

NEW YEAR AT 50°S

ENDLESS SEA

by Amyr Klink



Introduced by
Tom Cunliffe

It was not the New Year's celebration he had hoped for. As the weather deteriorated on his solo circumnavigation of the Southern Ocean, Brazilian adventurer Amyr Klink had to bolster his courage for a feat of endurance beyond all expectation



Amyr Klink has largely escaped notice in the English-speaking press, yet he is justly hailed as a hero in his native Brazil. His first book, *One Hundred Days Between the Sky and the Sea*, tells in lyrical prose of his epic 1984 row from Africa to Brazil. Sailing challenges followed, but perhaps his greatest book is *Endless Sea*.

Now married with three little daughters and a simple home on the beach near the town he loves, Paraty, behind Ilha Grande south of Rio, he is nevertheless driven to further adventure. In his own words: "I have taken a broom to the worst dust of all - the dust that settles on sailors and boats that never leave port."

Endless Sea is the story of his 1998/9 circumnavigation. Unlike most men who would share a tropical idyll with their family or friends, Klink opts for the lonely way, sailing deep into the Southern Ocean, via the Antarctic convergence. His only stops are at

South Georgia on the journey out and the Antarctic Peninsula homeward bound.

Klink's boat is tough, a 50ft aluminium sloop, but he is brave enough to re-rig her for this trip with an unstayed carbon aerorig. These are unconventional enough to cause many to shake their heads. Klink has to put up with a queue of Job's comforters, but he keeps the faith.

Having myself crossed an ocean beneath their shapely spars, I can agree with him that the rig makes so much sense it is strange there are not more of them around. The boom has a flat upper surface which possibly saves the whole venture when Klink is obliged to take a trip down it in conditions that would see most of us kneel in prayer instead.

We join him 1,200 miles south of Australia with New Year just around the corner.



FIRST PUBLISHED
in 2000 in Brazil
as *Mar Sem Fin*

AVAILABLE
Sheridan House,
2008, translated
by T.H. Norton

“Something is wrong with the weather; a sudden change in temperature and wind. Perhaps it is the Convergence line, which in these parts reaches far south toward the Ross Sea. Also, birds that had been constantly present are now gone and new ones appear, like small brown petrels in the thousands.

Almost 1,200 miles south of Australia, the main celebration during this festive season is summarised in a log entry, for some reason written in red: ‘We have reached Australia’, but I have no desire to stop there now. To do so would only mean that I gave up on my voyage. The farther south I can go with the wind’s help, the shorter my path, in time and distance, to our next landfall, Dorian Bay on the Antarctic peninsula south of Cape Horn.

Sunday, 27 December. Under full sail, which happens rarely, I am having British tea and biscuits, my feet propped up on the control panel, which would have embarrassed any well-mannered Briton. The biscuits are on my lap, the teacup in my hand, when I almost toss all against the ceiling. A gust of wind brings *Paratii* on her side in a flash. The pulverised biscuits start flying all over the place while I run out on deck.

The barometer is low and the weather depressing; I feared a surprise like this. The boom is let out to 90°, sail area reduced as much as possible and sheeted home. *Paratii* is running through the waves as if they, too, were biscuits. But these biscuits are getting bigger and bigger. One comes up from astern and engulfs us. When the foam finally blows off the deck I am pleased to see the windvane still in one piece.

Tuesday, 29 December. The barometer needle, falling dramatically, hit the hygrometer arm, which is already off the scale. Things keep getting worse. The tiny storm trysail cannot be reduced any further. My only option would be to remove it, but then I would have less rudder and speed with which to run the mountainous following seas.

I reduce the jib to the size of an umbrella. Even so, *Paratii* is making over 12 knots...18...20... even 22 knots. Oh God! Every time she surfs downhill I look around for a brake pedal. There is none. I transfer the helm from the Swedish autopilot to the electronic one, which is easier to disengage if I run into problems.

Every time a wave explodes, it leaves foam surrounded by clear turquoise rings. The water has a milky colour that could only be the result of extreme pressure. I have never seen seas like these.

This morning in the galley I sorted all the ingredients for the day’s menu: my lucky gnocchi, with placemats and everything. But the gnocchi didn’t have a chance. I am unable to pull myself away from the deck or from the helm, even for a second.

I am mesmerised. The package of gnocchi flies to the floor and is tossed back and forth. With it are the cutting board, the Parmesan shredder, a soup bowl, a gourd from the *Ver o Peso* [Watch the Weight] market in Belem, and knives and spoons. One of the drawers opens, spilling its contents down the galley hallway.

Thirty minutes before midnight, local time. The situation: bad – it cannot get any worse. Outside, a hellish darkness. The only thing I can see is *Paratii*’s wake and spray across the surface of the water, both illuminated by heavy phosphorescence. It has been hours since I last ate anything. My hands are glued to the helm.

I notice some improvement, so I start to work on that lucky meal – though I don’t believe in luck. Out of the boiling water, somehow or other, I manage to extract an almost raw gnocchi, which I eat in silence at the navigation table. My eyes are glued to the anemometer. Forty, 45, 50 knots! With the boat’s speed, the apparent wind adds another 12 to 15 knots. In other words, at least 60 knots of utter chaos.

Any sleep I get comes seated at the control panel. I dare not venture below, even to wash the dishes. I pray the boat will not broach in the middle of this pandemonium, I will not run into icebergs or anything else up ahead and that nothing will break. The hours drag on while I am getting increasingly sleepy. I dream of sleeping, but lack the courage to abandon my watch, even for a second.

The final day of the year begins with the seas still out of control. The barometer has now been off the scale for over 50 hours and shows no sign of rising again. I have lost any notion of what normal means. The sun peeks out occasionally, only to reveal daytime sights more frightening than the scariest moments of windy horror at night. The entire surface of the sea is covered with milky white and turquoise water. The apparent wind has dropped to 35 or 40 knots, yet the waves are more menacing than ever.

The churning seas, stretching forever around me, distort my perception of space. I am no longer sailing east, north, or south, but straight up and straight down. Sometimes a cliff appears from the north as a precipice forms to the south.

Incredibly, my little boat is behaving in a rather dignified manner. She slips sideways, burying the entire boom in water, then immediately rights herself and resumes her course without my ever having to take the helm. My fingers, just millimeters from the wheel, ready to disengage the autopilot or make an abrupt course correction, never need to touch it.

While I am hoping for the weather to improve, the seas actually worsen. Before noon, the GPS magnetic deviation indicator jumps from west to east. *Paratii* just passed the longitude of the magnetic South Pole (the alignment between the geographic and magnetic Poles only happens twice in a South Pole circumnavigation).

Coincidentally, the odometer on that same GPS shows exactly 9,000 miles made good since home. To top things off, a little while



▲ Above: *Paratii*, with her unstayed aerorig, up close to the ice in Antarctica

later I cross 140°E longitude, which I interpret as the official end of the Indian Ocean, precisely at the end of the year.

The only reason my mood stays upbeat is that just yesterday I crossed the antemeridian to our home. Now, every second of forward progress and every mile made good will bring me closer.

This doesn’t ease our immediate situation in the least, but just knowing the distance remaining is now less than the distance already covered, that half of the circumnavigation and half of my long-held dream are now completed are one hell of a reason to party.

In my naiveté, I assume that the barometer’s return to scale on such an important date is the harbinger of the storm’s end. Maybe from here on we’ll have good weather and pleasant seas...

After so much wind, there is nothing outside but ice-cold foam. No albatrosses, petrels, seagulls – nothing. The strange milky colour of the stirred-up seas transfers to the sky now, which is growing darker; and the final sunset of the year is the strangest yet.

I have my doubts about the weather, but even more ominously, the barometer, which promised to rise, drops again. Again the apparent winds begin to hit 50 knots. Resigned, I furl what is left of the jib. We will keep only the small storm trysail as our single sail.

And then the Southern Ocean unleashes its full fury. Any levity or good mood vanishes. The ounces of patience spent trying to understand what is happening are soon exhausted. Complete chaos – a nonstop, out-of-control apocalypse of water and foam.

I fail to notice the sheet to the storm trysail, the only engine driving *Paratii* at totally illegal speeds, has been chafing against a block. Now it threatens to snap. If the slightest piece of cloth breaks loose, or if the sheet breaks, a spectacular disaster awaits.

I build up my courage, cut a piece of line, go outside and inch like an octopus along the boom to rig a backup sheet, praying the whole time that a wave will not rip me off the boom.

The 16mm line is flailing in the wind like a thin wool thread. It is no fun at all making turns and tying knots while dangling out over the sea foam. I yell. I shout orders to myself. I shout that the knot is not tight enough. I yell to hear my own voice in the midst of the hellish sounds of that unstoppable wind.

I go below. Miraculously, I am not drenched. Using a heavy black terrycloth towel I dry myself, clothes, foulweather jacket, pants, boots and all.

Minutes later, a side-swiping waterfall rolls in from the north and smacks *Paratii*’s stern just as we are surfing down a wave from the west. She broaches. The galley rises and the navigation table drops. I slide across the sole and slam into the far wall. The boom, where I was just moments ago, plunges into the wave. The trysail is flapping wildly, desperate for the autopilot to regain control.

I turn off the autopilot and take over the internal helm. My God, this is even worse. The boat rights herself, but I cannot hold her course because I have no reference points. Looking forward, I can’t tell if the waves we are surfing are rolling in from the north or the west. To steer by compass is not possible either.

So I turn my back to the bow and, watching the waves astern, holding the helm behind my back, I discover that I can steer by watching the walls of waves and the windvane on the stern arch. Surfing backwards! Who would have thought! My New Year’s resolutions have been reduced to just one: to get out of here alive.

► Below: Klink with his family in 2013



◀ Left: Amyr Klink has carried out a number of solo voyages in the Southern Ocean