "We had so much fun when we were writing the blogs together: it was our daily lifeline back to home. It's just amazing to be able to have communications in both directions when you're thousands of miles away from land."

After 78 days, 15 hours and 54 minutes at sea, the women reached their destination: the island nation of Mauritius. Not only did they step into the record books, but they did so having created a lasting legacy in the form of their charitable donation – and the blogs that still stand as a record of their remarkable voyage.

Equally remarkable, the women add, was the Intel-powered classmate PC's performance throughout the trip. Despite pervasive humidity, the risk of corrosion from ever-present salt, drenching downpours, the inevitable knocks and bumps, and stifling heat, the classmate PC worked flawlessly for the duration – and arrived in Mauritius in pristine condition.

"It doesn't have any signs that it has ever been anywhere but on a desk," said Davies. "With the punishing conditions we faced on a regular basis, the classmate PC did very well to get there in one piece. Something small, compact, and durable is all you could wish for in an environment like that, and the classmate PC proved to be all of that – and more."

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