

NOBLE CROSSING

EXPLORATIONS

By Kathleen McAuliffe

Wind, high speeds, maneuvering by natural means of propulsion over rough and forbidding terrain—these are challenges that elate thirty-four-year-old French Baron Arnaud de Rosnay. A sportsman and innovator of new forms of recreation, de Rosnay has set several world records but is best known for his 1978 crossing of the Sahara at the helm of *le speed sail*—a sort of giant skateboard with a sail attached to the center. Riding the crests of dunes, leaping up to two meters in the air, de Rosnay blazed a burning-hot trail across 13,000 kilometers of desert, only to arrive at his destination, Dakar, Senegal, two hours ahead of time.

The speed sail requires expertise at balancing one's body weight against wind pressure. Its closest seaworthy counterpart, the wind surfboard, was thus a logical choice for de Rosnay's latest conquest—the crossing of the Bering Strait. Although only 96 kilometers as the crow flies, traversing that strip of water between Alaska and Siberia proved to be the most physically demanding challenge

of his career. As de Rosnay recalls on the first anniversary of his crossing, "Two-meter waves, a temperature of four degrees centigrade, and gales blowing force six combined to trigger my doubt as I plunged my hand into the water for the first time."

Since the Bering had defied any other attempts to traverse it by natural means, it became irresistible to de Rosnay, who delights in winning bets when the odds are stacked against him. He laughs, however, at being called a daredevil. "This was no youthful caprice, valiantly risking my life while battling the elements," he says. "Rather, it was a rigorous study of how to use all my resources to maintain maximum safety."

In May of last year de Rosnay sat down to draft the Bering master plan. The strait is navigable for only three and a half months of the year; the rest of the time it is locked in ice. In August the sun sets nine minutes earlier each ensuing day. For safety reasons he would have to fix his deadline somewhere between August 20 and 30. If he waited any longer, he would

run the additional risk of big September storms coming ahead of their cycle. This would give him barely four months to formulate a plan. Myriad preparations would be necessary—amassing wind charts, polar sea synoptic tables, and regional maps; choosing and building sails and boards; physical and technical training; designing safety systems and methods to protect himself against the cold. Not the least of his worries was obtaining authorization from the American and Soviet governments.

At first the U.S. government was cooperative, agreeing to send an Army helicopter to accompany him the half of the journey that would be in American waters. But when no formal written authorization was forthcoming from the Russians, the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon refused all assistance, judging the operation illegal. "Actually, the letter from the Soviet government was very warm," de Rosnay recalls, "but they could not offer me the requested assistance, because they said I hadn't given them enough notice and, furthermore, the region was especially remote." Not one to be perturbed by minor setbacks, de Rosnay simply interpreted the letter to mean that he would be allowed to cross at his own risk. "After all," he says with a gleam in his eye, "they did not give me a flat no."

Even so, this news would make his journey far more hazardous than he had originally anticipated. In the event of an emergency, de Rosnay could not depend on help from either nation. Moreover, he had intended to cross from the USSR to Alaska in order to take advantage of eastward-blowing winds. Now he would have to travel in the opposite direction, battling the winds and sea currents. This could increase journey time by as much as three hours (almost 40 percent), a frightening prospect in icy waters.

While training in Hawaii, however, de Rosnay learned a new technique of wind surfing completely unknown to Europeans. Hawaiian wind surfers won't touch their boards when the wind force is under four. They find the triangular Olympic



De Rosnay, beside his wind surfboard, tunes in to a weather broadcast on the eve of his crossing.

course amusing, but their chief objective is speed in deep seas. Consequently, they have technically modified the board so that one no longer changes direction by balancing the mast toward the front or back but by a play of the feet that de Rosnay likens to waterskiing. The result: Speed doubles while physical effort halves.

With less than a month to go before the planned departure date, de Rosnay decided it was time to confront the Bering. After the emerald waters of Hawaii, the remote village of Wales, Alaska, was a sensory shock. It was pouring rain upon his arrival, and he could barely make out the coastline: a dirty-gray beach dominated by 500-meter cliffs.

As de Rosnay soon discovered, the mountains that towered all around the strait formed a natural wind tunnel: The gales doubled their intensity as the channel narrowed. On more than one occasion his 24-kilogram board would be flipped up like a wisp of straw as he launched from the beach. This was wonderful entertainment for the local Eskimos, who had never seen a sail before and were clearly amused by the baron.

On his third day of trials, when he was two kilometers offshore, an imposing black mass with a medium-sized tail fin suddenly jutted up out of the water 30 meters in front of him. It was an Orca whale. "I've never turned around so fast in my life," said de Rosnay. Two Eskimos with binoculars wit-

nessed the scene from the shore. That evening the whole village knew about it.

To accustom his hands to the cold, de Rosnay began training without his waterproof gloves—a wise precaution, as fate would have it. Over the next ten days he tested and perfected his equipment. Both physically and technically he was ready for the big day. Now it was only a question of the right weather conditions.

Thursday morning, August 30, 1979. De Rosnay broadcasts in Russian a message over U.S. radio station NOME, warning troops in Siberia of his impending visit to one of their most heavily guarded military installations. "It was one thing to go uninvited, but quite another to go unannounced," he chuckles. "Can you imagine what would have happened if I was mistaken for an American reconnaissance craft? I can see the headlines now: 'Solitary Frenchman Triggers World War Three.'"

At 10:15 A.M., accompanied by the Eskimos' rendition of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow," de Rosnay bade his adieus and set sail on the high seas. In a waterproof sack he carried his passport, the Russian response to his letter, \$500 in cash, distress flares, and chocolate.

The first part of the journey was smooth going. The ocean was calm, with northwest winds blowing at six to eight knots. Even so, the coastline receded very quickly. By noon he was about 15 kilometers from the larger Diomedes—one of two islands that jut 600

meters above sea level along the International Date Line. To avoid the rough currents and eddies that form around the cliffs, he headed up as far as possible. As the sea became rougher, he had a hard time maintaining his balance. His hands grew heavy from the cold, but when he groped for the gloves tucked up in his belt . . . nothing: They had fallen into the water.

This was considerable cause for alarm, enough so that de Rosnay contemplated terminating his journey at Big Diomedes, which was at least on the Soviet side of the strait. In the end he decided to continue on course past the two Diomedes.

No sooner was he in Soviet waters than a warship's superstructure loomed large on the horizon. De Rosnay welcomed this silent sentinel with great relief as he neared the edge of the channel. The wind picked up, sending him flying from crest to crest. For two hours the ship maintained a parallel course, the crew on board gazing with astonishment at de Rosnay elegantly slaloming the great, unfurling crests.

The approaching mountains on the Siberian coast were a reassuring sight, but de Rosnay also knew that it would mean more turbulence ahead. To gain maximum speed, he began sailing downwind, his hands riveted to the wishbone harness and his eyes blinded by the spray. A big wave caught him off guard, and he took his second plunge of the day. This time, however, the water seeped into his wet suit, paralyzing him momentarily. Crouched in a fetal position to keep warm, he looked around for the guardian ship, but it was nowhere in sight. The cold had slowed down his reflexes, and he couldn't afford to miss re-hoisting the sail more than twice. The second attempt was successful, and he soon made his way toward calmer waters.

Only a few kilometers off the Siberian coast, the warship reappeared, following him at speed until he touched ground on a small pebbly beach. Moments later a launch was lowered into the sea to meet him. The crew on the deck began snapping photos, and de Rosnay jumped to his feet, snapping back with his own camera. "To show them that I was okay," he says, "I performed some acrobatics on the beach." But the eight-hour crossing had exhausted him, and he quickly gave up the idea of entertaining the crew members, who he could only hope would be friendly hosts.

His fears were quickly dispelled. Two hours later de Rosnay was dining royally on salmon caviar and fresh fruit and shouting vodka toasts to Anatoly, the ship's captain, who spoke impeccable English.

Battling the Bering Strait on a wind surfboard would seem to be enough of an adventure for any individual's lifetime. But not for de Rosnay, who has set his eyes on more distant goals: Would you believe a 4,500-kilometer journey from the Marquesas Islands, near Tahiti, to Hawaii this month? "With prevailing winds," he says cavalierly, "it shouldn't take more than about two and a half weeks." ∞

