

IN THE WAKE OF BERNARD MOITTESSIER

John Franklin

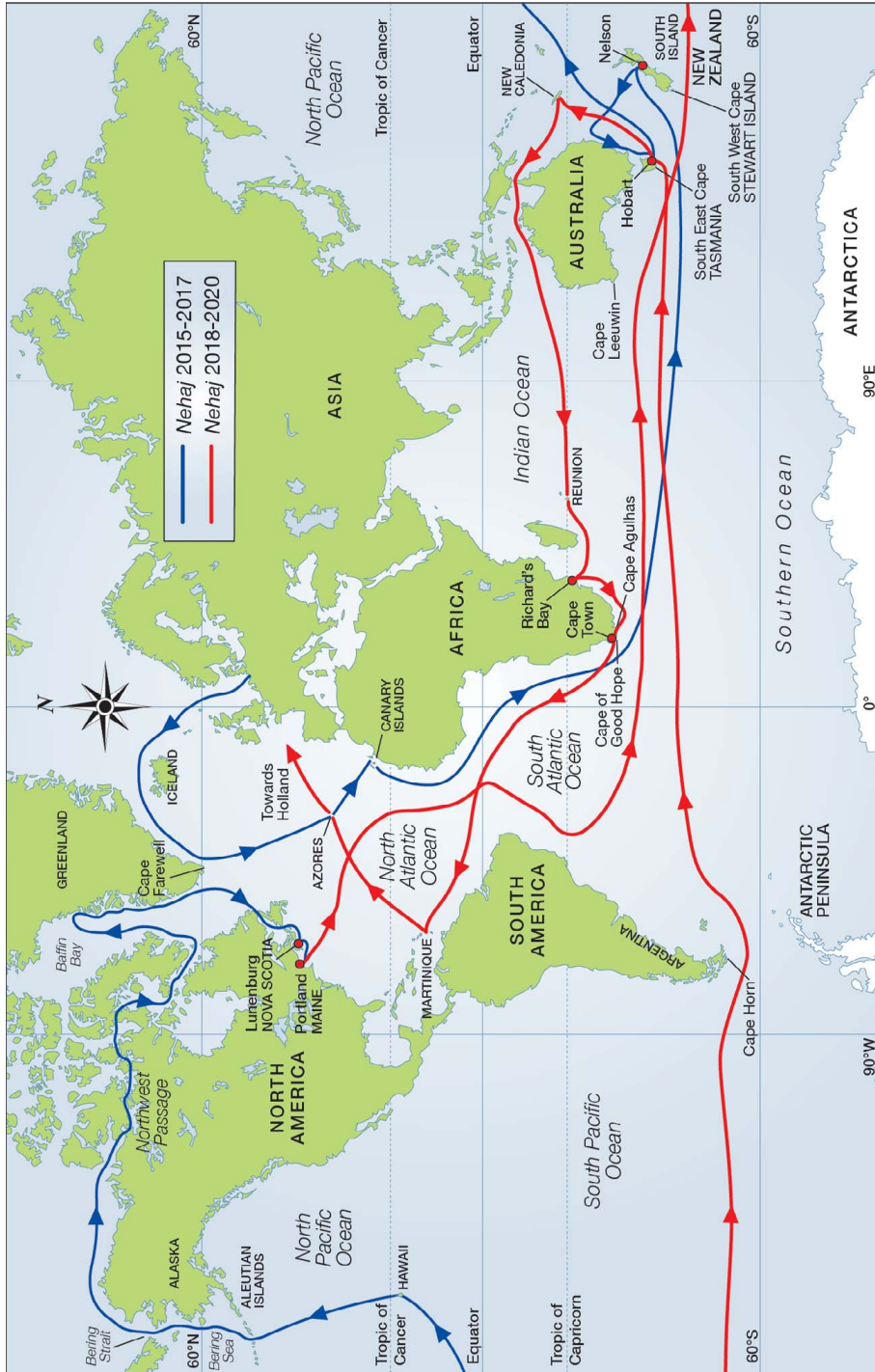
(John shares his meeting with Susanne Huber-Curphey in Richard's Bay, South Africa, in November 2019 – Susanne has since received the OCC Seamanship Award for 2019, see page 20. With thanks to Daria Blackwell for extracts from her treatise on Famous Women Sailors. All photos copyright Susanne Huber-Curphey.)

Jenny and I recently had the privilege of meeting one of the world's most experienced, accomplished, competent and intrepid sailors; not only that, but female and a singlehander. Not very much has been written about Susanne Huber-Curphey – she shuns publicity, doesn't publish a blog or have a website, and is content to sail the oceans of the world enjoying an intimate bond with the sea and her beloved aluminium boat *Nehaj*.

Nehaj is a Dick Koopmans 11.9m long keel design, cutter-rigged and built in aluminium alloy by Koopmans Kasko's in Sneek, The Netherlands. Her name derives from a castle fortress in Croatia meaning 'safe, secure'. The build yard completed the alloy work in 2013. Susanne then took over the fit-out, spending another two years living aboard while she worked on the completion, doing practically all the work herself to a professional standard.

Susanne aboard Nehaj. Note the watertight door at the companionway, small windows and simple deck plan. No roller furling, no sail tracks or travellers and no halyards led aft, slab reefing at the mast, no rod kicker but traditional boom gallows







Nehaj's interior, completed by Susanne herself, is functional and bright

Nehaj is a singlehander's boat, very well equipped but fitted out simply and functionally for long-distance yet comfortable passagemaking for her owner/skipper. Susanne had the standard cockpit sole raised so that it is only 25cm deep, to create bigger lockers and more space below. She figured that in the mainly high-latitude sailing she proposed to do she would spend almost no time sitting in the cockpit, as the boat would be steered by her Aries windvane self-steering and she would con the boat sitting comfortably at the head of the companionway steps out of the weather under her hard alloy dodger. Deck fittings are both rugged and functional, and the decks are covered with non-slip Treadmaster. The topsides are bare aluminium, and for low maintenance there are no painted surfaces and nor is there any wood to be varnished. She has no roller-furling headsails, preferring traditional hanked-on fittings, and stows her headsails below though a custom watertight forehatch into a large fo'c's'le fitted with storage bins. Reefing is standard slab reefing controlled from the mast.

On leaving Holland in June 2015 Susanne and *Nehaj* embarked on a remarkable shake-down cruise – 14,800 miles to New Zealand, solo of course. The route took them north of Iceland, passing Cape Farewell in Greenland en route to the Azores, then non-stop from the Canary Islands, passing South Africa offshore and into the Southern Ocean eastbound to Nelson on the South Island of New Zealand. After a spell in the South Pacific Islands and Australia, Susanne became attracted to the idea of an east-bound transit of the Northwest Passage. Leaving Hobart, Tasmania in February 2017 she sailed via Hawaii and the Aleutian Islands to the Bering Sea, successfully completing the transit in September 2017 and becoming the first woman to make a solo transit, for which she was awarded the OCC's Barton Cup. She continued on to Nova Scotia via Greenland and



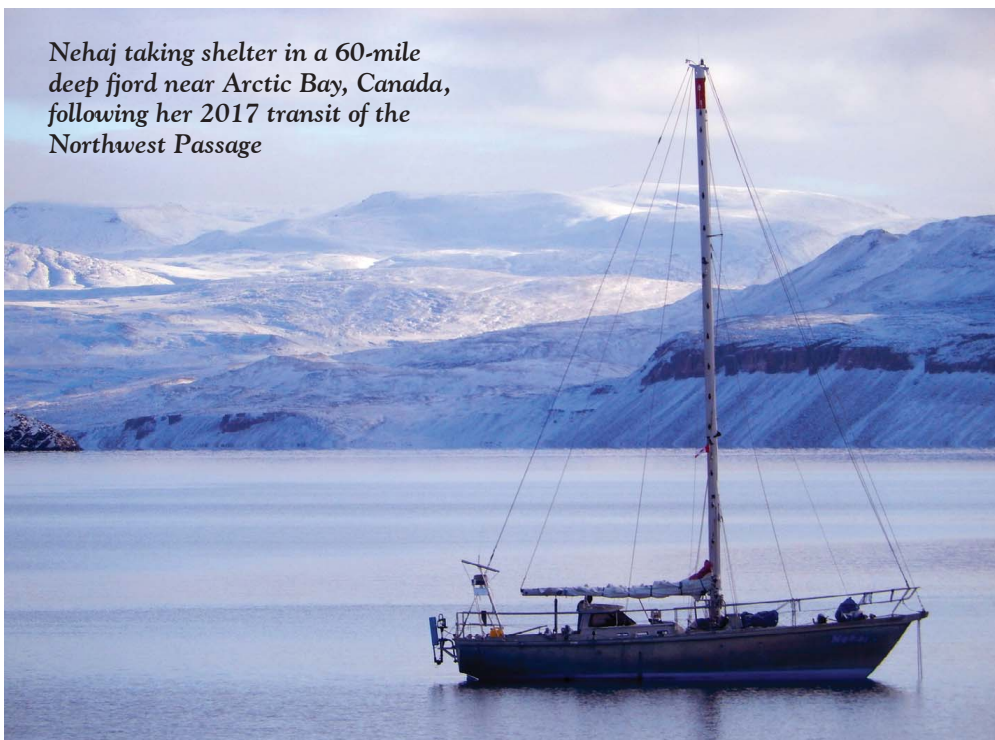
Large icebergs in Baffin Bay after leaving Lancaster Sound at 74°N

Baffin Bay, spending the winter of 2017/18 living aboard *Nehaj* afloat in Lunenburg.

During

2017 much media attention was focused on the 2018 Golden Globe Race, marking the 50th anniversary of the original 1968 *Sunday Times* race around the world won by Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, the only finisher. GGR 2018 was planned as a highly-organised event with a fixed starting time and location, as well as strict rules and limitations regarding boats to be sailed and equipment to be used. Susanne was amused but also worried by the strictness of the organisation, and was particularly

***Nehaj* taking shelter in a 60-mile deep fjord near Arctic Bay, Canada, following her 2017 transit of the Northwest Passage**





After wintering aboard in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Nehaj sailed to South Portland, Maine, where Susanne made final preparations for the Longue Route

put off by the media hype surrounding the event (later valued at \$185 million). In the event, 19 skippers started and only five finished, five boats being lost or abandoned along the way.

At the same time she became aware of another commemorative event – The Longue Route 2018, promoted by French ex-BOC racer Guy Bernardin in recognition of the 50th anniversary of Bernard Moitessier's role in the original Golden Globe Race. Moitessier and his 40ft steel ketch *Joshua* had become legends when he gave up his chance to win the original Golden Globe and kept on sailing around the world again so as to 'save his soul'. The book he wrote about his voyage, *La Longue Route*, has inspired all sailors with a spiritual bent and most particularly French sailors, who have dominated long-distance singlehanded ocean racing ever since.

In contrast to the highly organised GGR 2018 with strict rules, the Longue Route 2018 allowed freedom of choice of starting point and time. It also permitted a wide choice of boat length and type, and allowed skippers to make their own choices regarding equipment. Participants (not competitors, as there would be no winner and no prizes or awards) were to start from a point either north of 45°N in Europe, or north of 41°N on the east coast of North America, sometime between 18th June and 30th September 2018. They were to circle the globe non-stop via the southern Great Capes and return to an undisclosed French port north of 45°N. As Bernardin put it when launching the event:

'On this occasion, Guy invites other sailors to join him on this passage, in the same state of mind as Bernard Moitessier. This is not a race, there

are no rules, nor constraints or obligations, or awards. It is a return to true values, individual and human responsibilities of the sailor and the man. Freedom and serenity to be alone at sea'.

This inspired Susanne. The low key, non-commercial, non-competitive theme appealed to her – freedom and serenity to be alone at sea with one's boat – that was more Susanne's style. She promptly entered *Nehaj*.

Starting from Portland, Maine on 14th June 2018 she sailed south of all the southern Great Capes*, but as she and *Nehaj* approached South Africa for the second time, she announced that she would not be heading to France like the other participants but rather continuing on around the Southern Ocean in the spirit of Moitessier's original Golden Globe voyage aboard *Joshua*. In fact, she never had any intention of doing otherwise – she was racing Moitessier 50 years earlier! She finally made landfall in Hobart, Tasmania on 20th February 2019 after 251 days at sea, having sailed *Nehaj* over 360°+216° of longitude and 33,000 nautical miles at an overall speed of 5.5 knots. She beat the virtual sailing time of *Joshua* 50 years earlier by four days – his route had covered 360°+206° of longitude from Plymouth to Tahiti.

Here is Susanne's own account of her passage from the East Coast of the USA to Tasmania and on to Reunion Island:

'From June 2018 until July 2019 was an exciting and special sailing year for Nehaj and me.

* Cape Agulhas, South Africa; Cape Leeuwin, Australia; South East Cape, Tasmania; South Cape, Stewart Island, New Zealand; and Cape Horn, Chile.

***Sailing in the Atlantic trade winds,
Susanne was often able to collect rain water to top up Nehaj's tanks***





Cape Raoul, Tasmania, in the lee of which Nehaj lay hove-to in October 2018 while Susanne repaired her Aries windvane self-steering gear

Joining the informal event of the ‘Longue Route’, *Nehaj* sailed exactly 50 years after Bernard Moitessier in the wake of his ketch *Joshua*. Right from the start I compared both of our routes, timing and impressions. Like no other yacht in this historic sailing year our two boats were identical in length, beam, keel shape, draught and mast height. He had a ketch with a long bowsprit, I had a sloop with a cutter rig. His boat was of steel, mine of aluminium. We both had home-built boats, basic equipment and no roller-furling. And yes, I did try to sail a bit faster than Bernard!

For my start in the USA with one additional Atlantic crossing I added just six days, and amazingly *Joshua* and *Nehaj* reached the first milestone of the equator ‘at the same time’. As the passage carried on I felt ever closer to Bernard – just those 50 years separated us. When passing Cape Agulhas *Nehaj* fell back, while wintry headwinds and the already badly-fouled hull slowed us down even further in the Indian Ocean. *Joshua* lay a full eight days ahead when I passed Tasmania in October 2018. Catching up seemed impossible, but on the other hand there was still one full circumnavigation ahead of us!

After I had scraped off the goose barnacles, and as the southern spring weather slowly became more stable, *Nehaj* sailed more lively during the long journey across the Pacific Ocean. Despite a rough



*A dramatic view of Staten Island, after rounding Cape Horn in December 2018.
This was only the second time in Susanne's voyage that she saw land*

rounding of Cape Horn we then were just four days behind *Joshua*. My friends were not really surprised when I decided to keep on sailing east after New Year's Day, just as Bernard had, and that I had no intention of returning to Europe like the other sailors of the Longue Route and the Golden Globe Race.

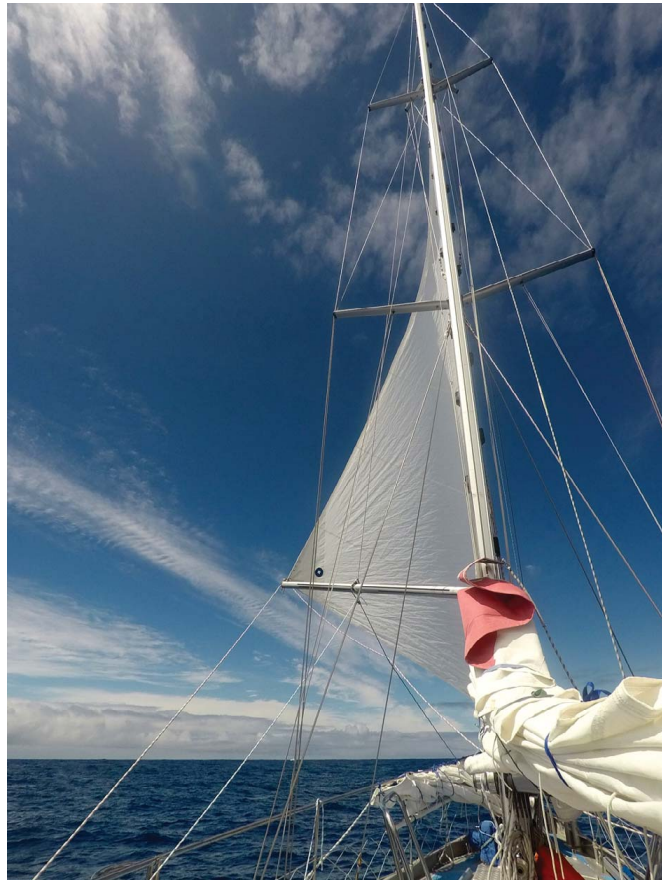
With summer approaching I dared the higher southern latitudes, while *Nehaj* easily managed heavy weather and strenuous sailing days.



During her 251 days at sea on the Longue Route Susanne rigged her trysail on 23 occasions totalling 633 hours. She used her full (unreefed) mainsail only 23% of the time

*Calm seas in the Southern
Ocean between the
frequent weather systems*

Being already 200 days at sea I felt in harmony with nature and quite at home with the elements. As I passed South Africa for the second time Bernard already lay one day behind, and when finally stopping in Tasmania after half a year in the Southern Ocean *Nehaj* was an amazing four days ahead. 50 years ago Bernard carried on to Tahiti, but eventually I noticed that due to the start in the USA my route of 576° showed ten more



degrees of longitude, and that we had passed the antipodes point of our starting harbour twice. Well done indeed, *Nehaj*!

Nehaj crossed her own course twice during this journey:

- ◆ Just north of the equator *Nehaj* finished her first circumnavigation (my third), via the Northwest Passage with 46,907 miles since launching in Holland in June 2015.
- ◆ Just west of Tasmania we crossed our own course for a second time. Consequently a non-stop rounding of Antarctica happened just by itself with 212 days at sea and a great average speed of 5.8 knots.

After 251 days since leaving Maine, *Nehaj* and I had a great arrival in Tasmania, without any frills though sailing friends gave me a lovely welcome. Besides the repair of the Jordan Series Drogue there was no work list as hardly anything had broken, just a big clearing up job to be done. In addition I still had lots of provisions on board as well as 100 litres of drinking water. *Nehaj* mastered those 8½ months at sea perfectly, and for me it was a fascinating time in full trust of my good boat.

Both *Nehaj* and I survived the subsequent terrible stranding in Reunion Island, although it caused considerable dents in the hull and in the ego. Soon we will carry on towards South Africa.'

Start in Portland, Maine, USA on 14th June 2018

Start	Landmarks		days at sea	miles	Difference to <i>Joshua</i>
14/06/2018	Equator	18/07/2018	34 days	4751 miles	equal time
	Cape Agulhas	25/08/2018	72 days	9617 miles	plus 4 days
	Tasmania	24/10/2018	132 days	16,237 miles	plus 8 days
	Cape Horn	08/12/2018	177 days	22,832 miles	plus 4 days
	Cape Agulhas	06/01/2019	206 days	26,843 miles	minus 1 day
Total	Tasmania	20/02/2019	251 days	33,043 miles	minus 4 days

Rounding Antarctica, Tasmania to Tasmania in 121 days, 16,873 miles and 5-83 knots

In another 'first', as part of this voyage Susanne sailed *Nehaj* from Tasmania to Tasmania in 121 days solo, non-stop and unassisted around the Southern Ocean. Although not officially verified, Susanne became the first woman to sail around Antarctica singlehanded and non-stop.

Susanne brandishing the Longue Route flag on arrival in Tasmania in February 2019



Having completed her own Longue Route in the wake of Moitessier, Susanne spent two months in Tasmania and then continued via New Caledonia across the Indian Ocean to the island of Reunion where she and *Nehaj* had a disastrous grounding and pounding on a reef. That she and *Nehaj* survived this horrific experience is testimony to the latter's immensely strong aluminium construction and to her Dutch builders. This is a story in its own right and a tale for another day.

Start	Landfall	Days at sea	Miles
Tasmania, 28/04/2019	New Caledonia, 16/05/2019	18 days	2341
New Caledonia, 01/06/2019	Reunion Island, 21/07/2019	48 days	6916
Total USA to Reunion, 5.56 knots average speed		317 days	42,300

Following her recovery in Reunion, Susanne worked for three months effecting temporary repairs to *Nehaj* and then sailed for South Africa. At the time of writing (December 2019) Susanne has reached Simon's Town and is intending to nurse her badly damaged boat back to Europe where she will have extensive permanent repairs by the original build yard.

Susanne's account on the previous pages is a grossly understated narrative of an exceptional voyage, even by her standards. In an attempt to understand more of the detail I probed her on several issues, and her matter-of-fact replies left me in complete awe and wonderment at this exceptional woman. When I asked her about her statement, 'After I had scraped off the goose barnacles ...' and how she achieved this she replied:

'In my opinion aluminium is the closest-to-perfect hull material for many reasons. The only real disadvantage is finding decent antifouling paint. Copper in the paint is impossible, as it will result in electrolytic reaction with the alloy hull, while the necessary poison is virtually negligent these days. So I paid lots of money for 'pro-fouling paint' which, just three months after applying, invited monster-size goose barnacles that slowed us down to half speed. Soon after rounding Cape Agulhas in September 2018 I had to decide whether to stop in Australia or to bite the bullet and scrape off those nasty critters mid-ocean, which I did. I was extremely scared of this job! I was scared of shark attacks, of hypothermia in the 12°C water, and scared of drifting off in wind and current and seeing my

Goose barnacles first became apparent in August 2018, before passing South Africa. Susanne removed them at sea in 12°C water before entering the Southern Ocean



own boat disappear. With a thick rope tied to Nehaj around my waist, it eventually took me three terrible times, each of 1½ hours in the water, to clean the hull. Back on board I virtually collapsed each time, followed by shivering in my down sleeping bag for hours while Nehaj lay hove-to and patiently waited for me.'

To most skippers, the idea of going over the side mid-ocean is frightening enough. To do so at 40°S, with no-one else aboard and in 12°C (54°F) water, is just incomprehensible! Next I asked her about heavy weather and storm tactics:

'Once you pass Latitude 40° South you have to be prepared for nasty weather. A cold front or low will pass, on average, every three days. Not all bring filthy conditions, but it will happen. I did use the true survival storm tactic of the Jordan Series Drogue (JSD) on six occasions for a total of 195 hours in winds of above force 10.

The worst time of my half-year in the Southern Ocean was when two boats in the Golden Globe Race were close to my position. In September 2018 Abhilash Tomy and Gregor McGuckin were badly in trouble and had to be rescued. I felt seriously depressed about their fate! While it all happened I was in contact with the MRCC in Australia and ready to assist. At that time Nehaj was in perfect safety just 50 miles away, weathering this storm on her JSD without any harm.

It was a similar situation when Susie Goodall pitch-poled and had to be rescued while Nehaj rode out the same weather system approaching Cape Horn*. This time I felt thoroughly decadent and guilty, in comfort with my Dickinson diesel heater warming the boat and my soul while Susie's dream was shattered.



* Susie Goodall reportedly was using a Jordan Series Drogue when her Rustler 36 *DHL Starlight* pitchpoled and was dismantled some 2000 miles west of Cape Horn. Subsequently it was found that the drogue hawser had parted at its knot, possibly as the breaking wave broke, somersaulting the boat.

The Jordan Series Drogue puts a huge strain on the hull and its attachments. Shown here are the 20mm welded chainplates for the drogue's 16 ton breaking-strain shackles

Damaged cones of the Jordan Series Drogue, which was used on six occasions during the Longue Route for a total of 195 hours. This explains the wear on the cones, though the ropes were undamaged. In January 2018 Susanne's sewing machine broke, and as hand-stitching replacement drogues took too long and she considered it to be her 'life insurance' she abandoned any thoughts of rounding Cape Horn for a second time



Didn't they all know that the Southern Ocean is no playground and that you have to have a storm tactic? In my opinion this is certainly the JSD, which I had put together myself. The excellent report of Sir Robin earlier this year came to the same conclusion. Sailing conditions in the Southern Ocean have not improved in those 50 years. My advice for the area is: 'Keep the mast out of the water and keep the water out of the boat'.

You must respect the elements. Sailing the high latitudes is no computer game where you will be rescued free of charge if things go wrong, where the insurer will replace your boat, and where you start the adventure game all over again while the world in live coverage holds its breath for you. The ocean is just you and your well-prepared boat – it is brutal and it is fascinating at the same time, and it is nature at its purest.'

That last sentence says it all for Susanne and *Nehaj*. What a privilege to meet such an accomplished sailor so at home with the ocean and her boat.

