

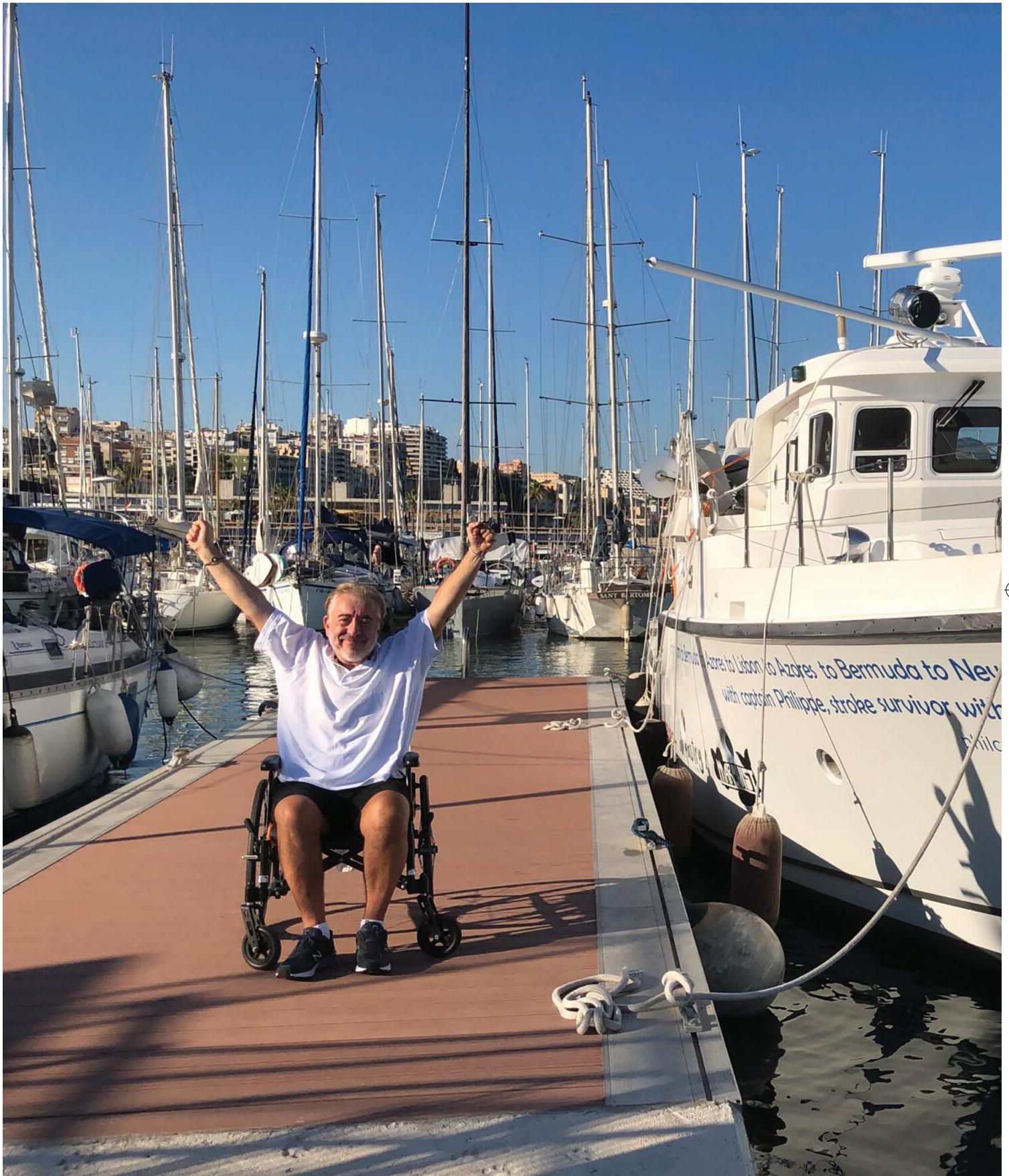


EMBRACING LIFE

A STROKE SURVIVOR, POWERED BY THE LOVE OF HIS SONS AND NEIGHBORS, SHOWS
ENDURING STRENGTH WITH A HARROWING 46-DAY ATLANTIC CROSSING.
BY SHANE SCOTT / PHOTOS BY FLORENCE GUGLIELMETTI AND ADELAIDE BERNARD

to Lisbon to Azores to Bermuda to New-York
h captain Philippe, stroke survivor with ataxia
philcrossing.com







The Embracing Life crew posing before beginning the third and final leg of the Atlantic crossing. Guglielmetti celebrating his victory of completing the crossing to Tarragona, Spain.

Five steps, then six—for 46 days, this was life—five steps from the wheelhouse to a mattress on the floor of the salon; six steps from the salon to the head. For the average boater, this would be a thoughtless part of a daily routine, but for Philippe Guglielmetti, those simple steps were the result of months of dedication, and years of overcoming. They were the key to living out his dream.

The 50-year-old, Miami based, French expat had always imagined himself crossing the Atlantic—if you're going to do something special in life, this is one of those things, he'd say. But by the time Guglielmetti had decided to let that dream materialize, he had been living in the confines of a wheelchair—seven years post hemorrhagic stroke.

2014 was the year his life would change. Guglielmetti was visiting France, en route to a business presentation for his 3-D printing company when he lost consciousness. He never made it out of the taxi. He awoke in an ICU unable to speak or move much more than his toes. The conditions his stroke induced were two-fold—one was cerebral degeneration which affected things like his ability to walk; the second was Pyramidal syndrome, which affected his ability to make decisions on how to use his body.

“For instance, you decide to take a glass of wine on the table; you're going to extend your arm to take the glass—it's your decision,” Guglielmetti explained. “You decide to take the glass of wine, but you don't decide every muscle of your arm to move; it's automatic. [But, not for me].”

Breaking it down even more, the stroke would hobble Guglielmetti with four primary disabilities: ataxia—the loss of control of bodily movements; proprioception trouble—an inability to approximate distance; nystagmus—double vision; and finally, a severe lack of dexterity.

One morning, in his Paris hospital room, a bedridden Guglielmetti woke to see a small orange toy resting atop his bedside table. It was a miniature 3D printout of the Golden Gate Bridge that he had brought to France as a sample for his presentations. His wife Florence had placed it there in attempts to make his room feel homier.

“I'm going to cross it,” he told himself.

It took four months of rehabilitation in addition to four hours a day walking around his local neighborhood park but, Guglielmetti achieved that goal. In fact, he surpassed it—with his last few steps across the bridge, he ran. But rather than settling down, the accomplishment left him thinking, “What could I do next?”



Guglielmetti behind the wheel of his Nordhavn 40. Customizations like oversized joysticks allowed for him to drive despite his handicap.

Guglielmetti had always been fond of the sea. Earlier in life, he served for ten years as the CEO of Arcoa Yachts in France. Moves to San Francisco, and later, Miami, were choices his family made to stay near to the water. In 2015, only a year after returning to his home in California, and accustomed to his family's tradition of waterskiing on the Pacific coast, Guglielmetti was already back on a boat, helping to tow his now 21-year-old son Maxime and 23-year-old daughter Marie across the water.

Once the family had moved to their new home on Biscayne Bay near the canals in Miami, in 2020, Guglielmetti decided it was time to buy a boat and purchased a Yamaha 275SD. At first, Florence helped him drive, but by the end of their first day out on the water, he managed the wheel solo.

"It was just to know if I was able to drive a boat again, and it was not so bad," Guglielmetti said. "This is the reason why I decided to go further, to crossing the Atlantic."

He turned and told his wife his plan. She shook her head.

"I'm tired ... I'm tired of you," Florence responded.

The years went on, but Guglielmetti knew that fulfilling his old dream would still be possible, only he needed a bigger boat. He also needed balance. By 2020, ongoing cerebral degeneration had taken a toll and much of his recovered mobility had gone into decline. If he was going to cross the Atlantic, it would have to be in a wheelchair. So, Guglielmetti started the hunt for a boat that could get him

across the ocean with as much stability as possible and as soon as possible, with a target voyage date of 2023.

His choice vessel was something with a full displacement hull, so that Guglielmetti could move through the water rather than on top of it. To his luck, he quickly found a Nordhavn 40 for sale by owner at a price he couldn't refuse—\$345,000 with no added equipment.

Having found his boat by December 2021 and wanting to win the race against his cerebral degeneration, Guglielmetti moved his target date to 2022. He wanted to achieve his dream while he could still function with some independence. But a voyage this risky required serious planning.

"I am the kind of person who takes calculated risk," Guglielmetti said. "But I try to equip any vehicle with the maximum security."

Equipping the Nordhavn to minimize risk meant getting the input of Guglielmetti's physical therapist, who showed boat furnishers where to place various grab rails. There would be nine in total, including one at the stern entrance, a set leading up the steps to the wheelhouse, and set down the berth to the head. Among other necessary modifications were a new wing engine, five new stabilizers and an oversized joystick for the thrusters.

"The oversized joystick helped me it, because pinching with my fingers [needed for a smaller joystick] I'm not able to do so well," Guglielmetti said. "With the big one, I can push it and pull it using my full hands."

Another important customization would take place with the head. With a standard toilet he would require the use of special gloves for cleaning. Instead, he had the Nordhavn's existing toilet swapped for a Japanese counterpart with a remote-controlled built-in bidet.

"You know sir, usually we need more than two months to do that," a worker from APEX Shipyard told Guglielmetti in response to his telling them that he needed all the equipment installed within eight weeks.

"You have no choice, I'm going to cross the Atlantic at that time," Guglielmetti responded.

When it came to a navigation window, Guglielmetti knew that, statistically, the North Atlantic would be least windy in June. This was key, even to the point of sacrificing his plan for five new stabilizers.

"I needed to leave at the end of May, and the time was too short for five stabilizers installation," Guglielmetti said. "Also, the cost was expensive. And for these two reasons, we decided to go with the [boat's existing] paravane roll stabilizers."

It was a risk that Guglielmetti could only take with the right crew. He had worked it out in his mind that the best way to cross would be in three-hour shifts. To do this, he'd need four other crew members—three to take shifts individually and one to take his shift with him, as a precautionary measure.

When Adelaide, an old friend who worked in the same lab as Florence, received an invite, she jumped at the chance—she would serve as the boat's mechanic and the only crewmember to make the entire crossing alongside Guglielmetti. Other members who rotated through each leg of the route included Guglielmetti's son Maxime, his oldest son Matthieu and Matthieu's girlfriend Abi, Guglielmetti's daughter's friend, Jeanne, and Guglielmetti's neighbor, Dominique.

Florence would stay behind as the on-shore crew. She, along with the help of a weather specialist in France, would listen through satellite broadcasts each day for weather forecast updates and communicate with the crew as well as surrounding boaters.

The most difficult part about assembling a crew was finding a nurse—or more specifically getting one aboard.

"There was a girl, a nurse, who wanted to come," Guglielmetti said. "But [when her mom found out] she was calling every day, saying, 'Oh, I had a dream, it was a nightmare... Tonight, I dreamed, you are dying in the middle of the Atlantic.' And she called every day for days and days and days. Then, eventually, the girl told me, 'I cannot come.'"

So, Guglielmetti turned to Charlene, a nurse, friend and fellow countryman that he had met in 2017 when she was backpacking across the Americas. On a whim, he invited her to stay with his family for a few days to avoid the expensive accommodations that come with touring San Francisco. While she was unable to join as onboard crew, Charlene was able to help by training Adelaide and Jeanne.

"We did theoretical and practical ground training and I also bought and organized all the medical equipment needed on board in case of a problem," Charlene said. "I taught them to assess emergency situations such as cardiac arrest, respiratory distress, head trauma, how to treat various wounds and non-emergency situations."

Preparations weren't complete without the finishing touches. Guglielmetti named his boat *Embracing Life*, a moniker he had coined from a book he had written and published about his post-stroke recovery and exploits that included traveling solo to Tahiti for a week on a whim and hiking in the jungles of Costa Rica. On the side of the boat, along its pearly white hull, were deep blue



Much of Guglielmetti's time was spent on the couch of the salon. Physical rehab allowed him to train for the many steps he would need to take from the wheelhouse to the salon.





One of many sunsets experienced as *Embracing Life* brought Guglielmetti and his crew across the Atlantic in 45 days.

letters reading: “From Miami to Bermuda to Azores to Lisbon to Azores to Bermuda to New York with Captain Philippe, stroke survivor with ataxia.” There, next to those words was a blue silhouette image of Guglielmetti in his wheelchair, arms raised in victory.

If the real Guglielmetti would be raising his arms in victory at the end of this crossing, he needed not only to prepare the boat, but his body. To strengthen himself, he met his physical therapist twice a week to practice climbing and descending steps on stairs and ladders, simulating his future daily routine to and from the wheelhouse. Together, they crafted the most efficient technique for the stairs—mostly pushing with his legs, the strongest part of his body, while his much weaker arms played the role of helping him balance along grab rails.

“[The therapist] put some stuff on the floor to add to make it less stable [as I walked],” he said. “And then I practice for two months grabbing the ladder, going up and down. Because on the Nordhavn 40, what I had to do was to go from the wheelhouse to my bed. It was, I think, five steps. And to go from my bed to the bathroom it was six steps. It was not easy to do when the boat was pitching and rolling.”

On the first night at sea, May 29th, wind was gusting to 30 knots, making it unsafe for Guglielmetti to go down the stairs to the cabin, so he spent that night on the sofa in the salon. The following night, he’d try again, but the boat pitched and rolled so much that the narrow cabin bed left too great a risk for falling off.

“The cabin was too hot, as we weren’t allowed to open like the windows because water could get in, so we all mostly slept in the salon with my dad,” Maxime said. “But, a lot of things happened at night, we didn’t do much sleeping.”

Whenever Guglielmetti made his way to the wheelhouse or head, he’d need at least one person ready to spot him as he stepped up and down. The crew had decided from the beginning that someone would be always with him, even when sleeping.

Before Guglielmetti would have the rest of the crew serve individual shifts behind the wheel, they first trained in two groups.

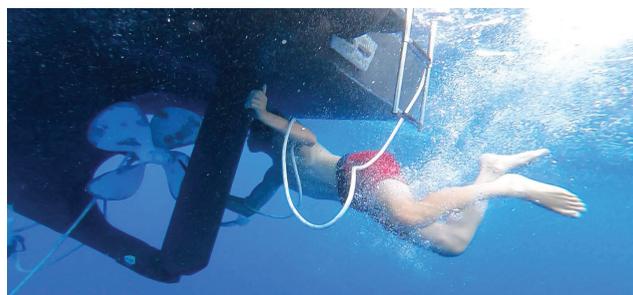
“We’d do three hours of being in the wheelhouse and three hours of break,” Maxime said. “Either you were in the wheelhouse, or you were sleeping pretty much so that was kind of an intense scheduling of work.”

By the time that the crew reached Bermuda, it was time for Dominique and Jeanne to take leave, while Matthieu and Abi, who had flown in from London, came to take their spots. After a week of storms on the island, *Embracing Life* was able to set off once more.

One week into the second leg, Guglielmetti’s crew was directly in the middle of the Atlantic between Bermuda and the Azores. The seas built, the wind gusted, and swells surged heavily. Early the following morning, a creaking sound began to emanate from the deck. It was around 5 a.m. when Adelaide woke Maxime. The two worked their way outside the boat to find the mast teetering back and forth—its starboard side support was broken. They tied lines around it in attempts to secure it.

“We left it at that because it didn’t look that bad at the time and there wasn’t much we could do about it because there was a lot of waves, even with the paravanes set up,” Maxime said.

But as the day continued, the mast swayed more and more, until it started bending in the center. All the crew could do was watch until it crashed into the cockpit, causing the whole paravane system



Maxime diving to free *Embracing Life's* prop from a caught line. The *Nordhavn 40* docked at Guglielmetti's Florida home.

to fall apart. The horizontal spreaders that had supported the mast, were still suspended by metal wire and now swung wildly, banging into the starboard and portside at each gust of wind.

"Because of the wind, the boat started rolling like 45 degrees, so much so that the water level would hit our portholes every time we moved," Maxime recalled.

The propulsion system was still fully functional, so Guglielmetti gave the command to keep moving forward. They would wait for smaller swells before attempting to remove the horizontal beams. But three hours later, they heard another noise, this time from the stern.

"Put the boat in neutral!" Guglielmetti shouted to Matthieu from the salon.

When the sun rose, Maxime went out to the stern to find that a thick line had gotten caught in the propeller. Guglielmetti attempted to use the satellite radio to communicate their predicament with anyone able to listen, but there was no reply. With a new storm quickly brewing, all Maxime and Matthieu could do was unbolt the wayward paravanes and let them sink into the sea. The crew would have to spend two and a half days rolling wildly, with Guglielmetti spending all of it on the floor with pillows surrounding him in order to avoid any serious falls, before they could dive in and assess the fouled prop.

When the storm finally subsided, Maxime grabbed a fishing knife and dove in. He hugged the frame of the propeller and slashed away at the line for 20 seconds at a time, surfacing for breath about a dozen times before he finally cut everything off.

With the paravanes gone, the team would need to travel the remaining distance without any added stability, forcing Guglielmetti

to spend any time outside of the wheelhouse on the floor of the salon.

"It was really difficult, it was rolling and rolling—everything was more difficult," Guglielmetti said. "But I was so motivated to cross the Atlantic, that I was able to endure it. I spent 18 days between the wheelhouse and the floor of the salon."

On June 12, 2022, *Embracing Life* completed her voyage, docking in the Mediterranean waters of Tarragon Island. The crew ended their journey in quiet contentment, satisfied and grateful that they had finished safe and sound.

A fellow boater docked across from Guglielmetti, saw the blue letters across the port side of the boat and paid them a visit. Tipping his cap, he told the brave captain, "You have all my respect."

With that, Guglielmetti caught a flight back to Miami to see his biggest supporter, his wife.

"Perhaps next year, we can try to go through the Panama Canal to Hawaii?" he asked her lightly, testing the waters on her receptivity of his next adventure.

"Do you want a divorce?" Florence responded, without hesitation. "Are you looking for a divorce?"

Now that his journey has ended, Guglielmetti just has one simple message he hopes gets through to anyone who will listen.

"Some people think too much before doing things, but if you think too much, you find a good reason to not do things," he said. "There are too many people they never do the things they dream about. Then they die and they haven't done what they want to do, or they are too old to do what they want to do. Do those things. This is the message. You can do it." □