

LIVING

# Man's incredible survival story: One year free-floating across the Pacific

By Josein Linder

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Jose Salvador Alvarenga after his mysterious, miraculous ordeal.

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It's hard enough to survive being stranded at sea in a small fiberglass vessel longer than any person in recorded history. But it's even harder to prove your story is true.

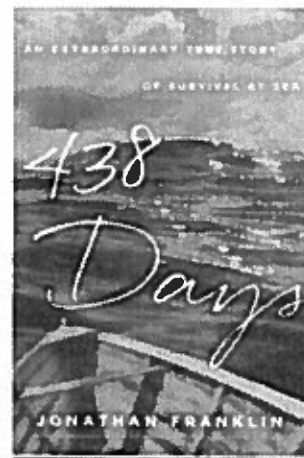
That was the conundrum Jose Salvador Alvarenga faced upon his harrowing return to civilization after a record, near-14 months free-floating 9,000 miles across the Pacific.

Journalist Jonathan Franklin was one of the first on the scene after Alvarenga's rescue. His new book, "438 Days," recounts Alvarenga's survival on rain water, sea life and even once his own hair seasoned with sea salt.

Franklin admits that even he had his doubts about Alvarenga's story. For one, a video of Alvarenga's first appearance takes place days after washing up on the uninhabited Tile Islet of the remote Marshall Islands, 2,375 miles off the coast of Hawaii. Though his hair is matted and wild, his face is round, not gaunt as one might expect.

He is smiling, even at one point waving to the cameras. Adding suspicion, that night at the hospital, Alvarenga tried to “escape” from his room. He claimed he thought he was under arrest, although no one had given him a reason to think it.

Alvarenga wasn't the most cinematic of protagonists. Thirteen years earlier, Alvarenga had abandoned a girlfriend, his parents and an infant daughter in El Salvador and snuck away to Mexico. There he began work as a fisherman, building a reputation for overindulgence. Alvarenga loved women, parties, food and drugs. Friends called him “Chancha,” meaning pig.



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But the more Franklin dug, the more Alvarenga's story tracked. “He was a well-known and beloved coastal fisherman with a history of surviving against the odds,” Franklin says.

Alvarenga, then 36, was last seen setting sail with another fisherman, Ezequiel Córdoba, for an overnight trip on Nov. 18, 2012.

They had only been out 20 miles when a storm hit and raged on for five days. They radioed back for help, their final contact with civilization. During the storm, their motor broke and, in an effort to remain upright, the men had tossed most of their equipment overboard.

Córdoba and Alvarenga spent significant amounts of time shielding themselves from the sun, wind and rain in an overturned ice box, huddled together.

But Córdoba fared far worse on their diet of raw sea turtles and birds and the occasional fish. The young fisherman had finally succumbed to starvation, two months into their ordeal.

After Córdoba died, Alvarenga spoke to his corpse, then five days later lowered him to a watery grave.

After that, Alvarenga claims he started to go crazy. “He was alone,” writes Franklin, “a tiny speck in the vast Pacific.”

But that's when Alvarenga's survival instincts took hold. Positive that he would not die, Alvarenga figured out how to fish the sea only using his hands, one knife and a machete. He drank turtle blood to stay hydrated when it didn't rain. He ate birds he kept prisoners aboard his 24-foot boat, even befriending one he thought particularly beautiful (although he later ate him as well out of necessity).

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Marshall Islands  
Getty Images

For his limited entertainment, Alvarenga played soccer against the birds with the carcass of a blowfish, using the center-line of the boat as the goal. He sometimes carefully swam alongside the vessel, always vigilant in his watch for sharks.

By the time he washed up in the Marshall Islands, he could barely walk. He was much thinner than he appeared in that video largely due to puffiness from his raw diet and year at sea.

A couple living on a remote island discovered him alone, starving and practically naked. He was near the same boat in which he'd last been seen.

Alvarenga ravenously consumed several meals in short order. He was dirty, confused and wholly uninterested in talking to the press.

"This was hardly the attitude of a publicity-seeking scammer," Franklin points out.

[View video](#)

In the book, Franklin begins each chapter with dates and coordinates. Alvarenga's journey was painstakingly recreated using the very currents that likely twirled him toward Australia. The dates were estimated based on a combination of Alvarenga's memory of the moon cycles and a study of those currents by the University of Hawaii and the US Coast Guard.

Alvarenga, Franklin claims, "was always clear as to how many months he had been adrift."

Based on that voyage and those dates, Franklin and the specialists he consulted, figured out that it is possible that Alvarenga might have happened upon the sea life that he claims sustained him, as well as the storms that always eventually replenished his water stores. That, along with his instinctual understanding of the sea, his faith and his tremendous luck, made Alvarenga's survival possible.

By all accounts, Alvarenga overcame impressive odds. He never tried to scratch out dates or messages to memorialize his nightmarish journey on the side of his boat, because, Franklin explains, "Alvarenga planned on telling his survival story in person."

Back in Mexico, his old boss and fellow fishermen wanted Alvarenga to return to his fleet. But Alvarenga wasn't ready. Instead, he went back to his parents and daughter in El Salvador, where he moved back into his childhood home. He fulfilled a promise he had made to himself while he was out on the boat: He was slowly becoming a good father, even helping to teach his daughter how to drive — on land.

"Now," writes Franklin, rather than days-long deep-sea fishing adventures, "he enjoys short boat trips."

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