

# Sailing

THE BEAUTY OF SAIL

LEARN  
to  
SAIL  
issue



0 71896 47213 4

JUNE 2023



# CRISSCROSSING THE OCEANS

Kenichi Horie has spent his life sailing small boats across the world's oceans in every direction and at age 84 he's not done yet

Story by Nic Compton

What a difference six decades makes. When Kenichi Horie left Japan on his first Pacific crossing in May 1962, he had to sneak past customs officials and hope that nobody would stop him as he sailed off with no passport or foreign currency to a foreign land where he knew no one and no one knew him. When he arrived in San Francisco 94 days later, he was promptly arrested as an illegal immigrant until the mayor intervened to save what was potentially a delicate political situation.

Cut to 60 years later when Horie made the same journey in reverse, sailing from San Francisco to Japan, and the situation was utterly different. This time, he gave a press conference at the San Francisco Yacht Club before he even left the dock and sailed under the Golden Gate Bridge for pictures before setting off under the full glare of the world's media. On the way, he gave interviews to journalists, spoke to schoolchildren via a satellite phone and, when he arrived in Japan 65 days later, he made headlines around the world.

There were however some notable similarities between the two voyages: both were conducted on 19-foot boats and both broke sailing records: the first when, at age 23, he became the first person to sail across the Pacific singlehanded and nonstop, and the second when, at age 83, he became the oldest person to sail across the Pacific singlehanded and nonstop.

And that's not all. In between those two landmark voyages, Horie has sailed around the world three times (westabout, eastabout and vertically) and has crossed the Pacific a further seven times making nine times in all. Along the way, he has set a variety of other records, including the longest journey by pedalboat, the smallest boat to sail across the Pacific, and the fastest crossing of the Pacific by a solar-powered boat. He has also become a household name in Japan and acquired a towering name among sailing folk the world over. His latest record earned him the prestigious Blue Medal Award from the Cruising Club of America, a special prize for a man who has spent much of his life sailing between Japan and the United States.

Born in Osaka on the south coast of Japan, Horie had no family history of sailing. The Hories owned a car parts factory and young





Kenichi's first job was as a salesman for the family business. While he was at university, he joined the sailing club because "it sounded like fun" and started reading about ocean adventurers such as Alain Bombard, Joshua Slocum, Harry Pidgeon and John Guzzwell. But it was the announcement of the first OSTAR that seems to have spurred Horie into action.

"I was surprised and felt that the 'conquering the world's ocean by small boat' era had already begun," he said. "Both *Sopranino* (the 19-footer Ellam and Mudie sailed across the Atlantic in 1953) and *Trekka* (the 20-footer Guzzwell sailed around the world in the 1950s) are small sailing cruisers but they sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and around the world. Therefore, though crossing the Pacific is a bit longer than crossing the Atlantic, I felt it was very much a possibility."

And so he bought the plans for a modest 19-foot plywood sloop from designer Akira Yokoyama and had it built at a boatyard in Osaka. He named the boat *Mermaid* simply because that was the logo of the textiles company that had sponsored his sails. For the next 60 years, he would include the name in all but one of the dozen or so boats he sailed in his various nautical adventures.

Meeting Horie now, you might think he was too quiet and gentle for such a daring adventure, but even at age 23 he had a determined streak. When the Japanese refused to issue him with a passport or American currency for his first voyage because they considered it too dangerous, Horie went anyway.

When he arrived in San Francisco, having sailed 5,300 miles and making history as the first person to sail singlehanded and nonstop across the Pacific, the American authorities were unimpressed and arrested him. It was a tricky time in U.S.-Japan relations, with the horrors of World War II still fresh in many people's minds, and both countries were keen to avoid any new sources of conflict. It took a canny politician, the then mayor of San Francisco George Christopher, to turn a negative into a positive by not only ordering Horie to be released and issuing him with a 30-day visa but recognizing his historic achievement by making him an honorary citizen of San Francisco, effectively signalling a softening in relations between the two countries.

Such was his sensational reception in the U.S. that when he eventually flew back to Japan, the authorities had to drop their threats of prosecution and Horie was welcomed home as a national hero. A best-selling book and a successful film of the voyage soon followed, cementing his place in the public consciousness. He's managed to stay there ever since, through a series of daring and often improbable voyages and stunts, earning himself the title of "Japan's most famous ocean yachtsman."

His first attempt to sail around the world "eastabout" came in 1972 on the experimental 24-foot *Mermaid II*. The trip ended in disaster when one of the boat's two masts cracked and Horie had



Kosuke Moriwaki/Kyodo News photo via AP



AP/Kyodo News photo

Horie waves from the coast of Japan as he sets off for another around the world voyage in 2005. He first set sail in 1962, above right. Horie waves in 2022 after becoming the oldest person to complete a solo nonstop crossing of the Pacific Ocean, above.

to be rescued by the Japanese coast guard. Undaunted, he was back two years later sailing the "wrong" way around the world (westabout) on the 29-foot *Mermaid III*, becoming the first Japanese sailor to complete a nonstop solo circumnavigation and setting a new record of 275 days.

To mix things up, his next voyage was a "vertical" circumnavigation which he completed in stages in 1978 to 1982 on a 34-foot aluminium yacht also called *Mermaid*. This time, his wife Eriko joined him for most of the journey, stopping at 10 ports along the way, visiting North and South America as well as the Arctic and Antarctic. Even though the project nearly ended in disaster when

the yacht capsized on one of the legs and stayed inverted for 10 to 20 minutes before righting itself, Horie still regards this as his favorite voyage.

Apart from this one exception, Horie usually sails alone.

"I think the hurdle is higher, that it's more challenging, to sail solo than with multiple crews," he said. "My basic belief and the starting point of sailing is to sail the world's vast ocean on the world's smallest sailboats." In his first book, "Koduko: Sailing alone Across the Pacific," he gives a different reason for sailing solo. "The crew matters the most," he wrote, and best crew he could find was himself.

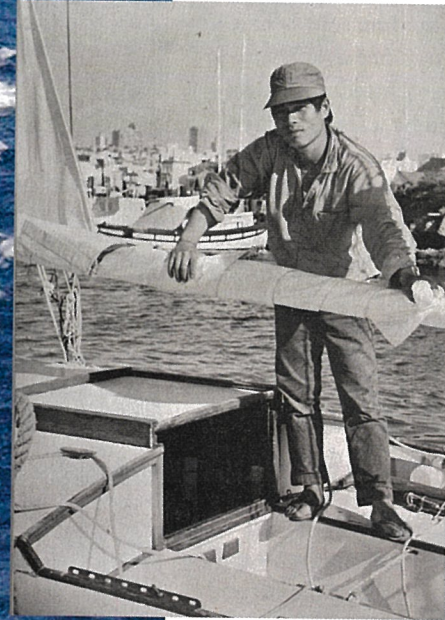
Yet, despite his considerable experience, Horie has rarely competed in any of the singlehanded races that proliferated from 1960 onwards, preferring

to sail truly alone. The single exception was the 1975 to 1976 Trans-Pacific Singlehanded Race, in which he finished third.

From 1985 onwards, many of Horie's voyages have carried an environmental message, either testing alternative forms of energy (including crossing the Pacific twice on solar-powered boats) or through extensive use of recycled materials. He took this to a new level in 1999, when he crossed the Pacific solo on a 33-foot catamaran made of 528 beer kegs welded end-to-end (he joked that only 500 of the barrels were empty). The masts were made from recycled aluminium cans, and the sails of recycled plastic bottles, a theme he would return to repeatedly on future boats. Three years later, he sailed the other way—from Japan to San Francisco—on a boat made from the wood of old whiskey barrels and fitted with hydrogen fuel cells. (It will come as no surprise that his sponsor by now was the Japanese brewing and distilling company Suntory.)

"People are using recycled materials to create a recycle-oriented society now," he said. "As a member of society, I also consider the environment as much as possible by using recycled materials. I would be happy if, by acting in an environmentally-conscious manner myself, it helps other people become interested in the environment."

One of his most remarkable voyages was on *Suntory Mermaid II*, a 31-foot catamaran driven by wave power, on which he crossed






the Pacific from Hawaii to Japan in 2008. The boat was fitted with two fins at the bow which moved up and down with the waves and drove the boat forward “like the tails of dolphins and whales.” It was an eye-opening concept that he hoped to prove was viable even on a long ocean voyage, albeit not traveling at great speed. The boat averaged just 1.5 knots during the 3,780-mile crossing, which took him more than three months to complete.

“Throughout history, mankind has used wind for power, but no one has appeared to be serious about wave power,” he told AFP news after the voyage. “I think I’m a lucky boy as this wave power system has remained virtually untouched.”

For his latest Pacific crossing, Horie went back to his roots with a 19-foot cutter—the same size as the boat he set his first record on, although built to a modern design. Once again, simplicity was key, and *Suntory Mermaid III* wasn’t fitted with a watermaker or even an engine and was powered by a single solar-powered battery. Unlike the original *Mermaid*, however, she had roller-furling headsails, a windvane, GPS and a satellite phone, as well as being supplied with whiskey, non-alcoholic beer and coffee courtesy of his sponsors. Horie also took a sextant with him, just as he did in 1962.

Unlike on his original voyage, Horie sailed from west to east this time, crossing from San Francisco to Japan. Asked why, he replied: “Because it’s warmer. On the Japan to San Francisco route you have to go north of the Pacific High, which is cold, and I want to wear a T-shirt. I will sail about two miles south of Hawaii, so it will be warmer.”

Horie set off from San Francisco on March 27, 2022 and arrived in Japan 69 days later, a distinct improvement on the 94 days it took him in 1962. What’s more, this time he had a passport and money with him and was welcomed by the local authorities with open arms.

His reaction when he reached the end of his voyage? “I want to do it again,” he said. “When I am 100 years old.” Watch this space. This octogenarian sailor isn’t ready to hang up his sailing boots any time soon. 



Kenichi Horie at sea

