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AROUND THE WORLD

Abhilash Tomy, the first Indian to sail around the world non-stop, has something crazier in mind

Only one person has ever succeeded in what the 38-year-old Naval officer is going to attempt.

by *Ashish Magotra*

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Abhilash Tomy

In 1968, there was a race around the world. It was to find out who will be the first to go around the world non-stop, unassisted. Nine people started, one finished.

A Frenchman went around the world but he thought there was no point coming back, so he went around the world again and settled down in Polynesia forever. There was another guy who committed suicide in the Atlantic. Another guy stopped in South Africa, went back to England and committed suicide. And somebody else's boat sank. Eventually, just one finished.

The race began in the British Isles and headed south down the western coast of Africa before turning east around the Cape of Good Hope and into the southern Indian Ocean. From there, it continued under Australia and New Zealand before a long run across the southern Pacific Ocean. After rounding Cape Horn, the race ran parallel to the Brazilian coast before crossing the equator and, eventually, made its way back to Britain. A 30,000 mile solo circumnavigation to prove they could endure the danger of the sea and the strain of solitude in their crossings. Adventure at its truest.

Now, with the 50th anniversary of the Golden Globe Race looming large, they are repeating the race next year, with 30 entrants from around the world and five getting special invitations. One of those five is Abhilash Tomy, 38, the first and only Indian to complete a solo, unassisted, non-stop circumnavigation under sail.



Image credit: Golden Globe Race

The race is set apart from other round-the-world races such as the Volvo Ocean Race (which requires a crew of 10) or the Vendée Globe by a very unique set of rules.

“They don’t want you to use technology that was invented after 1968,” said Tomy at an interaction during the Girimitr Sannelan, a congregation of mountaineers in Mumbai. “That means no GPS, no electronics, no electronic watches, no digital cameras. Anything electronic and digital – just forget. You are left with your sextant, a compass and a radio set. That’s it. You won’t even know what the wind speed is.”

If that doesn't sound scary, it should. But at the same time, it is also terribly, terribly exciting. To be able to do things in the manner of the adventurers of old is at once challenging yet romantic.

"Technology reduces your workload a lot," said Tomy, a Naval officer. "If you want to know where you are, you just have to switch on the GPS and you know how many days it will take you to reach your destination. You know everything. Without tech, to find out where you are... will take you about three hours... provided you can see the sky and the stars."

He added, "If you take a step back and sail without tech, then you are more in touch with the elements. Like, I remember this joke, when somebody on Facebook asked me how is the weather outside, I said, 'Wait, let me check the right website for it.' He was like, 'Idiot, I asked you to go outside, check the weather and tell me.' Jokes aside, your oneness with the sea is much more without technology. And that is why I am doing this."

Know everything about everything

When Abhilash went around the world for the first time, he prepared by learning how to do everything – including cook.

"You need to know everything about everything," he said. "Everything about oceanography, meteorology, medicine, your diet, aluminum repairs, carpentry work, fiberglass work, electronics, mechanical... anything that humanity has learnt till now, you need to learn, including international diplomacy. You don't want to land up in the wrong country and have them shooting you up."

This time around, he needs to bring all his experience to race. It helps in a way that he has done something like this before. He has learnt how to take it step-by-step.

"First, you build a boat," he said. "And you need to make sure the boat is strong and doesn't break. You just make it strong. Whatever design you have, you just make sure it is slightly thicker, slightly stronger, slightly above specifications because in the end, it is going to save your life or kill you."

Abhilash will be racing a replica of Sir Robin Knox-Johnston's original winner. The boat is now at the paint stage and will be launched in August. The best preparation, though, will be when he will sail it to the UK – the journey will take him three to four months, but it will give him an intimate understanding of the boat and its quirks.





Image credit: Abhilash Tomy

“The first guy will finish in 250-300 days,” Tomy said. “The boat is so small (around 10 metres), I don’t even have space to carry water for one year even if I am having just one litre a day. You just have to take rain water and figure out.”

Once the boat reaches Plymouth in the UK, it will be checked for any electronic devices, and then be sealed. It will be opened in time for the race and then checked again. It’s the sailing world’s version of an anti-doping program.

Abhilash seems calm but his job as a reconnaissance pilot with the Indian Navy has clearly taught him a thing or two about rough seas. It has also taught him to accept things as they come.

“Last time this race happened, many movies came out of it, many books came out of it,” he said. “This time, it is going to be one of the most talked about races of this decade. There is going to be so much drama and I can assure you right now that not everybody is going to come back,” he added with a smile.

“The easiest way of winning this race is by outliving the others. This is climbing Everest, without supplementary oxygen... without your clothes on. It is going back to a very different era, there is no escape... there is no cheat.”

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