

# SKIP NOVAK

THE BLOCKING OF THE SUEZ CANAL REMINDS SKIP  
OF AN EVENTFUL TRANSIT OF HIS OWN...

**W**hen the story broke about the Suez Canal fiasco I was reminded of my transit in May of 1980, not least of all how I got there in the first place.

It all started in Fremantle. I was asked by Peter Wright, the owner of the Swan 65 *Independent Endeavour*, a yacht I skippered on the 1979 Parmelia Race (Plymouth to Cape Town to Fremantle) what we should do with the boat as it had to leave Australia to avoid paying VAT. I suggested a charter season in the Med.

Peter Wright was a fascinating chap who, with his partner Lang Hancock, prospected, discovered and developed the Pilbara iron ore fields in Western Australia, which made their fortunes.

Logically the Suez Canal was our route north, and Peter, a sprightly septuagenarian, wanted to sail with us at least to the Seychelles. During one balmy starlit night while he and I were on watch, he admitted that the only reason he bought this expensive yacht was for an escape vehicle for his family when the Chinese invaded Australia – which he was convinced would happen. At the time I thought this pretty far-fetched and didn't know what to say. Fast forward 40 years and how prescient Peter was: not a land invasion, mind you, but certainly an economic one.

Ten glorious days were spent in the Seychelles, moored in Victoria's harbour. We met and socialised with the local Seychellois and a few young Brits living rough in beach huts having their last hurrahs before disappearing forever into the City of London. Right out of Graham Greene, we often missed the curfew and diverted into 'so and so's' for the night sleeping on their living room floor, as was routine during the time of coup de'etat attempts against the socialist regime.

On we went around the Horn of Africa, giving Socotra a wide berth, and had to stop in Djibouti to re-fuel. I remember feeling distinctly uncomfortable with our shiny yacht while all along the perimeter fence of the post-colonial yacht club hundreds of starving refugees were camped out. It was obvious that to cruise in this part of the world would require a

wreck of a boat in an attempt to blend in and possibly survive. And if you lost the whole shebang, so be it.

At the southern entrance of the Red Sea we like to think we were shot at by pirates while going through the Straits of Bab el Mandeb, but that popping noise could have been the engine backfiring on that fishing boat barely visible in the heat haze. It was a dreadfully long, hot slog going up the Red Sea, in convoy with shipping and never a shoreline visible to break up the monotony.

Our canal agent, the 'Prince of the Red Sea,' had his launch at the ready off Port Suez. The launch driver kindly offloaded our six or so plastic bags of rubbish – then walked to the back of his boat and threw them into the harbour, which was an impressive bit of recycling in 1980.

With my briefcase full of greenbacks, I took a nerve-

wracking ride on the back of a scooter to downtown Port Suez and was ushered into the Prince's HQ. Sharing his hubbly bubbly pipe, we exchanged niceties, then got down to negotiating his fees,

which of course were somewhat more than published, for all sorts of reasons. He then related the story of a British sailing couple who refused to pay and had been in Port Suez for three months. I shelled out and our pilot was arranged to be on board first thing in the morning.

I've forgotten the pilot's name but not his face.

Promising to guard the boat while we spent the night tied to a barge in Ismailia, I found him fast asleep by 2300 on our saloon floor. All along the canal passage he politely asked for 'presents' which we dished out, ie lengths of old rope, a pot from the stove and even some paint we had for his house, which no doubt needed a lick of it.

As we neared Port Said the requests became demands and the last straw was when he 'had to have' my rigging knife (not yet lost as a sentimental object). I objected strongly.

Luckily his launch came alongside in the nick of time, and I argued him into it with shouting and waving of arms on both sides. He fell backwards in his bilge and as his launch pulled away I put our hammer down. The last thing he shouted was: "I will keel you!" Shortly after we were thankfully flushed out into the relative sanity of the eastern Mediterranean. ■

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