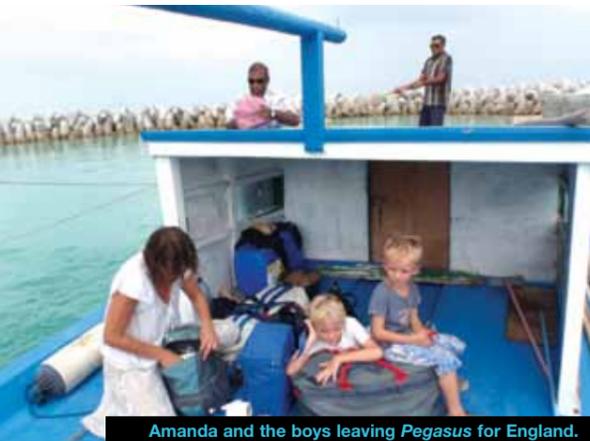




Cruisers meet ashore in Oligamu to discuss the situation and options.



Amanda and the boys leaving Pegasus for England.



PHOTOS: JASON LAWRENCE

# PIRATE PASSAGE

WITH THE ARAB SPRING THREATENING INCREASED REGIONAL UNREST JASON LAWRENCE DID A LOT OF SOUL SEARCHING BEFORE DECIDING TO TRANSIT THE GULF OF ADEN AND SUEZ CANAL. HERE IN THE FIRST PART OF A TWO-PART FEATURE, JASON TAKES THE PLUNGE AND DEPARTS THE MALDIVES FOR ADEN.

Main: Local boat in the anchorage at Oligamu. Right: Jason and Amanda.



Having lived on *Pegasus* our Atlantic 46ft Catamaran, for three years, cruised through the Pacific, around Australia and through Indonesia, we were keen to head back to Europe and complete our circumnavigation. Leaving Thailand after Christmas, it would be in the Maldives that our course would dictate the future, either NW across the Arabian

Sea with all its pirate dangers or S to Chagos, Mauritius, Reunion Island, South Africa and beyond.

The Southern route was long and seasonally dependant. It would be June before we could be South of Madagascar, and head into South African waters. At that point we would coast-hop down to Cape Town, being prepared to leave by mid January for the leg up to the Caribbean. A



PEGASUS	Atlantic 46LR Catamaran	
LOA	14.73m	48ft 4in
LWL	14.32m	47ft
Beam	7.87m	25ft 10in
Draft	0.86m to 2.08m	2ft 10in to 6ft 10in
Displacement	6,350m	14,000 Lbs
Sail Area Cutter	125sqm	1,350sqft
Designer	Chris White	
Launched	1997	

quick run N would see us ready to leave again late May for the transatlantic back home via the Azores.

We would need to sail 2,200 miles between March and November, 8,000 between November and June, immediately followed by 4,500 miles in June and July. A demanding and daunting schedule for Amanda, our two young children and myself. The alternative was to sail from the

Maldives to Turkey, some 3,500 miles between February and April, leaving us to make the onward journey home, some 2,850 miles at our leisure. The southern route would effectively be over twice the mileage and take another year.

Historically the pirates had been working the N coast of Somalia, along the GOA (Gulf of Aden), with very few attacks in deep ocean. This year seemed to be different,

and the game had definitely changed to a more dangerous one.

The strong La Nina conditions in the pacific had made for unusually light NE monsoon winds. With calm conditions in the Arabian Sea, the pirates had ventured deep into the NE and were attacking ships a thousand miles from their traditional hunting grounds. With the use of pirated mother ships and investors to finance operations



“THE DAYS WERE BEAUTIFUL, AND THE MOON BRIGHT, THE ONLY WORRY THE DREADED BANDITS.”

*Pegasus*' home for the last three years.

the pirates were causing havoc right up to the Straights of Hormuz. The whole Arabian Sea and north Indian Ocean was a danger zone with attacks on shipping from 3N to 22N and 43E to 73E, effectively Djibouti to Muscat to Maldives to Seychelles. This had changed everything, even the safety of the southern route!

**DECISION TIME**

By 1st February the majority of our cruising friends had arrived in the Maldives, and with pressure building on our documentation and status, it was clear something had to happen. Officially, we were only allowed to stay one week without purchasing a cruising permit, however, the authorities understood our situation and allowances were made.

Vessels and crew that had already been on station a few days were discussing various options at tense daily status update meetings ashore.

I had been working on my own plans and had developed three course options. At the same time the BWR (Blue Water Rally) was

pirate operations at 20-22N and then along the coast of Oman, through Salalah, and on to Aden. The distances were huge and the length of time exposed to danger was far greater than other possible options.

It was also a very long way under engine and against prevailing winds, with many hazards, fishing boats and nets off the Indian coast. In addition the majority of us had no Indian visas, so refuelling on route would have to be done in a very discreet manner. I really felt uncomfortable with the whole plan.

It was my belief that the pirates would hold their windward positions until the NE winds strengthened, then head back to the GOA and their traditional hunting grounds. I proposed a course heading W from Oligamu to about 10N 60E and then making for Socotra Island, keeping a good 100-150 miles offshore, with a lazy curve to the E end of the international corridor and pushing on to Aden, staying 10-15 miles N of the corridor in the wind belt. There had been no attacks on that route this year and I felt it a

fairly safe bet that the pirates would not be looking behind them. In addition, the proposed course was shorter, put me further W and through the danger zone quicker, allowing sailing in trade wind conditions rather than motoring into the N winds prevalent along the coast of India at that time.

The third course, which was a slim possibility, was a route from Cochin to Salalah fairly direct, which would run in a narrow band between the two shipping lanes coming S from Hormuz and SE from the GOA. I discounted this as there was no need to go to Salalah to meet any convoys, and I was keen to get the whole process completed as quickly as possible.

The only opposition I heard for my proposed route was that

meeting in Cochin, India and everyone was concerned about the change in the modus operandi of the pirates. After plotting all the various attacks and incidents over the previous six weeks, I saw four clear areas of operation, and therefore three possible tracks to Oman and the GOA.

The general consensus was that a route N along the Indian coast to 22N then across to Muscat was the safest option. This option was weighted by support from the BWR and their insurers, and being considered an easier route to protect, accepted as an option by the security forces. It still took all vessels very close to the main area of

BWR participants would not be covered by their insurance, and there was a concern that pirates returning home had to cross that track. As my insurance stopped at Sri Lanka that was not an issue for me, and with it being early in the season I suspected that the pirates would hold their NE positions as long as possible before coming back downwind to resupply and operate in the GOA.

That was the logic, but in reality we all knew any route was just a game of chance.

It became clear that Amanda and the boys would have to depart for England, to rendezvous with *Pegasus* again in less



Customs approaching at Oligamu.



Kite run at dawn.



Dolphins playing at the bow.

## CRUISING

hostile waters. It was a terribly sad moment, saying goodbye to the family, with all of us wondering if we would ever see each other again. It was the first time the family had been split since February 2008, but we all knew deep down that it was the only thing to do.

It was all getting a little tense in Oligamu. There were phone calls with UKMTO and the other authorities talking about proposed routes and options. Some vessels had already left. At least two other convoys started to organise their schedules, while ten boats were not signed up with anyone and were waiting for options to develop.

The yachting community guidelines on how to handle a pirate attack suggest that no resistance should be offered and that one should leave the authorities to effect a release.

### TOOLED UP

Every report I had read from attacked vessels stated that firing weapons at the approaching pirates thwarted the attempted attacks. The success rate was astounding. As a diabetic I really couldn't see any pirates keeping my insulin cool in their fridge, so assuming that I would be quickly dead if I left *Pegasus*, I decided that, in my case, it would be better to

face the demons there and then - whatever the consequences - and had been trying to buy a weapon with no success. Then a vessel decided not to proceed but to cruise locally. They offered me their weapon with 15 rounds, which I heartily accepted. I knew that if I used all those rounds I would either have won or lost. I felt extremely lucky.

I considered my position. There was no way to calculate odds on being pirated, you were either lucky or not. I just needed a moving circle of 25 miles to remain hidden. I had a passive radar unit, allowing me to hear when I was being interrogated, I had a weapon, and I would travel as fast as the conditions would allow...Speed and stealth would be my tools.

In addition the security forces were aware of our plans having registered with the UKMTO and other agencies. In the event of an attack, it was possible that some help would be available. All I had to do was keep the bandits off *Pegasus* until the cavalry



Chinese warship guarding a merchant convoy heading E.

### CARD Sys

The passive Collision Avoidance Radar Detector (C.A.R.D.) system we use as a portable system when we are deep offshore. The display shows the relative bearing and signal strength of any vessel operating radar within the range of the antenna's horizon. The system alerts us with a beep each time the antenna processes a signal, which is extremely useful as it sees radar signals when the vessel may be under the horizon, alerting us that there is shipping about, Great.



arrived...which could take anywhere from an hour to not at all.

The 10th February 2011 was our departure day and with mounting excitement I motored slowly out of Oligamu. I had wanted to sail *Pegasus* single-handed for some time, and the Arabian Sea passage is one of the great trade wind passages of the world.

The GRIB files looked good, and I could expect a few days of light winds before things picked up. I busied myself with a range of maintenance jobs that seemed easier to achieve without the family on board. After servicing both heads and trying to solve the raw water pump issue on both engines, I considered I'd had a good day.

We had organised a net on the SSB and, with a reference point in mid ocean, vessels checking in could give a distance and

**“THERE HAD BEEN NO ATTACKS ON THAT ROUTE THIS YEAR AND I FELT IT A FAIRLY SAFE BET THAT THE PIRATES WOULD NOT BE LOOKING BEHIND THEM.”**

bearing from that mark. It seemed a good way to monitor the progress of our friends on passage. I was conscious of keeping any transmissions from *Pegasus* to a minimum, but enjoyed the net and getting emails on the HF radio from Amanda and the boys back at home. ■



Above: Aden harbour from the mast top.



## STEALTH MODE

My first ship contact arrived at 2300, alerted through the CARD system (Collision Avoidance Radar Detection). No lights, no AIS. Looked like they were in stealth mode. It seemed that the merchant vessels were practising a 24-hour radar watch, looking for small boats just like *Pegasus*. I too was travelling without lights and with the AIS transmit turned off.

There was action about with Indian military aircraft talking with shipping on the VHF but I saw nothing, and settled down for another beautiful night at sea.

The morning of the third day saw the wind shift to the NE and with the kite set we started clocking miles. It was short lived and over the next 24 hours we had a mixture of kite and engine to make a disappointing daily run of 131nm.

It was at 2000 that night I saw my first ship. In the darkness before moonrise I saw white over red approaching dead ahead.

Was this the moment I had been waiting for? This huge ship came along my port side and took up station some 200 yards astern. No response from the radio, and I could now see it was a large warship. At the same time I noticed two targets on the radar some ten miles astern. I had no idea who they were, but as I moved off into the darkness the warship just sat between *Pegasus* and the targets, and that was the last I saw of any of them.

I was now getting “pinged” on the CARD every minute or so, as I had been occasionally during the afternoon. I guessed that there had been coverage over the horizon all day.

The wind set in on the 15th and I altered course to make for Socotra Island. My mileage increased from an average of 135nm per day to 190nm per day and it was great sailing with steady reaching conditions in 10-16kn on the beam and full sail. Beautiful. I made my way up to Socotra Island and was now definitely in the ‘zone’ I was getting a various array of pings, on the CARD system, I guess I was being seriously watched. By the 18 February I had made Socotra Island and maintaining 100nm clearance was looking forward to bearing away.

Approaching the international corridor the following day I came across an 18 vessel convoy being guarded by a Chinese warship. I was instructed to alter course to port, and after an hour they had passed, so I gybed, made N 15nm and broke out the kite for a fabulous run down the GOA.

Over the next three days I made good mileage. The days were beautiful, and the moon bright, the only worry the dreaded bandits. I saw four warships, and was over flown by two helicopters and an Orion type surveillance aircraft. It was during this period I heard American yacht *Quest* had been pirated and four crew taken.

Having been on alert for 11 days I was getting a little tense. I wanted to get into Aden and out of the war zone. Listening to the BBC I knew that things were not exactly stable. Egypt had had a revolution, Bahrain was up in arms, people were being killed in Yemen and Libya was just kicking off. I was now keen for my cruise to end.

At 0900 on 22 February I set the anchor in Aden harbour, the only yacht there but glad for a brief stop for fuel and stores. I had been lucky so far, but now felt the overwhelming storm clouds of regional unrest gathering. My exit from Aden might need to be an extremely quick one... ■

## NEXT MONTH

In the second part of this story, gunfire on the streets leads to a hasty departure from Aden for Jason and yacht *Pegasus*.