

SOMALIA



ANTI-PIRACY

NOTES FROM AN AFRICA CIRCUMNAVIGATION CRUISE

PART THREE

CRUISE SHIP ANTI-PIRACY PRECAUTIONS OFF THE COAST OF SOMALIA AND IN THE GULF OF ADEN

By Ted Cookson

I was fortunate to be able to take a once-in-a-lifetime 73-day Africa circumnavigation cruise with my fiancé Barbara and a number of friends between 11 March and 23 May 2008. Our cruise, on Holland America's elegant 48,000-ton, 793-passenger *Prinsendam*, began in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida and ended in Lisbon, Portugal. The itinerary included Cape Town, South Africa, the Horn of Africa and the Suez Canal. En route the *Prinsendam* called at a total of 28 ports in 20 countries. Of the ports, 16 were in ten different African states. Mombasa, Kenya, Salalah, Oman and Safaga, Egypt were among the ports we visited.

This is part three of a three-part article adapted from the notes I took during the cruise. This installment will touch on some of the anti-piracy precautions that were taken by our cruise ship while off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden.

Piracy on the high seas is so rampant nowadays that *Smithsonian* featured an article on the topic in August 2007 and *National Geographic* carried an article on piracy in its October 2007 issue. The total value of world maritime trade is estimated to be in excess of USD 6 trillion annually, so there is no shortage of ship targets for pirates. In 2006 some 239 major pirate attacks were reported. In that year 188 crewmen were taken hostage and 15 of those sailors were killed. However,



Prinsendam in Mombasa

these figures do not reflect the true magnitude of the problem as it is presumed that over half of all pirate attacks go unreported. In 2005 the cruise ship *Seabourn Spirit*, on which Barbara and I have sailed five times, was attacked off the coast of Somalia by pirates wielding a rocket-propelled grenade launcher from a small boat. Although those pirates were repelled in part



Helicopter rescue training



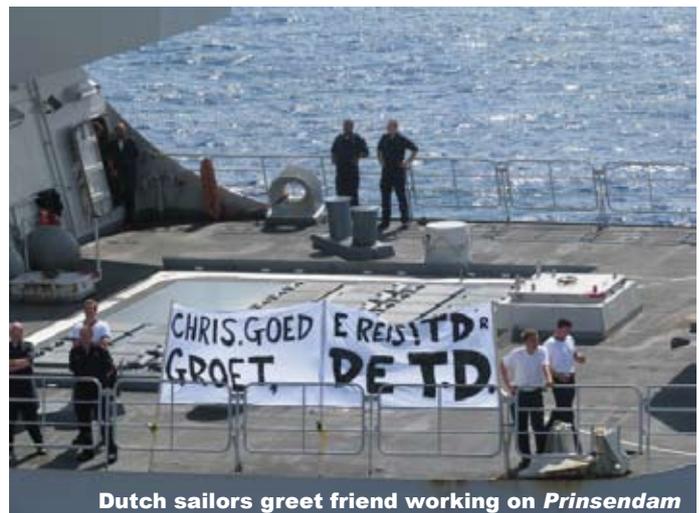
Evertsen side view



Helicopter rescue training



Evertsen bow closeup



Dutch sailors greet friend working on Prinsendam

through the use of a sonic weapon and no cruise passengers were wounded in that incident, the ship did suffer some minor damage and that cruise was terminated prematurely in the Seychelles.

Because the waters off the Horn of Africa are among the World's most pirate-infested, the *Prinsendam* was escorted by the Dutch guided-missile frigate HNLMS *Evertsen* during its entire transit along the east coast of Somalia 1-4 May. The helicopter on board the *Evertsen*, which is capable of landing marines on nearby ships, made periodic surveys of the surrounding seas as the *Prinsendam* sailed northward, always keeping a minimum of 200 nautical miles (370 km) off the Somali coast. The escort operation commenced upon our departure from Mombasa on the evening of 30 April, and it lasted until 4 May. The 6,050-ton *Evertsen*, which is 144 meters long and carries a crew of about 200, can cruise at up to 28 knots. In addition to a 127-mm gun, the *Evertsen* sports

Sea Sparrow missiles and surface-to-air missiles plus torpedo launchers.

On 2 May the chopper from the *Evertsen* conducted a rescue training exercise on the *Prinsendam*. A stretcher with our housekeeping supervisor was winched up to the chopper from the highest deck of the *Prinsendam*. Then on 3 May the *Evertsen* pulled alongside to within 60 meters of our cruise ship while aerial photos were taken from the *Evertsen's* chopper overhead. The other passengers and I were able to take photographs and video clips of both of these spectacular operations.

Commissioned in 2005, the *Evertsen* was deployed to the United Nations World Food Programme in 2007. Normally it accompanies vessels carrying food aid from Mombasa to the Somali ports of Kismaayo and Mogadishu. Luckily for us, the *Evertsen* was free to escort our cruise ship for several days because of delays in loading grain into the next cargo vessel it was to escort from Mombasa north to Somalia. On the afternoon of 4 May, though, the *Evertsen* finally had to turn south and sail back to Mombasa.

After our departure from Salalah, Oman on the evening of 5



Dutch male and female sailors



Light gun on Evertsen

May, Captain Christopher Turner ran the *Prinsendam* nearly at full throttle in the Gulf of Aden and through the Bab El Mandeb, the “Gate of Tears,” where the Red Sea is at its narrowest at the southern extremity. Only after we had cleared the coast of Yemen was the restriction lifted against passengers walking outside at night on the lower promenade on deck seven. Prior to that time most of the ship’s outside lights had been turned off and a security patrol was maintained on deck seven all night. Passengers were also asked to keep their stateroom curtains closed at night. Since at that point we were finally out of the zone where maritime pirate attacks are known to have taken place, our cruise director also began to schedule daytime outdoor activities again.



After we had entered the Mediterranean I happened to notice that the two pirate-repelling long-range acoustic devices which had been specially installed under the bridge on either side of the *Prinsendam* had been removed. The signal from those devices is so strong that it can damage one’s hearing. Captain Turner had cautioned passengers to stay indoors and well away from the windows if he were to announce suddenly that he was about to deploy that weapon against any raiders who might approach us in small craft.

Though I sighted a number of what I imagined could be mother ships and spotted many legitimate fishermen operating in speedboats in the Gulf of Aden, fortunately no pirates were ever in evidence. Because after 4 May we no longer had a naval escort, though, you can bet that the officers on the bridge of the *Prinsendam* made good use of their binoculars during our first two days sailing out of Salalah through the Gulf of Aden and along the coast of Yemen toward Safaga!



Dutch flag displayed on *Prinsendam* during maneuvers

ABOUT TED COOKSON: Egypt’s most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 307 of the 317 destinations on the list of the Travelers’ Century Club (visit www.eptours.com and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the “El Maadi” metro station) in Maadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tels. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: ept@link.net. Web site: www.eptours.com. The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted’s travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at www.eptours.com under “Ted’s International Travel Articles.”

