

The Red Sea



The Red Sea was the passage that **Thane Roberts** feared most on his round-the-world trip. He now remembers it as the most interesting

When my Norseman 447 *Shakti* and I left California in 1997, the Red Sea was the passage I feared most. By 2002, the World Trade Center had been attacked and I realised that in addition to the list of strong winds, hidden reefs and pirates, we would now be sailing directly up "the axis of evil". When we finally arrived at Salalah, Oman, after a passage from Thailand, our nerves were stretched.

Word on the cruising grapevine was that we would most likely encounter "pirates" during our passage through the Gulf of Aden, particularly off the coast of Somalia. To counter this, we formed a flotilla of seven cruisers and established defensive strategies: minimum

use of VHF radios and lights, establishment of reference waypoints and communication protocol, minimum boat speeds, intended routes, and boat formation strategies in the event of an unwanted visitors. In the event, our precautions proved unnecessary. A few fishing boats altered course to check us out and we had close encounters with some freighters, but otherwise saw no other craft. A helpful French aircraft flew over daily to inform us of any suspicious boats in our vicinity and several military boats on exercises in the Gulf added to our sense of security. We duly arrived safely in Djibouti six days later, having motored 32



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hours to maintain our minimum established speed of 5 knots.

Djibouti has a strategic location as a portal to Red Sea. Ethiopia had recently lost a hard fought war with Eritrea and with it their access to the Red Sea. This old French colony has experienced a strange renaissance following the influx of foreign military anxious to establish a foothold at the entrance the Arab World. We anchored in front of the yacht club, a beautiful colonial building which provided both excellent hospitality and cuisine to the transiting yachtsmen. The town was still untamed and raw under a thin veneer of propriety. We ate exotic meals with Muslim extremists and shopped for vegetables at midnight in an open market with Bedouins from the desert. What the city lacked in security it made up for in its vitality, which only emphasised the contrast between the colonial past evidenced by European style architecture and the current state of chaos and decay.

We took a van into the countryside through the desert where despite the fact that nothing grew, we could see several small settlements with houses made from low walls of piled rocks and corrugated iron roofs only four feet above the desert floor. The woman's dress was more colourful than the tropical fish offshore but the rest of their world was the dull grey of the desert sand. They had a few animals – donkeys and camels – but little else could survive in this arid wasteland. Government trucks brought them water and one person from each settlement would go into town once a week for provisions. As we continued along the road, it eventually rejoined the southern extremity of the Red Sea until it ended in a salt lake several hundred feet below sea level. It was here that we saw camel trains from several neighbouring countries coming to load salt and carry it back to their respective markets. Along the way, there were huge rifts rivalling the Grand Canyon, volcanoes with fumaroles, boiling hot springs, and other signs of the earth being torn apart by imaginable forces. The Red Sea is where the African and Asian continents meet, and where they are separating at the rate of an inch a year.

We left Djibouti in late March and headed through the Bab El Mandeb (the Gates of Sorrow or Tears) into the Red Sea. Increased boat traffic along with winds funnelling through the narrow opening make the straits difficult to navigate. The freighters are easier to locate and board in this area, which also leads to more incidents of piracy. The boats that left



Caption to go with photographs



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Caption above; centre top

a few days ahead of us had full gale conditions, but fortunately our conditions were better.

We rejoined forces again in Shamma Island, 30 miles south of Massawa in Eritrea. The island has an old but operating lighthouse watched over by a herd of camels, but we saw only their footprints. Since the island is small and flat, we couldn't imagine where they were hiding. This was our first introduction to the undersea world of the Red Sea – an amazing variety of tropical fish, colourful coral reefs, all not unlike a large, well-stocked aquarium. The fact that there are so few visitors (or fishermen) makes the fish even more plentiful and less frightened.

After a few days relaxing in the protection of the reefs, we ventured out to reach Massawa by late afternoon. The first impression of the village is startling. The town was built during the Italian occupation in the early 1900s and its architecture rivals the best in Europe. Instead of stone, however, the buildings are made of cut coral blocks and closer inspection reveals that nearly all of the buildings have suffered extensive damage during the thirty-year war with Ethiopia. The city is in ruins and yet occupied as if nothing had happened. Despite the seemingly desperate situation, the inhabitants seem almost jubilant – having won their war against Ethiopia, the city vibrates with hope and renewal. Like Djibouti, the port was abuzz with activity and, again, large cargos of basic food items from the United States were being unloaded at the docks. Security was tight but appeared to be unnecessary. We were able to wander around the town at all hours with no sense of danger. The people were extremely hospitable inviting us on several occasions to join them for a meal or cup of tea.

While there is a large Muslim population, the majority of the people in Eritrea retain their Christian faith imported by the Italians a century earlier. The European influence was even more in evidence in the capital city of Asmara, which we visited a few days later. It's a three-hour car ride that starts across an arid plane dotted with abandoned tanks and other remnants of the recent war. The temperature cooled and the landscape turned green as we approached the mountain capital that rests atop a mountain nearly one mile above sea level. Where the occupants of Djibouti seemed out of place in the European surrounds, those in Eritrea appeared right at home with their outdoor sidewalk cafés and Italian restaurants. The city is a bustling metropolis that, due to its remote and easily defensible location, escaped the ravages of the recent war. We could easily be in Europe except for the mostly black faces, and hearing them speak in fluent



Caption to the photo above

Italian would normally seem incongruous, but somehow made sense in this continent of stark contrasts and ambiguity.

We left Eritrea for Sudan a few days later and made our first stop 185 miles north at Khor Nawarat – a large complex of islands and reefs just over the border. We were met by an unmarked, open boat approaching with four armed men. After a few moments of alarm, we learned that they were the Sudanese border patrol and only wanted to check our passports and ship's papers. After untangling the spinnaker from the rigging caused by the impromptu "take-down", we were on our way again. We enjoyed two days of extraordinary diving at Khor Nawarat before continuing to Long Island, a little further north, where a large lagoon was home to flocks of pink flamingos and other estuarial birds. We had planned to visit Suakin in Sudan on the following day but gave up after hearing that the two boats in the anchorage were stuck and unable to leave due to bureaucratic delays. This was a shame since we had heard that the local market is a vision from the Arabian Nights with white-robed Bedouins coming in from the desert with their swords strapped to their backs and curved, bejewelled daggers in their belts.

It is in Sudan, the approximate mid-point of the Red Sea, that the winds in mid-March change from being mainly from the south

to the north. Here the easy downwind sailing ends and new strategies had to be devised to continue against the headwinds that can reach gale force. Some boats decided to leave extremely early in the morning before the winds filled in, and motor as fast as possible to the next anchorage, perhaps 30 miles away. Others let their voyaging be determined as much by the sights they wanted to see as by the weather. Although good weather information was scant in the Red Sea, careful observation and an on-board weather receiver that downloaded infrared satellites images enabled us to predict with some accuracy when the winds would turn, and we managed most of the last 500 miles from Sudan to Suez with favourable winds.

Marsa Shinab, 40 miles north, was reportedly the most spectacular of the many "marsas" along the African coast. The marsas are inlets surrounded by the desert sands, which can extend up to several miles inland, and it was in the glow of the late afternoon sun that we approached the edge of the Sahara desert for the first time, with camels silhouetted against the rose coloured mountains beyond. The abruptness of the break between land and sea was unexpected. The aquamarine waters of the Red Sea with their coral reefs teeming with life ended at a small sand cliff of

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perhaps ten feet before becoming a barren, arid plateau fading into a haze around the distant mountains.

In daylight we explored our strange surroundings from the vantage point of the surrounding hills. The earth was scorched and yet showed evidence of severe flooding during the rainy season. The surface layer of sand had been blown away, exposing the rocks that lie just below the surface. The effect was that of a surreal lunar landscape. From the higher elevation of the hills, we could see distant mountains, but no signs of life. Looking out towards the Red Sea, we could follow the meandering path of the marsa back to where we had arrived a day earlier. It was from this lookout that I noticed that the winds had diminished and we decided to take advantage of the respite and leave that afternoon. Our luck didn't run out until the sun was setting the following day when we experienced what I had until that point only heard about – Red Sea northerlies. We fought our way against the wind for most of the night, but even using the full power of the engine and sails, we made only three knots. After next twelve hours of this, we finally reached the next reef anchorage in Egypt – Gezirat Wadi Gimal.

After we arrived, we heard that we were not the only ones fighting the sudden shift in wind direction. Two yachts ahead of us had experienced the same change in fortunes and had decided to find protection on one of the marsas. The first yacht was able to use their radar to locate the markers of a planned marina and find their way into the protected waters. The boat behind inadvertently "cut the corner" when they passed what appeared to be a central channel marker on the wrong side. After a seven-year circumnavigation they lost their boat on the reef, just miles from their starting point in the Mediterranean.

The anchorage at Gezirat Wadi Gimal is reputed to have the best diving in the Red Sea, although we had now passed from the tropics into the subtropics, and the air and water were noticeably colder. We stayed for three days, diving a few times each day and thawing out in between. On the fourth day, the wind again became favourable and we sailed the remaining 200 miles to Abu Tig Marina with only a brief stop in Hurghada along the way. Now in Egypt, we passed numerous developments either completed or under construction, and by the time we reached Hurghada, they formed a continuous line along the shore. A few hours later we were moored safely in the largest of them all, surrounded by a cartoon representation of Arabian architecture. This is where the upper crust of Egyptian society comes to get away from the same Egyptian life that we had come to see. I guess the wind direction and weather aren't the only things that changes mid way up the Red Sea.

El Guona lies approximately 200 miles south of the Suez canal and covers I don't know how many square miles with innumerable hotels, condominiums, golf courses, and even its own downtown. The architecture is well done, but the overall effect remains more like "Arabland" than anything Egyptian or African. It's already a huge success, even though security is a major issue. Like all tourists in Egypt, on our excursions we had to travel in an armed convoy. I hope this is not the future of tourism – travelling in armoured cars



Caption

to "Disneyland" style representations of the original sites.

After a visit to Luxor, we began to understand the attraction of this ancient country and to experience the true nature of the place. After a five-day trip down the Nile, we took a train with sleeping cars back to Luxor, and then to the marina where we found *Shakti* as we had left her. Thanks to a government promotion, we had spent three weeks in El Guona at no charge. With the first weather window, we headed out for Shab Umm Usk, an island twelve miles offshore from Abu Tig, where we were told that pod of dolphins seek out the company of visitors. We anchored in the protected bay, and within a few minutes were surrounded by smiling faces, anxious to play. We joined them in the water and rather

then flee, they swam circles around us for several minutes. I am not sure who it was that was more curious in this unique meeting of the species.

Leaving Abu Tig, we were still 160 miles south of Port Suez. The winds were light but favourable and we were able to sail most of the way. The cargo traffic was now directed into shipping lanes which we had to cross a few times as we ventured north. We were also passing several oil platforms for the first time along our route. When night fell, the stars joined with the rigs and the boats at sea for a display of a thousand points of light.

We arrived at Port Suez in the morning and after tying to a buoy in front of the yacht club made arrangements with a local agent (Felix Agency) to arrange for our

transit of the canal. At that time (April 2002), based on a complicated formula of boat measurements, the cost was \$285. The next morning, our pilot arrived but we left late and when it became dark he became disorientated, and we nearly ran aground before I realized he had us heading south again. I decided that it was best to do our own navigation, and double check his directions and not relinquish complete control of the vessel.

Most vessels spend only one night in Imsalia, a large lagoon mid-way through the Canal. There they pick up a new pilot and leave the following morning for the Mediterranean that lies just 45 miles further north. Instead we decided to use Ismailia as a base to return to Cairo and do some more sightseeing before leaving Egypt. It was a

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short train ride away and the boat was secure in this small Muslim town that has its own quaint character with few tourists and many friendly locals. Three days later, after a memorable tour of Cairo and the pyramids, we were underway again. This time with a more experienced pilot and an early start, we had no problems, reaching Port Said by 12:30 pm.

As we finally entered the Mediterranean, we looked back on our Red Sea adventure with relief at having completed it successfully; but also with regret, knowing that we would probably never make the trip again. We discovered that the Red Sea is not just a passage between the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean but is itself an excellent cruising destination. It offers the cruising sailor an unspoiled cruising ground with some of the best diving in the world, and a completely different cultural experience with many exotic places to visit both along the coast and inland. During the month that I spent in the Red Sea my ideas changed dramatically from being the most dreaded parts of my circumnavigation to being one of the most enjoyable.

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