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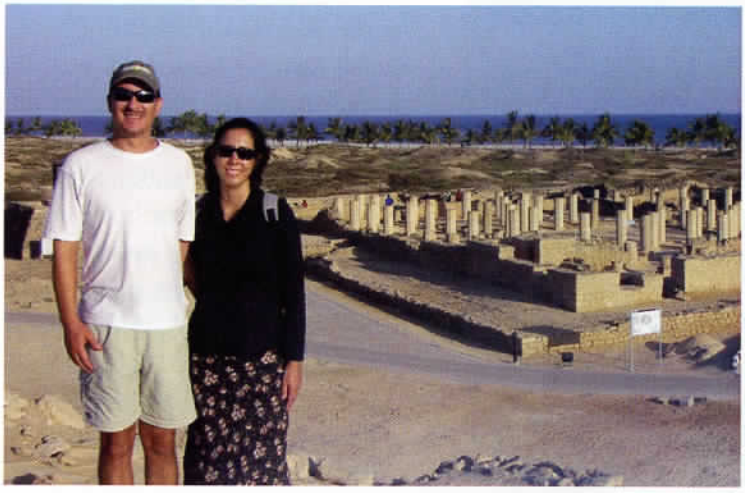
Preparing for piracy on a power circumnavigation

BY CHRISTI GRAB

Whenever my husband and I told people about our plans to circumnavigate the world on our 43-foot Nordhavn trawler Kosmos, they would inevitably ask, "What about pirates?" During the four years of planning, we researched the topic extensively. We started by finding out where piracy was going to be a concern. From San Diego to Australia, piracy was virtually non-existent. However, the stretch from Indonesia to the Suez Canal was supposedly rife with pirates. In the Mediterranean, boat break-in's were a mild problem, but not traditional "piracy." The Caribbean had a few pockets of piracy, and the west coast of North America seemed to be pirate free.

Then we looked into the likelihood of danger. The two biggest piracy "hot spots" on our route were the Gulf of Aden and Malacca Straits, where yachts are dramatically hijacked while underway. Generally speaking, the pirates in those areas tend to target large vessels with many crew, where there is a high probability of a big cash haul. What small boats most commonly experienced in Asia was petty theft while docked/anchored. Usually the pirates didn't inflict physical harm unless the yachtie initiated the violence. The chances of being raided in the most dangerous of places in Asia/Africa were 1 in 100, which we thought were good odds. In the Caribbean, most small-boat attacks also occurred when docked/anchored. The chances of being targeted in the Caribbean was even lower than Asia/Africa, however, there was a significantly higher percentage of violence during an attack. The good news, though, was that the piracy was concentrated in a handful of localized zones, and these areas could be easily avoided.

Christi Grab photo



Christi Grab photo

Left, Christi and Eric Grab in Salalah, Oman at an archeological site. Above, the Grabs' Nordhavn 43, *Kosmos* anchored in the Pacific.

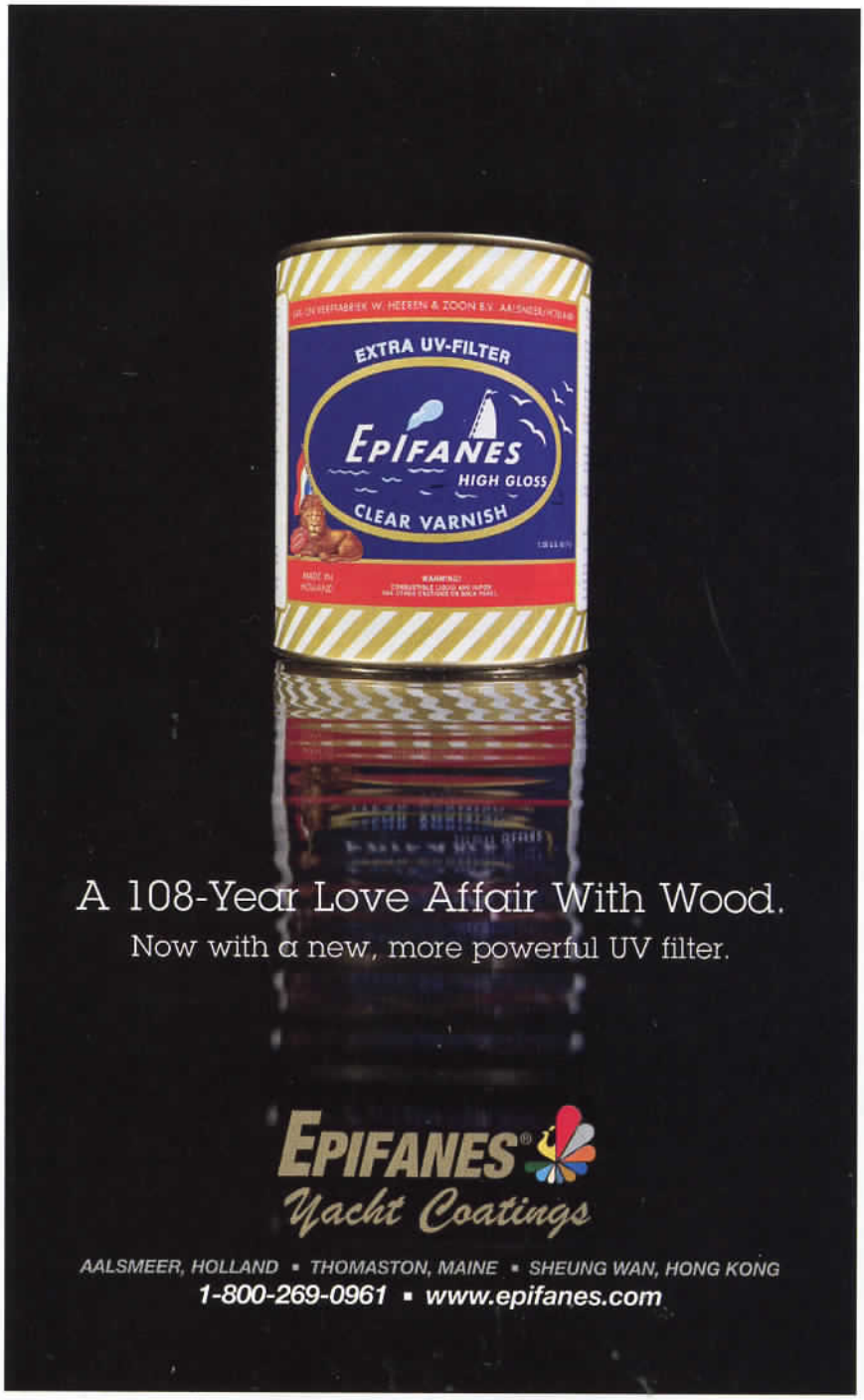
At first we were confused, "How can the odds be so small when pirate attacks always seem to be in the headlines?" We then realized only unusual things make the news. Common

tragedies, like car accidents, don't make headlines because they happen every day. But piracy is so rare that any time there is an incident, it gets sensationalized. All the news stories were actually an indicator of low probability.

Decided against guns

We debated about methods to defend ourselves, and decided not to carry guns. We believed the odds were in our favor that if we seemed non-threatening, we would not be harmed. But, if we pulled out a gun, we'd become a threat, making physical harm probable. Instead, we carried pepper spray and tools like axes and bats. Our plan was, if boarded, to lock ourselves in the engine room with the spray and tools. If they were only looking for money, they could take it and leave. If they attempted to commandeer the boat, we could cut off the fuel supply. If they got into the engine room, they'd be sprayed and batted.

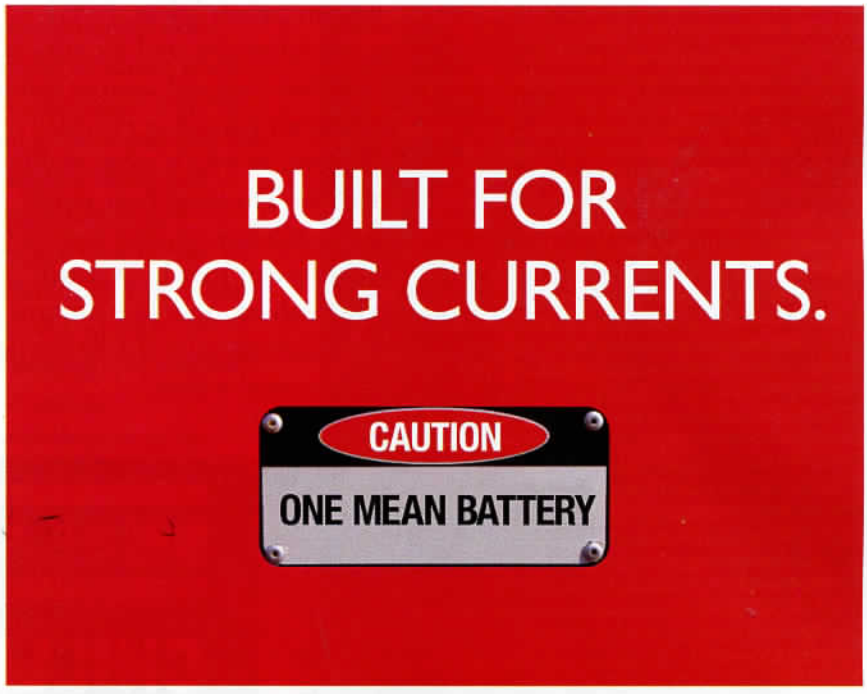
We started our circumnavigation in April 2007. Throughout the entire journey, we used common sense precautions. We had a minimal amount of items on deck, and the few things out were visibly bolted down. We locked the doors and hatches when we went out and when we slept. We didn't wear jewelry, brandish wads of money, or do anything else that would make us stand out as targets. In every country we went to, we tried to be kind and respectful of the locals. We dressed according to their customs, learned a few words of their language, always said please and thank you, smiled a lot, never complained, and generally tried to show good will. Many a time we got a strong sense that because we were nice, the locals made sure nothing bad happened to us or our boat. We suspect that yachties who didn't make as much of an effort might not have been as well looked after.



The six months we spent crossing the Pacific were crime free, as expected. In Asia, we didn't have any incidents, either. As we became more familiar with the Asian (and later African) cultures, we began to realize that many alleged pirate attacks were actually cultural misunderstandings. In that part of the world, it is the social responsibility of the wealthy to help the poor. If a poor person asks for a "gift," the wealthy person is obligated to comply. All westerners are perceived as wealthy, particularly if they are traveling on a yacht. So, oftentimes a poor fisherman will approach a yacht and ask for "gifts." The fisherman certainly does not think of himself as a pirate, just a guy entitled to a handout. If the westerner says no, the asker may become aggressive. After all, culturally speaking, the yachtie has committed a grievous faux pas. The yachtie, unaware of his gaffe, will incorrectly perceive the aggression as piracy.

Approached off Sri Lanka

When we were near Sri Lanka, a fishing boat approached us. They were making hand gestures to indicate they wanted cigarettes. We shook our heads, smiled, waved, and kept going. A few weeks later, another yachtie was telling about his "pirate attack." We suspect it was the same boat. The fishermen approached him and asked for many things, ranging from cigarettes to money to his watch. He said "no! no! no!" While the fishermen were insistent, they never threatened him and eventually went away empty handed. A few weeks later, we read about a "pirate attack" off Sri Lanka. Once again, we suspect it was the same boat. When the fishermen approached and demanded things, the captain pulled out a gun and started shooting. Our hearts broke reading that story.



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At the end of March 2008, we arrived in Oman. Our next leg was going to be the Gulf of Aden, and we were feeling confident. There had been no reported attacks on small yachts in Aden for almost two years, and the strikes back then were on disabled vessels. Needless to say, we were shocked and horrified when, six days before we were to start our transit, the top headline was a 250-foot mega-yacht and crew had been captured and was being held for ransom. At that point, we had no way of knowing that the local pirate business model had abruptly changed from stealing wallets to taking hostages, so we proceeded with our transit as planned. To avoid more dangerous coastal waters, we stayed 35 nm from shore and made no stops between Oman and Egypt. Fortunately, we had no problems.

Many people ask us if we'd transit Aden now, and the answer is yes. International security forces are actively patrolling the Aden waterway, so help is more readily available. The small boat assault ratio is still low, and the majority of yachts that have been struck were disabled. And, like last time, we would minimize risk by staying out of coastal waters.

In the Mediterranean, we continued to use the same precautions and had no issues with crime. When we got to the Caribbean, we were especially careful with route planning. To completely avoid all reported piracy areas, we had to skip a few islands and do some multiple day passages, but we felt it was prudent. We safely made it through the Caribbean and back home to San Diego without any incidents. ■

Christi Grab and her husband live in San Diego. Their Web site is: kosmos.liveflux.net/blog.