



Queensland

Five hurricanes and 240 days later: Australian woman rows 14,000km solo across the Pacific

Michelle Lee, a 50-year-old massage therapist, reached the Queensland coast on Wednesday after leaving Mexico on 8 August



Joe Hinchliffe

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work the tides and passages on a revised route that saw her land 58km north of her intended destination, at the palm-fringed resort town of Port Douglas on Wednesday.



📹 Michelle Lee in her specially built rowboat on an earlier voyage where she rowed across the Atlantic Ocean in 68 days. Photograph: Robin Skjolborg/PR IMAGE

There, shortly before 10am and after paddling for about 14,000 kilometres, Lee landed her boat - the Australian Maid - making her the first woman to row solo and unassisted across the Pacific.

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“The last bit was a bit of a battle,” she told waiting press. “But it’s the story of my life: winds, currents, tides, everything against me, often I had all of them doing different things. So, adversity, I guess, you got used to it out there.”

Lee, though, did not just have to face up to the challenge of extreme physical exertion.

She faced stretches of up to nine days confined to a cabin “no bigger than being under your kitchen table” as winds and waves raged around her.

In her confinement, Lee learned “the art of patience”. She played a ukulele, made a pudding, cut herself a mullet and listened to audiobooks - her library ranging from self-help author Joe



📷 Michelle Lee arrives in Port Douglas on Wednesday. Photograph: Brian Cassey/EPA

Not that she was ever totally alone out there on the Pacific. Lee was followed by two large sharks for weeks.

Later, four baby sharks started swimming beneath her 7.7m carbon fibre boat. Lee decided the sharks had felt satisfied to leave their “bubbas” in her care. Then, they multiplied by “50 or so babes”.

“I am the creche,” Lee writes. “It’s very cute. Everyone is in harmony with each other.”

One of these “magnificent water dragons”, however, would take the relationship too far, leaping on to the deck of the Australian Maid before thrashing around “like a maniac to exhaustion”.

In addition to sharks, an “abundance of beautiful mahi mahi”, nurseries of baby fish and turtles swam beneath Lee.

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📷 Michelle Lee holds up the Australia flag on arrival. Photograph: Brian Cassey/EPA

Birds too, became something of a spiritual figures for the lonely rower - at least at first.

“I had a bird on board for two days and two nights,” reads the day 64 entry of her digital diary.

“He sat on my bow. Felt like a guardian angel watching over me.”

One hundred and thirty-one days later it was, however, a different story.

“I’ve been harassed and accosted by very determined birds to land on my boat,” Lee wrote. “I chase them off due to their crapping habits. Makes huge mess and hard to clean off.”

Lee, though, has form in doing “hard yakka”. In 2018, she became **the first Australian woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean**. That voyage lasted 68 days and led to her being named the 2019 National Geographic Adventurer of the Year.

And for all the hardship, came the transcendence.

Lee writes of “awe filled” moments gazing at the stars and moon, the “spirit enhancing” impact of uninterrupted rainbows and light shows that “thrilled my senses beyond comfort zones”.

And then there was the feeling, on day 164, of having the seas and winds at her back after weeks of battling against the elements.

“Mother nature truly is the boss,” she writes. “I am constantly in awe and wonder. In love with life.”

Lee is planning to hike the month-long, 1,000km-long Camino de Santiago with a friend in three weeks.

This article was amended on 5 April 2023. Michelle Lee was the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean, but not the first woman to achieve the feat as an earlier version said.

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