

Solo Sailor Finds Love

(Courtesy Ontario Sailor)

He impresses sailors by showing up at Alberg class association meetings sailing solo aboard his Alberg 30. He's sailed by himself around the world the wrong way, dismasting once as he headed across the Pacific just past New Zealand.

While on the 28,000-mile journey, which was completed in May 1983, he filmed the trip using 16 mm film, and made an award-winning movie and wrote a book about his travels. And he designed a self-steering windvane system for his boat that allowed him to go along without touching the wheel of his yacht, which he's owned for almost 38 years.

Yves Gelin, 72, did his circumnavigation almost 30 years ago after buying his yacht in Port Hope. He named his yacht Jean-du-Sud after a sailing song he liked.

He immediately sailed the yacht along the St. Lawrence and to the West Indies, as far as the Grenadines. It seems he's not slowed down much since then.

At the age of 69, a few years ago, he sailed solo back across the Atlantic to St. Martin in the Caribbean. He came north to New York and back into the Great Lakes and north to his home in Oka, Quebec, on the north shore of the Ottawa River.

His yacht had been in Europe for about eight years, while he flew back and forth from Quebec, sailing mostly during the summer months to various locales, like Holland, along the Seine River to Paris and exploring some of the French canals.

He also sailed to Scotland and along its canals into Loch Ness and other lakes. He began the trip by sailing from the Magdalen Islands in the St. Lawrence to Ireland.

"Each summer I would sail two months and then leave the boat in a different place," said Gelin. He was accompanied sometimes by his second wife, a teacher, who wrote about the experience on the website (www.capehorn.com).

"She's a teacher but she would like to be a writer," he said. "I would prefer to sail with my wife but she's not always free."

As a teacher, she can take half a year off every second year, and joins her husband when she can as they travel around Europe. She will be retiring soon.

Gelin retired some years ago from his acting and filmmaking profession -- "I didn't retire, I just went sailing" -- swore an oath of poverty and shoved off.

He said at that time, his first marriage was coming apart, and he wanted to go sailing. His then-wife didn't like sailing, which would become a big part of his life.

"I felt the need to be alone on the ocean for a long-enough period of time...I made a vow of poverty because I had no income and I went sailing...I never, ever regretted it."

Born in Montreal, Gelin grew up sailing his father's Snipe at the family cottage in Oka on the Ottawa River. This is where he now makes his home.

At the age of 20, he cruised Lake Champlain on a 32 ft. yawl and was invited to crew aboard a 40 ft. wooden ketch along the St. Lawrence. This was his first taste of big-boat sailing, and he liked it a lot. Sailing would take up a large part of the rest of his life.

He jumped into sailing with both feet, and in 1967 bought a 24 ft. Olympic Star (not the same as the Olympic-class Star) which was constructed in the Montreal area by a Greek builder, who decided after a while to leave Canada and return to his native country.

In 1973, Gelinás bought his prized Alberg 30, sharing the cost with his brother. “I needed a boat but I really didn’t know what I would do with it.”

“I realized that achievement in arts required all of one’s energies and thoughts and I had only this thing in mind: sailing.

“The many books on spirituality I read agreed on one point: to attain inner peace, you must free yourself from your desires and there are two ways to do that: either you forget about them or make them come true. I knew I could never forget that passion.”

He borrowed money to purchase the boat, and took off for the Caribbean, buying out his brother after a year. Down south, he would charter for a few years to pay back the loan. But it wasn’t financially lucrative and the bank started calling after the second year.

“From then on, to sublimate the anguish of losing Jean-du-Sud in case it would be repossessed, I attempted to convince myself that it was lent to me for as long as I would need it and if it was taken away from me, it would mean I no longer required it.”

He made three trips from Quebec to the Caribbean and back almost every year, once traveling with his two daughters, who would later move to Sweden with their mother.

In the spring of 1974, he returned to Québec with stops in the Bahamas and along the U.S. east coast. The next summer, he single-handed to Bermuda and returned to Martha’s Vineyard near Boston, where he began working on the design of a permanent self-steering system for his yacht. He sailed solo to Martinique, again stopping in Bermuda.

In 1976, Gelinás went solo from St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands to Norfolk, V.A. and the rest of the way with his two daughters back to Quebec. Later that year, he sailed again by himself from Beaufort in the U.S. to St. Barts in the Caribbean.

In 1977, he sailed from St. Maarten across the Atlantic to the Azores and on to Falmouth, U.K., where he cruised the Cornish coast. He wintered in St. Malo in France.

The following year, he visited Holland and Germany, traveling through the canals and to the Baltic, as far north as Sweden. He returned to St. Malo, where he worked in a boatyard for about three years, preparing his yacht for a circumnavigation.

On his website, Gelinás says he left St. Malo on the Brittany coast on Sept. 1 1981 “bound for Gaspé, Québec -- the long way around the world, through the roaring forties and around Cape Horn, alone aboard (his yacht) Jean-du-Sud.”

“Coming out of the English Channel I turned left. And at Cape of Good Hope I turned left again, sailing across the Indian Ocean.

This “east-about” route is generally considered by sailors to be the wrong way or going backwards around the globe because the route is against the prevailing winds and the currents. Says Gelinás: “I wanted to make the pleasure last.”

He would complete his around-the-world trip in just 282 sailing days, which means he was traveling on average about 100-miles a day.

While on the high seas, he experienced two knockdowns and was capsized in February 1982 and his yacht rolled all the way around, resulting in a dismasting.

“I hit the cabin top but luckily the boat is narrow and there was not much room for me to bounce around.

“I salvaged the mast. I knew I couldn’t afford to send it down to the bottom,” he said. “I pulled it up on deck and rigged the boom.”

He sailed on a jury rig 169 days back to the Chatham Islands, which are about 460 miles east of New Zealand in the Pacific Ocean, and flew back to Quebec.

He blames the dismasting on changes he made to the rig before he left France, and his failure to strengthen the chainplates and bolts that would hold the new mast. He changed to a double spreader rig.

“I went to the Paris Boat Show and consulted a few spar makers who confirmed that to have any chance of resisting a capsize, my new mast would have to weigh at least five kilos per meter, and my present extrusion was about half as heavy.

“I made a super-strong mast, supported by a double set of spreaders, and an oversize rig. I was convinced I had made Jean-du-Sud the present of a capsize-proof mast.”

While at home, back in Quebec, he edited the film he had shot while sailing alone, part way around the world.

After working on his movie in Montreal, and having it shown on television in Quebec and later in France, he returned to his yacht in December 1982, fixed the rig and completed his trip back to Quebec, arriving home the following May.

He said he couldn't afford to sail around the world without an income, so he set to work getting his trip sponsored.

During the journey, he got a radio network to pay him \$20,000 for regular travel reports. His reports were broadcast on some radio stations in Quebec. The radio stations sold ads on his broadcasts and made money, he said.

Gelinas would broadcast his travel accounts by onboard Single Sideband (SSB) or Ham Radio to another Ham operator with a large tower, who would in turn send along his reports so that they reached the Quebec radio stations, which would air them.

“Every morning, I had a sked (schedule) with a Ham operator who had a good antenna. He could copy me and transmitted through a patch.”

Gelinas was also given a \$20,000 advance to write a book of his journey, which was published in French in both Quebec and France.

Although much of his sailing has been done solo, Gelinas says he doesn't seem to miss the company while on the open seas.

“During some periods I was lonely, of course. I was longing for some skin that was not mine. But I had never been so happy as when I was on my boat.”

He would later meet Celine, his second wife, who enjoys sailing.

“To avoid making the same mistake twice, I invited her aboard Jean-du-Sud before I allowed myself to fall in love. If she eventually did the same and agreed to marry me, it was not on account of my wealth.”

During his around-the-globe adventure, Gelinas flew the Quebec flag from his transom, saying he wanted to show off his Quebec “nation...I flew the Quebec flag. My nation is Quebec.”

He said his political views may have hurt his chances of getting attention in English Canada for his book, which has not been published in English, or the airing of his sailing film on his trip. He said a CBC executive dragged his feet on a contract to air the film.

Gelinas' movie of his global adventure has appeared on television in 10 countries. At the time, he was using heavier equipment and film, which is more expensive than shooting in digital nowadays because you had to purchase the film and develop it.

He said he didn't want to waste film and would only film when the light was just right and “I had something to say.” He said he shot only twice as much film during the trip as appeared in his movie, which is considered quite frugal in the movie industry.

The sailing film was shot in two parts, broken up by the dismasting. The two parts were later joined together to make a one-hour movie.

In 1984, he won top prize at the International Sailing Film Festival in La Rochelle, France and the Toulon International Sea and Exploration Film Festival, and in 1985 won grand prize at the La Rochelle International Sailing Film Festival.

There were other awards at film festivals in Italy and Portugal. Gelinás did a speaking tour in France and published a book on his voyage in 1988.

He was granted an honorary doctorate in 1984 from Laval University for his artistic projects and his sailing, and in 1998 he received the Golden Circle Award from the Joshua Slocum Society International.

Gelinás boasts that his film is the best sailing movie ever made and features some interesting movie-making techniques, especially for that time period.

He mounted a camera on a kite that was flying from his yacht, so that he could get some aerial shots of him sailing along. The camera was also mounted on the deck and below and even on a helmet, which captured images as he moved about the boat.

Some of the shots featured his bare “bum” which may have turned off some TV executives, who were nervous about nudity on television at that time.

“Rather than pretending the camera does not exist, Gelinás plays to the camera as he sails, sharing the daily chores, worries and joys and dramas of his adventure,” says the cover jacket for the movie.

Gelinás describes his film as a “great commercial” for his self-steering system, which he has been marketing since 1989. He first designed steering equipment for his first boat, the Olympic Star, and later set up a similar system for his Alberg 30.

“I needed self-steering gear. There was none on the market so I had to design one and I did it and it worked around the world.” He boasts of only one hour of steering as he made his way around the world. In 1989, he started his company, Cape Horn Marine Products, to market the windvane steering he had designed and modified during his trips.

For the first few years, he contracted out the construction of his windvanes, because he was an actor and filmmaker, with little welding or construction skills.

“At first I had to subcontract because my training was theatre school,” he said. “I would go to these shops and spy and see what tools they were using.” He later hired his nephew and they bought a metal lathe for construction. Gelinás does sales and administration.

“We are a two-person company,” he said. It took a while for the company’s products to catch up. Eventually, some yachting magazines featured his products with other self-steering systems and “I was a member of the family.”

The Cape Horn windvane attaches to the transom, with cables connecting to the steering wheel. The system is manual, being controlled by the direction of the wind. A windvane will keep a sailboat going along on a particular tack.

The windvanes are common on long-distance cruising boats. An autopilot, which takes a lot of energy to power, is common on shorter-haul yachts. Unlike a windvane, an autopilot is electronic and keeps a magnetic course, regardless of the wind direction.

Over the years, Gelinás has sold his self-steering units to sailors around the world.

There was a five-year period when autopilots hit the market, and people turned to these -- until they realized there was a huge energy draw and turned back to the self-steering systems, he said.

“People thought there was no market for self-steering systems – it took four of five years for people to realize that their boats were not plugged into the wall, and there still was a market.” He says the business has eventually paid off for him and his wife, Celine.

“Some twenty years later, the CapeHorn self-steering gear provides us both with a comfortable income, while still allowing me to move the sales office aboard *Jean-du-Sud* during summer months thanks to new means of communication such as Wi-Fi, HF radio and satellite, marketing self-steering gears being mostly a matter of answering emails.”

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gelinas sailed his yacht without an engine on the St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers, visiting different places. He is writing another book, this time on the nautical history of the St. Lawrence.

For the past 15 years, Gelinas has taken trips through Canada and the northern U.S. on his boat. He built a trailer for his Alberg, and sometimes combines sailing with towing to get to places like Georgian Bay, Fredericton, NB, and locations along the U.S. east coast. He has visited Massachusettes, Maine and has left his boat in Newport, R.I.

He returned to Europe in 2001, 20 years after first leaving there on his circumnavigation. He was joined on the trip by his wife. He wintered the yacht on the Seine, about 50 km from Paris.

He left his yacht in Europe and returned every summer, sometimes with his wife, to visit the French canals, Holland, Scotland, Ireland, France and Spain. He sailed solo across the Atlantic in 2008 to St. Martin and later that year brought his boat back to Oka, Quebec.

“I thought I would sail *Jean-du-Sud* back home to Québec just before I would feel too old to do it and last summer I sensed this moment was near,” he said in an article for a yachting magazine.

He also admits that before he left on his circumnavigation he said: “I have never been happier than when I was alone on my boat.” That might not be completely true.

“I was single and had not met Céline. It is in her company that for the past 20 years, I have been happiest, especially when we sail together, as she is never any farther than 30 feet. We made the passage across the North Atlantic to Ireland together and I was disappointed with her decision not to make the return trip, convinced that this tropical passage down the trades would be the apex of our seven summer cruise through Europe.

“I must now admit she was right -- those heavy seas and incessant roll could have disgusted her with sailing forever.”

Bringing the yacht back from Europe about three years ago, Gelinas covered 3,018 miles in 21 days, six hours and averaged 142 miles a day. “It’s a very respectable performance for a 30 ft boat, which demonstrates beyond doubt that I had all the wind I needed.

“I made the promise of never again crossing the Atlantic in January, but this is of little consequence since it will be my last passage.”

He spent 2009 working on his yacht after being in Europe for eight years. Last summer, Gelinas sailed solo to Picton for an annual gathering of the local Alberg association.

This year, sometime later in June, he’s planning a passage along the St. Lawrence to Newfoundland and the North Shore of Quebec.

“I want to sail down the St. Lawrence. It’s been 20 years since I’ve been going down the St. Lawrence... I’ve never cruised the North Shore before and I’m getting too old.”

He said his yacht “will still sail coastwise, but I doubt it will cross an ocean again, unless one of my four grandchildren is seduced as I was by the call of the sea.

“Luring them into the joys of sailing is my mission for the coming years.”