

CLIPPER CHRONICLES

Adventures and Lessons from the Clipper 2023-24
Round the World Yacht Race

Adrian Birrer

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CLIPPER CHRONICLES

Adventures and Lessons from the Clipper 2023-24 Round the World Yacht Race

A guide for ocean sailors and aspiring adventurers, drawn from the detailed daily notes and experiences of Adrian Birrer—circumnavigator, crew member, and sailmaker aboard *Ha Long Bay Viet Nam* (CV31), the champion yacht of the 11-month Clipper 2023-24 Round the World Yacht Race.

In *Clipper Chronicles – Part I “The Race”*, Adrian Birrer, circumnavigator, and sailmaker aboard *Ha Long Bay Viet Nam*, recounts the incredible story of the Clipper 2023-24 Round the World Yacht Race. Over 11 gruelling months and 45,000 nautical miles, this journey pushed its crew through icy storms, tropical heat, sleepless nights, and moments of doubt. Birrer’s detailed, daily log entries over 331 days and nights reveal not only the physical and mental endurance required but also the deeper lessons learned about resilience, teamwork, and the human spirit.

Through honest and vivid storytelling, Birrer delves into the struggles and triumphs of his crew: battling unpredictable seas, learning to trust and support one another, and confronting their own limits. From the roaring Southern Ocean to the light winds of the doldrums, every chapter immerses readers in the high stakes of life aboard a racing yacht.

In *Clipper Chronicles – Part II “Guidelines & Lessons”*, Birrer provides valuable insider insights and practical advice on topics such as the four-week Clipper training, physical and mental preparation, medical checks, financial planning before and during the race, concerns of partners and family, packing lists, details on Hyde sails and the Clipper 70 racing yachts, personal safety, the Code of Conduct, watch systems, onboard roles, hygiene and housekeeping, digestion, sample recipes, movement below deck, wooling & packing a kite, and the guiding philosophy: *Love your Sails*.

Whether you’re a sailor, leader, or adventurer at heart, *Clipper Chronicles* offers an unforgettable exploration of what it takes to overcome adversity and achieve greatness on the world’s oceans.

Adrian Birrer



I dedicate this book and poem to Katharina, my wife.

My Anchor, My Shore

My anchor, my shore, steadfast and true,
Who held the fort and let me explore anew.
With grace, you nurtured both hearth and kin,
And carried the weight of our world within.

You balanced the burdens of home and career,
A quiet commander, both strong and clear.
While I chased horizons, far and wide,
You kept our world steady, your love my pride.

Through storms at sea and skies so blue,
My compass always pointed back to you.
For your patience, your care, your unwavering heart,
This book is yours, though just a small part.

A year apart, yet bound as one,
You welcomed me home, where it all begun.



Charting the Course

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & FOREWORD

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I am deeply grateful to my elderly parents for their open-mindedness when the question arose of whether I should return home in case of serious illness—or worse. They encouraged me to see it through, assuring me they would manage.

A heartfelt thank you goes out to everyone who heard my calls for donations to UNICEF and contributed so generously.

Special thanks to my advisors:

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- Nutritionist Fabian Allemann, Alfavita in Zurich, Switzerland
- Dr Danielle Gyurech, Travel Clinic in Zurich, Switzerland
- Dieter Kuhn, Kuhn Sail Manufacturer, Romanshorn, Switzerland
- Heiko, World's End Tattoo-Studio, Zurich, Switzerland
- Central Apotheke, Horgen, Switzerland for their famous “Navy Caps” anti-seasickness formula

To the crew of *Ha Long Bay Viet Nam*, my teammates, Thank You for being part of this extraordinary journey. You were my challenge, my motivation, and my teachers. From the highs of teamwork to the complexities of individual differences, I gained invaluable lessons from each of you.

Special thanks go to Susan ‘Giffy’ Gifford, Eric Froggatt, Antony Bream, Martin Steinlechner, Felix Steiner and Marc Zollinger for giving me advice and helping to proofread the content of my manuscripts.

My heartfelt thanks to our fellow competitors and sailing friends: *Dare to Lead*, *Our Isles and Oceans*, *Bekezela*, *Perseverance*, *Zhuhai*, *Yacht Club Punta del Este*, *Qingdao*, *Unicef*, *PSP Logistics*, and *Washington DC*. Together, we battled fierce storms, pushing our sails—and ourselves—to the limit. Yet in port, we were comrades, sharing unforgettable moments. I will always remember this time with deep respect and fondness.

A special thanks to Sir Robin Knox-Johnston for making this adventure possible, and to the Clipper Race management, administration, and maintenance teams for their tireless dedication. The race office was always there to support, while the maintenance team worked relentlessly to keep the yachts racing.



Sir Robin Knox-Johnston

Sailing legend and decorated sailor, Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, who made history by becoming the first man to sail solo and non-stop around the globe in 1968-69, is the Founder of the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race and Co-Founder of Clipper Ventures alongside William Ward.



Figure 1: Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, Adrian Birrer, in Gunwharf Quay, Portsmouth, 1 September 2023

Josh Stickland

Josh is an experienced skipper with over 150,000 nautical miles under his belt. He started sailing at the age of ten, and with the Prince's Trust and UKSA's support Josh qualified as a Water Sports Instructor and has never looked back. He has worked all over the globe on yachts and superyachts up to 110m, but the pull of the Clipper Race was too much to resist for the former Ha Long Bay Viet Nam Skipper, who previously led his team to an incredible six podium places out of eight races, and third place overall, and sees him return for a second race as the Skipper of the Vietnamese team entry.



*Figure 2: Josh Stickland, Skipper Ha Long Bay Viet Nam
from Portsmouth to Zhuhai 2023-2024*

Foreword by Bob Beggs

Bob Beggs is no stranger to the Clipper Race, having served as a Training Skipper for over two decades. A highly experienced offshore racer and instructor, he has logged over 500,000 nautical miles and skippered in three previous editions of the Clipper Race.

Before his victory in the Clipper 2023-24 Race, Bob led Bristol to victory in the Times Clipper 2000 Race and later skippered Qingdao (2015-16) and Unicef (2017-18), bringing a wealth of expertise to each campaign.



Figure 3: Bob Beggs, Skipper on Ha Long Bay Vietnam from Zhuhai to Portsmouth 2024

In this book, Adrian offers a firsthand account of what it truly means to race a Clipper 70 around the world—the storms, the relentless grind, the camaraderie, and the pursuit of victory. Based on his detailed logbook, it captures the physical and mental demands of life at sea, the raw power of nature, and the bonds formed among sailors.

I first met Adrian in Zhuhai, where I took command of *Ha Long Bay Viet Nam*. The team had fought hard to climb the leaderboard, and my focus was to maintain that momentum. With three Round the World Races behind me, I knew sail quality was critical. From the outset, Adrian's dedication to sail maintenance and repair was evident. Unable to attend the official Clipper training, he took the initiative to apprentice unpaid with a professional sailmaker for three weeks—gaining invaluable experience.

The Zhuhai to Qingdao leg, though short, tested the yacht, sails, and crew. Every sail was deployed, and it was clear that our sails were in exceptional condition—a rarity at this stage in a global race. As we approached the North Pacific leg—the toughest stretch of the race—we refined every detail. Adrian adjusted telltales on the mainsail for optimal trim, and we

played our Clipper Joker Card, doubling our potential points. What followed was a relentless battle against towering waves, biting cold, and unrelenting winds, pushing both yacht and crew to their limits. But we won.

From that moment, *Ha Long Bay Viet Nam* never surrendered its lead, carrying the momentum through to Portsmouth and overall victory. Every crew member played a role in that success, and Adrian's contribution was immense—whether wrestling sails underwater, helming in punishing conditions, or keeping our sail inventory race-ready to the highest standard.

At its core, this is a story of ordinary people achieving the extraordinary. I am proud to have been part of this team and grateful to those who kept the yacht performing at its best—including Adrian, for his skill, dedication, and friendship.

Enjoy the read.

Cheers,
Bob

AQP's (Additional Qualified Person)



Figure 5: Ella Hebron, AQP on CV31 from Portsmouth to Cape-town (Leg 1&2) and Fremantle to Airlie Beach (Leg 4)



Figure 6: Cameron 'Cam' McCracken, AQP from Airlie Beach to Portsmouth (Leg 5 to 8)



Figure 4: Joss Crosswell, AQP on CV31 from Capetown to Fremantle (Leg 3)



Figure 7: Ha Long Bay Viet Nam CV31 (Photo by Clipper Race)

ABOUT THE CLIPPER RACE

“Seize the moment, unleash the adventure.”

The **Clipper Round the World Yacht Race** is one of the biggest challenges of the natural world and an endurance test like no other.

The Clipper Race, the brainchild of Sir Robin Knox-Johnston - the first person to sail solo and non-stop around the world in 1968–69 - was first held in 1996. The 'Clipper Round the World Yacht Race' is a biennial sailing race that takes paying amateur crews on one or more legs of a circumnavigation of the globe. Clipper Ventures plc owns and organises the race, supplying a fleet of eleven identical racing yachts, each with a fully qualified skipper and first mate to safely guide the crew.

Attracting individuals from all walks of life, the Clipper Round the World Yacht Race has trained and raced almost 6,000 people from over 60 nations, of whom nearly 40% had no previous sailing experience. All participants must complete four levels of intense ocean racer training before they compete. Mother Nature does not distinguish between females and males, professionals or novices. There is nowhere to hide - if Mother Nature throws down the gauntlet, you must be ready to face the same challenges as the pro racer. Navigate the Atlantic Tradewinds and Doldrums en route to South America, endure the epic Roaring Forties, experience Indian Ocean sunsets, face the mountainous seas of the mighty Pacific and bond with an international crew, creating lifelong memories before returning victorious.

The race was conceived in 1995 by Sir Robin Knox-Johnston, who together with William Ward (CEO), founded Clipper Ventures, a company that would run the race. The race has been held every two years since 1996, although in 2004 there was not a race and biennial racing resumed in 2005. The Clipper Race route follows the prevailing currents and winds.

Initial races did not feature corporate or sponsor branding. But in 2000, *The Times* newspaper signed on as title sponsor and a portion of the fleet was sponsored by international cities. Since then, the yachts in the fleet have been sponsored by countries' tourism boards, port cities or corporate sponsors. Clipper Ventures gifted the naming of a yacht to UNICEF to help raise awareness and funds for the organization.

The origins of the race name *Clipper* comes from the historic tea clippers. In the 1830s tea clippers were small, fast, cargo carrying sailing ships. Premium prices were paid for the season's first consignment of tea to reach London from China. In the Great Tea Race of 1866, four of these ships held an unofficial race, and this inspired the name of the modern day race.

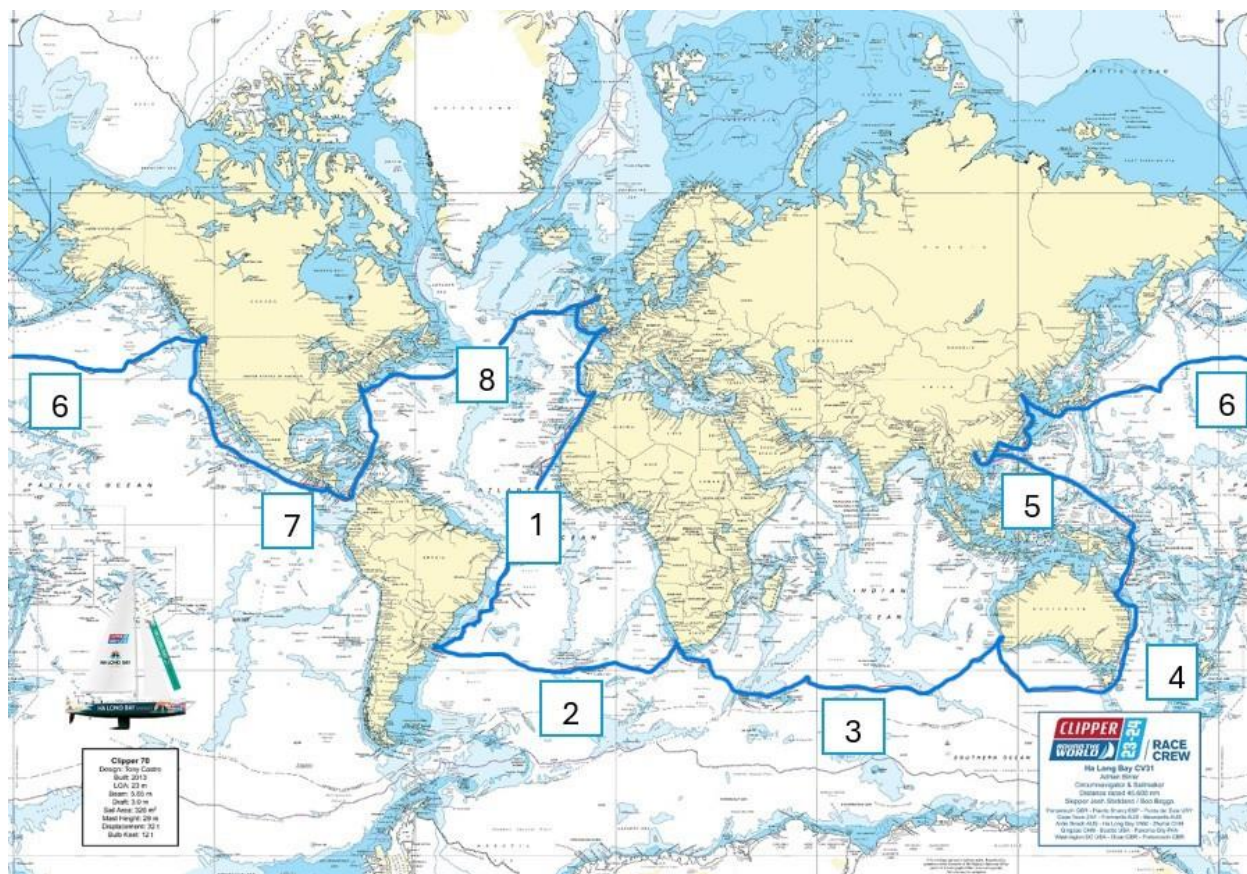


Figure 8: Charting the globe - the 8 legs of the Clipper 2023-24 Round the World Yacht Race (Personalized Chart Art print, created by www.chartart.co.uk licensed by the UKHO)

- Leg 1: "The Atlantic Trade Winds"
- Leg 2: "The South Atlantic Challenge"
- Leg 3: "The Roaring Forties"
- Leg 4: "The Australian Coast-to-Coast"
- Leg 5: "The Asia Pacific Challenge"
- Leg 6: "The Mighty Pacific"
- Leg 7: "The USA Coast-to-Coast"
- Leg 8: "The Atlantic Homecoming"

The yachts and their names in the Clipper 2023-24 Round the World Race are:

CV20 Dare to Lead	CV 27 Qingdao
CV21 Our Isles and Oceans	CV28 Unicef
CV22 Bekezela	CV29 PSP Logistics
CV23 Perseverance	CV30 Washington DC
CV25 Zhuhai	CV31 Ha Long Bay Viet Nam
CV26 Yacht Club Punta del Este	

PROLOGUE

A Glimpse into the Storm

Over two gruelling days, the ocean becomes both adversary and proving ground. Some 220 nautical miles off the Brazilian coast, relentless wind and rain transform the deck into a stage for unyielding endurance. By 0200, Yankee 2 is hoisted, and the mainsail double reefed to contend with Force 7-8 winds. Our course holds steady at 225°, driving forward at 10 knots through medium seas, the yacht heeled hard against the storm. Cascading waves pound the foredeck, drenching the crew in icy spray, while flashes of lightning pierce the darkness, revealing fleeting glimpses of the raw power around us.

The wind builds, escalating from a steady 20 knots to a punishing 40 knots, with gusts pushing Force 10. Below deck, life offers little respite. At a sharp 40° heel, simply moving through the confined space becomes an exhausting challenge. Writing in the logbook turns into a test of balance and perseverance, while the yacht's constant pitch and roll demand unwavering focus and strength. Sleep, when possible, is brief and restless, interrupted by the relentless movements of the storm-tossed vessel.

By six in the morning, hope materialises on the horizon - a faint mast appears in the distance. It is a rival yacht, and the sight sends a surge of energy through us. Despite the brutal conditions, our relentless teamwork pays dividends - we are closing the gap on the fleet.

The toll is undeniable. My arms ache from the unrelenting strain, my feet are perpetually soaked, and fatigue weighs heavy on my body. Yet, amidst the exhaustion, pride swells within me and the team as we reflect on what we are achieving. Against towering waves, lashing rain, and biting cold, we prove our mettle as sailors and as a united crew. This is the essence of ocean racing: unrelenting, humbling, and breathtakingly exhilarating.

The wind continues to toy with us. After several hours on course, it becomes clear that adjustments are needed again. We drop Code 2 and raise Code 1. The crew's efficiency shines as the transition is completed in just 15 minutes. Despite our efforts, *Perseverance*, one of our toughest competitors, narrows the gap, now only 14 nautical miles behind.

While the competition keeps us sharp, there are moments of wonder amid the routine. A pair of storm petrels chase flying fish darting from the bow's wake. A swallow-like bird flutters curiously around the boat, probably a White-tailed Tropicbird (*Phaethon lepturus*) which is common in this region, and a porpoise plus a pod of dolphins accompany us, their presence a fleeting but welcome reminder of nature's grace. The more mundane sightings include a stray blowfly and, bizarrely, a moth discovered below deck two days ago. These observations, though simple, provide brief respites from the relentless focus on the race.

Wind and Way

An introduction to the 360-degree compass rose and the fundamentals of sailing angles

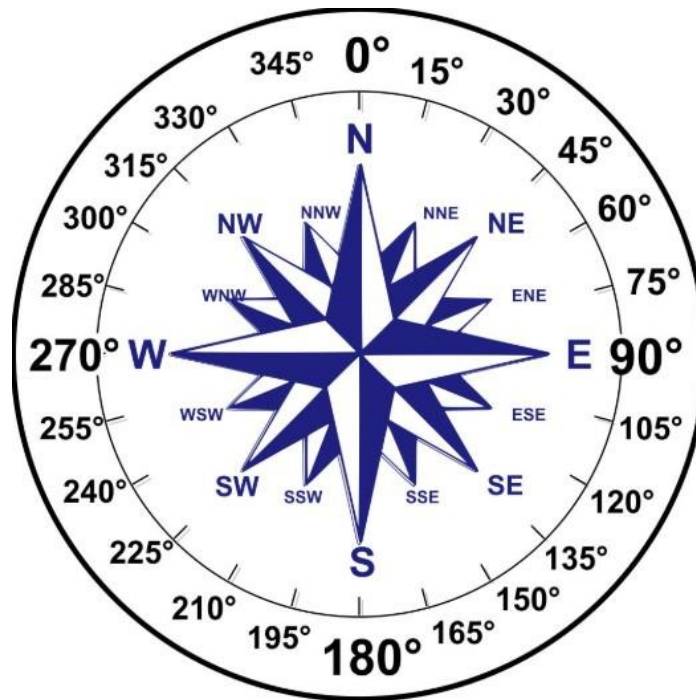


Figure 9: The compass rose, showing all navigational bearings and their corresponding degrees

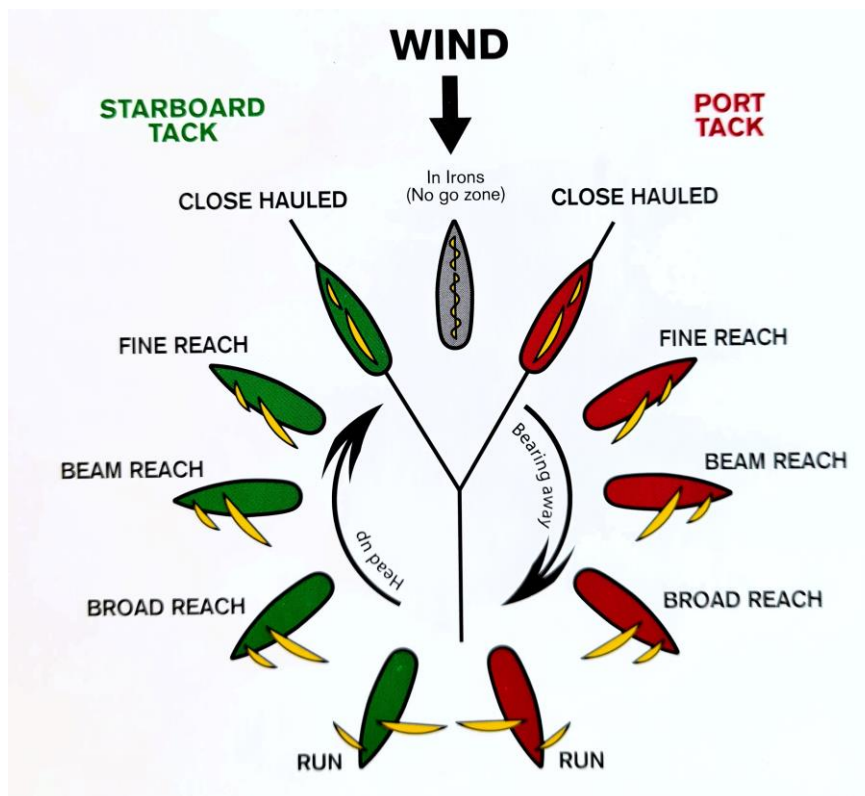


Figure 10: Point of Sails (Clipper Training Manual)