

# Coverage

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## The Guardian profile Sam Davies

“ She is on her own against the world and the elements. The other sailors like sailing boats, she loves being at sea ”

Even an encounter with giant kelp can't stop British contender in Global Vendée

Steven Morris

You don't have to be up with the intricacies of sailing to warm to Sam Davies, who is heading the British challenge in the most gruelling of solo races, the Vendée Globe.

Her online diary of the event, which will finish in France next month, reads like a good soap opera - a fast-moving mish-mash of mundane, human details and terrifyingly dramatic moments.

She has been knocked unconscious - not a good idea when you are sailing solo in the Southern Ocean - after being thrown across her boat. She has raced to the aid of a friend and fellow competitor when he broke his leg and was ready to abandon her yacht and leap into his to save him. She has also survived a close encounter with giant kelp, which stopped her yacht in its tracks.

There have also been lighter moments. Davies's description of taking a "sea water shower" in which she lets herself be hit by a wave, soaps up and waits to be rinsed by the next wave is a joy. She has also been pestered by an imaginary "thief" who has stolen her torch and one green sock. "I'm going to have to keep my eyes peeled to catch the culprit before anything else goes missing," she wrote, after being just a little careless with her belongings.

Round-the-world solo sailors are extraordinary creatures. After all, they have to spend three months alone battling the worst the oceans can throw at them. But Davies seems a little different. Of course, she knows everything



CV

**Born** 1974, Portsmouth  
**Education** Portsmouth grammar school; Masters in Engineering, St John's College, Cambridge University  
**Family** Parents live on a boat, grandfather was a submarine commander in the Royal Navy  
**Boat** Roxy Open 60  
**Career highlights** 1998 Attempted Trophee Jules Verne with all-female crew led by Tracy Edwards; 2001 Olympic sailing crew to Shirley Robertson; 2003 First transatlantic race in an Open

60; 2003-2006 Competed in four Solitaires du Figaro and two Transat AG2R races; 2007 Became skipper of Roxy; April 2007 With crew, set a new all-female Round Britain record; Autumn 2007 Finished tenth in double-handed Transat Jacques Vabre Race; December 2007 Qualified for Vendée Globe by coming seventh in solo Transat Ecover B to B to Brittany; May 2008 Fifth place in solo Artemis Transat race from Plymouth to Boston; November 2008 Starts Vendée Globe.

there is to know about her boat, the vivid pink Roxy. She wouldn't be coming fifth in the race out of a starting field of 30 if she didn't. But she also seems to have fun. She doesn't mind chatting about her moisturising regime, which makes sure all that salt water doesn't wreck her complexion.

Davies, who is 34, has sailing in her genes. One grandfather was a submariner (she wears his St Christopher medal), the other a boat-builder. She was a year old when she first sailed with her parents off the south coast of England. Her mother, Jenny, said she thought their devotion to yachting would put young Sam off. "We thought, 'Oh dear, she'll probably hate sailing!'"

Davies gained a masters in mechanical engineering at Cambridge University and in 1998 joined Tracy Edwards's all women crew competing for the Jules Verne trophy, another gruelling round-the-world challenge.

The trip ended when the yacht was dismasted but Edwards recalls Davies fondly. "She had amazing technical ability and she was so brave. I remember her going up the mast to fix a wind instrument. The waves were 40ft high and it was so cold. But as soon as she said she was going up you knew she would fix it. When she came down the inside of her legs were terribly bruised from where she'd been clinging on. On the outside she's blonde and leggy. On the inside she's a tough cookie."

In recent years Davies has based herself in Brittany, where she trains with the elite Pole France squad in Port La Forêt, and became a Figaro class specialist - sailors compete in yachts built to one design. And she discovered she loved solo sailing.

Her boyfriend, Romain Attanasio, also a Figaro competitor, said he felt solo sailing awoke an "animal instinct" in

Davies. "She is on her own against the world and the elements. The main difference between her and other sailors is that while they like sailing boats, she loves being at sea."

In 2007 Davies took the helm of her current boat. It has won the Vendée twice, but that means its design is old and it cannot compete with new vessels. Ellen MacArthur said that made Davies's race even more commendable. "I think where Sam is, considering she has a third generation boat, is really impressive. She is doing an awesome job."

Elaine Bunting, the features editor of Yachting World, paid tribute to both Davies's sailing and PR skills. "She's been great at communications from on board and she's clever, modest and pretty. Sam's the complete package."

So will global stardom greet her at the finishing line next month as it did when MacArthur came second in the 2000-01 Vendée? Probably not. MacArthur had a vast commercial machine ready to help her. Davies does not have that.

Davies could even be overshadowed by Dee Caffari, the other British woman in the race and the first woman to sail solo non-stop around the world against the prevailing currents and winds. She is two places behind Davies but the feeling is that Caffari may have the commercial clout to break through into the world of stardom and celebrity.

Friends say Davies will not mind. For her it is all about the sea and sailing. Attanasio is convinced Davies will compete in the Vendée again - hopefully with a new boat. "She could have a chance to win next time," he said.

It is doubtful Davies will stay on dry land for long. She has already discussed going sailing with her friend, Miranda Merron, later this year. Racing or just for fun? "Racing, of course," said Merron. "That is our fun."

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