



Words: Liz Cleere Photos: Jamie Furlong

Esper sails the coast of the Sinai Desert (source: Andre Tournis)



Above: Anchored next to wreck, oil fields of Ras Sheratib.
Below: Liz with Chief Ratcatcher.



VASCO DA GAMA ROUTE – STAGE 1

LOG BOOK

Date	From	To	Distance
5/11/09	Marmaris, Turkey	Port Fouad, Egypt	391
11/11/09	Port Fouad	Ismailia	40
18/11/09	Ismailia	Port Suez	46
22/11/09	Port Suez	Wadi Dome Marina	30
23/11/09	Wadi Dome Marina	Marsa Thelemet	30
25/11/09	Marsa Thelemet	Ras Sheratib	40
26/11/09	Ras Sheratib	Sheikh Riyah Harbour	38
27/11/09	Sheikh Riyah Harbour	Endeavour Harbour	40
29/11/09	Endeavour Harbour	Hurghada Marina	20
6/1/10	Hurghada Marina	Marsa Abu Makhadiq	13
7/1/10	Marsa Abu Makhadiq	Abu Soma	29
8/1/10	Abu Soma	Port Ghalib	100
12/1/10	Port Ghalib	Sharm Luli, Sudan	68
TOTAL			885

Above: The first leg of the Vasco Da Gama rally as featured in this article.

Esper to Egypt

The intense blue waters and desert backdrops of the Red Sea have long been alluring to European sailors, but at a price. With fears of piracy and dangerous reefs at the forefront of their mind Liz Cleere and Jamie Furlong embarked on their trip from Turkey to Egypt within the secure framework of a cruising rally.



Jamie and Liz

Some might say that sailing in the Red Sea, with its dangerous reefs to the west, hostile country to the east, and shores riddled with landmines on both sides, would be asking for trouble, “You’ll have to hole up in dangerous anchorages while you wait for 40 knot winds to pass, you’ll be stuck for weeks.” Others might say that cruising through the best known pirate area in the world to a country that is about to have a monsoon and boasts no marinas, might be considered just plain daft. “The Bab al-Mandab is more dangerous than Biscay”. The main advice offered was to go straight down the Red Sea without stopping, “The people are dirty and miserable; you’ll be plagued by beggars

and there are thieves everywhere”. After a two week delay brought on by bad weather, some last minute panicking as we anticipated the 4,500 mile journey ahead, and yet another engine check, we motored out of Marmaris Bay at dawn, on Guy Fawkes Day, 2009.

We would not have missed the opportunity to sail from Turkey to India with the Vasco Da Gama rally for the world. In the Red Sea we saw places only accessible by small boat or from the desert, and enjoyed a coast few travellers ever see. Most anchorages are uninhabited, except for the occasional military post half-heartedly manned by lackadaisical young men undertaking their national

service. There can’t be many places better in the world to fish than the Red Sea, and as for diving, snorkelling and just plain gawping at the scenery it is a breathtaking reminder of how beautiful our blue planet can be. Where else can you find thousands of miles of almost uninterrupted coral coastline and pristine beaches? Not a resort village or luxury hotel in sight, instead simple ports filled with poor but smiling and welcoming faces. It won’t last, the developers will get at it somehow, but until then it remains an unspoiled paradise for an adventurous sailor.

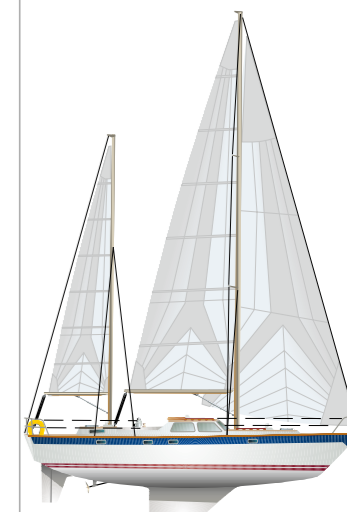


SAFETY IN NUMBERS

We had signed up to the rally earlier in 2009 with mixed feelings. After four fantastic years in Turkey trying to make up our minds about where to go next the one thing we were sure about was that we

wanted to sail there on our own, without any help from anyone else. The insurance-world cronies, however, made the decision about whether or not to join the rally for us, “No rally, no insurance!” they said. Sailing without insurance is unthinkable and, as we found out, a fine-able offence in some countries. Unlike other rallies the Vasco Da Gama collective is a fairly ramshackle amateur initiative for boats wishing to travel between Turkey and India, but it still felt like we were taking the easy way out. A broken rudder, smashed hulls, dragging anchors, lost dinghies, torn sails and numerous engine failures later we were glad that we had ended up travelling in the company of some accomplished and resourceful sailors.

Joining the rally in Port Said gave us our first taste of the continent of Africa and the diverse mixture of emotions everyone must feel when they get to Egypt. It is a loud, dusty, over-crowded living museum with a mixed bag of sights and experiences as you traipse from one jaw-



ESPER – OYSTER 435

LOA	43.5ft	13.22m
LWL	36.11ft	11m
Beam	13.8½ft	4.18m
Draught	7.2ft	2.2m
Displacement		13,608kg
Sail area		
Ketch	850ft²	79.97m²
Ballast		
	Encapsulated cast iron keel	
Designed by	Holman and Plye	
Builder	Ego Dridge/Oyster Marine	



Above: Ismailia Marina at dawn.
Right: Ancient Luxor.
Below: Solar panels working at Port Fouad.
Bottom: Baking bread on the roof, Luxor.



Beautiful Kalaboshi Bay, Turkey

**ESPER'S
TOP 5
BITS OF
KIT**

Solar Panels.

Model: Kyocera. Supplied in Turkey. 6 x 40 watt panels, hung from guardrail, flipped up when in use.
Plus: Plenty of juice in the batteries for all our gadgets.
Minus: Only when the sun shines.

Watermaker

Model: Schenker Modular 30M 12v.
Plus: 35 litres of water an hour and showers every day.
Minus: Lots of swearing when fitting.

Windvane Self Steering System

Model: Windpilot Pacific Plus with auxiliary rudder.
Plus: Hands free steering, even with the engine on. Doesn't drain the batteries
Minus: Doesn't make the tea.

AIS Transponder

Model: CSB200 Class B AIS Transponder.
Plus: Kept track night and day of 99% of commercial traffic in the busiest shipping lanes, with the ability at a glance to see their speed and direction. It allowed the coalition to track us from Port Suez to half way across the Arabian Sea.
Minus: Sometimes you don't want to know what is happening 150 miles away.

Cat

Model: Turkish moggy picked up for free in Marmaris.
Plus: Ability to diffuse tense situations between crew members. Endless source of amusement. Catches rats.



dropping ancient site to another. Sure, the constant haggling and demands for presents was at times frustrating, but on the whole we found the stigma of the 'baksheesh' culture a little unfair. There were plenty of exceptionally friendly and helpful people, who asked for nothing: children shouted 'Welcome!' as we walked down the street; the man on the check-out till chatted away in fluent

English, confused why anyone from Europe would choose to live on a boat; everyone posed greedily for photographs; and, just like at home, taxi drivers told us their life histories and discussed politics, while fleecing us of our cash.

HIDE THE COKE!

Much has been written about transiting the Suez Canal and, having made the trip ourselves, we would advise that future passage-makers do the research, but take it all with a pinch of salt. As with every country we visited you do better to just knuckle down and pay the agent his fee to smooth things over and get moving. It seems that even for our fearless rally leader, Lo Brust, who has been through the Suez more times than most of us have had fish dinners, it is a different experience every time. The one area that remains consistent is the predatory demands of the canal 'pilots', one of whom is required to sit on your yacht throughout the transit, smoking and drinking all your coke, while sulking because you won't make 10 knots with your tiny engine. When you tie up at the end of the day don't let these characters, with their badgering and whining for 'presents', dampen the pleasure you will have had sedately motoring your way through the man-made wonder that is the

Suez Canal.

At the half way point yachts are required to make a stop at Ismailia, 'the jewel of the Suez'. It is a warm and gentle town and a peaceful place to rest after the hustle and bustle of Port Said. It is also the best place from which to hire a taxi and spend some time in Cairo. "Where are you from?" the question asked by all cabbies the world over, is inevitably followed by "Ah England, nice people." You can substitute any country and the reply will always be the same; we have tried Wales, Australia, Canada, Khazakstan, and even America. On one memorable occasion in Egypt, after admitting we were English, this exchange was followed by the surreal, "that Mohammed Al Fayed, he's a good man. He should be our next president."

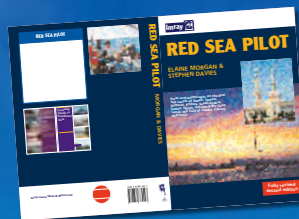
Don't let anyone tell you otherwise: the Pyramids do not disappoint. Even through our modern jaded eyes and the lifelong over-worked symbolism of all things Egyptian, they are magnificent, other-worldly and splendidly enigmatic. The Egyptian Museum too, although its method of display owes much to the early Victorians, is full of eye-popping, mouth-watering treasures. Drag yourself from each dusty showcase, with its sporadic hand written information cards, to the next priceless treasure.

We thought the exorbitant price demanded to see the surprisingly well displayed ancient mummies was worth every piaster.

If we hadn't been in the rally we may well have been tempted to stay in Egypt for the winter and then go back through the Suez to the Med for the summer. Transit fees are waived for the return trip within six months of leaving the Canal. We know of a growing band of cruisers who regularly commute back and forth. With the proliferation of well-priced marinas along its coast the Gulf »



Top: The Sphinx and The author in profile. **Above:** The Max-Prop cleans up well
Left: Jamie takes the helm



Imray

CHARTS AND PILOTS

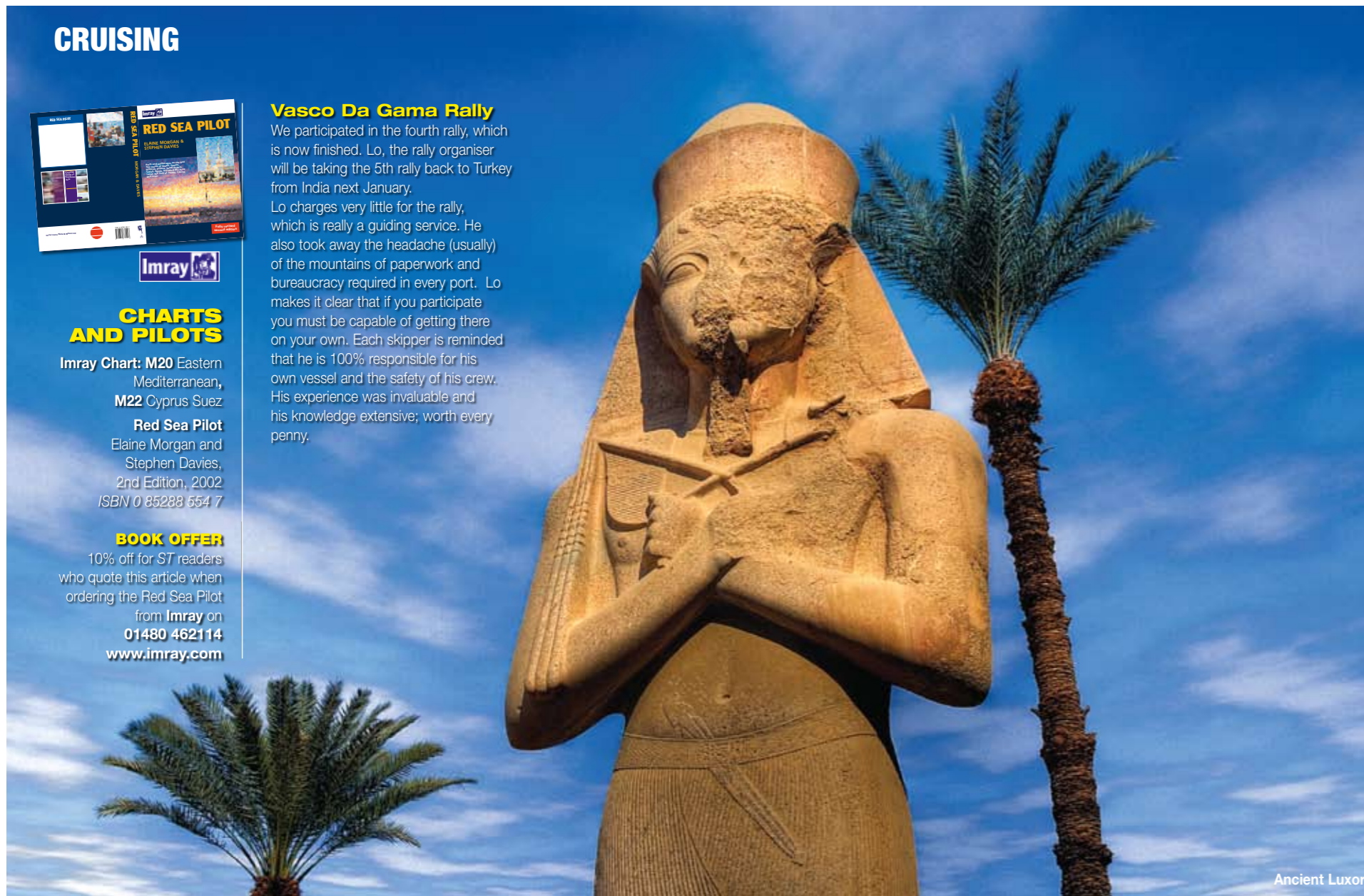
Imray Chart: M20 Eastern Mediterranean, M22 Cyprus Suez Red Sea Pilot Elaine Morgan and Stephen Davies, 2nd Edition, 2002 ISBN 0 85288 554 7

BOOK OFFER

10% off for ST readers who quote this article when ordering the Red Sea Pilot from Imray on 01480 462114 www.imray.com

Vasco Da Gama Rally

We participated in the fourth rally, which is now finished. Lo, the rally organiser will be taking the 5th rally back to Turkey from India next January. Lo charges very little for the rally, which is really a guiding service. He also took away the headache (usually) of the mountains of paperwork and bureaucracy required in every port. Lo makes it clear that if you participate you must be capable of getting there on your own. Each skipper is reminded that he is 100% responsible for his own vessel and the safety of his crew. His experience was invaluable and his knowledge extensive; worth every penny.



Ancient Luxor



Above: Our neighbours, Suez Canal **Right:** Esper under sail (photo: Salih Akman) **Below:** Below decks on passage **Bottom:** Ancient Luxor



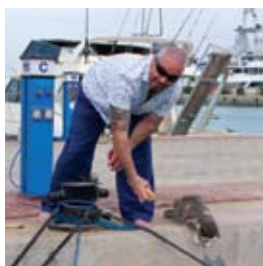
Esper

Built in 1989 *Esper*, hull number 46, is an Oyster 435. Despite being a cutter-rigged ketch, *Esper's* four sails are easy to manage. This is in part due to the in-mast furling of the main and mizzen, coupled with a high-cut Yankee and small stay-sail. Whoever came up with the sail plan was a genius; the sails set easily and it is often unnecessary to use any kind of self steering, mechanical or electronic. We also use a mizzen staysail (often), a cruising chute (sometimes) and a spinnaker (occasionally).

Esper is the name of the computer in the movie, 'Bladerunner'. It is also the name given to someone with Extra Sensory Perception. Most importantly, however, it is a short word that can be said quickly phonetically, is easy to hear over the radio and can be pronounced in most languages.

There are three permanent liveaboards on *Esper*: Jamie, Skipper On Deck; Liz, Skipper Everywhere Else; and Millie the Cat, Crew In Charge of Fish.

Read more about Liz and Jamie's adventure on www.followtheboat.com



Above top: Jamie and Millie fishing. Laid back store owner, Ismailia.

of Suez looks set to become a growing cruising destination: the sailing is fantastic, the weather is balmy and there are endless opportunities to go exploring inland. We had some of our best sailing here and twenty days after leaving the comfort of Marmaris our log book recorded *Esper's* record speed of 10.7 kt over the ground, the catching of a tuna, and to cap it all, dolphins.

A LITTLE TLC

Before we left it was important to ensure we were well-prepared. This naturally involved bankrupting ourselves by spending all our money on *Esper*. It's not until you live full time on a boat that you truly come to understand its advantages and its weaknesses. Using most bits of the boat continuously day in day out soon shows up the areas that need some TLC, especially on a twenty year old yacht. We agonised long and hard about re-rigging *Esper* and, as we did not know her maintenance history, decided to err on the side of caution by replacing the lot and having the parts shipped over to Turkey from Oyster. Our water-maker and solar panels give us the freedom to sail wherever we want, whenever we want. The addition of windvane self steering has made our lives easier on long passages, we no longer have

to watch the batteries drain and dwindle before our eyes when the autopilot is on. The most recent bit of kit is our AIS transponder, which has proved its worth time and again in those busy shipping lanes in the Med and Red Sea.

After the confinement of the Canal, *Esper* dusted off her decks, spread her sails, breathed in the fresh winds, and danced in the bluest, blue waters of the Gulf of Suez. This part of our voyage was a fairytale come true. Three to four metre waves and Beaufort 7, gusting 8, winds hurled us towards Hurghada over a week-long sailing frenzy. Heading southwards down the Red Sea from the Suez is a treat, with fresh winds behind you most of the way. While you sally from one anchorage to the next you can't help but gasp at the dramatic coastline. The spectacular mountains of the Sinai desert loom on your port beam as you roller coaster over the waves, reaching undreamed of speeds.

Before starting the journey our two greatest fears had been piracy (predictably) and navigating through reefs. Both of these concerns were well-founded when firstly Paul and Rachel Chandler, previous rally participants, were captured by pirates and secondly, when the first difficult 'marsa' (natural harbour) we entered after leaving the safety of Hurghada Marina ended in carnage.

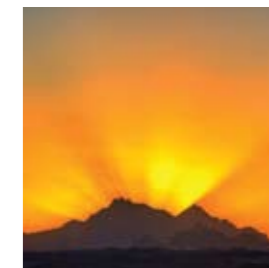


At the time of writing Paul and Rachel are still being held captive and we can only hope that they are released soon; we thought of them often as we re-traced their steps towards India.

By the time we reached Sharm Luli, on the edge of the Egyptian and Sudanese border, night had fallen. As the fleet made its way into the protection of this anchorage three boats came a cropper and hit the reef. Mustering all our concentration and making full use of Jamie's honed navigational skills, helped by cached images from Google Earth, *Esper* anchored safely. The following morning while two boats nursed

their badly damaged egos, Anthony and Davina of *s/y Divanty*, a Nauticat 521, discovered a crippling hole in their yacht's rudder. The initial shock was soon replaced by voices round the bay volunteering help on the VHF, and in the true spirit of our adventure we 'rallied' round with offers of stainless steel, tools and advice. By chance the fleet happened to include a professional welder with his welding kit on board; we also had Graham Levy of *s/y Eeyore*, a qualified diving instructor. What could be simpler for these two than repairing a rudder with no chance of a lift-out, whilst at anchor in a near-deserted and windswept bay, on the border of Sudan?

A small military post, consisting of a shack and a few non-uniformed conscripts, was based on the beach. They checked our papers and, after initially asking us to move on, relented when they learned of our predicament. Within a week the job was finished. Using two teams of divers, and an underwater camera, Tony Puttock, of *s/y Full Flight*, was able to fashion a new piece and supervise its assembly. Job done. That stay in Sharm Luli brought together an already cohesive group of boats into a real band of brothers. We had weathered the first setback together. We knew there would be worse to come.



Above top: Market lady with basket of limes, Ismailia **Above:** Marsa Abu Makhadiq at sunset