

# Guns, Coconuts, and Pirates



by Ed Steele

I suppose it really began when we read about the March 2005 pirate attack on the yachts *Mahdi & Gandalf* off Yemen. We read the first-hand reports on [www.noonsite.com](http://www.noonsite.com): pirates had attacked the two yachts with machine guns and a gun battle ensued with one of the yachts returning fire. Next were those international television pictures of Somali pirates attacking a cruise ship in November of 2005. This was a 10,000-ton vessel with over 300 people on board and it was attacked by a couple of skiff loads of Somali pirates toting AK-47 machine guns and rocket propelled grenades. The media reported the 440-foot cruise ship as having “taken evasive action” and having used a “non-lethal sonic device” to repel the attackers. What a joke! What sailor believes that a cruise ship can out-maneuver a couple of guys in a speedboat? I remember seeing photographs of the attackers taken by cruise ship passengers. The former could be seen laughing and left the scene only after they had run out of ammunition. My wife and I would soon be heading into those same waters and were now regretting the decision we had taken several years earlier not to carry firearms aboard our vessel.

The questions began to form. What kind of weapons to carry? How many weapons? There are dozens of threads on various cruising websites

where this topic is endlessly discussed and analyzed, with a predictable variety of opinions ranging from effectiveness to the morality of armed retaliation. The problem was that this was no longer theoretical--this was us! Friends asked us why we were even traveling through those waters. We replied that we were circumnavigating Africa and Africa was in the way. We either had to give up our dream or choose between pirates and the Cape. Many cruisers have chosen to tackle the Cape of Good Hope and to brave the Agulhas current. Given a choice between the remotest possibility of 60-foot breaking waves or rabid pirates, the First Mate declared for the pirates every time.

We began to research our options, our strategy being to prevent anyone from boarding. The weapon of choice came down to 12-gauge pump-action shotguns. We read that the pirate’s AK-47 machine gun has a 30-round magazine and it can empty this in three seconds. The 12-gauge pump has a five-round capacity and when shooting buckshot, can spew 50 bullets in around five seconds. Both have effective ranges of around 50 yards when fired from small boats at sea. We could not do a whole lot about rocket-propelled grenades but determined that again, these would probably be close-range weapons in order to hit something as small as a yacht.



The author has owned various firearms for most of his adult life, since the demonstrated ability to fire from both hands while holding the reins in your teeth is part of the driver's license examination in New Mexico (where we make our home when we're not sailing). The First Mate however, weighs in at 110 pounds, so the question became, could she handle a shotgun? Here the Santa Fe Police S.W.A.T. team provided assistance and guidance. Their team leader and instructor joined us at an indoor range and demonstrated the weapon at different distances and with different types of ammunition. My wife fired the shotgun with birdshot and did quite well at shredding cardboard targets. To increase her confidence and familiarity with the gun, we next approached a local gun club to use their skeet range. The gun my wife was using was a Benelli pump action with tactical sights, the same model that is commonly carried in police vehicles in the United States. Although this was only the second time in her life that she had fired a 12-gauge shotgun, she hit 15 out of 25 clay pigeons on the skeet range. If the pirates were wearing orange clothing and flying through the air, they were in for a heap of trouble!



By now we had purchased a second "used" shotgun with a recoil suppression system built into the stock. Next was the selection of the type of ammunition. All police officers in New Mexico must qualify with the pump-action shotgun, so the police department issues "reduced recoil" loads to the female officers. We purchased both the reduced recoil type as well as "full load" ammunition and set off for a remote bend of the Rio Grande River to try out the various types. After checking that Pancho Villa and his band of raiders were nowhere in sight, we set up our cardboard pirates at 50 yards. Although the recoil-suppressed shotgun was heavier than the regular weapon, with this gun my wife was able to fire the regular magnum loads of both double ought buckshot and rifled slugs, slaughtering the virtual buccaneers.

While all of this was going on, S/V *DoodleBug* was on the hard in Bundaberg, Australia and unless the Australian authorities granted us permission to import the guns, all of this was academic. Australia has strict gun control laws: they regard the pump-action shotgun in the same category as a machine gun, and new guns are no longer for sale, even to Australian citizens. A dozen or so e-mails passed back and forth between the USA and Australia over the next six months. We finally received confirmation that if we arrived in Bundaberg with shotguns as part of our checked luggage, the guns would be taken from us and returned when we sailed from Australia. It was suggested that we not bring ammunition as we could readily purchase it in Darwin, our chosen departure port.

So we loaded our gear and set off to return to Australia. We flew Southwest Airlines from Albuquerque to Los Angeles; the check-in staff yawned when we declared the shotguns as part of our luggage. The transfer to Qantas Airlines was a different story. The lady at the flight check-in spent almost 20 minutes wrapping our gun case in yellow "hazardous cargo" tape, even though we demonstrated that the case was securely locked. Upon our arrival in Brisbane, we were escorted by two Qantas officials who insisted upon carrying the gun case while we pushed the rest of our luggage on a cart. A moment of comedy ensued when nobody had a knife to cut the many layers of yellow tape. I followed a customs officer down some stairs to a maintenance locker, where a rusting blade was finally produced. The gun serial numbers were checked and carefully noted, I was given a receipt, and we bade farewell to our guns for the next few months.

*DoodleBug* left Bundaberg and sailed for Darwin in March of 2006. We had planned some further sightseeing before we left Australia and it was well that we did, as it took four permits and nearly eight weeks to obtain the necessary permission to purchase ammunition. The final permission came from the Ministry of Defense just a few days before we were due to sail. Throughout all of these negotiations the Australian bureaucracy pleasantly surprised us. At every turn the officials we dealt with were friendly, cooperative and supportive of our plans.

Everything now had to be coordinated carefully. Darwin has a 30-foot tidal range and we needed to be off the Customs dock at slack high water. The Darwin gun shop would deliver our ammunition order to us under the watchful eye of the Customs official and the latter would also hand over the gun case with its lethal contents. In addition we would take delivery of vital yacht supplies in the form of our order of duty-free booze. Amazingly it all worked and *DoodleBug* sailed from Darwin in September of 2006 bound for Bali, Indonesia.

The Seven Seas Cruising Association magazine wrote that *S/V Mar Bella* had entered Indonesia in July 2005 as part of the 2005 Darwin-to-Bali rally. They entered with two shotguns on board: they declared the weapons upon arrival, were issued a receipt and the guns were taken to secure storage by the authorities, to be returned upon their departure. Two days later *Mar Bella's* captain had been asked to visit the police station to answer a "few questions." When he did so, he was essentially arrested and the local newspapers trumpeted the story of how the authorities had captured an American yacht attempting to smuggle guns. After extended hassle they were eventually allowed to leave, but without their guns.

We had dined with the crew of *Mar Bella* in the Tuamotus in 2004 and had subsequently read of their experience. We now faced the Indonesian authorities with our own two shotguns. We had declared all details of our guns on our application for a cruising permit and had stored the two guns in a forward floor locker that was secured with a steel cable and padlock. We had also removed the bolts from the weapons and further stripped the firing pins from the bolts. The bolts were stored in our on-board safe and the firing pins were stored with the navigation equipment of dividers and mechanical pencils – well hidden in "plain sight." We rationalized that if we had to pay "handling fees" (read: bribes) to third world authorities, it would be cheaper to recover non-operable weapons than functional units. Even if we were forced to turn over the bolt assemblies we would simply blame the Australian authorities for the missing firing pins. All of these precautions turned out to be unnecessary as the Bali authorities were friendly and cooperative and allowed us to retain the guns on board. They placed customs seals across the gun locker and also the First Mate's wine storage locker. When the Captain protested against the proposed sealing of his beer locker, the Customs agent smiled and moved on, leaving these supplies seal-less (it's a guy thing).

Bali was a delightful visit and we set sail for Christmas Island still armed for a small war. We had rationalized that we might need enough ammo to prevent pirate boarding for up

to one hour while we sent frantic Mayday calls for assistance. Our 240 rounds would allow us to stop a rush at our yacht by a couple of speedboats and to respond to prolonged sniping at distances of up to 200 yards, with a bit left over for some practice shooting. We had also purchased a camouflage net from a Darwin military surplus supplier. We believed that this simple device, which we would rig over the cockpit for the run through the Gulf of Aden, would prevent an attacker from determining either the position or the number of crewmembers in the cockpit. It was not intended to conceal a white fiberglass ketch at sea.

The Christmas Island authorities took our shotguns into storage and handed them back to us from the dock as we departed. The next stop was Cocos Keeling and here the authorities were content to leave the guns aboard. *DoodleBug* then set sail for uninhabited Salomon Island in the Chagos group. The Chagos group of islands is a British Territory and a few days after we arrived, a patrol boat visited us from the military base at Diego Garcia. The visiting marines carefully noted the serial numbers of our weapons and all was fine. Salomon is approximately five degrees south of the equator and our intent was to hang there during the change of seasons (cyclone season was approaching the southern hemisphere and should be coming to an end soon in the Arabian Sea).

We had not fired our shotguns in six months, so one morning we called the four other vessels scattered around the Salomon lagoon on the VHF radio to warn them that we would be testing anti-piracy measures that morning and not to be alarmed at any loud noises. A voice on the radio announced that they would similarly be testing anti-piracy measures at their end of the lagoon. We reassembled the guns and dinghied ashore to an uninhabited motu, where we set up coconut pirates in a handy clearing and proceeded to pump them full of lead. Very satisfying and we are sure that the hermit crabs and rats appreciated the supply of shredded coconut.





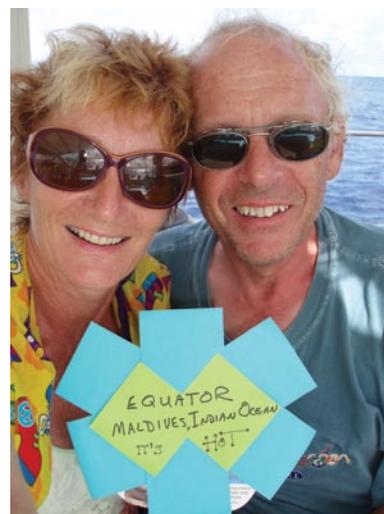
(The reader may be interested in the results of an impromptu survey on vessels carrying weapons. Americans are often criticized for being “gun-crazy.” The four other yachts at anchor consisted of one each of British, French, Italian and German nationalities. The French yacht was from Reunion and was intending to return there, thus was unarmed. Of the other three vessels, one was also carrying a pair of shotguns and another had two machine guns on board.)

Our next destinations were in the Maldives Islands chain. I had researched their Customs regulations on various websites early that year. Noonsite provided the intelligence that the Maldives authorities required visiting armed yachts to have an “International Permit” to carry firearms. Unless Kofi Annan’s son is selling these, there is no such thing as an “International Firearm Permit.” Who would issue such a document? I sent an e-mail to the Maldives tourist information office asking for clarification and a couple of months later received a reply that I needed to apply for a permit from the Maldives Ministry of Defense. I sent them an e-mail providing full details of our trip and of the weapons we carried and requested a permit. No response. A second e-mail was sent and still no response. Then I mailed a letter containing the same information and again received no response. My fellow cruisers at Salomon exclaimed that I was crazy to contact the Maldives authorities. Sailing websites would confirm that previous cruisers had declared their weapons in the Maldives and there was no problem in handing the weapons over for storage. The problems arrived when it came time to leave. Then the requests for “proof of ownership” and “international permits” would begin and the result was always that the guns were effectively confiscated. We were strongly advised to hide any weapons and ammunition and deny that we were carrying same. The Maldives authorities never search properly, we were assured. “Make things easy for them and they will make things easy for you.” We agonized for days over this but finally decided to take the advice of our more experienced colleagues and hide our weapons. We did an excellent job of this!

The day finally came to set sail for the northern hemisphere. We intended to touch upon the most northerly island of Uligamu before continuing on to Salalah, Oman. Six hours later we were “heaved to” in an unforecasted blow that lasted for several hours. When we set sail again I noticed that there was some water in the engine compartment. I tasted it and found it to be fresh water. What was going on? I could find no source for the leak but nevertheless decided to change course for the Island of Addu in the southernmost end of the chain. Upon arrival we hailed the Maldives customs and anchored to await inspection. Five officials came aboard *DoodleBug* from the various government departments including an official from “Security.” I now signed and stamped a document solemnly stating that we carried no weapons or ammunition aboard. I had lied! The first and only time I have ever done anything like this. There was no inspection of the vessel and our officials left. “That was easy!” we opined. We never did find the source of the mystery water in the engine room and postulated that it was perhaps wind driven rainwater, a commodity in plentiful supply at the time. A day or so later we had exhausted the sights of Addu and decided we might as well visit the capital of the Maldives at Male’. We returned to the customs office and applied for an inter-island permit to travel there.

The following morning we set sail for Male’ with our permit in hand. Five hours later we received an e-mail from the Ministry of Defense. It read something like, “Dear Sir, Thank you for your letter we have so far studiously ignored. We understand that you have firearms on board....” Well, okay, maybe I added the bit about studiously ignoring our letter, but the rest of it is on track.

Now it is a general rule – and you can make careful note here – that you can lie, or you can tell the truth. What you cannot do is mix the two. This we had done. We knew that Indonesia had sentenced similar miscreants as ourselves to 20 years of imprisonment and confiscated the vessel. We did not know what the Maldives penalty was and we further did not wish to find out. The crew held a brief conference aboard *DoodleBug* and unanimously decided it was time to ditch the evidence. We sent a polite e-mail to the Ministry of Defense, thanking them for their response and maintaining that we had changed our minds about carrying firearms--as indeed we had. If anyone wants to go



looking for the evidence, the two guns were disassembled and ditched in 6,000 feet of water just about on the equator. We decided we might as well get rid of the silver aluminum gun case at the same time. We stripped the foam interior out of the case and pitched it over the side. The case promptly snapped shut and floated in the Indian Ocean like an admonishing coffin. Rats! Time to practice our man-overboard drill. We motored back to the offending flotsam and the First Mate caught the handle with a boat hook on the first attempt. This time the opened case was lowered into the water until it was clearly waterlogged and sinking. The water here was wonderfully clear and for some time we could watch our weaponry sinking into the depths. We were now gun free and I was surprised at the feeling of relief that washed over me. Unfortunately the time had now arrived when we actually wanted to have weapons available: we were unarmed and about to enter Pirate Country.

*DoodleBug* sailed from the northern Maldives in December of 2006, bound for Salalah, Oman and cruising towards the horn of Africa and Somalia. As we sailed past Socotra Island, we passed through a swarm of Somali fishing boats and the Mayday alarm on our DSC-equipped VHF radio went off. There have been numerous reports of this scam to trap the unwary. You respond to the Mayday call and you are then robbed for your efforts. There were lots of motorized fishing vessels on our radar and we were under full sail, so we ignored the alarm. After a few minutes a voice snapped a brusque command in Somali and the Mayday call was deactivated. We continued to sail through the night and made wide course corrections to avoid coming near any radar contact. The remainder of our trip to Salalah, Oman passed without incident.

We stayed five days in Salalah before making the dreaded run through the Gulf of Aden. Much has been written about the dangers of these waters. We were now unarmed and during our first day at sea, we sat down to prepare our "Plan B." We first inventoried our equipment and laid out two large cans of "bear" spray (displaying the useful legend, "Not for use on Humans"), safety goggles, painter's face masks, flare guns, EPIRB, VHF, SSB radio and satellite phone. We also had a loudhailer originally intended for telling pirates to "Fudge Off!" before we opened fire but which also had a siren option. We decided and wrote down who was to do what if attacked. The plan was that if closely approached, we would remove anything from the cockpit that could be used against us, such as winch handles. The remote cockpit VHF head would also be removed. We would go below and bolt the cockpit door. On our vessel this is a substantial door and would require heavy tools such as crowbars to break

down--pirates could fire through the door but breaking through it with a machine gun only works in the movies. To make things uncomfortable for the pirates, we would set off the siren. When we heard the sounds of boarding, we would flood the cockpit with pepper spray, set off the EPIRB, fire flares, set off the VHF Mayday alarm, call for help on the SSB radio and call the anti-piracy coalition on the satellite telephone. We readied the radios on the emergency frequencies and set out the emergency telephone numbers ready for use. We each had assigned tasks and believed that we could handle all of these tasks without exposing ourselves to gunfire. We were as ready as we were going to get.

Just before mid-day, we were sailing with poled out genoa, winged main and mizzen when we noticed a radar target ahead. When it was about eight miles off, we identified it as a large wooden Arab dhow, with a tripod system on deck to unload cargo. These vessels have been associated in the past with pirate attacks, as they act as the "mother ship" to fast inflatables. We were of course instantly identifiable as a sailing vessel under sail, even 15 miles away, and the dhow changed course to head directly at us. We began to make an evasive course change when a second radar reflection appeared some five miles behind the dhow. This was definitely a container ship sized echo and we resumed course, on the assumption there would be no funny business in front of witnesses. The container ship echo also abruptly changed course to aim directly at the approaching dhow. The latter passed down our port side and then swung across our stern continuing on its way. By now the huge container ship was four miles away and dominating the



horizon. Thanks guys!

The sea conditions deteriorated during the day and the roller from the stern was in the 8- to 10-foot range. Fine for us with our heading but a potential problem for wannabe boarders. As we headed into the night we were still sailing wing-on-wing and had the mast tri-color navigation light lit. Around midnight we came upon some small fishing type boats. Our radar display showed one of these vessels had increased speed sharply and began to move to intercept us. Fishermen never run at high speed 'cause it burns up too much fuel. Around the same time, a freighter appeared on a collision course from ahead. We turned off our navigation lights and changed course, turning towards the intercepting vessel instead of away as might have been expected, and using our radar to track everyone's position. We covered the cockpit instruments with towels and checked carefully to ensure that we showed no spark of light. It was overcast and pitch dark as we passed between the freighter and the intercepting "fishing" vessel, sliding down the port side

of the freighter at less than a mile's range. Really spooky with no navigation lights on! The smaller radar target passed through our previous position but did not match our course change, thus indicating he had no radar and couldn't see us in the dark. For the remainder of that long night we kept a sharp watch for vessels both large and small, making course changes to avoid the proximity of any radar target. At 0400 hours a swarm of radar targets appeared ahead of us and we spent the next hour making wild course changes until the radar echoes coalesced into rain showers, leaving us tired and chagrined. We were passing the area with the statistical highest number of pirate attacks and the following night were off the Yemen town of Al Mukalla, almost out of the highest danger area.

It is interesting to note that eight weeks after S/V *DoodleBug's* passage, Noonsite piracy reports indicated that a pair of vessels closely approached seven yachts of the Blue Water Rally, in precisely the same location where we were approached. Three days later a pair of speedboats that seemed to be operating from a dhow "mother ship" approached another northbound yacht. This particular yacht had hired a couple of "maritime security specialists" and the crew donned body armor before waving flare guns at the approaching vessel.



In both reported incidents there was no violent act, but they serve to remind us how dangerous this area remains.

During the following three days of passage we had a few more scares, but nothing as overt as before. We arrived at the port of Djibouti at around 2000 hours and were escorted to our anchorage by a Djibouti naval vessel. The parting words of the naval security chief included a warning to put everything away, as there might be

"swimmers" in the night. We did indeed scour the decks and secured everything that was loose, before rigging a motion detector alarm in the cockpit that faced the stern of the vessel. This is a battery-powered unit we bought at the Post Office in Darwin for about US\$20. At 0300 hours, the First Mate was awakened by the scream of the alarm and she woke me up, as I was contentedly and deeply sleeping through this racket. She opened the window in the stern cockpit and found a slightly built man, crouched in the corner behind the dinghy. Using her biggest, deepest voice, she yelled, "You! Go! Now!" He replied several times, "I sorry madam, I sorry madam," before disappearing into the night. He had left behind two plastic bags and a piece of string, presumably to protect his loot during his swim. We were laughing so hard we completely forgot to spray him with the bear spray. ⚓

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