

Atlantic weather outlook

The amount of planning and research that goes into a venture such as the Pink Lady® Atlantic First can not be overstated. Physical prowess and mental robustness are of course essential, but by themselves they are not enough. To truly succeed in this project, a keen understanding of the elemental forces of Nature is required. The Atlantic Ocean is an unpredictable beast, which has claimed countless lives over the centuries. However, like all forces of Nature, it works in cycles and understanding these cycles is one of the keys to success.

Prevailing winds and tides rotate clockwise across the entire North Atlantic, meaning that any rowing boat crossing from the east to the west does so in the southern part of the ocean, whilst those hoping to make the crossing from the west to the east must do so in the northern section. This is a contributing factor in the team's decision to set off from St John's in Canada. Unfortunately for the crew, conditions in the north are much tougher than those on the southern route.

The first 350 miles of the crossing will be the most arduous and most treacherous, as the crew head south towards the Gulf Stream. Not only will they initially have to row across southwesterly winds, but they will also have to negotiate the treacherous Grand Banks, the shallow fishing grounds off the coast of Newfoundland. The whole area is a source of livelihood for generations of fishermen, but its vicious ferocity is renowned worldwide and its weather's unpredictability was vividly brought to life in the film *The Perfect Storm*. Not only does thick fog form quickly in these parts, as the warm southerly air meets the cold Arctic waters driven down from Labrador, but vicious storms can also appear out of nowhere. In no time whatsoever, waves can reach up to 50 feet in height, with only seconds between each peak.

As if this were not enough of a challenge, the area off the coast of Newfoundland is also littered with icebergs, which slowly drift down from Greenland. Every spring and early summer they can be seen protruding through the water, although up to 85% of their mass is hidden below the surface. Many weigh in at over 2,000 tonnes, although in some ways it is the smaller, piano-sized "growlers" lurking just below the surface that pose the greatest threat. Spotting these hazards is difficult at the best of times, but when the crew are rowing through thick fog with their backs towards the danger, the risk of collision becomes ever greater.

The Grand Banks, the Labrador Current and the ice floes will all work against the team, pushing them south and even back towards the North American coast. This is why the first week of rowing is the most crucial, and the crew must work extremely hard to break away and reach the 0.5 knot Gulf Stream, which will then help to carry them home. Once in the Gulf Stream, seas will still average between 7 and 10 feet, but the current should at least be moving in the right direction. However, the crew may still come up against harsh and terrifying conditions, whilst positioned up to 1,000 miles from the nearest piece of land - all of this in a boat that measures just 10 metres in length and only 1.8 metres wide.

The team will set off from St John's in Newfoundland at the end of June 2004, aiming to arrive off the Isles of Scilly just over a month later, and at that stage they will set a course for Falmouth. Since one of the team's aims is to bring the boat home to mainland Britain, the route is technically harder than that taken by the current record holders. As the North Atlantic Current approaches the British Isles, it splits into two, with one stream branching off to the south, whilst the other heads north. Catching the correct current and negotiating the Pink Lady® into the English Channel and on towards the mainland will be the team's final challenge. Accurate navigation will be the key here, otherwise the team could find themselves rowing against the current at a time when speed is of the essence.

A climatology study, undertaken by weather router Lee Bruce, has pinpointed the optimum rowing conditions for the Pink Lady Atlantic First route, taking into account the safety of the crew. Bruce is an ex-United States Air Force meteorologist, who nowadays specialises in global forecasts for ocean racing and global expeditions. His clients include some of yachting and ocean racing's professional elite. He will provide the crew with daily weather updates by means of their Iridium satellite phone. Although stopping or changing direction in the event of bad weather will not be an option for the crew (due to time constraints), there are still certain countermeasures that they can employ. For example, in the event of predicted high winds, they might redistribute the boat's ballast, or alternatively, they might row with three crew members instead of two in order to increase speed and escape a particular weather front.

While the summer months are the best for rowing across the Atlantic, fog, ships and stormy weather are still potential hazards for the team. And while June and July offer the optimum conditions for this attempt, the weather window is still extremely narrow and success is by no means guaranteed.

There have so far been 29 attempts to row the Atlantic from west to east. Only ten have been successful and not one of these has ever reached mainland Britain. Six men have died in the attempt, the latest being Nenad Belic, a doctor from Chicago, who set off from Cape Cod in May 2001 and died 151 days later when his boat disappeared during a storm off the coast of Ireland.

There is no question that this crossing is fraught with danger, but the crew will carry an array of technology to combat the problems that they might face. As well as their satellite phone, which can be used to contact the outside world, they will also carry two Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons, which can be set off in the event of a life-threatening situation to alert their support team of the problem. The crew will also carry an ARGOS locator beacon, which transmits a continual signal, relayed by satellite to the team's Logistics Support Manager, who in turn can plot the boat's progress on a minute-by-minute basis. The team will also use an Active Radar Enhancer, which will warn other ships of their location and also alert the Pink Lady crew to the presence of any vessels in the area. Without such a device, there is a very real danger of their streamlined, low-in-the-water boat being hit by much larger ships.

As well as their technical equipment, the team will also carry the usual safety equipment, such as flares to attract attention; survival suits, which reduce the risk of hypothermia in the event of capsizing and enable the crew to survive in cold water for long periods; a life raft and buoyancy aids. The team members have also all undergone sea survival training and practised capsizing drills and self-righting tests. In short, in the event that the weather turns against them, they are as mentally and as physically prepared as it is possible to be.

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