



Words: Liz Cleere Photos: Jamie Furlong

The rally shelters from fierce headwinds on the leeward side of Sadla Island.



Above: At the helm.  
Below: Somali girl refugee in Massawa.

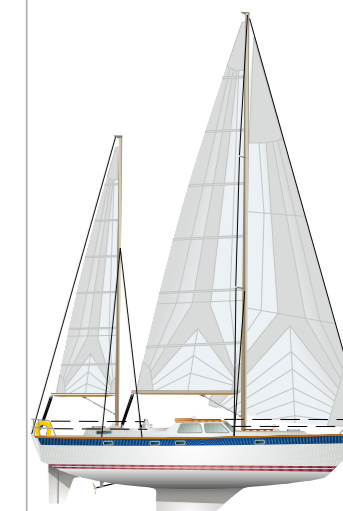


VASCO DA GAMA ROUTE - STAGE 2

LOG BOOK

Date	From	To	Distance
19/1/10	Sharm Luli, Egypt	Marob, Sudan	202
22/1/10	Marob	Marsa Inkeifel	91
25/1/10	Marsa Inkeifel	Suakin	114
30/1/10	Suakin	Trinkitat	44
2/2/10	Trinkitat	Khor Narawat	47
3/2/10	Khor Narawat	Massawa, Eritrea	175
15/2/10	Massawa	Ras Corali	27
17/2/10	Ras Corali	Howakil Bay	45
19/2/10	Howakil Bay	Mersa Dudo	129
22/2/10	Mersa Dudo	Sadla Island	3
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>877</b>

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



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	850ft²	79.97m²
Ballast	Encapsulated cast iron keel	
Designed by	Holman and Pye	
Builder	Ego Dridge/Oyster Marine	

Read more about Liz and Jamie's adventure on [www.followtheboat.com](http://www.followtheboat.com)

# Sudan and Eritrea

Only the most daring of cruisers braves the northeastern coast of Africa. Liz Cleere and Jamie Furlong continue their trip through this mysterious and often dangerous coastline within the secure framework of a cruising rally and discover that there are plenty of rare jewels lurking amid the reef-studded waters.



Jamie and Liz.

If you crave wild, unspoilt coastlines with technicolour diving and snorkelling opportunities, forget the Caribbean and sail straight to Sudan and Eritrea. Do not expect to find many facilities; without basic food, fuel, solar panels and a watermaker you will not last long. We stayed for weeks, but it could have been months – years? – without having to hit ‘civilisation’. The abundant sea life meant fresh fish on the barbecue every day, caught off the stern of the boat or swapped for old T-shirts with the local fishermen. Once, in Eritrea, we were given two mouthwatering lobsters in exchange for a knackered old jacket.

Before leaving Egypt, our Dutch organiser,

Lo Brust, held one of his casual briefings for the next leg. We were by now used to Lo's laid back approach to leading a rally, each of us acutely aware that he expected us to be self-sufficient and capable sailors. More regimented rallies have everything planned, from scheduling the order in which you arrive and depart each stop, to telling you how to dress for the evening ‘function’. On the Vasco da Gama rally you are given the date and coordinates of the next meeting point and left to your own devices and sartorial choices. He finished off the chat by handing round a list of his favourite anchorages and two invaluable pieces of advice: first, plot the course using the hand drawn

chart supplied with the bible (Imray's *Red Sea Pilot*); second, navigate by sight. In his opinion, and none of us was about to argue with this septuagenarian sailor, the chart is more accurate than any other available and your eyes are the best piece of navigation equipment you possess.



**A NAVIGATOR'S NIGHTMARE**

Sudan's picturesque coastline, fringed with coral reefs and bommies, is a diver's dream and a navigator's nightmare. The smallest mistake can mean a hole in the boat's hull and the end of a dream. The risk we were taking by sailing through reefs had been illustrated earlier in the rally when we had seen an abandoned yacht rolling in the surf. To aid visibility, most of us had put in place a method of getting to a high point from which to keep watch. Some boats had steps fitted to the mast, others had added ratlines to the rigging; we

used granny bars to climb onto the boom, giving us enough height to see well ahead. Getting up high is only the beginning; once there, you need the best possible conditions in which to see through the water. Too early and land shadows interfere with your view, too late and the sun ahead of you reflects on the water. Whatever the conditions, polarised sunglasses are a must. By enhancing your vision and reducing glare they really do work. The theory is all well and good, but it is only when you are actually inching through the narrowest of channels with evil looking submerged brown patches on either side of you, that the importance of all the preparation hits home. We found out pretty quickly that the best working method for us had me on the helm and Jamie calling instructions from the mast.

With all our senses in overdrive, we left the comparative safety of Egypt. For the next few months we would be at the mercy of our own sailing skills, something over which the less experienced among us secretly agonised. Even owners of the best appointed yachts were anxious about equipment failure and most of us had a



**Above:** Esper under sail.  
**Right:** Towing local fishermen in Massawa.  
**Below:** Sudan's pristine coast.



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

**Anchor**

**Model:** Rocna 33kg  
**Why?** We slept deeply while others around us stayed on anchor watch, although the anchor alarm helped too. In an anchorage where all the boats dragged, *Esper* moved only slightly. Backup: CQR 22kg

**Rapala Lures**

**Model:** The Magnum  
**Why?** Named 'Raymond', after the hardest kid in Jamie's town, it was indestructible; the evidence is in the photos.

**Liz's Watch**

**Model:** Citizen Eco-Drive 180  
**Why?** Waterproof to 200m. Solar powered. Enormous luminous dial for night sailing. Indestructible fabric strap. Has a five year guarantee and excellent after sales care.



Tea time in Massawa.

nagging suspicion that we had forgotten to make at least one basic preparation. With a mixture of intense excitement and trepidation Jamie and I headed towards our first anchorage in Sudan.

Marob had been high on my list of places to visit ever since I had learnt from a fellow sailor that she had seen a dugong there. These shy and endangered creatures gave rise to the myth of mermaids and it had been a dream of mine to see one. They are commonly known as sea cows – they eat seaweed – and resemble a cross between a very large seal and a big old potato. Their favourite habitat happens to coincide with the human idea of paradise: warm, tropical waters with white, sandy seabeds. As you would expect, jet-skis and pleasure boats do not mix well with dugongs and their population is rapidly dwindling.

**DUGONG SPOTTING**

An early start and a fast overnight sail placed us outside the winding anchorage of Marob, just in time to catch the sun in the right position. Jamie conned us in through this narrow *marsa* (inlet) while I nervously followed his every command. With the anchor successfully dug in, Jamie prized my hands from the wheel and we relaxed, this

first success giving our confidence a small boost. The area was so spectacularly beautiful that we stayed for longer than anticipated, soaking up the African landscape, beachcombing along its pristine shores and swimming in the clear waters. Among the rocks the water boiled with tropical fish, rays elegantly glided by and crabs in every size, colour and shape scoured for food. We looked for dugongs and when yet another splash yielded "only a turtle", we had to remind ourselves not to take for granted their own inimitable beauty. We saw a dugong eventually and watched it swim gracefully past the boat, diving and re-surfacing as it trawled for food; a sweet and graceful giant spud.

We had a week in which to enjoy the first part of this coast, but could have spent the whole winter there. We reluctantly left our little bit of heaven and headed towards the port of Suakin. The timing restrictions for entering and exiting Sudan's anchorages mean having to decide between maximum seven hour hops along the coast or overnights. We chose to stay at each anchorage for at least two days and opted mostly for offshore sails. This meant we were able to pick our way through the ever present rocky dangers into each new anchorage at the optimum time of day, minimising the risk and stress involved.

**THE HEART OF DARKNESS**

When we reached Suakin our senses were overwhelmed by the Africa we had dreamed about. Crushing poor, Suakin is only dirt roads, lined by decrepit colonial buildings and homes made from discarded junk. Children walk barefoot and play football with a stone. Our hearts ached for the conditions in which the people lived. Their obvious happiness was out of kilter with their surroundings. They smiled and talked to us, welcoming us to



African vista, Marob.

their country. Kids coming back from school, shyly tried out their spoken English and enthusiastically clamoured for the rubber-ended pencils we had brought with us. Most nights the cafés – or tumbledown shacks – were filled with loud chatter and animated faces. The cardboard shanty town was spotless and not a piece of litter could be seen.

All of this should be put into context. Sudan has some deeply disturbing socio-economic and political troubles. It is a country divided and perpetually at civil war. Its president faces two international arrest warrants on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. We can only talk from our perspective, that of coast-hopping sailors. For all its problems we fell in love with the place and its people.

**BRIGHT MASSAWA**

Eritrea took us a stage further. For a country that ranks in the bottom 2 per cent of every league table, it is elegant and proud. Its people, like the Sudanese, were warm, inquisitive and welcoming. Lying south of the Tropic of Cancer, I had imagined the coastal port of Massawa to be a bright and sunny place. It is not, it is relentlessly grey, occasionally rainy and often humid. Nevertheless, our stay there was a joy. Despite >>

**Living the dream. Jamie and Liz's journey to cruising Nirvana:**

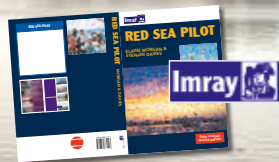
Jamie became a full time sailor and traveller in 2002, crewing yachts throughout Europe, culminating in a yacht delivery across the Atlantic, where he met Liz in Antigua. She was bitten by the bug and, after extricating herself from a demanding job and crippling mortgage, sold her house and joined Jamie in 2005. They bought *Esper* in Turkey, where they spent the next three years setting her up for world cruising.

They intend to follow their nomadic existence forever: "Once we get too old to move around much we will probably live on a barge; I simply can't imagine living back on land. It is important for us to know that there is always the opportunity to travel, even if it is only a few miles down the canal," says Liz.

**'Marsas' and 'Bommies'**

New for us were the many creeks, known as 'marsas', which appear in gaps along the reef-lined coast. Marsas are natural bays, rather like low fjords, which often stretch a long way into the desert. They are fringed with coral reefs and are usually found behind a headland or promontory at either side of the entrance.

Bommies are random, isolated clumps of coral, often just below the water's surface. They follow the line of the reef, but appear singly or in groups and present a great danger.



**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

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Dinghy pontoon, Massawa.



**Above top:** Football in Suakin. **Above** Marsa Little Inkeifel. **Right** Fenkle celebrations, Massawa.



originally being told by the president to leave before the independence day celebrations began, we were extended an invitation not only to stay, but to take part.

We were unexpectedly seduced by the gentle, smiling people of these countries and humbled by their forbearance and lack of avarice. Everyone on the rally handed out pens, pencils, toys and anything else they could think of to our new friends. Leah, the youngest at 10, went back to her yacht time and again to see if she could find any more of her toys to give away. Francesca and Marco, of the Italian flagged yacht *Easy 'n Free* brought sacks of goodies with them, which they

distributed to the local schools. For some, however, this leg of the rally proved to be breaking point. The difficulties of the passage and potential danger of piracy, were threats with which we lived for the full six months. Sometimes this ever present anxiety took its toll on all of us. For the yachts *O Khayam* and *Moody Time*, however, the added political unrest in Yemen, with its attendant government warnings, was a risk too far; they left the rally, turning back after Massawa.

The last stage of the Red Sea was simply unique in its beauty. Eritrea's coast developed into something surreal. As we battled our way through currents and waves a fantastical volcanic landscape to the south of Massawa reared out of the sea.

We left Howakil Bay with great expectations, looking forward to a good 24 hour sail. What we hadn't bargained for was 2kn of current against us, sloppy 2m waves on the nose and the loss of our autopilot. The start went well, with a good, strong blow pushing us along. Six hours into the journey the wind dropped and conditions deteriorated, the fierce currents and square waves making life on board miserable. Then the autopilot, which had played up a few times already on the trip, gave up altogether. It was at this point Jamie decided it was time to get to grips with the Windpilot Pacific Plus,

our windvane steering system. Using as much sail as we could handle, we tried to get some steerage with what little wind we could fine. As if by magic, Jamie managed to set the Windpilot while we were motorsailing. The combination of a top class piece of equipment and a yacht that holds her course so well meant we were able to let Esper take over the steering, allowing us some rest.

It was a long hard first night of short watches, neither of us getting much sleep. Sometimes we appeared to be going nowhere, with our speed over the ground regularly showing less than 3kn. Just before midnight, on the second night, our navigation lights gave up. Then, just before dawn on the second day, and as we seemed so close to our destination, the engine alarm shrieked. With no autopilot I could not let go of the wheel. Jamie was left to identify the problem, while keeping a careful eye on the radar and GPS. What took us an hour to realise was that the fan belt had sheared off, resulting in a cooling system not doing its job and a dead alternator. It may look fairly standard on paper, but consider this: we had been sailing for 36 hours with virtually no sleep; we had confused, sloppy waves jostling us; the current was pushing us onto nearby jagged rocks; it was bible-black dark; what wind there was came straight into the

bay, not allowing us any chance of sailing out. It was a testing hour, demanding that we think fast and prioritise our actions as each minute passed. By not panicking, methodically dealing with each problem, and with nerves of steel, we made it.

**ANGRY GUNMEN, BREATHTAKING BEAUTY**

As dawn struggled through the blackness we crawled out of the bay to discover the strangest and most eerily majestic part of the coast so far, Mersa Dudo. We gratefully motored towards an inviting coastline, finally losing the tumbling waves. We both passed out with exhaustion 40 hours after we had left the previous haven.

Considering what we had just been through, waking up the following morning to the sound of angry military men banging on the side of our boat, screaming "GO! GO! GO! GO NOW!" and waving machine guns threateningly in our faces, was less frightening that it should have been. We had noticed the big red exclamation marks on our charts claiming that this was a restricted area, but as Lo had anchored here before we had anticipated no problems. However, these gun-toting military boats brooked no argument and demanded that we leave immediately, even in the face of 25+kn of wind. After some frantic discussion, Lo managed to get them to allow us to anchor off nearby Sadla Island to wait out the weather.

Thank you, angry military men. Sadla Island is a large, chocolate brown volcanic crater. Its beaches are packed with shells and coral. On one side of the island turtles were laying eggs, while sharks swam in the shallows; on the other side talcum white sand led up to ospreys nesting on ledges. I doubt if anyone other than local people have set foot on this place; it was new even to Lo. We had found ourselves in a place so beautiful it rendered us speechless.

After a few days of unforgettable bliss we made ready to start the next leg. Now we were down to 13 boats with the picturesque anchorages behind us and the worst part of the voyage still ahead of us. The tension was high as we prepared to leave Eritrea and make our way towards the Gulf of Aden, aka Pirate Alley.



**Above:** Volcanic scenery of Sadla Island. **Below:** The old bank bullet-ridden in Massawa.



**Birds**

The Red Sea is a feast for bird lovers. All along the coast we found ospreys, often with chicks in their easily accessible nests; we watched them hunt and were happy to see them using our masts for spying on their prey.

Pelicans and flamingos are frequent companions on the water and one night a group of bridled terns hitched a lift on *Esper*. There were too many types of herons, storks, waders and gulls for novice ornithologists to identify, but we were charmed by the prolific Brown Boobies, further down the coast.

We saw fan-tailed ravens, hoopoes, kites and weaver birds further inland. Our favourite bird, the fantastically comic Sacred Ibis was out in force in Massawa.

**Fish**

Fishing along these coasts is child's play. We trolled a line the entire length of the Red Sea and never failed to catch a fish. We used hardy Rapala lures, which are expensive, but work. We caught tuna, wahoo, Spanish mackerel, kingfish, barracuda and on one occasion a shark.



**Above top:** Fresh catch of the day. **Above:** Osprey chicks, Sadla Island.