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JUST DO IT!

When a devastating stroke left Philippe Guglielmetti confined to a wheelchair, he refused to let it curtail his ambition to cross the Atlantic on his own boat





Don't think about it too much, just do it," says Philippe Guglielmetti, his thick French accent still clearly identifiable a decade after moving to the US. "The more you think about it, the more reasons you will find not to do it."

He's talking about his decision to cross the Atlantic ocean on his own 40ft motor boat – a major achievement in itself but one that's verging on the superhuman for someone who struggles to cross his own bedroom without help. Then again, Philippe is used to ignoring what he should or shouldn't be able to do – the very fact he's still alive is something of a miracle given the catastrophic stroke he suffered in 2014. "Statistically I should be dead," he says, "that's what the doctors told me. Now they want to study me to find out why I'm not!"

Philippe was only 50 years old when his life changed forever mid-way through a taxi ride in Paris. "I had read about illnesses that affect people in their 40s and recognised the symptoms straight away. I told the driver to take me to the hospital and explained to the doctors I was having a stroke."

Sceptical as the doctors were about this self-diagnosis, a scan confirmed his worst fears. Philippe was placed in an induced coma and ended up spending six weeks in a French hospital before being deemed well enough to fly back to the US for further rehabilitation.

The initial prognosis was not good. He couldn't walk, he struggled to speak, he'd lost fine control of his hands and he suffered from debilitating double vision that left him dizzy and unable to judge distances. The only thing that kept him going was his determination to carry on living life to the full. That and the promise of a Japanese toilet!

"I know it sounds crazy but the thing I was most worried about was not being able to go to the loo on my own. When my wife Florence suggested we buy a Japanese toilet that could wash my bottom for me, it was a life-changing moment"

It's a telling insight into how much life has changed for Philippe since that fateful day. He'd been a keen boater since childhood, learning to sail an Optimist dinghy from a young ▶





LEFT: New Yanmar wing engine fitted while electronics were upgraded too

FAR RIGHT: Philippe takes a break from helming duties in the saloon

RIGHT: Matthieu gets to work in the galley



ABOVE: Philippe's Nordhavn 40 prepares for relaunch after modifications
BELOW: Fully stickered up with sponsors' logos and renamed *Embracing Life*



age and accompanying his parents on their modest sailing yacht near their home in the South of France. But while his parents made a point of never using the engine unless they absolutely had to, Philippe always yearned for the powerful motor yachts he saw blasting past them. "I remember thinking that one day when I am an adult, I will have a fast motor boat like that," he says.

It took him a while to achieve it but having started a successful IT company in his early 30s and selling it for a tidy sum six years later, he didn't just buy a boat, he bought an entire shipyard.

At the time ACM was a well-respected French builder of small to mid-sized motor boats but struggled to make much of an impact beyond its home market. Philippe spotted an opportunity to expand its reach by building larger, more luxurious boats under the dormant Arcoa brand and bought the company. He built a new factory in Brittany, relaunched the Arcoa brand as a builder of stylish lobster-style boats up to 62ft and enjoyed considerable success until the financial crisis of 2008. An offer from a wealthy French retail magnate to buy the company proved too good to turn down so he sold up and moved to the US to launch a new business in 3D printing. It was during a sales trip to Europe in 2015 that the stroke hit.

GETTING BACK ON HIS FEET

The road to recovery was long and painful but whatever damage it had wreaked on his brain's ability to control his body, it hadn't touched his cognitive function. That same entrepreneurial spirit and lust for life that had brought him success in business now provided the drive and motivation to get back on his feet. The first goal he set himself was inspired by a small orange toy his wife Florence had placed on his bedside table at the hospital in Paris. It was a 3D-printed model of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco which he'd brought with him as a sales prop. He decided there and then that he was going to walk across the bridge unaided.



It took months of intensive rehabilitation and bloody-minded determination to start walking again but sure enough he delivered on his promise to walk across the bridge. With that first hurdle safely negotiated, his thoughts now turned to another crossing, on an altogether bigger scale.

Ever since his time at the helm of ACM, he'd dreamed of crossing the Atlantic on his own boat but had never found the time or opportunity to do it. Now he had both, even if his physical disabilities meant it would be a lot more complicated. As ever he refused to let that put him off.

"It was feasible, I knew I could do it, I just needed the right



boat and the right people to help me. Of course a lot of people advised against it but like anything in life, if you overthink it, you'll find reasons not to do it."

The first step was to get back on the water. As his teenage children were into waterskiing, he decided to have a go at driving the family ski boat. "My fine motor skills aren't that good but you don't actually need super fine control to steer a boat so it was OK."

When the family moved from California to Biscayne Bay, Florida in 2020, he went one step further and bought their own seagoing boat, a waterjet-powered Yamaha 275SD, on which he could hone his close-quarter docking skills.

Now his transatlantic plans could really start to progress. Originally he'd scheduled it for May 2023 but another cruel twist of fate forced him to reconsider. Cerebellar atrophy, a gradual degeneration in the area of the brain controlling coordination, meant he was starting to lose his sense of balance. Although his legs and arms still had the strength, he could no longer walk without hanging on to something.

ANOTHER SETBACK

A lesser person might have given up at this point but instead of scrapping his transatlantic plans, Philippe decided to bring them forward by a year while he still had the physical ability to cope. That just left the small matter of finding a boat to do it in.

"You need three things for a successful crossing," Philippe tells me. "The right boat, the right weather and the right crew. Given my budget of around \$500,000, there were only two boats that had the necessary range and the seakeeping – a Selene 43 or a Nordhavn 40."

In December 2021 he found a 2001 model Nordhavn 40 for sale which, while lacking some key equipment for an ocean crossing, was in pristine condition. He snapped it up for \$345,000 and set about preparing it for the challenge ahead. This involved replacing the defunct wing engine with a 30hp Yanmar and replacing the transmission with a new ZF gearbox, overhauling the main 105hp John Deere engine, adding a stern thruster, upgrading the electronics and hydraulic steering, ▶

BELOW:
Departure day from
Miami in May 2022
INSET: Philippe
takes a difficult few
steps on board



In December 2021 he found a 2001 model Nordhavn 40 for sale in pristine condition





LEFT: Philippe's sons made the most of the calmer moments of their eventful voyage

installing a new Simrad remote autopilot, and fitting an oversized joystick that would allow Philippe to bring the boat alongside using his hand rather than his increasingly unresponsive fingers.

In an ideal world he would also have swapped the paravane stabilisers (bird-shaped steel foils suspended from long outriggers that glide through the water either side of the boat) with active fin stabilisers. However, a combination of limited time, money and supply chain issues soon put paid to that. Besides, a two-day sea trial to bed in the new gearbox and test all the systems proved that the paravanes, while crude by today's standards, were at least simple and effective.

MODS AND CREW

Just as important as the technical upgrades to the boat were the physical adaptations needed to cope with Philippe's disabilities. His physical therapist specified where to place the nine new grabrails that would enable Philippe to support himself on the short journey from his cabin to the wheelhouse and heads, where he'd installed another Japanese toilet. "I even took a spare pump for it – for me it's even more important than the engine!"

With a new departure date set for June 2022, Philippe now turned his attention to the crew. He quickly identified that it needed to be people without a rigid schedule who could adapt to the changing timelines dictated by the weather. Students would

be ideal and who better to have than his own children? His two sons Maxime and Matthieu, Matthieu's girlfriend Abi, a colleague of Florence called Adélaïde and their neighbour Dominique. The crossing would be split into three legs: Miami to Bermuda; Bermuda to the Azores; and the Azores to Portugal, with crew coming and going but with Philippe staying on board the whole time.

"I was the captain as I had the experience of running boats but they had the physical ability to do whatever needed doing," explains Philippe.

The crew would each take three-hour stints at the helm, including Philippe, albeit with someone always on hand to offer help if he needed any physical assistance.

Philippe, Maxime, Dominique, Adélaïde and Jeanne left Miami on 29 May and before long were being buffeted by 30-knot winds, making it impossible for Philippe to safely negotiate the stairs down to his cabin. He settled down for the night on the saloon sofa instead.

"The first two days were pretty exciting but after that it's just water, water, water. We read a lot, I thought a lot. I wanted the crossing to be a special moment in life, you only do it once, so make the most of it."

Other than rougher than expected seas, the journey to Bermuda passed smoothly. Jeanne and Dominique left the boat to be replaced by Matthieu and his girlfriend Abi. With both his sons now on board it was time to tackle the longest leg across the heart of the Atlantic ocean. Once again things started well enough, other than the expected seasickness, which affected almost everyone for the first few days.

However, about a week into the crossing and hundreds of miles from land, they spotted a worrying movement in the mast supporting the outriggers. The constant pressure from the paravanes had taken its toll on the two forward shrouds supporting the mast and the bolt securing the starboard one had



BELOW: The first leg from Miami to Bermuda went smoothly and without incident, with another change of crew coming on board in Bermuda





LEFT: The mast had to be secured to the aft deck after collapsing

INSET: Philippe kept a cool head when the chips were down

that might signal all was not well. When the inevitable happened, Philippe ordered the gearbox to be put in neutral while the crew set about taping a GoPro camera onto a long boathook to try and see what was going on under the boat. A stray section of rope had got wrapped around the propeller.

KEEP CALM AND SIT IT OUT

“For me it wasn’t a big deal,” says Philippe, “I’d already experienced rope around a propeller twice before and I knew the swell was due to drop in a couple of days so I told everyone we were going to sit it out until it was calm enough for someone to dive in and cut the rope.”

Not surprisingly, his wife Florence was less laid back about their predicament.

“I called her to let her know it wasn’t a problem. Yes, we were adrift in the middle of the Atlantic and I was stuck in a wheelchair but we were OK. Of course she was worried and started calling everyone she could think of. And I can tell you, in the middle of the Atlantic everyone wants to help you. I even had a phone

call from the captain of a big ship offering to come and help us.”

Listening to Philippe relive the experience with a big smile on his face and his relentlessly upbeat tone, you get the impression he actually relished the challenge.

“You know, it’s funny, talking about it now, it’s good that we were stuck in the middle of the Atlantic. If nothing had happened it wouldn’t have been an adventure!” ▶



BELOW: Once the swell had died down Maxime was able to dive in and cut the rope from the propeller and let the paravanes drop into the depths

worked loose. With the swell already 3m high, they couldn’t risk raising the paravanes or trying to make running repairs so they had no option but to keep plugging on and hope that the one remaining shroud would hold out. As the day went on the creaking and groaning got worse and worse until the mast itself started to bend. The crew could only look on in horror as the whole mast collapsed onto the aft deck, sending ropes, wires and paravanes hurtling into the sea around the boat.

Initially the propeller seemed to have escaped without getting tangled so they secured the mast as best they could and for three hours limped slowly onwards, listening intently for any noise



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This drone image from earlier in the crossing shows the paravanes in use suspended from outriggers attached to the mast by ropes



BELOW: The collapsed mast was an ugly reminder of their brush with disaster



My sons were so good to me, it was fantastic to share this with them. In 40 years time they will still remember this experience together

After two and a half days adrift with the boat at the mercy of the wind and waves, the swell finally started to subside and Maxime was able to dive under the boat and free the propeller. They then unscrewed the remaining shroud, allowing the paravanes and shrouds to sink to the bottom of the ocean.

“It was a long few days but it’s better to spend a couple of days drifting in the ocean than for the ocean to be your grave,” muses Philippe breezily.

ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

Now the question was whether to carry on to the Azores or return home to Bermuda.

“If it was safer to go back and abandon the attempt I would have done it, but it was no more dangerous to carry on to the Azores so that’s what we decided to do,” reasons Philippe.

Without any form of stabilisation from the jettisoned paravanes to limit the movement, the boat rolled wildly from side to side in the 3-4m seas, regularly dipping the portholes below the surface and sometimes seeing the water come right up to the bottom of the saloon windows when the occasional bigger 6m wave passed every 30 minutes or so.

While the rugged Nordhavn boat was designed to take it, the constant motion made life on board even more difficult, particularly for Philippe, who could no longer risk moving up and down the companionway except for obligatory trips to the bathroom. Instead he spent most of the time holed up in the wheelhouse barricaded between the sofa and the liferaft to stop him sliding around on the floor.

It was a bruising experience both mentally and physically but one which brought the crew even closer together.

Philippe is effusive in his praise: “My sons were so good to me, it was fantastic to share this with them. In 40 years time they will still remember this experience together.”

Looking back, it also gave Philippe the chance to put his seagoing experience to good use. “When the sea is beautiful everybody can be a good captain, when it’s not going to plan that’s when the real character comes out. Thankfully, everybody trusted me and respected my decisions.”

His calmness paid off and on 25 June, after 17 days of being rolled around like a tea towel in a washing machine, they finally made landfall in Horta, the Azores, having covered two thirds of the way across the Atlantic.

That still left one final leg of their journey to reach mainland Europe and complete their Atlantic crossing but with a chance to get the boat properly checked over, the engine serviced and another change of crew, it felt like the worst was over.

Philippe had originally planned to make Portugal his first port of call before heading north to Southampton and re-crossing the



LEFT: The Azores gave the crew a chance to catch up with repairs RIGHT: Safely alongside in Horta, the Azores
BELOW: Philippe celebrates their arrival in Tarragona INSET BELOW: Stocking up on supplies

Atlantic in the other direction but with a return journey now out of the question due to the missing paravanes he re-routed to Barcelona in Spain where he could have the Nordhavn lifted on to a ship and transported back to Miami.

THE FINAL FURLONG

Despite enduring 45-knot winds and an epic 12-hour stint at the helm when passing through the busy strait of Gibraltar, the rest of the journey passed relatively uneventfully for Philippe and his crew. They finally made landfall in Tarragona, a few miles from Barcelona, on 12 July some 44 days and 4,300nm after leaving Miami, making Philippe the first wheelchair user to cross the Atlantic by motor boat.

Philippe is justifiably proud of his transatlantic achievement: “I did it, I did it, I crossed the Atlantic ocean. I am proud to show what is possible when you are disabled. If you have an

accident in your life, you don’t need to stay in your bedroom, you can still set challenges and achieve them.”

As for what comes next, Philippe is still undecided but the chances are it won’t involve his current boat.

“When I suggested to Florence that we take it through the Panama Canal to Hawaii, she said, ‘Are you looking for a divorce, do you want a divorce?’ So no, it won’t be on this boat but I will find something and it will involve a crossing.

“I have some ideas but I can’t share them yet, my wife will kill me!”

One thing’s for sure, Philippe isn’t done yet and once he finds the right opportunity, this inspirational Frenchman will embrace it with all the same enthusiasm and planning as his Transatlantic challenge – but without too much thinking!

