

Advice for cruising Somali waters: Don't

If you must pass the pirate stronghold, experts say you should take an armed security team with you.

By Jim Flannery

As Somali pirates become bolder, more brazen and better armed, the international community and the world's shippers are in a quandary over what to do. But the choice for yacht captains is clear, say cruising and security experts.



With Somalian pirates becoming more brazen, international forces are stepping up patrols in the area.

Don't go near the Gulf of Aden or the Somali coast, the experts warn. If there's no alternative to hazarding the region, seek professional help — and they don't mean a psychiatrist. Hire a trained, well-armed security team to go with you or put your boat on a yacht transport.

“If it was me personally, I wouldn't go there at all,” says Jeremy Wyatt, director of the World Cruising Club in Cowes, England, which organizes cruises worldwide.

“It just doesn't make any sense to take a yacht there” — not now or for the foreseeable future, agrees A.J. Anderson, managing director of Wright Maritime of Fort Lauderdale, which manages megayachts and their security arrangements.

Cruising guru and three-time circumnavigator Jimmy Cornell joins the chorus. “At the moment I would be very cautious about including the [Gulf of Aden-Red Sea] route in any cruising plan,” says Cornell. He would sail around Africa’s west coast or put his boat on a yacht transport to transit the Suez Canal.

In recent years, yachts have sought safety in numbers, making the passage through the Gulf of Aden in a convoy, but Cornell says that’s not a safe option, either. “At the moment, I wouldn’t recommend it,” he says. “It’s not good.”

At last count, NATO, the European Union, India and Russia had deployed 14 warships in the region, but the fleet does not provide armed escorts to the more than 20,000 commercial ships that transit the Gulf of Aden each year, and their patrols have not driven the pirates off. If anything, the pirates have become more active.

“It’s going to get worse before it gets better,” Anderson warns. “A few more [high-profile incidents] are going to have to happen before the international community decides to descend on these guys and take them apart.”

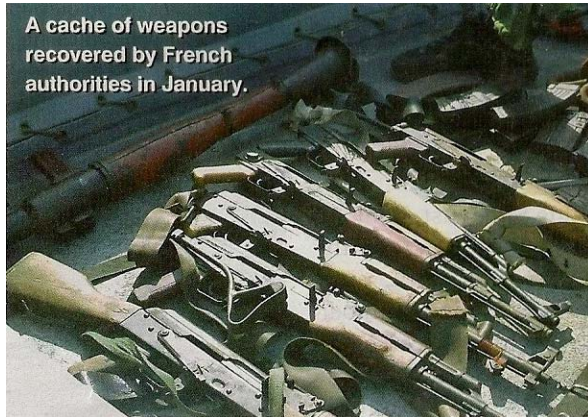
FIVE DROWN

The danger is bad enough already. Through Dec. 19, roughly 109 pirate attacks had been reported in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia in 2008 alone, according to the International Maritime Bureau, which tracks piracy from an operations center in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Forty-two of those attacks ended in hijackings. In late-December, some 14 vessels and 268 crew remained hostages.

The hijackers were demanding \$25 million for the Sirius Star, a supertanker carrying \$100 million worth of crude oil, and \$20 million for a Ukrainian ship that was transporting 30 T-72 battle tanks and other heavy arms to Kenya.

On Jan. 9, a light plane parachuted a reported \$3 million ransom onto the deck of the Sirius Star, winning the release of the 1,080-foot Saudi vessel, its 25 crewmembers and its crude oil cargo. But eight of the pirates never got the chance to enjoy their spoils.

Making a quick getaway in stormy 5- to 7-foot seas, one of the pirates’ small boats capsized, dumping eight of them into the water along with their shares of the loot. Five reportedly drowned, three reached land without their money, and one body washed ashore with \$153,000 in a plastic bag — a dead end for one engaged in a deadly business.



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A TOUGHER RESPONSE

Responding to the growing threat, the United Nations adopted a resolution Dec. 16 allowing naval warships to put armed forces ashore in

Somalia to pursue pirates with permission of Somalia's government. Meanwhile European Union forces have adopted a policy of responding aggressively to reports of pirate attacks. On Jan. 1, a French Navy frigate thwarted a pirate attack on a Panamanian-registered cargo ship in the Gulf of Aden and captured eight Somali pirates. Three days later, a French warship captured another 19 pirates while coming to the rescue of two more cargo ships in the gulf.

On Jan. 9, the U.S. Fifth Fleet announced the creation of a multinational anti-piracy task force — Combined Task Force 51 — comprising warships from 23 nations and coordinated by the U.S. Navy from Bahrain. It was expected to begin operating in mid-January.

“We are in seriously dangerous waters,” says Patrick Estebe, managing director of **AffairAction** of Fort Lauderdale, a 20-year-old security firm and one of the first, still in business, to offer maritime security services. Estebe says the pirate threat off Somalia has ratcheted way up. “What has happened in the last five years is that [the developed world] has lost the respect of its enemies,” he says.

HEAVIER ARMS

The pirates have attacked ships with virtual impunity. Estebe says their firepower has become more lethal. They fire on vessels with Russian-made PKM 7.62 mm machine guns that can breach most hulls, and with lethal rocket-propelled grenade launchers. They have started operating from mother ships now and prowl much farther afield, he says. Pirates hijacked Sirius Star 450 miles off the south Somalia coast. “At the present time, we’re telling [cruisers] to stay away from Somalia waters,” Estebe says. “Go around Africa. You’re not in a rush.”

Some luxury megayachts — for instance, motoryachts that aren’t designed for blue water — must hazard the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to move between charter grounds in the Mediterranean and the Maldives or Seychelles, or between the Mediterranean and the United Arab Emirates.

Then, “the only way to go is with an armed escort,” Estebe says.

Estebe puts highly trained armed teams of two to four men on the yachts.

During the past four years his teams have repelled four attacks off Somalia. The pirates “are businesspeople,” Estebe says. “Their purpose is not to get hurt.”

As soon as their prey mount a credible defense and fight back, they withdraw and look for an easier target, “but you’d better be strong,” Estebe says. “You better have real teeth. They can smell a paper tiger.”

Estebe warns, too, against hiring “cowboys” for a security detail.

“There are a lot of trigger-happy people out there,” he says, many of them contract employees who have worked security in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. “They are way too used to shooting first and asking questions later,” he says. “That won’t work in these circumstances.”

A yacht owner, a captain or members of a vessel’s security team can be held liable and go to jail for an unwarranted shooting. “These people must be extremely disciplined in the rules of engagement,” Estebe says.

USING A TRANSPORT

Putting a yacht on a transport shifts the burden of security from the yacht owner to the ship owner. In November, Dockwise Yacht Transport of Fort Lauderdale put out word that it was booking passages on one of its semi-submersibles, scheduled to sail this spring from Oman to Genoa via the Suez Canal after an inaugural trip to the Persian Gulf for boat shows in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The company is wooing yachts that normally would make that Gulf of Aden-Red Sea passage on their own bottoms or in convoy. If approved by Dockwise’s Dutch owners, the 685-foot Yacht Express will carry a security team and make the dangerous passage at night — at speeds of 16 to 18 knots — in a security corridor patrolled by warships, says Dockwise spokeswoman Catalina Bujor.

“We are putting these measures in place for this particular voyage,” she says. If successful, Dockwise might make this an annual trip, according to Bujor.

Choosing to voyage north around the West African coast presents its own problems, Cornell says. Most West African ports are not safe. “You go nonstop,” he says. “You don’t stop anywhere. The only place you might stop is Namibia.” He says, too, that cruisers making the typical east-west circumnavigation must plan well in advance to leave Asia early enough to arrive in Cape Town by early November, before the onset of the south Indian Ocean cyclone season.

SOME URGE BLOCKADE

The International Association of Independent Tanker Owners, representing 2,900 tankers — 75 percent of the world fleet — called in late November for an international air-and-sea blockade of the Somalia coast to end the piracy. They say diverting tankers around the West African coast will jack up their costs 30 percent, and they oppose arming merchant ships as an act of self-defense.

Some cruise lines were following the lead of Hapag-Lloyd Cruises' C. Columbus, which in early December disembarked several hundred passengers in the western Yemeni port of Hodeida and put them on a charter flight to Dubai, where the Columbus picked them up after transiting the Gulf of Aden with its crew only. Other cruise lines are saying they will continue to carry passengers through the Gulf of Aden and rely on their speed to outrun pirates, if attacked.

Miami maritime attorney Gale Kenneth Hawkes, author of the 1989 book "Maritime Security," one of the early treatises on this growing problem, says ship owners must return to the centuries-old practice of arming merchant ships so they can defend themselves. "I think the solution today is the same as it was in 1989," he said. "The way to keep pirates off your ship is to shoot them."

He proposes arming crew, training them well and keeping an armed watch. He says pirates normally back off from a strong defense and look for easier pickings.

COPYCAT FEARS

Security experts foresee no immediate improvement in conditions off Somalia. In fact, they are bracing themselves for a further spread of piracy and criminality on the water, and they advise yachtsmen to do the same.

The success of the Somali pirates may well trigger copycat attacks on luxury yachts elsewhere, says Anderson. "A copycat situation in this hemisphere could be a real problem for us," he says.

Estebe links the Somali piracy to a decline in the country's tuna fishery brought on by foreign ships illegally fishing Somali waters. A decade ago, in the absence of any fisheries protection, local fishermen began arming themselves and stopping foreign fishing boats to demand compensation — a practice that has evolved into the current state of affairs. Sophisticated criminal organizations based landside gather intelligence, buy arms, dispatch mother ships, undertake attacks and demand ransoms.

Among Somalis, “The pirates are considered Robin Hoods,” Estebe says. He believes the world economic recession and other long-term trends — growing populations and shortages of water and food related to climate change — will embolden more have-nots to resort to piracy. He says the pirates are trying to steal a share of the opulence they see — not just on merchant ships but on yachts, which are more vulnerable. He says yachtsmen can defend against attacks, but they won’t abate until the root causes are addressed.



ATTACKS NEAR VENEZUELA

Cornell’s Web site, www.noonsite.com, a Bible now for cruising yachtsmen, has a full page of news reports, e-mails from cruisers and links dedicated to the issue of piracy.

He says the cruising climate in Venezuela already is deteriorating. More than 90 crimes against foreign yachtsmen and women have been reported over the last three years, the most recent the murder Nov. 8 of Ken Peters on the sailboat Chill. Peters and his wife, Cathy, were anchored alongside another sailboat, I’Lean, off Isla Borracha near Puerto La Cruz when a wooden skiff with three men aboard approached the two yachts in late afternoon. The men asked for water, but then opened fire with pistols, killing Peters and wounding Steve Davis on I’Lean in the thigh. Davis reportedly drove off the attackers with a shotgun, injuring one and possibly killing another. It was the fifth shooting in Venezuela involving yachts reported in 2008 on noonsite.com.

Cornell advises cruisers to steer clear of Venezuelan waters.

Estebe, who usually has advised yacht captains to eschew firearms and use other means to defend themselves, has reversed his position in light of growing piracy and criminality — and the likelihood of more to come. He recommends skippers arm themselves with a shotgun, to protect against assailants who pose an immediate threat, and a high-powered rifle with scope (a bolt-action hunting rifle will do) to disable an outboard or scare off potential assailants at 200 yards. Ideally, the skipper would use the rifle to keep pirates away and avoid loss of life. Estebe says skipper and crew must be trained in firearms use and scrupulously obey the firearms laws of host countries.

“All the pirates have been emboldened,” he says. “In the past, you could find ways for cruisers to protect themselves other than firearms,” he says. “Now if you don’t have firearms, they won’t take you seriously.”

The threat of yacht hijackings with ransom demands is serious enough that Anderson’s company is including non-lethal crowd-control technology — water cannons and high-tech sound-wave weapons that fire concentrated 150-decibel beams of sound — in some of its megayacht designs as piracy defenses.

“The military uses it for crowd control,” he says. They also are putting it on ships now.

This story originally appeared in the March 2009 issue.