

Ocean Challenge Live!—The Vendée Globe
Solo, non-stop, around-the-world race

WEEK

3 Equator Crossing

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By Rich Wilson, Skipper
Aboard *Great American III*

For a mariner, crossing the equator – the Line – is a major event.

The tradition for a first-timer is an on-board ceremony where the initiate is degraded before King Neptune, who must pass judgment upon the initiate's worthiness to come into his new hemisphere. Typically, a shipmate will dress as King Neptune, with royal scepter, a crown, and beard, and act as judge, jury, and prosecutor on the worthiness of the supplicant.

The tradition is taken seriously by mariners and aboard commercial vessels, too. When I was aboard the huge containership *New Zealand Pacific*

(after our rescue by them off Cape Horn, Thanksgiving Day, 1990), and en route to Europe, those merchant mariners in their crew who had not crossed the Line before were smeared with bilge oil and grease in their hair. In our 2003 Hong Kong-New York passage, my shipmate Rich du Moulin, an initiate, ended up with a more modern version, granola and milk in his hair!

Either way, the intent is serious: to give King Neptune, who rules the seas, his due respect. And it is a way for us at sea to remind ourselves that we are not in control out here – it is King Neptune, with his winds and waves and currents, who rules. For us to be safe, we must respect the sea, and an equator-crossing ceremony is a symbol of that respect.



Dead Reckoning

by Dava Sobel,
Author of *Longitude*

Skipper Rich will soon cross the Equator, 0° latitude, the great dividing line between Earth's northern and southern hemispheres. Having traveled from 46°30'N at the start, he will go as far as 56° south, below the tip of Cape Horn. As he circumnavigates the globe, he will also travel through the full 360° of longitude.

Fortunately for Rich, his navigational equipment keeps him constantly informed of his precise position. Earlier sailors had to rely on a mixture of guesswork and hope to do that, and only rarely figured out exactly where they were.

They could tell their latitude easily enough by the height of the sun or known guide stars above the horizon – in clear weather, at least. But longitude always posed serious problems. The most popular means, known as dead reckoning, called for a log on a knotted line to be thrown overboard. The navigator, using a sand glass to time how quickly the line paid out, gauged the ship's speed along its course. Then he factored in the effects of ocean currents and winds on their progress, to estimate a position east or west of homeport.

Not until the end of the 18th century were the necessary instruments – the sextant and the chronometer – invented to determine longitude at sea.

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