

Samantha Davies is one of the world's leading solo sailors in a male-dominated sport. But despite tackling perilous seas and hauling sails twice her weight, she still indulges in all things girly – and a little bit risqué

Interview CAROLINE PHILLIPS
Photographs CHRISTOPHER SIMMS

'Sometimes I sail naked'

When you see Samantha Davies pottering about in a teeny pink bikini on her pink sailing boat, Roxy, and spritzing her cabin with perfume, it's difficult to imagine her facing waves the size of houses, 80-mile-an-hour winds and nights without a second's sleep. It's hard to think of her sailing solo among icebergs, killer whales and vicious storms. Or being stuck, as she once was, with no wind, in thick fog and in the path of an oncoming ship – seconds from death, had she not turned on her engine.

But that's how life is for Sam, a 33-year-old Cambridge University engineering graduate who once wanted to be a ballerina, still loves to dress in girly clothes onshore and wears three tiny diamond ear studs and a belly ring.

She was one of only two women to compete in the Artemis Transat solo race from Plymouth to Boston last month and – despite hitting a whale and losing the use of her radar on her first night – came fifth: the first Briton and first female to reach home. And, in November, she will set sail alone in the Vendée Globe – a 26,680-mile nonstop solo race that starts and finishes in France and takes in the perilous Southern Ocean. 'People have died during it,' she says. 'But I'm not going to think about >





◀ that.' Instead she aims to beat the record of 87 days, ten hours, 47 minutes and 55 seconds set by a man, Vincent Riou, on the same boat in 2005. Sam will be one of just a few women ever to have attempted the gruelling race (in which Dame Ellen MacArthur finished second in 2001).

Is she the new Dame Ellen? 'Oh no,' she says. 'Ellen thrives on driving herself to the point of misery. I like sailing with a big smile on my face.'

Sam is a woman of surprises. Sometimes at sea she's in oilskins; other times she wears nothing at all. (In the tropics, when it's really hot, it's better to do everything naked.) If she needs luck, she races in her special knickers: 'My girl boxers with "Lucky" in pink diamanté.' Meeting me in London, she's casually dressed in jeans, Uggs and a Roxy sponsorship T-shirt and jumper (her boat is owned by the sporty clothing label). With her blond hair and blue eyes, she appears wholesome, humorous and down-to-earth.

Let's get her sailing credentials out of the way – then we can move on to the important questions, such as: 'How do you have skin that looks like a Clarins advert when you don't sleep and your face gets ravaged by sun, salt and sea?'

Sam comes from sailing stock: one grandfather was a submarine commander and the other a powerboat racer pilot. 'My parents had a boat where we lived on Hayling Island [off the Hampshire coast near Portsmouth], and we'd all take off after school: my sister Debbie and I would do our homework, then sit up at night in gales waiting to see if our anchor broke free of its moorings. My parents even taught me to cook a roast in a tiny galley in a force 8 gale.'

By the time she was at university, she was escaping from

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Cambridge to sail at weekends, only giving it up in her final year to focus on her studies. Ten years ago she started sailing professionally – missing her graduation ceremony for a race: 'I was in the middle of the Atlantic instead.' Coached by sailing's Big Three – Tracy Edwards, Shirley Robertson and Ellen MacArthur – she financed herself by working part-time for a yacht designer until she found sponsorship.

Along with Dame Ellen, Sam is in the top five Open 60 female sailors in Europe ('Open' meaning yacht design is largely unrestricted; '60' being the length of the boat in feet), which makes her one of the world's leading sailors. It hasn't come easily. She qualified for the Vendée Globe in December 2007 by completing her first Open 60 solo race, and she's been preparing for the challenge for the past year, practising emergency medical treatment by sewing up pigs' trotters (a previous Vendée Globe contestant, Bertrand de Broc, had to stitch up his tongue after an accident), hanging out with meteorological professors, studying star navigation and learning about nutrition. 'In rough seas, sometimes it's too dangerous to boil water, so you just eat freeze-dried food,' she smiles. 'But as I'm a girl, my nutritionist acknowledges that I have to eat chocolate each day!'

She has also been working with a trainer to bulk her up, for two hours a day, five days a week – swimming, cycling and weight-lifting. 'Don't give me big muscles,' Sam wails.

'But you've got to pull up your mainsail, and you can't do that without strong muscles,' replies her trainer.

'But my objective after the race,' insists Sam, 'is to have smaller, ladylike arms and shoulders!'

Which brings us back to the girly stuff. Every few days ▶



◀ alone at sea, Sam speaks to her boyfriend of three years, a French yachtsman called Romain. (He sealed their relationship by flying across the world to meet her at the finish in Brazil after the 2003 Transat Jacques Vabre race: 'I was glad I'd washed that day!' she says.) 'We're renovating our home in Brittany,' she explains, 'and he rings my satellite phone when I'm in the middle of the sea with impossible questions such as, "Where do you want the plug?"'

And what about her complexion? 'On one of my first Atlantic crossings, I got salt burns on my face from the sea water,' she grimaces. 'I ended up with blisters, scabs and scars on my cheeks. So now every day I clean the salt off and moisturise with ultra-hydrating cream.' Is that how she achieves her glowing look? 'I'm sailing in unpolluted air and only drinking water. I don't smoke and I wear sunscreen, even when it's snowing.' And her hair? 'There isn't a shower. I wash my hair in sea water – then rinse in fresh.' It's nice, she adds, to look good. 'Particularly going through the finishing line, because everyone's watching the girls.'

Sam is a woman in a man's world but, she says, it's never really been an issue for her. 'I've always been the one girl sailing with a male crew. Sailors used to think it unlucky to have a woman on board, but I started racing after Tracy Edwards had changed the idea of it being a male sport. By then it was seen as a novelty to have a female on board, and people thought it improved the atmosphere. I found myself being chosen in place of men who were equally good.' Do men take her seriously, then? 'Yes.' After going to an all-girls school, she was one of very few women on

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her university course, and she now uses her engineering knowledge every day. 'Anyone who sails without an engineering background is sailing blind,' she says.

Naturally there are physical disadvantages. 'At nine stone and five foot six, I'm smaller than most guys. So I have to train harder.' She hauls sails that are twice her body weight. 'But mental strength is more important than physical,' she asserts. 'Patience and endurance, great female attributes, are also a big advantage. Guys go full out wanting to win... which only works for the first day. Women are much better at conserving their energy. Maybe it's also because we don't like to suffer as much as men!' So do women make better sailors? 'We're equal.'

Sam is good at having it both ways. She has added feminine touches to her cabin – pretty drawings and a fake orchid. When the boat's ashore, she strides about in her bikini bossing around the crew she trains with – all men, one an Olympic finalist. She hides her make-up bag from them. ('Otherwise the boys take my mirror to look under the engine, my lipgloss to grease the engine and elastic bands to tidy the ropes!') And she uses her sex to her advantage: 'Whenever I don't want to climb the mast to do a job at the top, I wear a short skirt so that I simply can't get up there.'

Ah, yes, climbing to the top of the mast. Does her mum worry about her at sea? 'I fret more about her,' says Sam. Her parents, Paul, a retired engineer, and Jenny, his former secretary, now have their own replica 1928 schooner. 'They sold everything – including their house – to buy their dream boat. They have no fixed address and refuse to have a safety beacon or satellite phone.' Do they ring her onshore? 'If their mobile works, and they hook on to the nearest Wi-Fi with an aerial that Dad made with Mum's wok!'

On one occasion, when Sam hadn't seen her parents for 18 months, she was competing solo in a race and sent them an e-mail with an estimate of where she was going to be. They sailed nine hours to meet her off the Azores. 'I was racing from France to Cuba and couldn't slow down. We couldn't get close enough to meet – they were a mile and a half away. But we chatted on VHF radio while I strained through binoculars to see them. Afterwards, I felt so lonely I cried – the first time I've ever wept on a boat.' But she carried on and finished her race. 'After a while, I didn't feel lonely as I knew there were other people out there on the same ocean.'

Loneliness, exhaustion, cold: 'It's amazing how your body goes way beyond limits that we think we can endure,' Sam admits. 'The first three days are disturbing. I'm suddenly alone, feel terribly lost and lose my appetite. I have to sleep practically standing up, the space is so cramped. Sometimes I cat-nap for ten minutes a night. It's frightening being emotionally and physically drained in the middle of the sea, knowing you couldn't go home even if you wanted to.'

But somehow the struggle just makes Sam more determined. 'Even at my lowest moments, if someone could magic me home I wouldn't let them,' she insists. When she was 23 she attempted the Jules Verne round-the-world race with an all-girl crew but lost her mast near Cape Horn. 'That's why I really want to complete the Vendée Globe,' she says. And looking now at her confident, determined, focused face, it's not hard to imagine her doing it. **5**

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