



A Middle

Taking a 40-footer from the



On November 3, 2001, a Nordhavn 40 began a six-month 23,000-plus-mile circumnavigation of the globe. At the helm was Jim Leishman, vice president and co-founder of Pacific Asian Enterprises Inc. (P.A.E.), builder of the Nordhavn line of expedition-capable traveler yachts.

By February, Nordhavn's Around the World cruise had taken the boat all the way from Dana Point, California to the Maldivé islands. This month, Leishman describes the crew's adventures voyaging through the waters of the Middle East, on their way to the Mediterranean Sea.

After the events of September 11, 2001, we all shared grave concerns over the potential risks of passing through the Middle East in an American-flagged vessel. We'd had less serious concerns about passage through the Southern Philippines and the notorious Straits of Molucca — and, fortunately, *Nordhavn* passed through both of those regions without incident. Now, the biggest worry of all was ahead: the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and Egypt.

On February 16, we departed from the Maldives, cautiously comfortable with our original route through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean Sea. We took up a course for Salalah, Oman — 1,377 miles to the northwest. The Indian Ocean continued to provide ideal conditions, light winds out of the northeast and very mild seas.

With clear skies and temperatures in the low 90 degree range, we were glad to have air conditioning (which

STRANGE SIGHTS AND SOUNDS — (clockwise from top) During the trip, the crew of *Nordhavn* saw camels roam free in Salalah and a beaten-up old airplane at the entrance of the Djibouti Airport. They fueled up in both Salalah and Djibouti, and they heard coalition warships interrogating merchant ships over the VHF radio.



photos courtesy of Pacific Asian Enterprises

East Cruise

Arabian Sea to the Suez Canal

kept our staterooms a cool and dry 70 degrees Fahrenheit). The gentle breezes flowing through the open doors and window of the saloon and wheelhouse kept temperatures on the upper decks comfortable. These ideal conditions allowed for plenty of rest — and the galley and aft deck barbecue were in constant use.

Meals and their preparation became a perpetual subject of conversation and debate. With the abundance of frozen choice steaks, prime rib, chicken, pork, lamb, hams, fish, sausage and more aboard our boat, the choices were always difficult.

Brian Saunders emerged as our official ship's chef during this leg of the cruise — however, he acknowledged my barbecuing expertise and the cocktail hour usually began about the time the boat's Magma grill was lit. Crewmember Paul Grover referred to the cockpit as the "Vanderbilt Deck" — and with comfortable reclining chairs, a balmy breeze, the setting sun, dinner on the grill and a cool beverage in hand, voyaging (and life in general) just doesn't get any better.

Each morning, Brian and Paul would monitor prearranged frequencies on the SSB radio, to receive information from numerous sailboats en route to Salalah. We heard a lot of discussion about boats leaving Salalah in convoys. There were approximately 30 yachts anchored and waiting to depart. We also heard that there were German navy ships gathering at the southern end of the Red Sea.

To enter the Red Sea, we would have to pass through the Gulf of Aden and clear the island of Socotra, just west of Somalia and the Horn of Africa. This has been a dangerous area for years, with many reported pirate attacks. A course to Salalah added distance to our voyage, but it offered a convenient and safe port and the opportunity to arrange a convoy with other yachts



headed up the Red Sea.

The weather continued to be fair, and evenings were cooler — in the high 70 degree range. Each night, we were treated to a remarkable show of phosphorescence at sea — brighter than any

DO AS I SAID, NOT AS I DO



LOOKING OUT FOR THE CREW — Crewman Brian Saunders (right) emerged as the official ship's chef during this leg of the cruise. Horses are beasts of burden in Said (above). Jim Leishman had fuel attendants help him refuel in Djibouti (top and far right).

photos courtesy of Pacific Asian Enterprises

running, we called the Salalah Port Authority for entry clearance and were authorized to enter the inner harbor. We dropped our anchor the morning of February 25, and we were promptly cleared by immigration, customs and the port police — all of whom were kind enough to come out to the boat. The whole process took less than 30 minutes.

Nordhavn and about 30 sailboats were corralled into a small section of the inner harbor — each yacht clearing the other by less than a boat length — all swinging together on single bow anchors. It wasn't long before sailors (some of whom we had spoken to on the radio) came by in their tenders, curious about our voyaging power boat. They offered helpful information about Salalah.

Oman is reported to be one of the richest countries in the Middle East. Its port of Salalah is a small but bustling terminal, with room to load and unload up to about 10 large cargo ships. There are modern container cranes here, along with traditional single-arm cranes for handling non-containerized freight.

One seawall is reserved for the traditional Dow-type cargo vessels of wood construction — some of which carry chickens and goats. One of these old woodies arrived carrying hundreds of tons of smelly smelt-size fish — all packed into burlap sacks and stinking beyond description.

The stevedores unloaded the fish ship by hand and stacked the foul-smelling bags into awaiting trucks, overloading them to the very top of their cargo fences. I later learned that these fish were used to feed beef and dairy cattle — and that this feed was the reason why local beef has a fishy aftertaste. We were very thankful for our well-stocked onboard freezer.

We learned that the favorite restaurant and gathering place for the yachting crowd is within an easy walk of the port. The restaurant serves good food (including imported beef) and drinks. The restaurant is aptly named *The Oasis*, and it buzzes with activity late into each evening.

After dinner at *The Oasis*, Brian and I met some British sailors returning to the navy supply ship *Fort Rosari*. That morning, the British aircraft carrier *Illustrious*, a small British frigate, and *Fort Rosari* had entered the harbor and moored along a quay near the yacht anchorage. Two other British frigates had

I've ever seen. Perhaps this light phenomenon was what made the water teem with flying fish.

At night, *Nordhavn* was pelted by them. Some of the flying fish, attracted by the light, would fly right into the open wheelhouse doors. One even glided through the saloon and crashed in the lower passageway to the staterooms.

Squid, too, attacked our boat after dark. One particularly large one flew out of the water, hit a paravane pole and burst, spraying the whole starboard side with reddish brown ink. It took an hour to clean up the mess.

WELCOME TO OMAN

After eight and a half days of easy

moored in another part of the harbor.

We were soon invited aboard *Fort Rosari* to have a nightcap with the sailors in the crew's lounge. We found that the crewmembers of this British naval ship were all merchant marines, supplying the carrier and frigates with ammunition, fuel and general supplies.

We spoke at length with the second officer of the ship and expressed our concerns about security in this region. He could not say where the vessels had been or where they were going, but told us that they were part of an international coalition for the prevention of terrorism. With complete confidence, he assured us that the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea were all very safe, and that we had nothing to worry about.

Later, lower-ranking crew packed into the smoke-filled lounge. They told us that the Middle Eastern waters were thick with coalition warships — including German, French, British, Italian and American vessels. They boasted that there were aircraft in the air 24 hours a day, and that if we keyed our VHF radio on Channel 16 to call a Mayday, there would be aircraft overhead within a matter of minutes.

We were elated with this news. By morning, it had spread throughout the anchorage. All the following day, grateful cruisers were inviting the British crew out to their yachts for drinks and snacks.

We enjoyed our stay in Salalah. The weather was very pleasant and the people were all friendly. The terrain is very arid, resembling the coastline along Mexico's Sea of Cortez — and I found the cooler dry air refreshing, after weeks in the tropics.

The town of Salalah looked new and prosperous. We found modern, well-stocked markets here for provisioning.

More than once on the way to town, our taxi had to slow to allow free-ranging camels to cross the road. The driver explained that the locals had little use for camels these days, but treated the animals with reverence for their past contribution to Arab society.

ON THE WAY TO DJIBOUTI

A new crewmember, journalist Peter Swanson, joined us in Salalah. On March 2, we departed Salalah, bound for Djibouti — 730 miles to the west/southwest.

Our original plan had been to stop in Massawa, Eritrea — but two days



OH, THE THINGS YOU'LL SEE — (top) Ahmed and Mohamed, an agent and a pilot, respectively, from Felix Maritime, came along as well-paid guides. Jim Leishman (left) and guest crewmember Peter Swanson kicked back and had a few drinks at Djibouti Yacht Club.

out of Salalah, our boat's stabilizers began to act up. I found that the gyroscope that controls the system had failed. We had never seen this type of failure before and did not have a spare unit aboard — so, a new one had to be ordered. It could not arrive in Salalah in time, so it was sent to the next safest port — Djibouti — which would only be about 10 hours out of our way.

We began the voyage out of Salalah in the company of another boat — *Millennium*, a 62 foot twin-engine motorsailer. We stayed together for a day and a half, but *Millennium* preferred to slow down to conserve fuel.

We had been buzzed by a British reconnaissance airplane and had heard numerous coalition warships interrogating merchant ships on VHF Channel 16. We knew the entire area was under surveillance — so we felt very secure as we continued cruising alone.

After an easy four-day run in perfect conditions, we pulled into Djibouti at 5:30 p.m. on March 6 and dropped anchor in front of Djibouti Yacht Club. We enjoyed a pleasant dinner ashore.

The following morning, we left the sanctuary of the Djibouti Club Nautique and entered the real Djibouti — one of the tiniest countries in Africa. Djibouti is little more than a port; however, its location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and Asia gives it significant strategic importance.

Djibouti was colonized by France, and the French influence is apparent



photos courtesy of Pacific Asian Enterprises

FEAST OR FAMINE



in the local architecture. French is widely spoken here, and the French Foreign Legion maintains order and provides security for the country.

I wish I could have had a better impression of Djibouti. We met some nice people — including the Fed Ex agent, the head port captain and our poor refugee helper from Ethiopia —

but the majority of people we saw were living at a poverty level I have never seen in any Central American or Asian country I've visited.

While on the streets, I felt a thousand desperate eyes boring into me: people who desperately needed food. While we hear that the crime rate is low here, I thought about what I might do to survive, if I were in their position.

RED SEA RUN

With a full load of clean fuel and a

mechanically perfect vessel, we departed Djibouti on March 10, bound for the Suez Canal. We wished the best for the poor people of Djibouti, but we were elated to be clear of the harbor and felt secure again being back at sea.

Our first challenge was the narrow Straits of Bab El Mandeb, the real entrance to the Red Sea. In addition to the heavy shipping traffic and a little piracy here, the 12 mile strait between Djibouti and Yemen is known for strong southeast winds and steep seas.

Nordhavn got some firsthand experience of what 40 knots can do in the narrow straits and shallow water. For the first two days out of Djibouti, we had rough seas. Then, just as predicted in everything I've read about the Red Sea, the winds slowly decreased. They dropped off to a calm at the mid waypoint, then slowly filled in from the northwest — building up to 30 knots as we approached the Gulf of Suez.

We arrived in Suez City at about 6 p.m. on March 18 — just before dark. The strong north wind that plagued us for the past three days finally let up. Most of this Monday was calm, which gave us time to clean the boat.

We contacted our prearranged port clearing agency, Felix Maritime, and we were greeted in front of Suez Yacht Club by agent Ahmed M.A. Ghany. From the yacht club tender, he assisted us in taking the fore and aft mooring buoys and securing the boat.

Having cleared into Oman and Djibouti by myself, hiring an agency

to do the footwork seemed well worth the minimal cost. Ahmed came aboard, collected our ship's documentation and passports, and advised us that a surveyor from the Canal Authority would measure the tonnage of the vessel. We could refuel and pass through the canal the following morning. With a vessel capable of 8 knots speed, it is possible to navigate the entire 118 mile canal in one day.

At 7 a.m. Tuesday, Ahmed was back aboard with the surveyor. Within a half hour, the boat was measured and we cast off the moorings to fuel. Suez was the first fuel dock we had seen since Thailand, as we had become used to taking fuel from trucks on the quay.

At about 9 a.m., we picked up our pilot and were on our way through the amazing Suez Canal — built more than 150 years ago with French engineering and Egyptian labor. I've passed through the Panama Canal several times, but this was my first Suez transit. I found the Suez just as fascinating as the Panama — particularly in that it was built originally almost all by hand and completed in 1845.

Our first pilot, whose name was Mohamed, immediately took the helm and would not relinquish it throughout his leg — which was about two-thirds of the way up the canal to Ismailia.

I had been studying the Indian Ocean Cruising Guide, which shows a photo of a pilot steering the author's sailboat. A quotation reads: "For the most part, the pilots of the Suez Canal are courteous and diligent — although they will always nag you to 'go faster, go faster' and will always be offended at the meager baksheesh (compensation) you offer."

Sure enough, our pilot was the same guy — and I showed him his photo in the book. He laughed and nodded.

The first thing he said was "Captain, full speed, please — full speed" and the second thing he said was "Captain, some cigarettes, please." He would have nothing to do with the autopilot and insisted on hand steering for eight hours while smoking a whole pack of cigarettes.

Trying to get these guys not to smoke in the wheelhouse would probably be impossible — and the concept



of formula hull speed and wasted power seemed incomprehensible to our pilot. Rather than go 8 knots at a reasonable 1,900 rpm, our guy insisted on full throttle — increasing our fuel consumption by 50 percent and adding only .4 knot more speed.

Upon arrival in Ismailia, the "baksheesh thing" started. I had planned — at the agent's advice — to give our pilot \$25 and a couple of shirts. Sure enough, he was appalled. We finally agreed on \$35 and four shirts — and I thought we were done.

"Captain, more cigarettes. Five packs please," he said prior to leaving. I gave him one — and didn't feel too good about the negotiation process. We later found out that Mohamed is well paid (as are all pilots) — and that he has four wives.

As soon as Mohamed left, our new pilot boarded us. His name, too, was Mohamed — and the process began again.

The second Mohamed was to take us the balance of the way to Port Said, and we understood that we would run until 10 or 11 p.m. to finish. At about 5 p.m., our pilot was told we must stop short of Port Said and wait until morning to complete the transit. It was all a bit confusing, but we stopped and tied up at a Canal Authority dock behind a huge tugboat.



Our agent Ahmed and Mohamed stayed aboard with us until dawn, when we began cruising again — arriving in Port Said about 10 a.m. Wednesday, March 20.

In all, it was a neat trip. Along the shoreline, we noticed evidence of two wars with Israel — 1968 and 1973. The banks were littered with the torn and twisted parts of personnel carriers, landing craft and other unrecognizable machines. We also noticed that preparations had been made along the whole length of the canal for quick setup of strategic floating bridges, in the event of a military action.

Egypt seemed like a thriving country, with new construction everywhere we looked. The town of Ismailia looked particularly nice, with numerous resort hotels and palm-lined banks, flowers and manicured gardens everywhere.

I hope to return to Egypt someday to explore further and to see the Nile River and the pyramids — but now, it was time to push on to the Mediterranean. 🌊

In the months ahead, Leishman will share further adventures of the Nordhavn 40 round-the-world cruise with Sea readers. For more details on the voyage and a link to the daily cruise update, go to www.goboatingamerica.com