

Glenn's ship's attempt to break record

Reporter Paul Hardman speaks to a Manx engineer who is part of the crew aiming to be the first to circumnavigate the globe from great cape to cape in a motor-powered vessel less than 24 metres (78.7ft).

Glenn Kensall, from Ramsey, is currently on his way to embark on sea trials in the Baltic and off the Scottish isles to test the former Swedish Icebreaker, named MV Astra, before she undertakes the 22,000 nautical mile journey

MV Astra departed from Lanzarote, where she had been undergoing conversion work and maintenance for the expedition, which is expected to take four to five months depending on weather.

Following the completion of the trials, there are also plans to stop off in the island in August as they are en-route back to Lanzarote, where the crew will be based until they cast off for the official journey in December.

Glenn has spent most of his life at sea, having started off working on fishing boats out of Ramsey at 15.

After this he went into the Merchant Navy – working first for Ramsey-based Mezeron at 21.

It was at Mezeron where he undertook his qualifications in areas like sea survival and fire-fighting to become an uncertified deck hand.

He then he went on to the Steam Packet, employed as a motorman.

In the past 10 years he worked as a chief engineer with Bibby Ship Management, but was made redundant because of the pandemic.

After a stint working on a superyacht, his friend told him about a job which had come up.

His friend knew of Iain Macneil, who had bought the ex Swedish rescue boat, and was planning to convert it into an 'expedition vessel' – and the offer was for Glenn to be employed as crew engineer.

Alongside him, there will be four or five other crew, including

Iain. Glenn soon became involved with the outfitting work in Lanzarote, bringing in ideas on how to keep the engines better running and keep the pipes clear.

Iain is the owner of Witherby Publishing Group, which produces maritime, nautical and navigation training aids.

Glenn told us: 'He's got a really good background and is a meticulous planner, for the last year he's done a virtual weather map.

'So he got all his best team together, and they've basically produced a model forecasting, to look at if we're going to approach any really bad weather on route.

'Iain's going to have people in his office that are constantly weather routing.'

Glenn explained the extent of the potentially record-breaking cape-to-cape circumnavigation:

'We're going to leave Lanzarote, then we're going to the Ascension Islands down to Capetown or around there.

'Then up to Mauritius, and then across to Fremantle, Australia, then across to New Zealand.

'From there up to Tahiti, and across to Ushuaia (on the southern tip of Argentina).

'And then Ushuaia right around the cape up down the bottom and up to the Falklands, then up to Rio de Janeiro, and then back across (the Atlantic).

Iain has contributed cutting-edge technology to MV Astra, such as a built in camera sensor called Oscar – which monitors wave heights, and objects in the water.

The engine performance is also going to be constantly monitored from Iain's onshore offices as well, and fuel consumption will be tailored to wave height.

Powered by diesel engines, the MV Astra also carries extra fuel tanks, and two RIBs (rigid inflatable boat) for expedition purposes.

For provisions, there are metal



The current crew for the expedition pose in front of MV Astra. Chief Mate John Aitken, junior watch officer Carlos Casola, chief engineer Glenn Kensall and skipper Iain Macneil

cages attached to its sides to carry canned food, and a custom built fridge-freezer below decks.

Being built as a superclass-1a icebreaker, MV Astra has a hull thickness of 16mm.

MV Astra also has zero vanishing stability, which means that in the event of capsizing, it can self-right.

'We don't want her doing that, it's not something we're looking to push!' Glenn joked.

He continued: 'She handles really well.

'For a small boat, she's the best boat for the challenge – so now we need to go and see if the crew can handle it (the weather), that's the next big piece of the puzzle.

Glenn explained that this was because sea sickness can affect everybody differently on different boats.

He noted how though he never usually gets seasick, on the one occasion where he was on board the Manannan as it was being delivered from Australia for the Steam Packet, he didn't feel well.

They expect to hit some of the hardest weather around Ushuaia.

Glenn explained: 'They've got some pretty tasty weather down there.

'That bottom end [of South America], if you look on a map it's all fjords – it's like Norway.

'There's loads of little fingers [bodies of water] sticking out, and places to hide.

'The plan is, when we get down there, to get around [the southern tip of the continent] as fast as possible because we might have to dodge in and out of the fjords for a couple of days, to hide from the wind until we get a time that's safe to move.'

Coincidentally, the name 'Astra' came from the boat's former service in the Swedish Rescue Service, where she was sponsored by a donation from the Astra-Zeneca pharmaceutical company – now world famous for producing a Covid-19 vaccine.

Glenn told us that he hopes his journey will 'maybe inspire some young Manx people to think about a career at sea, as it's dying out'.

He explained that he feels there to be a lack of information for young people in the island about gaining access to the industry, and with his story he wishes to draw attention to the routes he took advantage of to advance his career at sea.

This included the Slater Fund, which offers scholarships of up to £18,500 to pay for rating qualifications.

Glenn hopes that the Manx government could get involved to offer

people support in getting the initial qualifications to access the industry, adding that he and other Merchant Navy seafarers on the island would be happy to help out with the training.

Among the initial 'tickets' (as they are known in the Merchant Navy) needed to get out to sea are qualifications in sea survival, first aid and firefighting.

He continued: 'It's nice to put this [story] out there in the Isle of Man, because we have such a shortage of seafarers now.

'The Isle of Man [government] don't do enough to help our seafarers.

'And the youth growing up now, they don't really know what's out there or what can be achieved.

'I'm sure there's lots of young people out there that would love to be doing this trip, and there's so many boats out there (to crew) – including super yachts.

'I'd really like to see some young people from the island going out to sea.

'We were a seafaring nation, and we seem to be losing it.'

The crew of MV Astra are planning stop by the island with the boat sometime in August, en route to sea trials.

More information about the expedition is available on MV Astra's blog at: www.mv-astra.com