



Ship or sail?

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
NEVILLE HOCKLEY

A cruising couple faces their toughest decision in 12 years of world voyaging

The heavy load carrier *Annette* anchored in Phuket, Thailand, as Neville and Catherine Hockley's boat, *Dream Time*, is loaded aboard.

After nine years of drifting peacefully between friendly South Pacific isles, enjoying warm receptions along safe shorelines, and — besides the occasional outburst from Mother Nature — quiet, uneventful passages, we've crossed the equator and returned to the Northern Hemisphere to face one of our toughest cruising decisions in 40,000 nautical miles of world voyaging.

Since my wife, Catherine, and I left New York in 2007, it has been for the most part

carefree sailing. Sure, we've made a few difficult decisions along the way, which is to be expected, like how to deploy two anchors to weather a tropical storm, deciding how best to sail "uphill" for more than 2,000 miles from New Zealand back to Tahiti, or weighing the pros and cons of riding near gale-force winds at Norfolk Island. But none of these compare to the significance and uncertainty of our most recent dilemma.

Last year, after 18 months exploring Australia, we

entered Southeast Asia and sailed *Dream Time*, our 38-foot Cabo Rico, north up the busy western coast of Malaysia along the Strait of Malacca, a congested and notorious waterway boasting the world's highest concentration of piracy attacks. Tens of thousands of tugs, tankers and containerships hauling 30 percent of global trade — 5 trillion dollars' worth of goods — squeeze through the region each year. But thankfully, for cruisers at least, pirates only swing



as-quickly-as-possible yacht delivery. In recent years, the majority of world cruisers have avoided this region altogether, while the South African route will have mariners navigate a staggering 10,000-nautical-mile detour to enter the Mediterranean Sea via the North Atlantic, a voyage many won't even consider. So, the few mariners who decide to head north up the Red Sea into the Mediterranean find themselves faced with what is perhaps one of their biggest world cruising decisions: whether to ship or sail.

The Horn of Africa

Traditional sailing routes from Asia to the Mediterranean carry mariners across the Indian Ocean, around the Horn of Africa and into the Gulf of Aden before passing through the Bab el-Mandeb, or Gate of Tears — the narrow southern entrance to the Red Sea — and north to the Suez Canal.

It is a passage I completed in 1994 when sailing from Sydney to Italy, and while piracy around the Horn of Africa was a concern, the threat of attack against a sailboat was such a remote possibility it fell within an acceptable risk range — one similar to striking a semi-submerged cargo container, for example, or colliding with a snoozing humpback whale at night — and so we sailed past Somalia

and through the Gulf of Aden without incident.

But over the last 15 years, Somalia has experienced civil war, famine, illegal fishing and the illegal dumping of industrial waste along its coastline, disrupting local industries and driving some fishermen to seek compensation elsewhere. And what began as attacks by Somali fishermen against illegal trawling in an attempt to protect their waters and livelihoods escalated to organized criminal activity and the rapid increase of piracy in the region, where in 2010 heavily armed flotillas of Somali pirates hijacked 49 vessels,

The Hockleys sailed *Dream Time* through the congested Strait of Malacca, a zone notorious for piracy.

their grappling hooks toward commercial vessels, leaving tiny recreational crafts to pass unmolested.

But for cruisers continuing west keen to enter the Mediterranean, options become a little complicated. Unfortunately, the traditional and more direct route through the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea has become a tumultuous passage where local rebels, war, unfriendly shorelines and Somali pirates — who have no qualms targeting sailboats — make it far from a relaxing cruising experience and more of a get-through-



making an estimated \$238 million in ransom payments.

Increased security

Since 2010, however, security has improved around the Horn of Africa with the Combined Maritime Forces,



Neville Hockley watches as *Dream Time* is made ready to be lifted from the water.

or CMF, a naval coalition of 33 countries patrolling these troubled waters. Along with efforts to address the root cause of piracy, attacks around Somalia and the Gulf of Aden have been in steady decline.

Some authorities attribute this reduction not only to the CMF but to defensive measures taken by individual merchant vessels, which include contracting armed security guards, installing high-pressure water hoses on decks, razor wire, sonic weapons, mannequins to give the appearance of higher crew numbers, and making transits inside the Maritime Security Transit Corridor — a military-established channel of water across the Gulf of Aden where naval vessels concentrate their surveillance efforts. Additionally, with fewer sailboats in the region, there has been a significant reduction of soft-targets for pirates to focus their attacks.

Sailing statistics

Before the year 2000, 200 cruising sailboats transited north from the Indian Ocean up the Red Sea and into the Mediterranean each year, almost twice the number of those choosing to sail the less favorable route around South Africa. Yet by 2015, due to the increasing risk of piracy in the Gulf of Aden, the numbers were dramatically reversed with more than 350 yachts sailing the longer South African route and only 14 reportedly making the passage north from the Indian Ocean to the Suez Canal. It's interesting to note that during that same year, 25 yachts shipped their boats; this indicates that within the fleet of sailors wishing to enter the Mediterranean from the Indian Ocean, and at a ratio of almost 2 to 1, more cruisers felt the risk of piracy was too high to sail and chose to ship their vessels instead of trying to sail

through this dangerous zone.

After a decline in piracy around Somalia from 160 attacks in 2011 to just one attack in 2016, rumors began circulating within the cruising community that perhaps the region was once again safe to transit. However, 2017 saw a fresh increase in piracy with attacks being launched against five commercial vessels, prompting the Maritime Security Center Horn of Africa (MSCHOA.org), an initiative established by the European Union Naval Force, to post a notice on their website warning sailors:

"In view of the recent escalation in pirate attacks in the area of the Southern Red Sea, Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean, and the consequent very high risk, the essential advice is not to enter this area."

And in February 2018, while some reports show that only eight yachts sailed north up the Red Sea, one Australian catamaran issued a



mayday when five high-speed skiffs approached their vessel. Luck, it seems, may have played a role in the outcome, as a naval vessel was close enough to deploy a helicopter and within 15 minutes the yacht was escorted to safety by its very own billion-dollar security detail.

The decision

Dream Time is not averse to a little calculated risk-taking, but the challenges she has faced over the years have been against the indifference of Mother Nature, not the targeted malevolence of Somali pirates or Yemeni rebels. Reefing sail, laying a hull, trailing warps, life vests, harnesses and EPIRBs would do us no good if high-speed skiffs crossed our path.

But with a decrease in piracy it was a route that, for a few months, my wife and I were preparing to sail, even gathering charts for the region. But as our departure

date from Thailand drew closer, the reality of the risks grew more ominous. I suggested Catherine could disembark in Sri Lanka before *Dream Time* continued west, but it was made clear that we either sailed the route together or not at all. Budgets, objectives and

ultimately decided that the potential cost associated to the risk of sailing far exceeded the actual price of shipping, so we decided to ship.

The ship

With the difficulty of the decision behind us, moving forward with scheduling

Dream Time, in the slings, is swung toward Annette's deck.



acceptable risk levels differ for each vessel, of course, but for *Dream Time* at least it was

the transport and preparing *Dream Time* was remarkably simple. Sevenstar Yacht



Workers secure *Dream Time* on *Annette's* deck using heavy-duty straps.

Transport has delivered boats around the world for more than 25 years, and with a growing demand now schedules three ships to make the transit from Thailand to Turkey each spring. The hardest part was paying. Fees are approximately \$700 per foot for monohulls — and even more for catamarans — but, while the process is expensive, Sevenstar provided the reputation, experience, convenience and peace of mind that made our decision easier to process.

It was the first time we'd had to prepare *Dream Time* for a haulout, hardstand storage and an ocean passage all at the same time. But since the rigs could remain standing, preparations took less than a day with the removal of our furling headsail (optional), pickling the watermaker and securing the cabin for rough seas.

Some yachts chose to leave all sails and canvas rigged and seemed no worse for wear after the transit. However, with the ship scheduled to steam at 20 knots, likely against matching headwinds up the Red Sea, the removal of furling sails, loose canopies and deck gear seemed a good investment with 40 knots of sustained apparent wind.

Annette, a sturdy-looking 500-foot heavy load carrier, was assigned by Sevenstar and wasted no time lifting her cargo of yachts on board, averaging three vessels a day. Nine boats had chosen to ship with Sevenstar from Thailand to Turkey in April, including a tiny aluminum French sloop, two Australian catamarans, an English Hallberg-Rassy and a 99-foot S&S Maxi.

A delay in loading the S&S gave us a “bonus” (in the words of Chris, our Sev-

enstar agent): an extra night on *Dream Time*. And, without having to ask, compensation from the company to cover the hotel room we had already booked for the night. An early morning haulout, however, worked to our advantage with strengthening light rather than fading, and a rested Sevenstar crew freshly caffeinated and ready to begin their workday, rather than eager to end it.

Chris described Phuket as one of Sevenstar's most challenging loading destinations. With a steady 1 to 2 knots of current flowing briskly through an open anchorage four miles from shore, conditions can quickly deteriorate in strengthening wind and building seas, which makes berthing a bouncy 40-foot recreational yacht alongside a stubborn 500-foot, 8,383-GT cargo vessel an unsettling white-knuckle experience for

the yacht's captain, and a Herculean task for the Sevenstar crew attempting to align slings and prepare gear.

But with a wispy breeze over a calm sea, our conditions were ideal: Within just an hour of tying up alongside, working in the glare of deck lights under the soft glow of a new day, Sevenstar's load master along with a diver and deck crew of five, had slings, blocks and straps in position. Joining the rising sun, *Dream Time* was gently lifted from the Andaman Sea and slowly swung up and across *Annette's* deck.

The act of stepping onto a waiting RIB, however, was for a few minutes a confusing and disorienting moment for us. After all, in almost 20 years of owning *Dream Time*, it would be the first time she would embark on an ocean voyage without us. Since we left New York, we have traveled together, each protecting, caring and sheltering the other, and the thought of *Dream Time* traveling on without us was a rather lonely one.

I think Sevenstar understood this, so to allow us time to watch the procedure and perhaps process the emotion of separation, Chris spent an hour patiently positioning his RIB so we could observe *Dream Time* as she was lifted by one of *Annette's* three cranes and carefully lowered to her berth, tucked in comfortably behind the vessel's superstructure where welders waited to secure her cradles

directly to the steel deck, strapping her down using industrial-sized shackles and deck fittings usually reserved for securing monstrous spools of submarine cables or wind turbines. And the voyage that would have taken *Dream Time* three months to transit took *Annette* just two weeks, which included collecting a megayacht in the Maldives and nine heavily armed security guards in Sri Lanka to meet the company's insurance obligations while transiting the Gulf of Aden.

The transport went without incident and, after her 5,000-nm passage, *Annette* anchored in Turkey two nautical miles from the town of Fethiye, which lies just 360 nautical miles north-northwest of the Suez Canal.

Dream Time arrived in reasonably good condition, coated only with a thin layer of salt and Saharan sand as proof of her transit, and the unloading process was complete in just two hours as we watched the Sevenstar crew release *Dream Time's* deck straps and lift her from the hardstands before swinging her up and over the railing

to meet chilly Mediterranean waters.

I wasn't sure how I would feel processing this interruption to our world voyage, the sudden transition from heavy tropical climes and jungle backdrops to a shockingly different crisp panoramic scene of snowy mountain peaks. But just moments after we clambered down the rope ladder hanging over *Annette's* freeboard, stepped onto *Dream Time's* decks, fired up the Yanmar and motored across the bay, the interruption and concerns were instantly forgotten, replaced only with an excitement and

Dream Time moored in a Turkish Mediterranean cove.



eagerness to explore a new region: the Mediterranean Sea. ■

To read more about Neville and Catherine's world voyage, visit zeroXTE.com.