

# THE LATITUDE 38 INTERVIEW

## Mike Johnson

*We don't often profile our advertisers. But Mike Johnson is far from a typical ad client, and besides, there's very little competition for what he's 'selling'. Although he's not based on the West Coast, he takes out Classy Classified ads regularly in Latitude to recruit paying crew who help subsidize his ambitious voyages all over the planet aboard his 44-ft schooner Gitana.*

*A soft-spoken southern gentleman with tousled gray hair and a smile so broad that it makes his eyes squint, Mike is a fascinating storyteller whose faint southern drawl belies his Virginia roots. As you'll read here, he's already had some remarkable experiences under sail, and at age 67 he clearly has no intention of hanging up his sea boots anytime soon.*

**Latitude:** You obviously have a longtime love of offshore sailing. Do you come from a family of sailors?

**Mike:** No, but I'm originally from Virginia. My father was a dedicated fisherman. He didn't do it commercially, he just loved fishing, so he got us out on the water in the Carolinas and elsewhere any chance he could. Even before I learned to sail, I liked the idea of sailing — the independence of it.

*So how did you actually get started sailing?*

I started sailing small boats in the Chesapeake, and when I was in college I worked aboard the last commercial sail fleet in America: the Chesapeake oyster dredgers, which, of course, don't operate under sail anymore, if at all.

*And how did you make the leap to bluewater voyaging?*

I'd been a paratrooper in the military, and not too long after I got out they passed a Cold War veterans act that allowed me to go back to school and get some free education. I got my masters degree, then I got a teaching assistantship, and ended

**The sturdy Westsail 32 'Aissa' skirts a massive glacier while exploring the remote waters of Greenland.**

up getting my doctorate from William and Mary College in Virginia.

I worked as a psychologist for a while in a clinic in Richmond, VA, but then this guy came along and offered me a chance to sail in the South Pacific. That was it. I never went back to a desk after that.

*What sort of boat?*

A 57-ft William Hand staysail schooner built in 1929. The skipper was actually a family friend who'd been a fighter pilot in the Navy. He brought it around to Florida, but had so much trouble with it, he decided to sail it back to the West Coast to sell — he thought he'd get a better price there.

And he asked me to help.

I said, "Well, only if we're going to go somewhere exotic like Tahiti." He said, "We could do that." So we ended up taking that boat for a year from Florida out to the Marquesas, Tahiti, Tonga, Samoa, the Line Islands, Hawaii and across to San Francisco. That was in 1979 or '80.

*That's a hard act to follow. After that what did you do to build sailing experience?*

Later I sailed in the Caribbean aboard the 144-ft three-master *Regina Maris*. I learned about celestial navigation from those guys — they didn't have GPS on board. I also did some deliveries, and sailed aboard the former San Francisco schooner *Lord Jim* around Cape Horn — west to east, from Tauranga, New Zealand, to Argentina.

*So what led you to sail your Westsail 32 around Cape Horn?*

I later worked in England as bosun on the British sail-training ships *Sir Winston Churchill* and *Sir Malcolm Miller*. They're about 110-ft three-masters built by Camper and Nicholson with square rigs and no labor-saving devices. I learned a lot from sailing with the Brits — mostly the way they run things. They were all Royal Navy or merchant navy officers. I think I was the only American that ever worked on those ships for any length of time. I just fluked into it.

Anyway, they used to have these conferences of Cape Horn veterans through an organization called AICH (Amicale Internationale des Cap Horniers). I was a member of the British section. I remember talking to this old guy who was 93 at the time — he was a real character. He'd made something like 20 roundings, but he clarified, "I don't count the times I went from west to east." Going that way, with the prevailing wind

*"We were hit by a sperm whale once in the middle of the Pacific. That did a little bit of damage. But the worst thing that ever happened was we got rolled over 360°."*

and current, was too easy I guess. So I decided if I ever went around again I'd be sure to go east to west so nobody could say, "Well, you didn't do it the *right* way!"

The old-timers considered rounding Cape Horn to be from 50° south to 50° south; one ocean to the other. You didn't duck in and out and check your weatherfax, then go when the weather was good, and finally sail around Tierra del Fuego.



COURTESY MIKE JOHNSON

They didn't consider that to be anything!

*So the old-timers' challenge obviously struck a chord with you.*

Yes. When I finally did attempt it, we left from Rio de Janeiro and sailed nonstop aboard my little Westsail 32 *Aissa*. We saw one piece of land and one ship before we got to Easter Island 84 days later.

We had no engine at the time. When we got down in the Drake Passage below the Horn, we figured that we had to do 60 miles a day to stand still, otherwise we were being pushed back to the east by the current. There are calms down there — although not often. But the problem is if you've got no engine you're not sitting still, you're getting pushed back the wrong way. Then a low will come through and you've just got to keep beating into it.

*(Ed. note: To insure a proper, old-style rounding, Mike disconnected *Aissa's* prop shaft and sealed it before leaving Rio.)*

*That was a pretty dramatic way to start your first circumnavigation. Can you describe your route?*

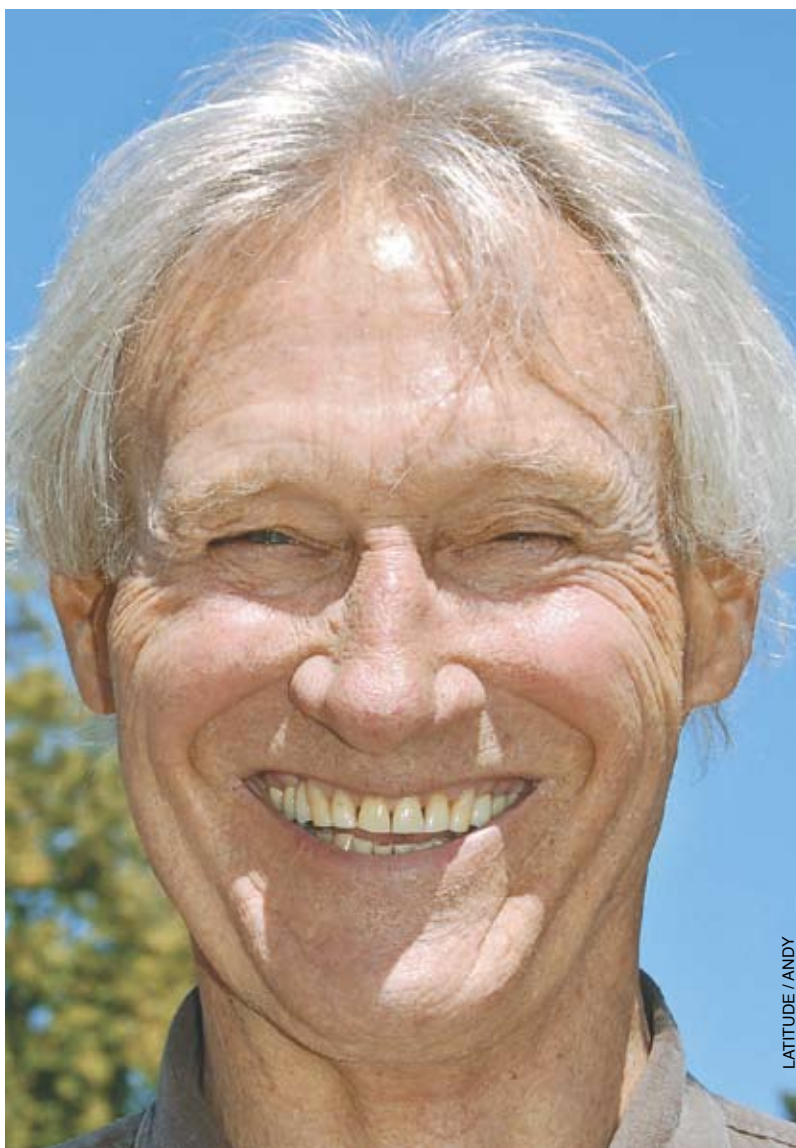
We left from Virginia, sailed down the Atlantic and around all five of the Southern Capes the 'wrong way' — Cape Horn, South West Cape at bottom of New Zealand, South East Cape at bottom of Tasmania, Cape Leeuwin at the southwest corner of Australia, and the Cape of Good Hope at the bottom of Africa. That whole trip took about seven years, although I was not continuously sailing.

*Sailing west-about must have been incredibly tough, especially in the far south. How did the boat hold up?*

We were hit by a sperm whale once in the middle of the Pacific. That did a little bit of damage. But the worst thing that ever happened was we got rolled over 360° when we were 200 miles south of New Zealand's Stewart Island. It was just me and a Californian, Becky Walker. We were lucky to survive that. The boat was half full of water. We lost everything off the decks — mast, boom, rigging and dinghy.

*How did you get to a safe harbor?*

We sailed under jury rig to Dunedin, in southern New Zealand, and made repairs at the Otago Yacht Club. It took about two years to rebuild the boat. Then we eventually went down and rounded South West Cape again and continued on to Tasmania.



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*Wow! Most sailors would have given up after that. Let's go back a bit. Tell us when you got the idea of taking along paying crew.*

Long before, when I was sailing in the South Pacific, I met a guy named Herb Smith in the Marquesas. He was sailing aboard the biggest of three or four schooners he'd built, all named *Appledore*. I think this one was a 67-ft gaff-rigger, and he had about 17 people that he was taking around the world in 18 months. His wife and kids were aboard, and the family was making a go at sailing with paying crew — that was their livelihood.

So I thought, I could do something similar, part-time. I could go to places I wanted to go, and get other people to go along and share the expenses.

I started off with people I knew, but I ran out of them in Australia, so I started running ads and recruiting people. I guess the most interesting thing about that first trip was I got a couple who wanted to buy a boat, but didn't have any experience. They'd both been in the Coast Guard, so I thought, "Well that's good, they know what

they're getting into." But I later found out they'd only worked desk jobs in the Guard.

They joined me in Western Australia, and paid me to go all the way to East Africa. They wanted to go to somewhere in Asia along the way, so I agreed to go to Sri Lanka, even though at that time the Tamal Tigers were causing a lot of trouble there. We sailed from Freemantle to Shark Bay, Australia, then from there to Christmas Island. Then on the way to Sri Lanka we escaped an attack. I hesitate to say they were pirates, but they were certainly up to no good. I lost them in the dark and we got safely into Galle, Sri Lanka. At that point my crew informed me, "We're out of here. This is *too exciting* for us."

*So there you were in Sri Lanka with no crew.*

Yeah, so I took the train into Colombo from Galle, although at that time the Tamals were blowing up the train every few days. It was kind of a dicey place back then, so there was only one other boat, a Canadian, in the bay at Galle at the time. I had to advertise for crew in backpacker hotels, because I couldn't take any Sri Lankans out of the country.

I ended up with a female British night club singer who'd been working at the Hilton Hotel in Colombo, and a young Australian. He was the son of a neurosurgeon and I think his father had told him to go surf around the world or something.

## the latitude interview:

Anyway, I sailed with them to Madagascar, then to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on to Zanzibar and up to Kenya.

After that I kept advertising whenever I needed crew — including ads in *Latitude 38*.



LATITUDE / ANDY

**Johnson points to his route around Cape Horn during his engineless, 84-day rounding aboard 'Aissa'. If you're looking for hardcore adventure in faraway places, you might want to answer his ads.**

*That was before the current epidemic of piracy started, of course. But did you have any other trouble in Africa?*

From Kenya I went on down through Mozambique, around South Africa and up to Namibia. Probably the most exciting — or dumb thing — was that we went into the bottom of Angola when the war was going on there. I'd heard about this place called Bahia de los Tigres from a guy. But, of course, we didn't have permission to go there. There was a spit of land that stuck out, with a wide-open bay behind it and these desert sand dunes dropping down on the other side — very spectacular. When we arrived, the whole town had been abandoned, because of the war I guess.

So we anchored in the bay using a chart this guy had sketched out for us on a napkin — literally, that was all we had. I went ashore, and as I walked up the beach my military

**"Land mines!" he said.  
"Let's get the hell out of here."**

training kicked in: I noticed there were land mines all around me on the beach with their tops blown off and I thought, "Hmm, this is not a good place to be." So I walked on to the airstrip, then went back to the boat. The kid that was with me was hot to see everything, so I told him there were land mines all over the beach, but if he wanted to go, just beach the dinghy where I did and step in my footprints. "Land mines!" he said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Luckily for us, we did. But as we were sailing out of the bay, four PT-type craft approached us. They did a loop around and were having some kind of conversation — probably about what to do with us. So I shot for the entrance, and for some reason they let us go.

From there we went on to St. Helena Island and then on up into the Amazon.

*That's not a place most cruisers go. What was it like?*

We had a lot of good experiences, but when we were up the Amazon's basin's Xingu River, the same kid was rowing ashore one night when I was off the boat, and these guys — river pirates — surrounded him, stripped him down and took everything he had, including his glasses. But for some reason they didn't take the dinghy. I found him later with no clothes, nothing.

Another time in the Amazon we had a boat come up on us, but we had some weapons on board that I'd bought in South Africa. We pulled them out and eventually got out of there. There's no real law and order in the Amazon. Later, we went to the same place where Peter Blake had been killed. We had our anchor line cut there, but nothing more.

*Did you complete your circumnavigation in the Westsail?*

Yes. I eventually got *Aissa* to the U.S. — through the Caribbean and up to the Chesapeake. I sold her to a retired CIA officer, but he didn't know much about sailing. He kept calling me and asking questions. Finally, after about a year and a half he suggested, "Why don't you and I sail across the Atlantic and when we get there I'll pick your brain." I told him I didn't want to go up to Bermuda and across to the Azores. I'd done that too many times. But if he wanted to go to Greenland I'd consider that. I don't think he knew what he was getting into, but he agreed, and we did it, ending up in Norway.

*So where did you find your current boat, Gitana?*

I bought the schooner in Seattle, and it took me most of two years to outfit her. She was custom-built in '79 by Bud Taplin at the Worldcruiser Yacht Company in Costa Mesa from a Lapworth-designed hull. Because of the cost, though, he never built another one.

*Can you describe her?*

*Gitana* was made of fiberglass, but built to look like a traditional wooden schooner. She's beautifully finished inside with ash, mahogany and teak. Her original name was *Sultana*.

When I bought her in '99, she really wasn't ready to go into the open ocean. I had to build completely new hatches, refurbish the mast, put on all new standing rigging, new water and fuel tanks, and later, on the East Coast, I replaced the engine.

*Where have you taken her since '99?*

Well, I'd already spent a lot of time in the far south. I've been down around Cape Horn three times: once west to east; once with the *Westsail*, east to west; and once down to the Antarctic Peninsula — that was actually the easiest way, because we sailed way down below the Antarctic Circle with the wind on the beam in both directions.

So I figured this time I'd do something different. I sailed from Seattle down to Panama, to Colombia, and up the East Coast. I spent about a year in the Chesapeake, then went up to Halifax and across to Greenland again. We went into one village up there and a woman was looking at us funny. I asked her through a Dane who was there when the last time was that they'd

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## mike johnson

seen a sailboat up there. She said never!

From there we sailed over to Iceland and completely around it, then on to the Lofoten Islands of Norway (68°N). We then went to Spitzbergen. I think at that point we were about 460 miles south of the North Pole — in a fiberglass boat! You have to have an expedition permit from Norway to go there, and they're pretty picky about who they'll let in because you're totally on your own. Nobody's going to tow you out of there.

You also have to carry firearms for the polar bears. They haven't been hunted for 20 years, and they're completely unafraid of humans. In fact, a couple of people were recently eaten by bears up there. We had a few instances where we were walking along the beach and all of a sudden a polar bear came walking out of the water right in front of us. They don't want you shooting the bears unless you have to. They tell you to fire two warning shots and if the bear keeps coming, shoot to kill. But it's a spectacularly beautiful place — and there's no charter fleets there yet!

*And after that?*

Then I came back down the west coast of Norway, through Scotland, along the west coast of Ireland and down to Spain. I spent two years in the Med, crossed to Egypt, then on to Israel. I met a few Israeli sailors who told me Israel's boating infrastructure is very crowded. There are a few marinas, but they're always full. But this guy said down near the Gaza Strip there's a great marina with nobody in it, because Hamas had been shelling down there. So we sailed into Echelon, which I think is less than three miles from the Gaza Strip, stayed for three weeks, then went up to Haifa and on to Turkey. I left from there last year for Brazil, where the boat is now.

*When you were in the Near East did threats of piracy in the Indian Ocean keep you from heading down into the Red Sea?*

Yeah, I'd been considering sailing down the Red Sea, but I've been monitoring the pirate situation for four years and it's just getting worse and worse.

*When I want to go to a place that I consider to be politically*

***The little cutter may not have been fast, but she took Johnson and his crew safely all over the world in all sorts of weather — including the Southern Ocean and the far north, seen here.***



dangerous I try to fly in there ahead of time if I can and look around to get an idea of what I'm getting myself into. So when the boat was in Turkey about two years ago, I decided I would fly down to Yemen to see if I could get through that area. I've

*She said, "Mike, you've had a lot of good ideas, but this one is really dumb."*

been working with the same travel agent for years. She said, "Mike, you've had a lot of good ideas, but this one is really dumb."

I went down there for a week anyway. If it wasn't for the fact that there are a lot of people down there trying to kill Americans, it would be a fascinating place to go visit. I made arrangements to go along that whole coast to the far eastern end of Yemen with a translator, a driver named Mohommad, and a soldier with an AK47 named Rambo — really. We even got out into the valley where the bin Laden family had originally come from.

I thought if I had a steel boat and a crew that was heavily armed, I'd be interested. But taking people down there in a fiberglass boat, you wouldn't have a prayer. You may get through — people do. But it would be a matter of luck, not because you were prepared and you'd done everything right. You can try to mitigate the danger, but I think you're really skating on thin ice.

*Spoken by one who knows. So where to from Brazil?*

This year, we're going to try to go from Salvador to Cape Town, then to Fremantle, staying in the roaring 40s. Hopefully we'll be able to stop at Tristan de Cunha. Then there's two sub-Antarctic island groups in the southern Indian Ocean that I'd like to visit: Kerguelen and Crozet.

*How many crew will you take along?*

On these long legs, only myself and two others; three watches, three people. I have carried more, but on this trip I want to carry the bare minimum because of the distance, and the water and food needs. It's about 4,200 miles to Cape Town with only one possibility of a stop, and about the same distance to Fremantle.

*It must be crucial to screen potential crew well for such long passages. What's your method?*

What I normally do is interview by phone first. Somebody once advised me that when you talk to people who don't have a lot of experience sailing — and many who respond don't — you're going against 50 years of Madison Avenue. They've seen beautiful pictures of sailboats in tropical lagoons, with beautiful sunsets, palm trees, and fruity cocktails. That's what they're thinking, and I've got to convince them that's not the way it is.

I tell them exactly what a typical day is going to be like. I say, if you want to see the world, get on an airplane. Because if you're a boat crew, the boat has got to come first. Sometimes you've got things that need to be fixed, you've got seasons to consider, you've got weather windows. . . Maybe you'll have time to see something ashore, but that can't be the primary goal.

I've had people from every English-speaking coun-

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## the latitude interview:

try in the world, and I would say 92% were fine; 8% either had delusions about what they were getting into — not that I didn't tell them about it — or they didn't like it, even though they thought they were going to. I've never had anyone come back to me and say I didn't tell them it was going to be like this.

After our phone conversation, if they think they're going to like it, I send them an information packet with background on me and the boat. Then, if they still think they want to go, I meet with them face to face — I don't ever take anyone I haven't met face to face. Having gone through that process, I've been pretty successful. And I have to say some of the best crew I've had have been women. A lot of sailing has to do, not with brute strength, but with balance and finesse. And the kind of sailing I do, in the places I've been, has to do with mental toughness. Women can be as tough as anybody, obviously. The woman I had aboard going around Cape Horn (in the Westsail) was tough as nails.

The worst people I've had was a couple who had the wrong expectations. But the guy had a great quote. He said, "You know Mike, you can like sailing, but not like to sail very far."

### *How do you structure your fees?*

I'm not trying to make money off this, I'm just trying to get help with the expenses for things like food, fuel, charts. . . I try to sail six months a year. I calculate what I think it's going to cost based on past experience and I charge a set price for the whole leg. That way, if we stop for five more days than anticipated, I don't want people to think I'm slowing down to gouge them for

more money. It's the same price no matter how long it takes.

*I assume you have other sources of income?*

I have some investments I made long ago, and I have some income property, so if I'm careful I can get by pretty well. But I like living outside, and I like living simply, so that makes it easier.

So, no, I'm not a trust-funder or anything — I wish I was! Someone asked me what would I do if someone suddenly gave me a million dollars. I had to think for a minute, and the first thing I came up with was, "Well, I guess I'd hire a varnisher."



**Johnson's current boat, the stays'l schooner 'Gitana', will take him and his crew from Brazil to Australia this year.**

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## mike johnson

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COURTESY MIKE JOHNSON

*What do you do in the off-seasons when you're not sailing?*

Well, I usually go around and straighten out everything that's gone wrong while I was away! Like, I have this little house in New Mexico. They had a really hard winter this year and all the pipes froze and broke. So I've spend most of the last three months fixing them. I tell people I work for six months trying to stop leaks on the boat, then I come back and do the same thing on land!

*You're 67 now. How long do you think you can keep this up?*

I hope for a long time. My long-range plans this time are to go around the north coast of the

Australia and then out into the Western Pacific — New Guinea and Micronesia — then up to the Aleutians in Alaska, and work my way down to Seattle.

I always say if you sail a boat around the world, you've gotten your money's worth from it, no matter how much you get for it when you sell it. I might put this boat up for sail in Seattle in about three years. If it sells, I'll probably buy a steel boat,

and if I'm in good health I'll probably go through the Northwest Passage.

*This lifestyle certainly seems to suit you. You look fit and happy.*

Yes, and it helps that my boat is a manageable size. One thing I've noticed during the years that I've been sailing is that

*"You know Mike, you can like sailing, but not like to sail very far."*

the boats are getting bigger. And the bigger they are, when they have problems, the problems are bigger too, in addition to the costs. When I sailed to Tahiti the first time, most of the boats we saw out there were like 35 feet, maybe 40. Now you see people on huge air-conditioned boats with dishwashers and clothes washers, and they're sitting in air-conditioned comfort watching their videos. I wonder why they're out there. They could stay here in California and do the same thing.

*Yup. Sorta makes you wonder, doesn't it.*

*Thanks for the chat, Mike. Be safe out there, and be sure to drop by again the next time you're here in the Bay.*

— **latitude**/andy