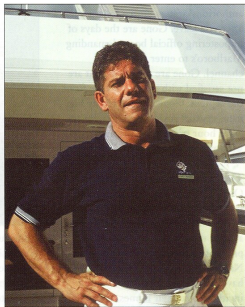


# THE GREAT DIVIDE



## WALKER ON WATER - THE SUEZ CANAL

BY CAPT. MARTYN WALKER



Once had a recurring dream that I was passing through the Suez Canal on a yacht and every time I reached the open sea again, I found myself running back along the shore only to sail again back through the canal. A strange dream that took some analyzing from close drinking partners, ex girlfriends and pretty much anyone else that wanted to surmise the meaning. Eventually I drew the conclusion from everyone's input that it represented the divide

between two lifestyles of which I was unsure which one to hold on to. The Suez Canal is in fact very much this for the yacht person that makes the transit, marking a difference in lifestyle. South bound from the glamour of the Riviera's of the Med, the bunkering ports of call such as Djibouti or Aden are a far cry from St Tropez. North bound again these ports are a stark contrast to the Asian shores and the Atolls of the Maldives or the Seychelles.

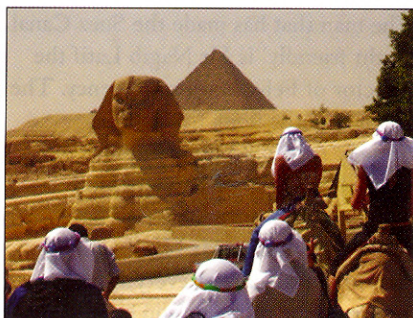
My first transit was in the early 1990's on return from Hong Kong. With horror stories ringing in our ears about how many cartons of Marlboro it took to transit along with fables about the bribery and corruption imposed on a yacht by officials, the experience I remember was true to form. On arrival at Suez Roads the small boats started to appear from the shore demanding cigarettes to embark port officials, who in turn demanded cigarettes, money, perfume and just about anything else they could think of. The problem was what ever you gave was not enough. The second transit was as frustrating, despite the captain personally making up gift packages for the pilots wives and daughters that would have had any lady smiling on Valentine's or Mother's day.

All the time there was one man at Port Said that enjoyed immensely showing his country to the visiting yacht crews. The man that has made the Suez Canal 'yacht friendly' is Mr Nagib Latif the director of Felix Maritime Agency. The proof is in the book that will be proudly presented on board for your perusal with photos and letters of appreciation from yachts that have made the journey. Mr Nagib and his staff now take care of everything for you from the moment you enter the

authorities' waters until a long while after you leave. Gone are the days of imposter official boats demanding Marlboro's to enter the buoyed channel. Gone are the pilots that are not satisfied with a care package from the captain. Gone are unfriendly line handlers that scare your stew for the eight hour trip staring through windows at them.

The transit now is easy and enjoyable. One of Nagib's staff will travel with you taking care of all formalities and advise on correct protocol which is still at your discretion, not obligatory. The pilots are appearingly hand picked by Nagib and on my last two transits I have had the same pilots who have invited me to their homes, yacht clubs and other places of special honour to a visitor to Egypt.

The convoys generally start at 0400 from Port Said south bound and 0700 north bound from Suez Roads for yachts. A stop in the Great Bitter Lake in the middle, which I am told is in fact the sea that Moses parted, will be anything from an hour to four hours. Yachts travel at the very front or the rear of the convoys. Neither of which really matters as every ship has timed distances to adhere to over the transit and mostly one just potters along at your own pace without concern for ships behind or in front. You will be supplied by the canal authorities with two line handlers for the transit. We tried to get a photograph of them holding a line but alas they were allergic to rope which seemed a bit strange considering their occupation. However they do set up a rather trendy bazaar on your aft deck with utmost care and dedication in order to relieve you of any small change you may have. I have never been able to resist



contributing to my own 'karma' by purchasing some of their wears and in fact recently my wife and I had Christmas again in May. When I gave the glittering plastic pyramid, camel leather jewelry box and pharaoh covered copper tray to my four year old daughter, her eyes lit up more than when she saw the cardboard box her first bike came in!

On the south bound trip a stop at the Port Said yacht club is the first indication of the cultural divide one is about to enter in hours rather than weeks, thanks to a man made cut through the desert sands. On arrival Mr Nagib will greet you with prepared paperwork and walk you through numerous forms that require the captains signature and stamp. To navigate this alone would be a career in itself. Once the clearance is given, the head count will be taken of crew who wish to visit the pyramids the next day and a departure day set for the transit. I have always found that time has been short but always promise to allow more time for my visit with Nagib. In general the crew visits the pyramids the next day and we sail on the convoy at 0400 the following day. I have yet to not delight in the stories and photos from crew taking the 'no road rules' drive into Cairo and camel rides at the pyramids. One day I will make the trip myself!

The pilot will board an hour or so before departure. In the darkness the navigation lights of the last few ships in the convoy will eerily pass. Then it is lines off and as the sun rises, stretching before you will see an amazing feat of engineering and a line of shipping

surrounded by sand, sand and more sand. With the pilot offering direction this is always a good time for the crew to have maybe their first experience of boat handling under a pilot's command and the captain to disappear for a while. Fear not the pilots are hand picked and take all the yachts through. Our boats are fun compared to the big tankers and container ships. My last pilot told me that the day before us he had piloted a 65,000T container ship, 85m long, through the canal with only 400m visibility due to a sand storm. I trusted him implicitly!

Pilots generally change at the Great Bitter Lake; also they have different pilots that take you in to Port Said and out of Suez Roads. Having always been fascinated by ships the Suez Canal anchorages have every type of ship imaginable and is great ship watching.

On arrival at Suez Roads the pilot disembarks leaving the Red Sea before you and a New World to those who are first timers. North bound the sea buoy marks the end of an adventure that will be long remembered.

The reoccurring dream was some years ago now and no longer do I have it. I however do always feel a tingle of something in my bones when Mr Nagib says farewell on the radio and 'safe trip my brother, see you again soon'!

Who knows?

*Captain Martyn Walker is the master of MY Montigne, a 152ft Feadship.*