

ARIZONA BOATER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO DESERT WATERSPORTS

**'Round-the-world
speed record run...**

**100% biofuel...
100% carbon neutral.**

**We catch Earthrace in San Diego.
And almost in Manzanillo, México.
And almost ride along.
And still might.
Or not.**

Photo: Joe Sage



We've been asked many times how we first found out about this boat. It may have been in a PR feed, or it may have been in the news; we're not sure at this point. But once we saw it, we had to know more. We checked their website (www.earthrace.net) and saw the route included a stop in Mexico and one in San Diego. We contacted them to find out when those would be, as it would be pretty compelling to catch up with it while in our neighborhood. Thus began months of correspondence, from a flurry of emails to several-times-per-day calls by satellite, cell and even ground crew home phones in Spain.

The captain and the record

The current/prior record for circumnavigating the globe by speed boat is 75 days, set by captain Ian Bosworth in the boat Cable & Wireless in 1998. Sir Richard Branson, of Virgin Records, Virgin Airlines and Virgin everything-else fame, holds the Atlantic crossing record, since 1986. Enter Pete Bethune, an intrepid New Zealander with degrees in mechanical engineering and applied mathematics, a seasoned former oil engineer with Schlumberger in the North Sea and North Africa. He is also a yachtmaster, offshore medic and founder of CamSensor Technologies, a combination that provides a sound foundation for this effort.

Branson, Bosworth, Bethune: all start

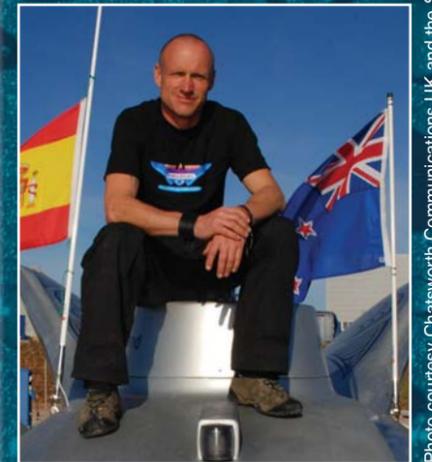


Photo courtesy Chatsworth Communications UK and the Sunday Times (London).

with B as in boat. Hmm.

Pete has staked his home and any other life's savings on trying to beat the record. And he one-ups his predecessors by making the attempt completely on 100% carbon neutral biofuels. This, of course, has not escaped Branson's attention, as he expands his efforts to

KEEP RIGHT >>



Photos courtesy Chatsworth Communications UK and the Sunday Times (London).

power Virgin Airlines with biofuels, having made his first successful flight earlier this year. Nor does it escape our attention, as US gasoline crosses the \$4/gallon mark, and alternative fuels become increasingly newsworthy for daily transportation, as well.

Alternative fuels

Working within a target schedule of just 65 days, this effort has run the gamut on the bio-fuels issue, as first the world saw spikes in food prices, some of which were intimated to perhaps be caused by a spike in development of ethanol fuel from corn and sugar cane, followed by the dramatic climb in the price of oil, which quickly renewed interested in alternative fuels, followed by an increasing spike in food prices, blamed by some on the use of food as fuel, and by others as simply the result of fuel itself raising the normal incidental costs of growing and delivering food.

(By the way, a number of biofuels have been tried, including the fat gathered during liposuction, for which Pete even volunteered whatever he could from his own fit frame.)

One thing for certain, Earthrace is a noble effort, with broad applications, and it's more newsworthy every step of the way.

The race attempt begins

We've also been asked many times if this is a race, why aren't there other boats? This is a record attempt, a race to best an existing record. The race is against the clock, the calendar, the machinery and human endurance.

As the event launched from Valencia, Spain, we were glued to the GPS tracking feature on the Earthrace site. A run around the harbor, then west past Gibraltar and on to the first stop: the Azores. From there, it was a long stretch to Puerto Rico, and that's where the schedule had its first hiccup. Fuel has to be shipped in by a worldwide logistics company, and there will be no compromise in the use of 100% biodiesel. The Puerto Rico shipment had been diverted, so the crew lost about 30 hours there. On to Panama and two more delays.

Engineer Mark Russell caught his big toe on a shard of carbon fiber and pretty well ripped it off. Quick attempts to duct-tape it back were insufficient, so they took Mark to a qualified medical team, who basically duct-taped it back professionally. They would check it further in Mexico and seek further help there or in San Diego, if need be.

Another logistical issue loomed in Panama, though. There were a good 100 or so boats backed up at the Atlantic/Caribbean end of the canal (strictly speaking, this is the west or northwest side... check a map to see the convoluted path of the Panamanian isthmus). There was some discussion of this being due to labor issues at the Canal, but in the course

of finally getting moved to the front of the line, it was agreed that the Canal Authority had been most helpful and that there were no issues as first reported, after all.

These delays cost another couple of days.

We ready our visit

Meanwhile, we were sitting in Arizona, studying the GPS updates, calculating the speed and projected distance and time against maps from Panama, past Central America, to Manzanillo, on the Mexican coast, southwest of Guadalajara, between Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo. (As fate would have it, the key rep from the printer of this magazine, who had happened to be in San Diego during the Red Bull Air Race, was now going to be in Zihuatanejo at this time, enabling him to potentially see the boat pass, or at least hear about it. There was happenstance and synergy galore afoot here.)

We were also studying flight schedules to Manzanillo, which amount to two airlines with two arrival times fairly close together, about midafternoon if all were timely, and of course with stops variously in LA, Houston or our favorite, a 23-plus-hour layover between flights in Ciudad de México DF. If we had time to hang out in Manzanillo for a few days waiting, it'd be easy. But we'd have to be efficient with our time away, so we kept watching the boat's progress and the flight and hotel possibilities. (The ground crew's hotel would suit us just fine, a beautiful facility right on the waterfront, with its own harbor to accommodate the boat's refueling and toe-repair stop.)

The thing is... by this point, we'd progressed beyond just going to Manzanillo (and San Diego, next) just to see the boat, but rather were talking about riding along. This was indeed available to us, but it's a sponsorship arrangement, and despite some offers of sweetheart pricing, still a bit much for us. At the same time, that didn't rule it out. So we watched the schedule, watched the flights, watched the bank balance and the wisdom that does or does not reside within, and the clock ticked down.

Life on board

Now, to go along means a fair amount of preparation. The boat is lean and mean. The shell is constructed of carbon fiber, with a cockpit as purpose-built as any F1 race car, an efficient galley and head (with a door reluctantly added to the head just for the sake of some prior ride-along guests, despite its additional few pounds of weight... remember, this is a speed record attempt), and berths in the bow area. There are actually eight berths cast and mounted into the bow area, though the crew is limited to four, and the guest list is limited to two, again for the sake of weight,

not to mention the jockeying of human mass in tight areas with pressing tasks at hand.

One of the remarkable things about the Earthrace boat is that it is designed and engineered to ride pretty much flat, submerging straight through the waves. (Videos of this can be found at their website, and/or on YouTube with a simple search.) The radical trailing outrigger pontoons of this trimaran help keep the boat stable as it does this. But the berth area has only one small hatch in the deck above, and that is often closed for the sake of the submerging cycles.

Add to this the two 1100-hp Cummins diesels, which provide thunderous vibrations throughout the carbon fiber shell and background noise of 85 dB or more at all times. Protective headgear must be worn, along the lines of helicopter piloting.

Sleep is in the schedule, but realistically is one of the first things to be deprioritized.

The crew eats pretty well, with various delicacies provided by kind souls at most of the refueling stops. However, every pound does count, so not everything makes it aboard. And the ride can be rough. So dining also gets deprioritized. On top of trying not to eat too much in Mexico before boarding a fast boat for a few days, we figured there was a serious weight-loss program in our future.

Countdown to Manzanillo

Alas, procrastination was too easy to come by, with the schedule uncertain, the packing list undetermined, the sponsorship price not finalized, and the looming possibility of not just buying a one-way ticket to Mexico, but also buying it at the last minute, two things sure to earn us an extended conversation with TSA agents. And since we would be heading to Mexico not completely sure whether we would be boarding for the ride to San Diego, then flying back from there, or booking a return flight from Manzanillo... well, we were up until 11pm the night before the boat was finally most likely to arrive, with the alarm set for 3am, just in case.

We could still probably book a flight, and it would arrive in Manzanillo either just in time for the boat's arrival, or at least almost certainly in time to catch up with the crew while they were on their two-to-four-hour refueling, medical and provision stopover. We were on the satellite phone to Spain again, checking to see whether Mark's toe would be fixed in the harbor, or whether there'd be that little margin of time if he went to the hospital for care. It would be quick, in the harbor, probably.

We were up at 3, but the rest became like watching the proverbial slow-motion train wreck. We watched our last-minute packing and then airport deadlines come and go,

OUR SAN DIEGO TRIP 2

Having spent some near-sleepless nights on our Manzanillo options, we flew to San Diego this time. We rented a Hyundai Tucson: solid, comfortable and sized right.

Lodging was at the Pacific Terrace Hotel in Mission Beach, handy to Shelter Island while avoiding downtown parking, Ocean Beach airport noise and even freeways.

Rates ran from \$317 up to \$417 for a full ocean view. AAA discounts are available. Full ocean view was not available with a king bed, but a queen still offered a great night's sleep with the surf right outside. The shifting race schedule forced several changes in our reservation, and the staff accommodated this graciously. Included are secure underground parking, a pool and hot tub fronting the ocean, and complimentary breakfast with patio seating.

Pacific Terrace Hotel

610 Diamond St., San Diego CA 92109
800-344-3370 • 858-581-3500
www.pacificterrace.com

Mission Beach retains its funky nature, but this hotel gives a top-notch oceanfront stay that might cost two or three times as much a few miles up in La Jolla. The hotel was so nice, we stayed an extra day. ■



Photos courtesy Pacific Terrace Hotel

Photo: Joe Sage





Photos: Joe Sage

watched the boat approach Manzanillo (via GPS tracking) and tracked the flights we'd missed. The flight was indeed a little late. We never were certain whether we'd be able to dash out the airport door, grab a cab and ask in our best minimal Español to be taken to the Manzanillo harbor, or whether it might be a little more casual than all that. And we weren't certain how easy it would be to find this small boat in that big harbor. Imagine our surprise and confusion, then, when the boat (still tracking on GPS) cruised right past Manzanillo harbor as we understood it, past the airport, which is on the coast to the north of the harbor, and pulled into another coastal spot to the north of that.

We had, indeed, had some difficulty locating the hotel on satellite maps, but had figured it was just brand new and that the maps hadn't been updated yet (which if you've ever checked a Phoenix location, you know is often the case). Well, if we'd grabbed that cab, one of two things would have happened: either we would have headed south to the major harbor, and we likely would have missed the whole deal, as our cabbie helped us poke around the whole wrong area; or the cabbie would have been more savvy, headed north, and we would have probably assumed we were being kidnapped.

If we had it to do over, we clearly would have flown down a day early, enjoyed the Mexican cuisine, and let our busy schedules and digestive tracts sort themselves out as best they could.

Countdown to San Diego

So, now the boat was off to San Diego, and we were not aboard. An opportunity clearly missed in Manzanillo, we were not about to let the same thing happen in southern

California. Fortunately, of course, there are many more flights to San Diego, so our options were much more flexible. And having learned the above lessons about timing and the uncertainties of arrival times for the race itself, we went ahead and flew to San Diego about 22 hours ahead of the anticipated arrival time. This was just one short day and a half after we might have caught the boat in Manzanillo. Time was flying, as was the boat.

In one prior abandoned attempt at the record, as well as in some trial runs, Earthrace had encountered some major adventures. They were once chased down by Colombian gunboats (and still have the bullet holes to back up the story). Another time, they were chased down by pirates and/or the authorities near Palau and detained for enough days to blow the speed attempt. And one time they had a tragic collision with an unlighted fishing boat, in the middle of the night, off the coast of Guatemala. To paraphrase the popular bumper sticker, things can happen. We wondered a bit what it might entail to cross from Mexico into the US by boat. Reading the captain's blog during the run from Manzanillo to San Diego, we were fascinated by a tale of weapons, brought along after the Colombian adventure and with pirate risks in mind, but ordered by Spanish authorities to remain sealed for the duration, until they were registered back in New Zealand. As you can read online, Pete's logic was that as soon as they were out of Spanish waters, they were back under New Zealand authority, if any. And in New Zealand, only the owner had to be registered, not the hardware. And he was already registered. And yet... they would be back in Spain before they were ever back in New Zealand, so logic came with a conundrum. Nonetheless, somewhere between Manzanillo and San Diego, the crew decided it would help pass the time if they uncrated their guns and fired at the occasional lemon, flung from the deck out over the ocean. This added to our own low-level paranoia about what might happen during the customs process when the boat arrived in the US. Well, we weren't aboard, so call it interest, rather than paranoia.

Shelter Island, arrival eve

When we arrived in San Diego, after dark the evening before the boat's scheduled arrival, we headed straight to Shelter Island, to get oriented to the boat's specific point of entry (not wanting a repeat of what might have happened had we done the Manzanillo taxi dash). Seeing no obvious signs of activity nor a major venue, we stuck our heads in what turned out to be the back door of the San Diego port police, which was just open for a little fresh air. They hadn't heard a thing about

this, although they did remember the boat coming through a year or two back, and they were able to go straight to the Earthrace website with us. They did say the first stop would have to be next to their office, where customs officials would be the first to welcome them to our shores.

Shelter Island, arrival day

We continued to track the boat's speed via GPS, and to pull satellite images and maps into Photoshop, where we could apply mileage scales, convert metric knots per hour into MPH and guess the arrival time. We headed back to Shelter Island the next day. Manzanillo had attracted hundreds of spectators and enough press to fill a substantial media tent. We saw few people and no tent at Shelter Island. Going back online, wireless from our rental Hyundai, we located the marina facility that was due to host the fuel loading, and we headed to their boatyard office. The office staff was mostly oblivious to this big event, too, though they did note they'd received other inquiries, and the phone did keep ringing with still more.

Shelter Island is attached to the mainland by a causeway, and when the boat came in from the ocean, it would have to head between the island and the mainland for customs, but then either dock on the opposite side of the causeway from the boatyard's own docks, or head back out, around, and the full length of Shelter Island, then back in from the east end, to get to the docks. Nobody was quite sure how these logistics would work, and we hoped not to get caught in heavy onlooker traffic, if we guessed wrong.

Showtime San Diego

A good handful of people were gathered at the west tip of Shelter Island by 4pm or so, including one local TV news photographer with his videocam, who unfortunately had to give up and return to the station by 5:10pm max, the outside of his window of opportunity for a 6pm news item. The boat came into sight about 5:20pm. They indeed seemed to first head toward the far end of the island, toward the fueling docks, but were turned about and directed back around to customs. Mark's folks had arrived on the scene, to see how his foot was doing and just say hello. A couple of other people were there who had happened upon the event as it passed through Panama and wanted to catch up with everyone again. As the boat maneuvered to the customs dock, a collection of uniformed people headed down to meet it. We weren't positive whether they were EMTs for Mark's injured foot, and/or customs officials. Some of the spectators inquired, but were met with silence. Not EMTs, we guessed.

The customs officials did find something of great interest, which cost the boat a precious hour or so of its turnaround time. Weapons? Mexican contraband slipped aboard by unknown parties? No. Well, yes. It was Mexican contraband, but just bacon and eggs.

The boat finally was released to its refueling tasks. Rob Drewett, world-experienced underwater and documentary cameraman, was the first off the boat, and we joined him, and/or he us, as we both raced around the island, catching good vantage points as the boat passed the North Island Naval Station on Coronado Island, San Diego Harbor and the downtown skyline, and headed to the docks.

An enthusiastic group met the boat and crew at the docks, and many had brought special treats, which the crew would carefully review for their pleasure and nutrition versus weight ratio. As darkness fell, a plank was laid from the dock to the stern, and people were able to file aboard for a peek.

Pete has long since reconciled himself to the fact that he may have sunk substantial funds and time into this project, but "at least I have the coolest boat in the world." Everyone seems to agree with that assessment. Not many seemed as though they'd really want to cram themselves into those quarters for days at sea, however. But us? We can see their point, but nonetheless really wish we'd done the Manzanillo to San Diego run. When a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity presents itself, that generally means you don't get a second chance.

The rest of the trip

We toyed with the idea of Hawaii to the Marshall Islands, a leg which was heartily recommended to us by the ground crew. And as we go to press, and the boat heads from Singapore to India, we still toy with the idea of the Oman to Egypt leg. Imagine the fun TSA would have when we show up with a one-way ticket to Oman.

The boat has had another snag or two. One driveshaft failed after Palau, and a new one had to be crafted and installed in Singapore. At that point, which is also as we go to press, the new record was still in sight. Log on to www.earthrace.net to find out how it all turned out.

And while online, check out everything; we can barely scratch the surface here. There is extensive information on the boat's benchmark technologies and fuel efficiency, as well as Pete's overall commitment to minimum impact on the precious waterways of the world, which go beyond the fuel to every detail of outfitting and maintenance. And read the captain's and crew's blogs; yes, we seem to have missed an opportunity. ■

