

Piracy and the recreational yachtsman



While there are many hazards that members of this yacht club are aware of when it comes to sailing the high seas, the threat of piracy remains – hopefully – one that few of us will need to contend with. But even aside from a flurry of coverage in the media, the threat of piracy in places such the East and West coasts of Africa, as well as parts of the Caribbean, Asia-Pacific and even the Mediterranean, is a menace that more sailors are becoming aware of.

People can hold a number of misconceptions about piracy and even more misguided notions on how to deal with it (such as carrying lots of firearms). It is

therefore essential that sailors obtain good, practical advice on the “dos” and “don’ts” on how to avoid danger. And it is also important not to assume that pirates are all armed to the teeth, or zooming about in ultra-fast motor boats. A lot of problems stem from events such as theft from marinas or from boats when they are at anchor.

These are some of the themes in a fascinating talk in March at the Royal Thames Yacht Club by

Christopher Ledger, a former Royal Marine officer, RNVR YC member and now the co-chairman of Idarat Maritime. He advises shipowners, managers and crews about marine security issues. Many of his clients will be merchant ships and not all of his advice is applicable to recreational sailors, but a good deal of his advice does carry a great deal of relevance. His talk at the RTYC was entitled “Maritime Crime and Piracy: Avoidance Tips For the Cruising Yachtsman”.

Ledger pointed out, for example, how pirates, with their access to the same GPS satellite navigation technology as law-abiding sailors, are able to work out the location of those all-important way points that cruising yachts use in departing for their crossings; he described how pirates have worked out how to

lurk just over the horizon when potential prey is around. Similarly, he explained how pirates are very often just desperate, often scared people who pick on what they see as weak targets but can be surprisingly caught off guard if boat crews respond decisively and keep a sharp look out.

This article will not recount the full details of the advice that Ledger gave – the best thing for those who are interested is to contact him directly (details below), but I cannot resist sharing a few of his ideas. For example, he mentioned the importance of sailors having plenty of very bright lights on a boat during the night and of carrying items such as old flares in the cockpit to fire at a pirate boat in the event of an attack, and to also have items such ear muffs and goggles to put on (the very sight of a crew putting on such things can be disconcerting and alarming to an attacker).

He also stressed the crucial importance of skippers briefing their crews on how to deal with piracy, of going through radio drills and other procedures so that procedures are dealt with as rapidly as possible.

Above all, he wants to instil in sailors the same kind of situational awareness that people should adopt if, for example, they are travelling on land in a strange country or, for that matter, in a big city. Just as we lock our doors and keep an eye for anyone who might look suspicious or threatening, so we should not assume that the high seas don't have their threats. One particular danger can simply arise because

recreational sailors who sail to “get away from it all” can unwittingly drop their guard.

As well as being a fascinating talk, the event also contained a lively question-and-answer session where people were able to air a few concerns. First of all, Ledger wanted reassure people not to be scared about going to sea in certain places; he does not want to frighten people off, just to put certain dangers in a proper perspective and encourage good practice. One particularly important question, this author thought, was a query on why the Royal Yachting Association does not have – at least at the time of writing – a training course or training module dedicated to security training to deal with piracy and associated threats. Ledger said he has pushed for this, but so far drawn little interest. Members at the event agreed that this is an unwise stance for the RYA – and it seems that a worthy cause for this yacht club would be to press the issue to the RYA and to encourage training on such matters by the RNVR YC itself.

Ledger did a great job in explaining a difficult subject to an audience of sailing enthusiasts. As the geopolitical situation around the world remains precarious in many places – with fresh threats, for example, from places such as North Africa – Ledger’s lessons and insights deserve the widest possible audience.

Mr Ledger’s Idarat Maritime business can be found at this website: <http://www.idaratmaritime.com/>

Another useful resource on piracy threats for mariners is the IMB Piracy Reporting Centre.

<https://icc-ccs.org/piracy-reporting-centre>

The Noonsite website is also a valuable resource.

<http://www.noonsite.com/>