

Daily Press

Hampton Roads' Newspaper

FINAL EDITION

Newport News-Hampton, Virginia

Sailor

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Horn, the southern tip of South America. He calls it the Mount Everest of sailing and the toughest corner on the face of the world.

"My motivation, originally, was to see if I could do it the 'hard way' with a small ship and no engine," says Johnson, tracing a tough-tipped finger along a world map marked in orange and black pencil.

The "hard way" around Cape Horn means going East to West, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. That's against the wind, against the current, against common sense.

Lt. William Bligh, commander of Great Britain's infamous Bounty, couldn't make it around the hard way in the late 1700s. He had to U-turn and go all the way around the world. The Panama Canal has since reduced most travel around Cape Horn to sporting events.

Johnson had sailed the easy way in 1982 and joined the Cape Horn Association, a group of "90-year-old men" who sailed large square-rigged ships early this century.

At conventions, the old men constantly gave Johnson a hard time for doing it the "easy way," so in 1988, he took his tiny vessel and headed south.

And as if rough waters weren't enough of a test, Johnson packed up and sealed his engine shaft and didn't bring modern navigation tools. Nothing but a sail and sextant, to find his way.

"It's a point of pride to use the sextant," he says, jabbing at weekend-Ahabs who rely on satellite navigation systems and call the Coast Guard when they run into trouble. "Good seamanship is having the ability to always get yourself out of what you get into."

He cleared Cape Horn in 85 days at sea, docked at Easter Island, "where the big heads are," he says, and asked, "What's next?"

"Originally I thought I might sail down to New Zealand," he says, admitting he never devised a plan to cruise around the bottom of the world through rough seas. It just sort of happened.

After the first cape, he kept going, sailing beneath the southernmost points of New Zealand, Tasmania, Australia and Africa.

To finance the trip, he took on thrill-seekers who paid to work as crew members. Over six years, 11 people — never more than two at a time — sailed with Johnson.

Johnson experienced weeks at sea with nothing to look at and spent a year in New Zealand while the boat was being repaired. During the six years, he flew back to



Michael Johnson enjoys shore leave at the Grafton home of his girlfriend, Stephanie Panzera.

Dave Bowman/Courtesy Press

the United States a half-dozen times to "take care of business" and see Panzera.

But there were plenty of adventures. "When we struck a male sperm whale, a Moby Dick-type whale, that was a high point," says Johnson, describing a blood-and-blubber encounter in the Pacific. "We took a big chunk out of its back."

And there was a freak wave south of New Zealand that almost destroyed his ship during a mild storm.

"All of a sudden we just got this monster wave and rode up the top of it and fell off upside-down," Johnson says.

Without a sail, he motored to land, and the Aissa stayed there for a year getting fixed. A local doctor offered his house and Jeep for Johnson's use. His crew member, a woman from California who had been on board since Virginia, fell in love and married a New Zealander.

"It's the fate of the currents," Johnson says of the union.

He scrounged for a new crew in Australia, finding two young men keen on a caper to Africa via Asia. They only made it as far as Sri Lanka, an island nation near India.

"It's hard to explain to people what they're getting into," he says. Aissa under Johnson runs like it's in the British Navy: strict, straight and upright. "They have these romantic ideas of partying and moonlight, but it's hard work."

Plus, as Johnson tells it, Sri Lanka is a war zone in the middle of pirate-infested waters.

"There's no law out there. There's a lot of talk about piracy," he says, bringing out a world map marked with pirate trouble sites.

Red spots mark the Indian Ocean, most of the African coast and northern South America, all stops on Johnson's trip. "If they attack your boat, they'll probably

kill you," he warns.

He flips through the log book. More scorpions. More drawings and maps.

"With Africa, you never know what you're getting into," he says, diving into a thousand tales of the dark continent:

- Exploring an old German town in Namibia, largely off-limits because diamonds could just be picked off the ground.

- An abandoned, mine-laden port in Angola, patrolled by weird black birds. Fellow sailors murdered in Mozambique.

- The beauty and unrest of Cape Town, South Africa, in the months before last year's election.

- Dead ships and whale bones along the foggy Skeleton Coast.

He bought a rifle and pistol in South Africa, but didn't really need them until he crossed the Atlantic and dipped into the Amazon River.

Slow canoes cruising alongside the Aissa would change course when the would-be looters saw Johnson's firearms.

Johnson sails for adventure, but likes to search out the history and culture of places. He keeps track of what he learns in his log, and is conscious of who sailed before him. He talks about the paths of Bligh and Magellan.

"We went to San Helena — where they left Napoleon all those years ago," he says, tracing his route from Africa back toward home.

The path intersects itself off the South American coast, marked in August 1994 as an official lap around the planet.

How do you top that, Cap'n?

"I don't have any plans yet," Johnson says. He'll move the Aissa to Florida later this year, and he and Panzera may troll the Caribbean. She's not really into circumnavigation.

"It's not how most people think of sailing," Johnson says. "I guess."