



# Life on the ocean waves

The Global Challenge is considered to be one of the world's most difficult yacht races – sailing some 30,000 miles against the prevailing winds and currents over six legs and 10 months. **Hilary Bishop** ventures aboard the BP Explorer before the start of the next race to meet some of her crew.



**A** 22 metre (72 foot) yacht sounds big and it is. When you clamber aboard it is a large expanse of white plastic and steel stretching away in both directions. Below it's like a small house, with different cabins, two toilets and a kitchen/dining room, all sweet and cosy. The publicity describes it as "comfortable". But it becomes a lot smaller once you realize that 18 people are about to live in it and sail it for weeks and weeks on end. Cramped doesn't get close to describing how it feels with everyone below. Claustrophobic would be nearer the mark.

But the 17 amateur crew and professional captain who set out from Portsmouth on 3 October 2004 to race the *BP Explorer* round the world "the

wrong way" seem undaunted, keen and even positively jolly. This applies also to the two BP staff members who join the core crew on each leg of the race, and who are often referred to as leggers. This must be because the conditions they will face "ranging from the calms and energy-sapping heat of the doldrums to the icebergs, storms and monumental seas of the southern oceans" seem very distant from a grey day in Southampton docks.

I suspect that this is the case with many great adventures – most of those taking part have no idea what they are letting themselves in for. "It was much harder physically than I'd anticipated," admits Kelvin Pemberton from New Zealand, a BP employee who took part in the 2000/01 race. The crew are also quick to

**Teamwork: The 17 amateur crew and professional captain of the *BP Explorer* will be joined by two BP staff on each leg of the race.**

point out that they will never all be below at any one time, because of the watch system.

I realize that I have failed to appreciate the yacht specifications once I am introduced to the sleeping arrangements. "The berths are more inviting than on most ocean racing yachts," says the publicity. Clearly I haven't been on enough ocean racing yachts to appreciate the subtle difference, because to me they are simply alarming. Three hammock-like cots are stacked one on top of the other like a vertical sardine can. You have to roll in and out, because there is virtually no head room in between and



## BP Sponsorship

BP sponsors the yacht *BP Explorer* and the Safety Award at each port of call.

The Global Challenge yacht race reflects BP's brand values, the unshakeable belief in BP staff and the company's commitment to safety in all it does.

The BP values pinned up around the yacht emphasise:

- Safety
- On time
- Honesty, respect and tolerance
- Excellence
- Inspire pride and praise
- Continuous improvement
- Communicate-resolve-forget
- Performance focus

This sponsorship reflects BP's ambition to build a company renowned for performance, environmental leadership, innovation and progressive ideas. Particular emphasis is also placed on:

- Team-building
- Stronger relations with partners
- Increased awareness of the brand globally
- The chance for employees to challenge and develop

you can strap yourself in so that you don't fall out when it's very rough!

Andrew Smith, an Englishman who is giving me a tour of this charming arrangement, cheerfully says, "we've put all the snorers in the forward cabin". And while this seems to make absolute sense I can't help thinking that whether your neighbour snores or not will be the least of your worries when the boat is rolling so much you need to be strapped into your cot.

Space is a big issue. "It was hard only having a 1.5 kg weight allowance for all your personal things," says Pemberton. "Do you take sun block or chocolate, deodorant or cigarettes? Some people didn't take deodorant let me tell you," he adds. Each crew member has one crate, the sort my children keep a fraction of their toys in, for ALL their belongings.

Two toilets, mysteriously called "heads" in sailing lingo, sound luxurious too. But actually, because the boat is often leaning so much, you can only use the toilet which is on the downside (rather than up in the air) and, as Pemberton put it, "you don't want to go in the middle of a storm anyway, because you just get thrown off."

Make no mistake, the race these people are about to take part in is without doubt one of the hardest feats you can undertake in a sailing yacht. They will cover about 48,200 kilometres (30,000 miles), sailing against the prevailing winds and currents over 6 legs and 10 months. As the race website so succinctly puts it:

"Imagine being numb with cold. Imagine biting 70mph winds that sting your face as you lumber about the deck rollercoasting its way over 50-foot waves. Imagine hanging on for your life as a wall of freezing water crashes on top of you. Imagine doing this for five weeks at a time."

The Global Challenge was launched in 1990 by Sir Chay Blyth and an organization he set up called Challenge Business. The amateur status of the crew was initially much derided, but the race proved so popular that it has been held four yearly ever since. In the 2004/5 event 12 identical yachts, built for the previous race, will sail first to Buenos Aires, then to Wellington, then to Sydney, then to Cape Town, the longest leg to Boston and finally back to Portsmouth via La Rochelle.

The 15 core crew, allocated to each yacht by Challenge Business to ensure a fair distribution of ability, have each paid a berth fee of 26,750 pounds. Those now part of BP Explorer are an interesting mix. There is Holger Bindel, a German and the ship's doctor; Christian Talpo, an Italian restaurant manager who lives in Hong Kong; John Stewart an Irish IT project manager who works in San Francisco;

**Top priority: BP's commitment to safety will underpin every aspect of the crew's performance.**



and Laura Alexander, who is English and used to work in PR. They are all united by a sense of commitment and adventure. Bindel has a friend who did the race. "I thought he was mad, but then I met his team, they had become his friends and I thought I'd like to be part of something like that." Alexander says, "I signed up in 2001 after seeing the yacht sail into Sydney Harbour during the last race. I sold my house and gave up my job." And, she tells me, "I get really sea sick, but I think I've found a medicine to keep it under control."

The 12 BP leggers, plus the six reserves have been selected from across BP's vast pool of more than 100,000 employees. All staff could apply and 350 did so, representing 25 nationalities. 48 were invited to two days of selection in the UK. Claire Blakeway, the BP project manager explains, "the leggers were chosen for their qualities as team players, as fundraisers and for their physical fitness. Sailing experience was not a prerequisite."

This aspect of BP's sponsorship is clearly linked to engaging employees. Andrea Morrell, an American who works at the Carson Refinery in California, is a classic example. "I worked for Arco, which was bought out by BP and suddenly I found myself working for one of the largest companies in the world. Overnight there were so many opportunities and lots of my co-workers have moved to other parts of BP's operation. I saw the *BP Explorer* project announced on the intranet and I applied because it looked like such an excellent opportunity for an adventure." Morrell, whose sailing experience is limited to a few afternoons out, is taking part in the final leg from Boston to Portsmouth.

**Plain sailing: Conditions will range from “the calms and energy-sapping heat of the doldrums to the monumental seas of the southern oceans”.**



She will be joined on this part of the sail by Dennis Boyd, at 47 the oldest member of the BP crew selected for a berth, and an experienced sailor. “Initially I was a bit disappointed not to have been picked for one of the southern ocean legs, because that’s what you dream about. But I guess that’s a young person’s thing,” explains Boyd. “I’ve done a fair bit of yacht racing though,” he adds, “and the leg from Boston is going to be the closest thing to a downwind race. So hopefully my experience is going to help with that.” Like all the leggers, one of his main concerns is joining a tight-knit group for a relatively short period. His strategy – “I think I’ll try and bring some fresh jokes on board.”

Gabriela Froes from Brazil, who is on leg 5 from Cape Town to Boston, is an enthusiastic sailor. She thinks this is going to be a life-changing experience. “I’m going to get to know myself better,” she says, “and I’m looking forward to spending time with a crew who come from different cultures.” Froes also puts into words another aim of BP’s sponsorship: “When I get back to my desk after the race, all the skills and experience I will have learnt on board the yacht will become part of how I work.”

For Froes the hardest aspect of taking part so far has been the fundraising. The leggers are expected to collectively raise £60,000 for the race charity, Save the Children. “The Brazilian currency is worth so little compared to the pound,” she explains, “that the average contribution from friends and local colleagues is about £1.50 as opposed to £5 or £10 in the UK.” Froes has contacted BP’s entire legal community and relied on her friends and family. “Now when people see me coming they say no, no you can’t have any more

money”, she laughs. She’s doing well though, already at £3,000.

Jo Henderson, another legger, is also planning her fundraising activities. Henderson joined BP relatively recently as a graduate trainee and is currently based at Grangemouth near Edinburgh. “I feel very lucky to be given such a fantastic



opportunity”, she says. Henderson is taking part in the short leg from Wellington to Sydney and she dreams of sailing into Sydney Harbour at sunset. “My worst fear”, she adds, “is breaking a leg before I go or someone getting hurt en route.”

The BP Explorer skipper, and the man who has the task of building an effective and race-winning team out of this group of very different people, is 41 year-old David Melville. He agrees that being a modern skipper is about processing data from the vast array of technology on board, “more Excel spreadsheets than a beard and pipe-smoking”. I see what he means when he shows me the two areas of the cabin which look more like part of a space rocket than a yacht – screens with maps and charts, weather information and the internet.

Melville comes across as fiercely competitive and committed. He is very clear that the Global Challenge is a race and one that he is determined to win. But he is realistic about what’s ahead. “It’s hard to stay focused and competitive over the long legs. It’s difficult to be aggressive when you’re sleep-deprived. The crew will get a maximum of four hours sleep in one go while they’re at sea, if they’re lucky. The weather will be bad and physically it’s very hard work. The most miserable thing in the world is wet feet,” he adds. You feel he’s had a lot of wet feet in his time. Sleep

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**Gabriela Froes**

## BP Explorer

deprivation is something Melville also knows a bit about, both from his sailing and because he and his wife had a baby, Jasper, in May.

The skipper is clear about the particular difficulties associated with a keen but not necessarily experienced crew. "There is no advantage in not picking your own crew," he says. "The risk is always there that people won't get on." He is very positive about the BP leggers, in whose selection he was heavily involved. "They are the best BP has to offer and are of a very high calibre. It's good to have fresh faces and new energy over each leg."

At a personal and professional level this race is the realisation of a dream for Melville. "There aren't many opportunities to sail the Southern Ocean. You have to have a good boat because it's so arduous." Which explains why Melville is even contemplating this race when he has a five month-old son, who he will not see for long periods over each leg. "It's going to be very hard, but the idea is that Kate and Jasper will fly out to each stopover to meet the boat".

There's one crucial aspect of this challenge which will make everybody either grumpy or happy and that's the food. Jane Cook from Scotland is sorting out one of the biggest supermarket shops I have ever seen, and trying to store it in a very small galley (kitchen). "It looks like a lot, but there are 18 of us and we're all supposed to consume 4500 calories a day and 6000 on the southern oceans. We've



**Setting sail: The Global Challenge was set up in 1990 by Sir Chay Blythe and has been held four yearly ever since.**

no fresh fruit, veg or milk and we've got to try and make it interesting. At this stage we're trying things out," explains Cook "to see what we like."

I had lunch with them and it wasn't that bad. We had reconstituted chicken breast in a spicy sauce, dried mashed potato and a cereal bar. But I wouldn't fancy it for nine months.

Cook is also thinking about hygiene. "Some of the crew aren't used to preparing food," she explains "and we all take it in turns. So people have to learn to wash their hands. Any kind of infection will spread very quickly in such a small

space." The yachts are also obliged to keep all the rubbish they generate at sea on board. They can only offload it in port. There is a sealed container for that.

Have I put you off? Do you think they're all mad? Kelvin Pemberton, the former BP legger, says he'd do it again tomorrow. And that's pretty impressive given that he was seasick for two weeks of his 40-day trip from Buenos Aires to Wellington. "I lost 20 kilos," he says, "they should have marketed it as a weight losing opportunity." But Pemberton has nothing but enthusiasm for the experience. "As a legger I was worried about fitting in with a crew that was really close. But we were made to feel really welcome. The team spirit was great, there was a lot of humour and every day was different, you just didn't know what would happen next." And Pemberton has something else to show for it. "I've made lasting friendships, lots of visitors."

Kelvin still remembers the 18 metre (60 foot) waves in the Maire Strait near the Falkland Islands. A 22 metre yacht sounds big, but when you think what BP Explorer and its crew have to endure, it's actually pretty small. I hope they make it. They hope they'll win. **BPM**

You can follow the crew of BP Explorer at <http://www.bp.com/bpexplorer>

● *Hilary Bishop has been a journalist for over 15 years, mainly with the BBC. She's worked in news and sport, and is a Latin America specialist.*

