

Fantastic voyage:
the *Plastiki* at sea.
Inset: skipper Jo Royle.

My Story: *JO ROYLE*

The 31-year-old skipper says the historic *Plastiki* voyage to Sydney is her greatest achievement



I'm honestly not an adrenalin junkie, but from a young age I have been unexplainably drawn to the ocean. I started off wanting to become a master of the waves, but experience has taught me that you can never master, just respond. I want to learn more about the ocean, which makes up 70 per cent of our planet, and our connection to it — we know so little. From surface analysis, we know we're clogging up the oceans with our trash, but we really haven't got a clue what goes on beneath. So very little of the ocean has been explored. For me, being out on the ocean is empowering and addictive. It puts life into perspective.

"I grew up between Lancashire, in northern England, and Devon, in the

south. All of my holidays as a child involved boats. I studied communications at Leeds University, but all I wanted to do was go back to life at sea. As soon as I finished my degree, aged 21, I made my first Atlantic crossing as part of a three-person crew delivering a boat from England to Antigua. I found it hard getting sailing jobs because I was a young girl — I kept hearing, 'OK, you'll be the stewardess under deck' — but determination changed this.

"Several years later, I sailed to the island of South Georgia in the Antarctic. It was an incredible, beautiful experience that changed my life's focus from simply wanting to explore the blue heart of the planet to wanting to further understand our connection with nature.

"It was then that I really saw for the first time the effect mankind has had on our oceans. As we circumnavigated this incredibly remote island, one side was pristine, but the other, which was exposed to the Southern Ocean, was littered with plastic. I've always been passionate about the environment and I really believe that our purpose on the planet is to be caretaker, to make sure that future generations can have the same experiences in nature as we have, so this sight affected me deeply.

"That's why the *Plastiki* became such an important project for me. I met [environmentalist and adventurer] David de Rothschild nearly two years ago and was fascinated by his plan to build a 60-foot catamaran made entirely of recyclable materials and sail it ▶

LUCA BABINI. INTERVIEW BY RACHEL SHARP

TALKING POINTS

11,000 nautical miles across the Pacific, to draw attention to the large amounts of plastic debris in the world's oceans. The Plastiki team wasn't made up of experts in boatbuilding, composite scientists, et cetera; rather, an eclectic group of individuals with a real can-do attitude. That's the empowering part — when you come together from different backgrounds to bounce ideas around, you get smart solutions.

"Almost 70 per cent of the Plastiki's buoyancy relies on 12,500 two-litre plastic bottles, all from San Francisco's recycling centre. Each one is filled with 12 grams of dry ice, which makes them really solid. The whole boat is recyclable, there are no toxic resins and it's all heat-welded.

"We set sail on March 20, 2010 from San Francisco and made just three stops on the 128-day voyage: at Kiribati in the remote Line Islands, in Samoa, then in New Caledonia.

"It's fairly unusual to have a female skipper on an otherwise all-male boat, but it was no issue for me to spend so long in close confines with five guys. We didn't really know each other before setting sail, but we worked well together and the guys were all very respectful. I'd be like, 'OK, turn around; I'm going to have a shower on the deck,' and it was no big issue. It's funny — the older I get, the more I miss female company. I may do a practical job, but I'm quite a feminine girl. Guys don't chit-chat like us — or giggle as much. I used meditation skills to maintain my sanity. At night, I could lose myself in the amazing stars.

"Only two of us were experienced sailors, so we were constantly navigating, reading the weather, forecasting, fixing the boat, and managing the power and systems. Then there was blogging, interviews and personal messages to send. We had a watch system of three hours on, three hours off, so I never slept more than three hours at a time. I'll make a great new mum one day.

"When we ran out of wind, we'd drop all the sails and go for a swim. One of the biggest shocks of the trip was that, in nearly five months at sea, we saw only three pilot whales and four dolphins. I was so disappointed: I didn't see a single

"We bathed in salt water [or] if we saw rain in the distance, we'd head towards it and all get on deck ..."

shark. Since 1950, about 90 per cent of the big predator fish have gone. Today, that population is replenishing in marine protected areas, but that makes up less than 1 per cent of the ocean.

"Before we left, we stocked up on local sustainable foods and meats, which we canned and dried, and set up a little hydroponic garden onboard too. We had no way of making fresh water, so we took enough to ration and relied on the rain. We had some wine, which was nice in the evenings, until it went a bit warm and manky after a while. It sounds like a detox diet, but I think I actually gained weight because I wasn't very active.

"I love fashion, but there was none at sea, or beauty luxuries. We bathed in



From top: Royle on deck with David de Rothschild (right); the Plastiki's unique bottle hull construction and solar panels helped keep it "off the grid".



salt water, and if we saw a rain shower in the distance, we'd head towards it and all get on deck, soaping up, hoping for a fresh shower. Kiehl's invented a three-in-one shower gel, shampoo and conditioner [Kiehl's Cross-Terrain All-in-One Refueling Wash] for us, which is now sold in its stores. I used a lot of Kiehl's [French] Rosewater to save my dry skin.

"Landing in Sydney on July 26 was absolutely overwhelming. To see nine helicopters and so many people and the media was unbelievable; we were just happy to know that our message had come across. In our lifetime, we are not going to see a ban on all single-use plastic, but my wish is that we see a huge reduction. We need to give plastic a value, so we see a smarter use of it, so we don't just throw it away.

"The most common consumer plastics clogging up our oceans are all what I call 'dumb use', or single-use plastics — plastic bags, polystyrene containers, drink bottles and bottle lids. We buy a plastic bottle of water that lasts in our hands for five minutes, but lasts in the ocean for more than 500 years. As it slowly degrades, it breaks down into finer and finer particles that spread and act as a sponge for all the chemicals now in our oceans. Then filter feeders come along and eat these toxic specks believing they're food, and they then get eaten by bigger fish and even bigger fish, which eventually end up on our dinner table. There's new science linking the toxins in single-use plastics to fertility problems and cancers.

"Plastic has only been on our planet for 100 years and I don't believe there's been enough science done to know how toxic it is, and that's really scary. I didn't think that a year ago; that's how this voyage has affected my own awareness. We can all make easy changes today, just by changing the products we're using.

"I'm not a saint. I'm still selfish in my purchasing choices. But it's a kind of weakness in me that I feel I have to hurry up and get things done while I can. I hope the Plastiki and our voyage inspire people to go on their own mission. One person can make a difference. When we get together with other people, we can do anything."

To make your pledge for plastic-free oceans, visit www.myplastiki.com.