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A Canadian warship circles the convoy in the Gulf of Aden



Above: Idyllic beach of Salah.  
Below: Cobble under sail.  
Below right: Liz on watch.



**VASCO DA GAMA ROUTE - STAGE 3**

**LOG BOOK**

Date	From	To	Distance
27/2/10	Sadla Island, Eritrea	Djibouti/Eritrean Border	100
28/2	Djibouti/Eritrean Border	Aden	110
9/3	Aden	Al Mukalla	290
14/3	Al Mukalla	Salalah, Oman	350
Arrive Salalah 17th March			
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>850</b>

**CHARTS AND PILOTS**

**Admiralty Charts - Folio 32** Red Sea-Gulf of Aden-Arabian Sea  
**Red Sea Pilot**  
 Elaine Morgan and Stephen Davies, 2nd Edition, 2002  
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# Cruising pirate alley

Pirates have come a long way since the days of Captain Kidd and it takes a certain kind of cruiser to run the gauntlet of the Gulf of Aden's notorious 'Pirate Alley'. Liz Cleere and Jamie Furlong continue their exploits within the relatively secure framework of a cruising rally



Jamie and Liz.

*"We're pumping out manually: we can't find where the water's coming in... so much water's coming in at the moment. The engine's completely covered, the saloon's half full..."*

Things can get tense in Pirate Alley, especially in the middle of the night when you are maintaining radio silence, scanning the water for fast-moving shadows, and trying to sail in formation. The last thing you want to hear is your friend coming through loud and clear to let you know that he is taking in water.

In late February, we reluctantly left idyllic Sadla Island in Eritrea, with the intention of getting as far south as possible before crossing the Red Sea

to Yemen. This was our first taste of sailing in convoy. If you have never done it, we have one simple piece of advice: don't, unless you have to. The stress and mental torture of trying to get 14 yachts of varying degrees of perverseness to sail at the same speed, in the same direction and in formation is like trying to herd cats with attitude who all think they are Top Cat. How many skippers do you know who like taking orders?

The first hundred miles from Sadla Island put the convoy theory to the test: Depending on the individual skipper, some found the convoy too slow, some found it too fast, there were boats who, having been given a waypoint refused to deviate

from it even though the leader had altered course, and there were yachts who simply strayed from their group and sailed where they liked. Everyone had an opinion and they all expressed it. Lo, our fearless rally leader, grimly pressed on, knowing from experience that we would settle into a rhythm, eventually.

**MACHINE GUNS AT DAWN**

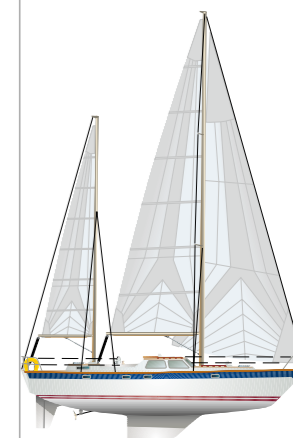
Adding to the general tension, Cobble developed engine trouble during this stage and was heroically towed by the Swiss boat, *Anthea*. When strong headwinds reduced *Anthea's* speed to less than three knots Lo called a halt to our progress and we sheltered in the shallows close to the border of Djibouti. This proved too much for the local military who, within a matter of hours, moved us on. By now we were used to being woken up at dawn by machine guns. It was a truly beautiful morning but, more importantly, the headwinds had died. Now was the perfect opportunity to make a dash across the shipping lanes of the Red Sea.

Along with piracy, the Bab el Mandeb — 'Gate



of Tears' in Arabic — had been one of our biggest concerns. This notorious stretch of water connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden is divided by the island of Perim, with Dact-el-Mayun to the west and the smaller Alexander's Strait, only two miles wide and our chosen route, to the east. Ferocious winds often blow through these narrow channels, accompanied by strong currents, causing turbulent seas and impassable waters. Basing our departure from Sadla on a change in wind direction and speed had been the right decision; we crossed a flat Red Sea and quickly passed through the Strait. Three knots of current popped *Esper* out into the Gulf of Aden like a champagne cork. The current soon dissolved, but spirits were high and we were all on full alert as we began our journey through the most pirate-ridden stretch of water on earth.

After the exhilaration of passing through the Bab safely, the convoy was not holding formation. Our group was particularly bad at staying together throughout the rally, two boats mostly tending to lag behind and ending up with group two: This



**ESPER - OYSTER 435**

**LOA** 43.5ft 13.22m  
**LWL** 36.11ft 11m  
**Beam** 13.7ft 4.18m  
**Draught** 6.5ft 2m  
**Displacement** 13,608kg  
**Sail area**  
**Ketch** 850ft<sup>2</sup> 79.97m<sup>2</sup>  
**Ballast**  
 Encapsulated cast iron keel  
**Designed by** Holman and Pye  
**Builder**  
 Ego Dridge/Oyster Marine



Above: Fishermen or Pirates?  
 Right: *Rhumb Do*.  
 Below: Friendly locals in Aden.  
 Bottom: Unspoilt beach track, Oman.



At anchor in Al Mukulla.

**HOW THE CONVOY WORKED**

After many years of taking boats through the Gulf of Aden, Lo has devised a simple kite-shaped sailing pattern for a successful convoy. He is positioned at the front and centre point of the kite. Group 1 follows him a quarter of a mile on the starboard quarter, group 3 mirrors group 1 on the port quarter and group 2 stays a mile directly behind Lo. At night the groups close in. Each of the groups contains four or five boats, including a 'leader'. Each leader is given a different coloured flashing light, which is mounted on the stern. These three group leaders and Lo maintain the kite shape by watching their AIS transponder readings. The other boats in each group follow their lead boat.

**TACTICS**

- We knew when we made the decision to sail through the Gulf of Aden we were taking a risk. By joining a rally we minimised that risk.
- The tactics are simple for small yachts:
  - Sail in company
  - Sail close to land
- Inform the MSCHOA of your intentions long before you begin the journey — we reported to the UKMTO every 6hrs
- Maintain radio silence where humanly possible
- Use minimal lights — we used only deck mounted navigation lights, no mast or steaming lights
- Install an AIS transponder. We were tracked by the taskforce all the way from Suez through to Oman.
  - Arm yourself with knowledge and do your homework: Assess the element of risk for yourself

steaming ahead and the rest of our group falling behind, *Esper* was left on her own and vulnerable. It was a heart-stopping moment.

It turned out to be a false alarm. Lo informed us we were passing a fishing village, but he had got the message across. The plan of closing in fast together should we find ourselves under attack had not worked. From that moment most of the rally tried harder to stay where they had been placed by Lo.

**SLIPPING THROUGH THE NETS**

Strangely enough, it was not the ever-present threat of piracy which kept us on full alert through this most dangerous of waters. The constant menace from haphazardly laid, and poorly marked, fishing nets quickly became our biggest dread and took up all our waking thoughts. The coasts of Yemen and Oman are alive with fishing vessels of all sizes and shapes, with nets strung out behind and in front of them. Sometimes they are lit at night, but quite often they are only marked with a float. Most of the fishing boats leave their lights off until a boat gets close to them, so navigating through this assault course really keeps you on your toes. As our group was on the landward side of the 'kite' we were closer to shore and more vulnerable to the nets. On several occasions one of the convoy boats

left *Esper* in position, but often on her own or with the company of only one or two boats. Inevitably, while stranded in this position, several groups of fast moving skiffs appeared heading straight towards us.

"*Rally boats, rally boats, close in NOW!*"  
 Lo was talking to us on channel 72, while at the same time, on channel 16, a naval warship began a one-sided conversation with a commercial vessel about pirates just spotted in the area. With Lo

would snag them. Despite the niggling and whining induced by sailing in formation, when it came to our fellow rally boats being in any kind of danger everyone stepped up to the mark. Having towed *Cobble* over 200 miles *Anthea* was struck down with a broken head gasket just after leaving Aden. This time it was Lo, on *Mistral*, who undertook the towing of another yacht. In an enviable feat of engineering Jean Claude was able to repair *Anthea's* engine while being towed. There were several unscheduled night time diving adventures. Anthony, of *Divanty*, had the most accessible dinghy, and time and again lowered it into choppy water, fixed the outboard to it and motored from boat to boat with people, equipment and underwater torches to help disentangle props from nets. 'It all adds to the excitement,' was his comment. When Ian, of *Rhumb Do*, broke radio silence to tell us he was taking in water a cold chill ran through the rally. Props caught in nets, failing alternators and broken autopilots were one thing, but this was different. As we listened in silence to Ian's bulletins every boat in the rally willed him to locate the problem. Jamie hastily prepared towing lines. Agonising minutes passed and finally Ian located the problem: the end cap of his heat

exchanger had split and broken off. He hastily jury rigged a solution, while his crew — Robbie from Canada — bailed like crazy, and once again we were on our way.

**ARRIVAL IN ADEN**

During this dash along the coast there were priceless moments on land which we will remember forever. We did not see much of Yemen, in fact we only saw Aden, but we fell in love »



Right: Handful of "qat".  
 Below Right: Aden's market, "Crazy Place".  
 Below: Dorado in the Arabian Sea



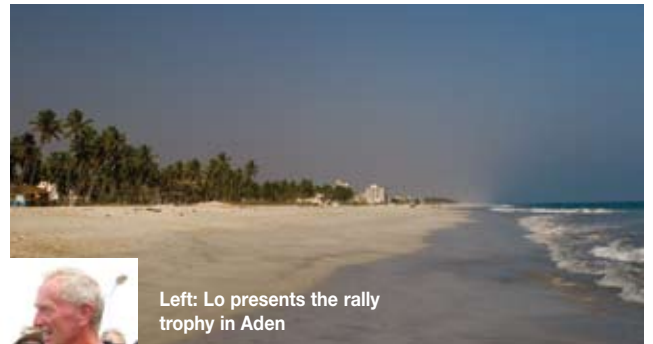
**QAT**  
 Sadly, when visiting Aden do not be surprised to find that you can get nothing done in the afternoon. The use of "qat", the country's biggest oppressor and national drug of choice, is in daily evidence. "90% of men chew qat every afternoon. They spend their money on this stupid drug and leave their families hungry," said Selim, who is one of the 10%. Sure enough we found men who, cheeks stuffed hamster-like with green leaves, lay on the floor in shops, or lolled around helplessly. Continual use leaves you almost speechless and incapable of work.

# CRUISING VASCO DA GAMA RALLY



Entering Aden at dawn.

Right: *Rhumb Do* in Oman.  
Below Right: The unspoilt coast of Oman.



Left: Lo presents the rally trophy in Aden

## USEFUL CONTACTS

All official bodies will advise yachts not to transit the Gulf of Aden. Although there is no organisation set up to help small yachts, these bodies offer extensive information..

### MSCHOA

#### Maritime Security Centre - Horn of Africa:

Set up by the European task force to tackle piracy in this area. Established the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC)..

[www.mschoa.org](http://www.mschoa.org)

### ICC-CCS

#### International Chamber of Commerce:

Go to their IMB Reporting centre for information on piracy

[www.icc-ccs.org](http://www.icc-ccs.org)

with the people and the place. Since ancient times, Aden has been a key port on the east - west trading route, but after the withdrawal of the British in the late 1960s, decades of civil strife have left the town pock-marked, dishevelled, and abandoned. We found our delightful taxi driver Selim in this dusty city, who showed us round the place. He prefers the grittier side of Aden, peppering our drives with potted histories and inappropriate jokes.

“Look, pirates!” he grinned, as we passed a careworn group of Somali refugees, “They look friendly now but wait till you’re back at sea...”

He took us to a shop in Crater’s market where they serve iced fresh lime juice of such lip smacking thirst quenching flavour it puts our Pepsis and Fantas to shame. We talked politics and Selim explained how his country prospered under communist rule: women discarded the Jilbab, children went to school and work was plentiful. “We were happier then. The Russians sent me to Moscow to study engineering. Now we are back to the old ways. I drive a taxi and my wife wears black.”

Life was a little less interesting in Oman, but certainly more beautiful. In Port Salalah the system is rigged so that you cannot stay without using an agent. This has led to arbitrary and spurious fees being levied, with no recourse for the hapless yachtsman. On the positive side the beaches were untouched and spectacular. We were pleased to learn that Oman has a huge Indian workforce, resulting in some great restaurants delivering delicious no-frills curries to the workers. Our most memorable moment in Salalah was meeting the crew of HMS *Chatham*. We were lucky enough to be in port at the same time as this



The coast of Salalah.

Royal Navy type 22 frigate was making minor repairs. The rally went on board for a talk on piracy and a tour of the ship, where we gawped at the weapons and coveted the Gatling-style gun, which would have fitted nicely onto most of our boats. We spent many hours setting the world to rights with the crew.

Just as we were preparing to leave bad news arrived. Overnight, the pirates had switched their area of operation. Two piracy attacks had occurred off the coast of Oman, one of them less than 30 miles away. The UKMTO immediately

requested that we remain in Salalah until they had investigated the danger. Once again, the sickening fear of piracy had reared its head

*Listen to the weekly podcasts of the rally on Liz and Jamie’s website, [www.followtheboat.com](http://www.followtheboat.com)*



Above: Liz, Jordan and Robbie play with HMS *Chatham*’s toys.