

Crossing the Arabian Sea to Mumbai



Regular readers will be acquainted with Liz and Jamie's exploits as they thread their way through pirate infested seas from Turkey to India as members of a cruising rally. Having made it to within 60 miles of their destination, the last thing they expected was the Indian navy to T-bone their yacht.

Salalah should have been where our convoy ended, but the pirates hadn't finished with us yet. As we prepared to leave, a call came through from the UKMTO to tell us a ship had been hijacked 30 miles off the coast of Oman, bang in the middle of our proposed route. We were asked to stay for a few more days while they investigated the danger.

With no further attacks occurring in the vicinity and an intense Omani naval presence, we took the decision to head out of Salalah on 5 April. The taskforce requested we stay together until well away from the danger zone.

Once again we sailed together in convoy, checking in with the taskforce every six

hours, maintaining radio silence and using minimal navigation lights.

Before making the plunge eastwards, we spent another night at anchor in a pristine bay. Ras al Hallaniyah, part of the Kuria Muria Islands, lies 125 miles north of Salalah. Knowing this would be our last chance to enjoy the deserted shores of Oman, we spent the day snorkelling and beachcombing among the white sands, beneath the dramatic red rock of this barren coast. We relished a few hours of unadulterated fun before the familiar threats of piracy, storms and equipment failure forced their way back into the forefront of our minds.

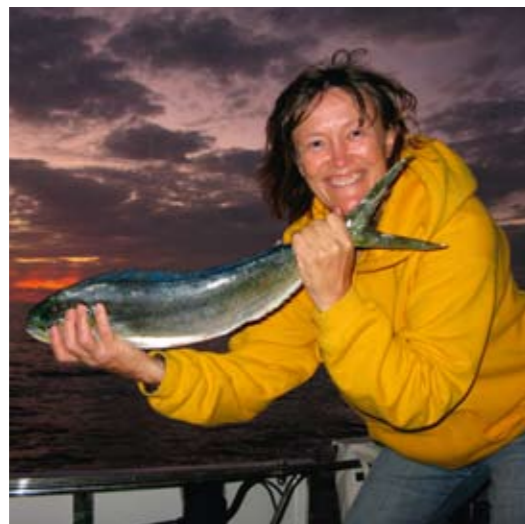


CRUISING VASCO DA GAMA



ENTERING THE DEAD ZONE

Early on in the voyage, after leaving behind the hundreds of small fishing boats that litter the Arabian coast, we entered the 'dead zone', an area that sits between the busy shipping corridors of the Arabian Sea. Here it was quiet with just the occasional fishing boat for company. We had little to worry about at night, because we saw few lights on the horizon and nothing on the radar. During the day we were surrounded by empty ocean. The only downside to having AIS is being able to see the enormous amount of traffic that is out there. In reality this apparently empty sea is teeming with shipping.



VHF HELL

We hadn't anticipated the ever present jibber-jabber on the VHF radio. Many bluewater cruisers will have heard lone voices over the airways at night pining for 'Maaario-o-o' and the derogatory chanting of 'Filipino mon-key!' This was nothing compared to the bombardment of sound that accompanied us from Oman to India. Every channel was alive, including 16, with conversation too X-rated to repeat here. For most of the voyage we kept Channel 16 on low and relied on digital selective calling to contact fellow rally members. As we came closer to the Indian coastline it was worse with all channels blocked by local fishermen shouting into their radios. A loud barrage of incomprehensible voices accompanied us into Mumbai.

We were eager to begin life on the open water. Since leaving Turkey we had been anticipating the crossing as one of the highlights of the rally. We headed north, still in formation, early the following morning. The convoy, having served its purpose in getting us safely through pirate-ridden seas, broke up when we reached safer waters. Every skipper was once more master of his or her own destiny.

Some of the faster yachts disappeared over the horizon quickly. We kept up the radio 'net' twice a day – once in the morning and again in the evening. Between the group we had enough SSB and VHF power for messages and bulletins to be relayed back and forth across the Arabian Sea. For security reasons we did not give our positions over the air, instead we announced our distance and direction from previously agreed waypoints. The net gave us a chance to pool weather information and to pick up the latest advice from the taskforce

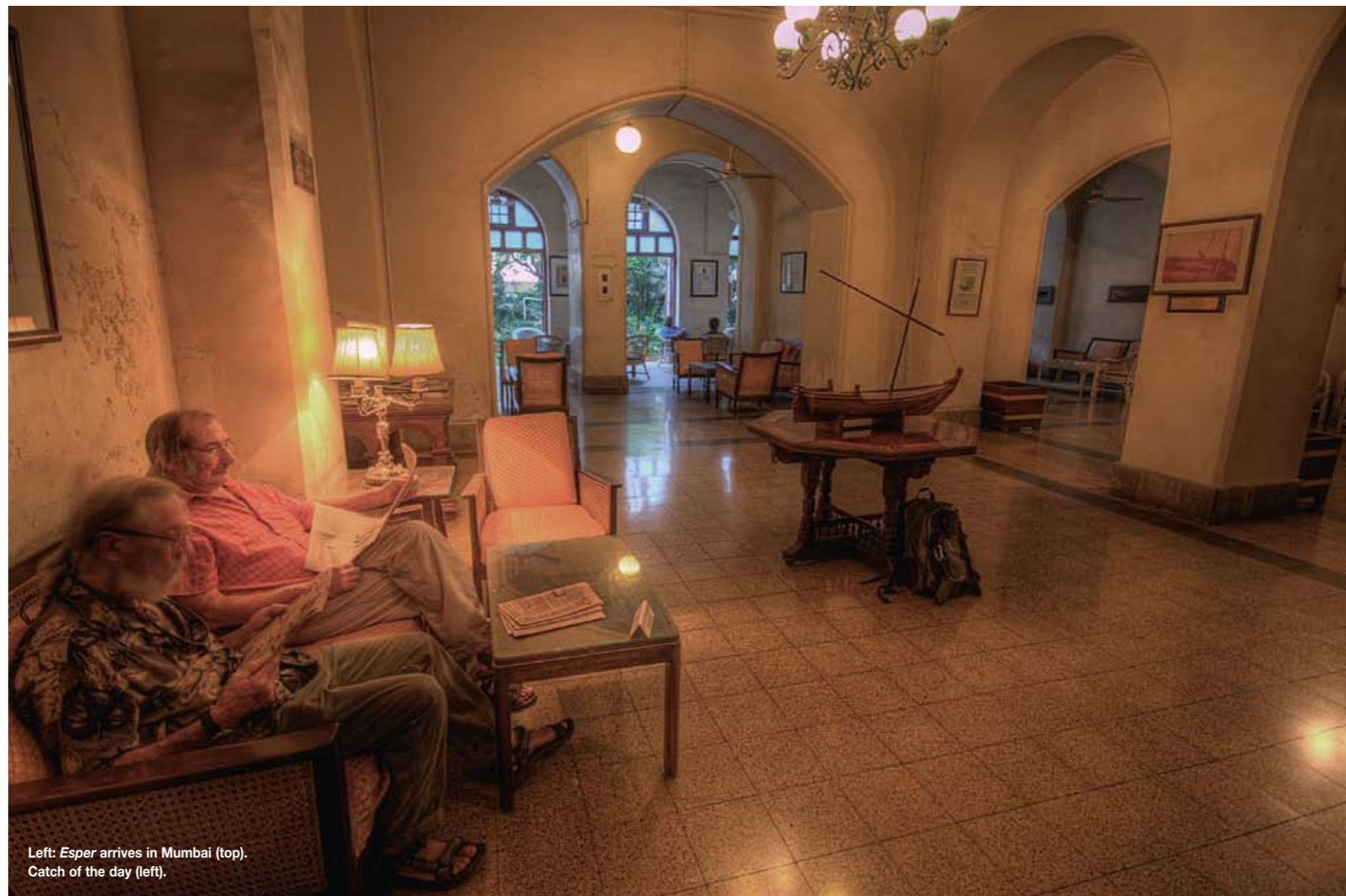
After a couple of days of freedom and light winds the group began to hallucinate. Jamie was the first to see phantoms on the radar screen, always dead ahead. We strained our eyes in the darkness, but saw nothing. Soon *Roam II* reported the phenomenon: a clear blip, dead ahead, but nothing in the water. When Dan of *Still Dreaming* reported the same apparition, our imaginations ran riot. What was out there, so solid

on the radar screen, but so well camouflaged in the water? Next time the ghost appeared Dan was ready. Night vision goggles in hand, he strode to the bow of his yacht and peered into the middle distance. No boat, but hovering in the air, just above the sea, was a helicopter. It seemed that even out here our military friends were keeping an eye on us.

Within moments of leaving the convoy we caught our biggest fish yet, a bright blue dorado (aka mahi-mahi or dolphin-fish). It was skinned, filleted and put in the fridge within minutes, while Millie the cat gorged herself on the leftovers. It is one of the tastiest fish in the sea and very plentiful; we dined well over the next few days, after which we moved on to tuna. This positive start to our independence, boosted by half decent winds, augured well for the crossing. We sat back and relaxed as *Esper* slowly made her way across the rolling ocean

ARABIAN NIGHTS

A pattern soon emerges when you are at sea. On *Esper* we have no strict system, instead we take our watches when the time suits both of us, maintaining a minimum of three hours. Jamie is a night owl, preferring to cruise through the blackness, trimming the sails. He will happily stay awake from evening till the wee small hours, while I sleep for England below.



Left: *Esper* arrives in Mumbai (top).
Catch of the day (left).



Clockwise from left: The opulent surroundings of the Royal Bombay Yacht Club; beautiful wrought iron staircase; members' bar.

INSURANCE?

Each rally member had a different tale to tell. We knew boats with expensive policies for every eventuality and some with no insurance at all. We contacted all the brokers we could find about our planned voyage. We were surprised by the different responses:

- No kind of policy outside the Mediterranean
 - Cover only for Egypt
 - Varying premiums from country to country, within a single policy
 - Cover only if the yacht is part of a rally
 - No cover if the yacht is part of a rally
 - No cover for single yachtsmen
 - No cover without a minimum of three crew
 - Cover for two crew only – providing the yacht has a windvane steering system, which is regarded as crew, unlike an autopilot, which relies on battery power.
- We are happy with our policy from Topsail (www.topsailinsurance.co.uk). We were also offered cover by WG Yachts and Pantanaeus.

I am a lark, so it works well. I start to flag by 2200 when I scuttle off to my bunk, leaving Jamie alone in the cockpit.

We have discovered that letting the person on watch make the decision about when to finish works best for us, allowing the other person to sleep without waiting for the alarm to go off. Jamie starts to flag around 0300 hours and will rouse me carefully, but no matter how gentle the awakening we are both programmed to spring into action as soon as our eyes open. We'll check the radar, paper charts, digital display and AIS together before heading our separate ways, Jamie leaving me with the same mantra.

"Keep a 360° lookout. Stay in the cockpit. Come and get me if you are worried about anything."

We keep up our energy levels through the night by eating little and often. Heating up a bowl of noodles when coming on watch takes just enough time to let our night vision kick in. The cockpit at night is a cosy place, illuminated only by the moon and dimmed dashboard lights. Sometimes we might listen to audio books, but neither of us listens to music, preferring the sound of the boat and the sea.

For the first couple of hours I am on full alert, scanning for lights and hazards. I'll assiduously clamber up and down the companionway checking the instruments and the horizon. On a good night the

boat creaks as the rigging does its job and the sails are taut in the warm, steady breeze. The air of the Arabian Sea is hot and when you are alone with your thoughts, it is easy to nod off in the darkness. To keep awake I'll do sit ups in the cockpit, check the radar and AIS more frequently and try to identify the stars. With no light pollution in the middle of the ocean the night sky is spectacular. It was a joy to watch Scorpius emerge on the horizon and crawl across the heavens – home to my favourite star, the fiery red Antares. I never tire of peering over the side to watch a stream of brilliant tiny galaxies reflected in the phosphorescence of *Esper's* wake.

Dawn is a special time for any yachtsman. As the weak light reveals the horizon, the world emerges from shades of grey to bursts of Turneresque pinks and oranges. Dolphins, already on the hunt, come to play in *Esper's* bow waves; happiness incarnate.

DHOW AND WHY?

The calm didn't last long. On the third day, over the radio, we heard Mary's frightened voice from *Still Dreaming*: "Rally boats! Rally boats! Can anyone hear me? We are being followed! It's a big dhow. Can anyone assist?"

Their yacht was not visible, but she was coming across loud and clear. The fear in Mary's voice »



USEFUL CONTACTS

All official bodies will advise yachts not to transit the Gulf of Aden and inform you that if you decide to sail in this area you do so at your own risk. Although there is no organisation set up to help small boats like yachts, the following bodies offer extensive information. Since we finished the rally, MSCHOA has added a section devoted to yachting, including guidelines. MSCHOA (Maritime Security Centre – Horn of Africa) was set up by the European task force to tackle piracy in this area. It established the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC). *Esper* joined MSCHOA organisation to gain full access to the website www.mschoa.org. ICC-CCS (International Chamber of Commerce: Commercial Crimes Service). Go to their IMB Reporting centre for information on piracy and a map of piracy activity www.icc-ccs.org.



Departure point: We were happy to get back out on the open water and leave the container cranes of Salalah in our wake.



Esper's arrival in Mumbai made it into the local paper (above left). Pot makers in a Mumbai workshop (main pic).

was palpable as she tried to explain to Jamie exactly what was happening:

"They have come alongside. Dan has gone out to talk to them. They passed us and then turned round and came back. There are lots of men shouting at Dan. I don't know what to do."

"Describe everything you can see and tell me where you are," Jamie replied.

"There's lots of shouting. They are so close!"

Jamie did his best to keep Mary calm and asked her to describe what she could see. We tried to work out where she was as the position she had given made no sense. After a tense few minutes while we listened to Mary, and some tremendous shouting in the background, she stopped transmitting. Fearing the worst, we waited by the VHF, calling them again and again. Eventually a relieved Dan came on to tell us that the men in the dhow had simply been curious and had wanted to say hello. This was a timely reminder that we should continue to expect the unexpected.

We soon slipped back into our routine, but it became tougher as the wind dropped, the seas got lumpy and our autopilot – which had been problematic since Egypt – really began to play up. What had started out as an occasional loss of power had transformed into regular lengthy periods of no autopilot at all. The conditions meant motoring, so

on went the engine and once again we were hand steering, the pain of which was compounded by an increasingly stiff wheel.

GEAR FAILURE

Jamie spent the best part of the next two days with his head in the engine or the lazarette. He checked the alternator regulator, the steering cables and the rudder. The jury remained out on whether the alternator regulator was at fault or if it was an electronic/computer problem. The rudder turned out to be fine. We had already checked the cables in Egypt, but they had stiffened again, so Jamie loosened them and the steering became easier. I spent six unbroken hours on the helm and was eventually forced to go to bed with a frozen back.

Some hours later I was back on watch. To my astonishment Jamie had balanced the boat and *Esper's* windvane steering system had taken over helming duties. I nearly cried from relief. We were motorsailing, but there was just enough wind for our wonderful Windpilot Pacific Plus to work. We had no autopilot for the rest of the trip, but with this new-found ability there were fewer occasions we would have to steer by hand.

We took a moment in the middle of our journey across the Arabian Sea to mark the occasion and to

toast Jamie's 15,000th mile. A weak vodka and tonic and half a beer later, we resumed our jobs, but decided that from now on we would take more time out to simply sit together and enjoy the sailing, rather than running from task to task.

As we headed towards Mumbai, the shipping traffic steadily increased. With the aid of AIS we were easily able to work out which vessels were on a collision course and which could be quickly discounted. Having a transponder meant we knew we were clearly visible to those ships equipped with AIS. On the few occasions we made radio contact to alert them to our presence they had already seen us. But even the brilliance of AIS could not prevent what happened to us next.

Roughly 60 miles from our final destination we, along with *Roam II*, were skirting the Neelam Heera and Ratna oilfields along Direction Bank. Terry called us to warn us they had been boarded by the Indian navy, who had arrived on an aged fishing boat demanding to see ship's papers and any stocks of alcohol on board. Having gone through the niceties the gentleman in charge took a bottle of gin for his troubles. We kept a lookout for said fishing boat and an hour later a heavy wooden tub, ringed with old car tyres, headed straight towards us.

"I have been hailing you for the last 20 minutes on

Channel 05. Why do you not respond?" shouted an angry looking naval type.

"We are not listening on 05, we have Channel 16 open," was Jamie's reasonable reply.

"Call me now on 05!" came the command.

Because we were in earshot and already having a conversation it seemed superfluous to talk on the VHF, but Jamie dutifully went below to try Channel 05. The crew took this as their cue to grin and wave at me. The helmsman was mesmerised and – presumably interpreting my shouts and gesticulations to back off as a sign of encouragement – steered the boat in the direction he was looking, straight at me.

HUMAN FAILURE

Just as Jamie was about to come up and point out to the naval man that Channel 05 is a duplex channel, so he couldn't be heard, there was a sickening crunch. The fishing vessel drove into the side of *Esper*, smashing the toerail and bending a stanchion. Jamie flew up the companionway without touching the sides and began cursing. There was a stand-off for 10 minutes while Jamie refused to show Petty Officer Ali Kumar any paperwork until he had seen insurance documents and been given a promise to pay for our repairs. PO Kumar denied all responsibility and told him to stop swearing.

"I'm not swearing at you, I'm swearing at the situation." Misunderstanding what Jamie had said, PO Kumar looked concerned: *"We are not trying to scare you."* Luckily this linguistic mix-up defused the situation and, registering Jamie's outright refusal to allow him on board, they backed off and let us on our way. Some time later, Jamie wrote about this incident on our blog and was contacted by VAdm Pradeep Chauhan of the Indian Navy. While asserting that he was writing unofficially, he was kind enough to show some sympathy towards our experience and promised that those responsible would be 'investigated'. We were never reimbursed for the damage.

The final 24 hours' motoring into Mumbai was arduous and fraught with obstacles, allowing us no sleep. Every inch of ocean was covered in fishing boats or nets. At night, we were surrounded by lights of all colours and combinations, flashing or static and utterly meaningless to us. During the day we gave up trying to dodge the nets, so we put the boat in neutral and glided over them. It was a pity we had not stumbled on this successful tactic earlier.

Arriving in Mumbai had the adrenalin rushing as this wondrous city assaulted our senses from all sides. Despite some difficult moments we had made it across almost a thousand miles of ocean. We anchored in the shadow of the Gateway of India in water resembling mulligatawny soup. We gazed at the exotic skyline and then, after 36 hours without rest, fell asleep.

Awakening refreshed, we knew we had all the delights that this exotic city can offer on our doorstep. Before we plunged into the melée, we made a beeline for that haven of tranquility, the Royal Bombay Yacht Club in all its opulent glory.

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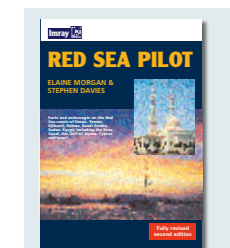
Read more about Liz and Jamie's adventures on their website.



SPINNAKER OR CRUISING CHUTE?

On day five, we tried the spinnaker for the first time on *Esper*. We had plenty of experience with the cruising chute, which works well in light to moderate winds, but in very light winds is not powerful enough for our boat.

Having set it quite quickly, Jamie – manual in one hand and wheel in the other – spent an hour balancing the boat. He was successful, but we achieved little extra speed. With the prevailing wind coming from the west and northwest, instead of the predicted northeast, our most successful sail plan was running goosewinged with the cruising chute.



CHARTS & PILOTS

Admiralty Charts – Folio 32 Red Sea-Gulf of Aden-Arabian Sea Red Sea Pilot Elaine Morgan and Stephen Davies 2nd Edition, 2002 ISBN 0 85288 554 7

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