

# IS ENOUGH?

What to do when you've circumnavigated the globe seven times? You go again, of course. Brian Hartz caught up with Japan's 74-year-old Minoru Saito during the refit of the 56-foot steel-hulled yacht he intends sailing solo and non-stop the 'wrong way' around the world.

It's no surprise when Minoru Saito reveals that he was a mountain climber prior to becoming one of the world's most famous solo circumnavigators. He has the twinkling eyes, the crackling energy and the darkly funny outlook on life of someone who has been to the edge – of endurance, of sanity – and come back for more.

Seven times the 74-year-old has circumnavigated the Earth alone in a sailboat, his most recent voyage, in 2004-05, being completed non-stop. He has survived rounding Cape Horn in a howling gale, capsizing hundreds of miles from land and living off nothing but rainwater and boat-grown radish sprouts for weeks at a time. His exploits have earned him the 2006 Blue Water Medal from the Cruising Club of America and induction into the World Single-Handed Sailing Hall of Fame alongside luminaries such as Joshua Slocum, Francis Chichester and Sir Robin Knox-Johnston. And he was recently recognised by the Guinness Book of World Records as the world's oldest non-stop solo circumnavigator.

But Saito's eighth solo circumnavigation could very well be his most challenging. Set to commence in October from Yokohama, Japan, the non-stop Saito Challenge 8, as it's being called, will be his first "backward" trip around the world. He'll head

west against the prevailing winds and currents, finishing in early June 2009 back in Yokohama if all goes as planned. And during that time he will celebrate his 75th birthday, alone at sea, like many birthdays before. Only a handful of sailors have succeeded in a westward circumnavigation, and none approaching Saito's age – a fact of which he is well aware.

"So now I am getting old, with not much power," the white-haired Saito says at the Westhaven offices of Whiting Power Equipment, which supplied a new Yanmar engine to the dilapidated, steel-hulled, 56ft (17.06m) yacht he bought specifically for Saito Challenge 8.

"But I train every morning for 53, maybe 54 years now. Before sailing I was a rock climber, a mountain climber. I climbed for 24 years. Now I am not strong enough to climb mountains; my powers are reduced as I get old, and climbing is very difficult. So I started thinking of my next adventure – what to do that would be like climbing mountain. So I switched to sailing in 1973. I've been sailing for 35 years – not so long."

Saito is nothing if not humble. He has sailed more ocean miles – 270,000 and counting – than most of us can fathom. That's further than the distance from the Earth to the moon. Yet still, he

Photos by Desmond Frith & Mike Hunter

presses on toward 300,000, saying he is inspired to keep going by the memory of the late Sir Peter Blake, whom he met in 1989 when *Steinlager I* was being prepared for the fifth Whitbread.

That meeting occurred during Saito's first trip to Auckland, when Boating New Zealand's Mike Hunter photographed him triumphantly arriving in the Waitemata Harbour. Ten years on, the image of Saito on the bow of his 33ft (10.05m) yacht clutching a can of Steinlager was featured in an

advertisement on the inside front cover of *Boating New Zealand's* May 1999 issue, a memory that prompts a hearty bout of chuckling from Saito. Somewhere amid the laughs the words "Steinlager" and "oh, yes, very good beer" can be heard. No translation needed – this guy knows how to work a New Zealand audience.

Saito's most recent arrival in Auckland was not so flash. On a 4000nm shakedown cruise from Hawaii – where he bought his latest yacht, the 19-year-old *Nicole BMW Shuten-Dohji III* (Nicole BMW dealership in Japan is his major sponsor; shuten-dohji translates as "drunken child") – to Auckland via Pago Pago, Saito suffered a litany of major gear failures.

The expected 26-day voyage stretched to 52 days as the yacht's generator, mast, mainsail, radar and autopilot failed. Saito had to hand-steer the boat by himself all the way from Pago Pago, where his French crewman had left the boat due to a family emergency.

Eventually the yacht's aging Detroit diesel engine gave up the ghost a mere four miles from Auckland, but Coastguard was there to give him a tow while vessels from the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron accompanied him into port.

"That boat is not so good at the moment, but it has a strong steel hull," Saito says. "I didn't know the boat at all when I bought it. I chose it because I needed a bigger, tougher boat to go westward. When I went around the world before, I went eastward. But westward is different. Much tougher."

In addition to installing the new engine, Whiting Power Systems has repaired the yacht's generator and completely refitted the engine room.

"We've overhauled or replaced the shaft, rudders, shaft brake, everything," workshop manager Scott Lansdowne said. "We've had two guys working on her pretty much full-time since Saito

"So now I am getting old, without much power. Will I do a ninth circumnavigation? The boat can do it. I hope I can."





arrived (on March 31). Everything was in such bad shape...when he got here the batteries were not charging at all. We've mounted an auxiliary alternator so he'll have double the charging capacity. He'll be much better equipped now."

Other Saito Challenge 8 suppliers include Yachtspars New Zealand, which provided a stronger and taller mast stepped to the keel instead of the deck, as well as stronger rigging and heavy-duty cruising sails. Saito says he chose Auckland for the repairs and improvements to *Shuten-*

*Dohji III* because of the quality and affordability of the service: "It's the best place in the world for us to get this work done."

The crew at Whiting Power Systems say Saito, despite his limited English, fits in very well in New Zealand.

"He's become like a part of the family here," managing director Grant Crawford says. "He's been sailing with some of the boys on the weekends. He likes to go fast."

Saito left Auckland in early June and at press time had completed about 30 percent of his anticipated 4600nm, six-week passage from New Zealand to Japan, where he will make final preparations for Saito Challenge 8.

"With a taller mast, bigger engine and new sails, we can average at least 120 miles a day," Saito says. He is adamant about starting his circumnavigation in October and finishing no later than June 2, 2009 – the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Port of Yokohama. "There must be no delay. I must be back in Yokohama on or before the

### MINORU SAITO FACTS

**BORN:** January 7, 1934, Tokyo, Japan.  
**RECORDS:** Oldest solo circumnavigator (71), oldest solo non-stop circumnavigator (71), most circumnavigations by a solo sailor (7).  
**HONOURS:** Special recognition as "The Spirit of Around Alone" (1999), Sixth Around Alone Race Closing Ceremony; Single-handed Sailing Hall of Fame (July 2006) – Museum of Yachting, Newport, Rhode Island; Medal of Honor (July 2006) – City of Newport, Rhode Island; Blue Water Medal 2006 (January 2007) Cruising Club of America, New York; Guinness World Records (2007 and 2009 editions) – oldest solo non-stop circumnavigation at age 71.

Fingers crossed for luck: Minoru Saito during sea trials on the Waitemata Harbour a few days before he left for Yokohama, Japan.

anniversary day," he explains. "I think he's telling us to hurry up," Crawford says with a laugh. But undaunted as always by the mountain looming in front of him, Saito is already eyeing the next challenge. "Will I do a ninth circumnavigation? Maybe. *Shuten-Dohji III* is a steel boat. It is tough. We'll see. I want to go around Antarctica. This boat can do it. I hope I can." Follow Saito Challenge 8 on the web at [www.saito8.com](http://www.saito8.com).