

French adventurer seeks Pacific record with 'flying' boat

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Alain Thébault of France, skipper of the "Hydroptère" yacht, on a test run in Los Angeles, California on May 20, 2015

Skimming across the surface of the vast Pacific, Alain Thebault scans the horizon with his blue Breton eyes. He is feeling good. A record is there to be broken.

"It's like a magic carpet," Thebault said aboard the cutting-edge "Hydroptere" sailboat, which he hopes to pilot halfway across the Pacific from Los Angeles to Honolulu in record time.

Off the California coast under azur-blue skies, Thebault accelerated the hydrofoil supercraft to 30 knots as the 18-meter (60-foot) boat stands on three foils that claw the waves, lifting the hull fully out of the water.

The few passengers cling to the side as they experience the sensation of flying for a few moments.

"Welcome, it's back to work," Thebault said, smiling as he helmed the vast craft through the shallow waves off the coast of San Pedro, just south of Los Angeles.

This is Thebault's first journey in three months on the ship that set a speed sailing record of over 50 knots in 2009, and now he is ready to attempt to best a crossing mark: reaching Hawaii from the City of Angels in under 4.19 days.

"We want that record," the fiery and passionate Frenchman said.

A key to that goal is to keep the Hydroptere intact. It's broken down four times.

"The first challenge is to keep the structure," said the sailor.

"It will work well in flight stability between 20 and 29 knots with three-meter swells," Thebault said.



Alain Thébault of France stands next to the "Hydroptère" prior to attempting a record crossing from Los Angeles to Hawaii in under 4.19 days

"And don't hit floating objects."

In June, stars should be aligned for the Hydroptère's journey. The moon will be full to offer some visibility at night.

More importantly, financial and legal obstacles have been temporarily overcome.

False starts

It took three years of efforts and false starts to get to this point.

To finance the venture, the 52-year-old had to sell his house—with the blessing of his three daughters.

Since then, he also found the remaining cash from the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation and the Paul Ricard Oceanographic Institute, among other sponsors.

Prince Albert is also sponsoring the Solar Impulse 2, the solar-powered superglider being flown around the world by Swiss aviator Bertrand Piccard.

"We are very good friends. He is currently in China, and we've agreed to meet in Hawaii, one powered by wind, the other by the sun," he said.



Alain Thébault will be accompanied in the record crossing attempt by close friend Jacques Vincent as well as James Spithill, who won the last America's Cup on another flying catamaran, the AC72

The Hydroptere is also planning to film the "great garbage patch," a vast stretch of ocean the size of the US state of Texas awash with plastic and other trash.

Six people will be on board for the crossing. Thebault will be accompanied by best buddy Jacques Vincent as well as James Spithill, who won the last America's Cup on another flying catamaran, the AC72.

Thebault's mentor Eric Tabarly came up with an experimental foil-cruising catamaran in 1979, and Thebault "flew" the Hydroptere for the first time in 1994.

In the meantime flying multi-hull boats have multiplied, including the Flying Phantom, the GC32, the SL33 et the AC45, as well as the AC72.

The Frenchman is already working on another prototype expected to race at four times windspeed.

"We should be able to go at 80 or even 100 knots," he said.

This self-taught adventurer rapidly persuaded experts to follow him, and he is currently working with four retirees from Dassault and Airbus.

How much did the Hydroptere cost? "Twenty years of passion," Thebault deadpaned.

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