

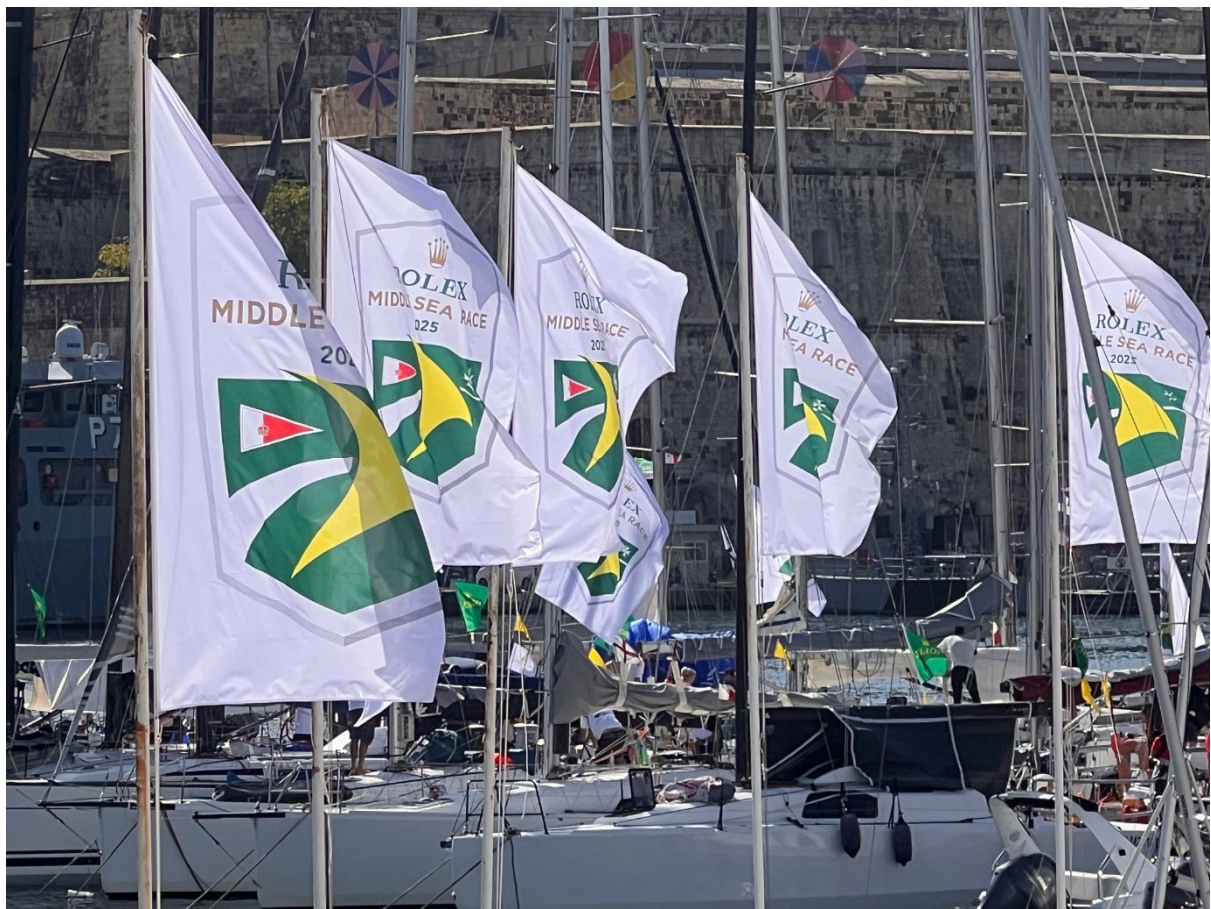
Rolex Middle Sea Race 2025

My First Middle Sea Race

by Elisabetta Cavanna

The Rolex Middle Sea Race is one of those regattas you never forget. More than a competition, it's a journey into the sea, into history, into endurance, and into oneself. A few months ago, my Australian mentor in competitive sailing, **Malcolm**, who I sailed with during the eight years I lived in Sydney, brought his stunning **Swan 48, Grace of Sydney**, to the Mediterranean for his first Middle Sea Race. To my surprise and delight, he asked me to join the crew.

Grace of Sydney is a solid, elegant boat — but one that bites the sea. The crew was my sailing family from Sydney: seasoned sailors and dear friends. I didn't hesitate long: with a mix of excitement and a little nervousness, I accepted. And so, the adventure began.



Preparation and Briefing

Arriving in Malta, our objective was clear: sail safely, enjoy ourselves, and perform at our best — as a crew and as a boat. We began lightening everything: boat and mind, readying ourselves for any condition.

The days leading up to the start were buzzing with energy. The port was alive: tender services shuttled captains, sailors, and crews between Valletta Marina, the Yacht Club, and the Excelsior Hotel. Stunning boats from around the world, many from Australia, were being prepped to perfection. Crews tested instruments, tuned sails, and practiced manoeuvres.

Our first real training was the coastal race around Malta on the Thursday before the official start. It's the moment to gauge crew readiness and scout the fleet. For us, it was the first session together after months — perfect for shaking off rust and igniting adrenaline.

The weather was ideal: bright sun, calm seas, 18 knots of wind. Then, dark clouds gathered. Lightning split the sky, the wind strengthened, and we were flying. Two boats dismasted before the real race even began. We didn't place highly in the coastal race, but we felt ready.

The next day, at the Excelsior Hotel briefing, the excitement was palpable — that good tension that precedes great adventures. There was also a rising concern for a nasty low pressure that was forming off the Tunisian coast. The forecast models were conflicting, and sailors were tangibly worried! We understood that we just had to wait and see what the weather would bring us the day of the race. The boat was ready, stripped to essentials and perfectly tuned. The crew too: provisions stocked, safety briefing complete. We were ready.

We divided into shifts: two groups of five, three hours at night, four by day. A rhythm that builds habit but, on a race this long, challenges mental and physical endurance.



- **Crew shifts:** 2 groups of 5, 3 hours night, 4 hours day
- **Weather:** It was a lighter RMSR than usual with relatively light and variable winds for large part of the race, wind rarely exceeded 25 knots except strong gusts during the first storm
- **Objective:** Safety, preparation, team coordination

The Start – Heart in Mouth

The cannons of Grand Harbour signalled the start. Adrenaline surged, hulls brushed, crews studied each other. We started close-hauled, then out of the ancient port, the spinnaker opened — hearts pounding with the wind.

Soon after, the forecasted storm hit: gusts up to 35 knots of wind, 2.5-meter waves, driving rain. The boat leaned like a blade, life jackets and wet weather gear always on. Moving on deck fully equipped in safety gear felt like a spacewalk: every step a precarious balance, every action a challenge to the sea.

We worked four consecutive shifts to maintain speed while our friend Pasquale's boat was struck by lightning and forced to retire. We outran the storm, but tension remained high.

Sailing is managing the unexpected. The Middle Sea Race isn't just about speed; it's about focus and adaptability. You must trim sails to shifting winds and manage basic needs — food, sleep, bathroom — in tight, moving spaces.

Malcolm, our captain, was the crew's moral compass: calm, prepared, able to read both sea and men with clarity.

The galley for eleven people was its own challenge: curry, tajine, shepherd's pie, lasagna, beef & chili... Dinner at 6 PM, between shifts, was our only moment together — a brief sanctuary. The rest of the day: snacks, fruit, hydration, keeping focus.





The Mythical Route

Sailing through the Strait of Messina close-hauled, with favourable current, felt like navigating a natural theatre. At night, in front of Catania, a moonless sky was ablaze with stars, like Van Gogh brushstrokes. Later into the night to the east, the sunrise illuminated Etna; to the west, storms flashed over Calabria.

Then Stromboli, greeting us with his powerful rumble and a spectacular eruption. But behind the beauty lay a trap: complete calm left us stranded for nearly 24 hours. Butterflies fluttered among the sheets; a sparrow perched on the boom. We watched the sea breathe slowly.

Those who chose the outer route gained wind and positions. We lost time and water: from third we slipped to fifth but remained calm.



Islands of Endurance

After Palermo and San Vito Lo Capo, under strong wind and clear skies, we passed between Favignana and Levanzo, then toward Pantelleria, appearing suspended in the Mediterranean at night.

From there to Lampedusa, the sea changed: following seas and favorable currents, but rough, real, uncompromising water. We relayed six Mayday calls from migrant boats adrift with dozens onboard. It was difficult to reconcile the knowledge that we had full support for emergencies while they remained abandoned and unheard for hours. We felt powerless while knowing a boat like ours could not safely intervene.



The Long Calm and Revival

Between Pantelleria and Malta, off Lampedusa, a new calm struck. Gentle winds left us idle for hours. We lost positions, falling to ninth. “Better to keep high,” we said, slightly frustrated. We tried, but couldn’t push the boat; the flat sea punished our 17-ton *Grace of Sydney*. Finally, after endless hours, night fell, Lampedusa passed astern, and the wind returned. With the asymmetrical spinnaker up, the boat came alive: shooting stars, dolphins, bioluminescent waves — pure alchemy.

After five days of constant trimming, the spinnaker felt like an extension of my body: I became sea, sky, and wind.

The Finish – Finishing is Winning

We reached Malta under steady, strong wind, surfing waves. Switching from asymmetrical to spinnaker, we sailed directly toward the last mark. The crew was together, ready to enjoy the magic of the finish.

At the last mark, 200 meters from the line, we prepared to douse the spinnaker and turn to windward. *Aqua Nomis*, the XP44 from *In2theBlue*, was ahead — a final duel awaited. Then, 100 meters from the finish, the incredible happened: they dismasted. Shocked, we acted immediately: proceeded to the finish line while alerting the race committee and checking no one was injured. We were allowed to finish and stood by until *Aqua Nomis* was assisted.

On 23 October 2025 at 13:49:08 we crossed the finish line, 5 days and 2:29 hours after the start. Ninth in IRC 5 and first in the Swan Cup.

We could have aimed higher in our division, we did finish barely a couple of hours after Noisy Oyster, the winning boat in our division, but the true success for us was being there: syncing with the crew and the elements, managing complex situations calmly, and performing at our best.

The challenges made the beautiful moments even sweeter. Sailing teaches resilience, patience, and humility like nothing else. It wasn't always easy — but every wave, every gust, every challenge was worth it.

RMSR 2025: *Good hoist. Good peel. Good gybe. Good vibe.* **Mission accomplished.**



- **Duration:** 5 days 2,29 hours
- **Class:** IRC 5
- **Position:** 9th overall, 1st Swan Cup
- **Key takeaway:** Team synergy
- **Lesson:** Calm builds patience and strategy