

CAPTAIN VARUN AND THE PIRATES

# SURVIVAL MODES

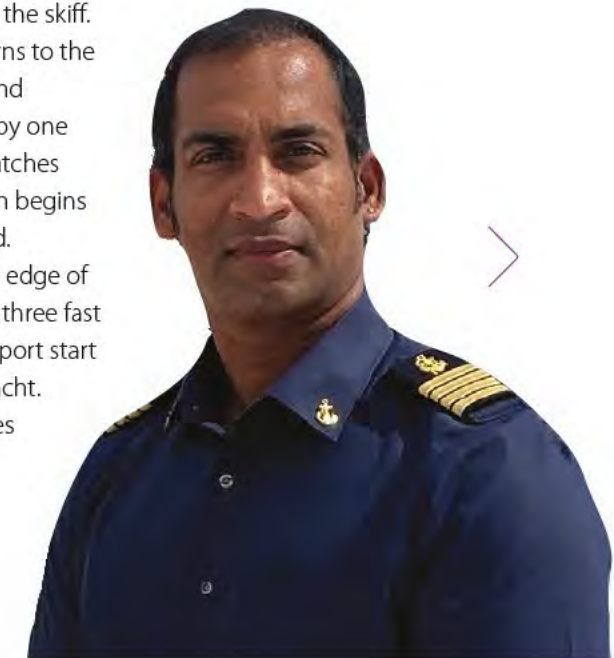


TEXT BY  
[Redacted]

Be prepared, and keep a cool head – how to prevent your yacht becoming prey, as recounted by an experienced skipper in this startling first-hand account

It's every captain's worst nightmare. A lone vessel appears on the radar, approaching from the stern, and begins shadowing the yacht's speed and course. It has no AIS signature. Attempts to hail the vessel receive no response. The vessel creeps closer; the watch crew describes it as an outboard-powered skiff with two men aboard. The captain alters course a few degrees; so does the skiff. The captain returns to the original course and increases speed by one knot; the skiff matches the turn and then begins to increase speed. Suddenly, on the edge of the radar screen, three fast contacts over to port start closing on the yacht. Three little echoes off to starboard that looked like fishing boats a moment ago begin to do the same.

**Below**  
Captain Varun Raj Pakalapati



Below  
Asya's bridge

The captain alerts and musters the crew. He announces grimly that their status has changed from yacht-in-transit to pirates' prey.

Captain Varun Raj Pakalapati knows this drama well, because in 2019 he was in the middle of it. An Indian Army veteran and past member of the Indian Olympic sailing team, he had made the passage from the UAE to the Mediterranean 16 times. In 2019 he was Master of the 47m steel displacement Heesen superyacht Asya.

"I had finished my watch and been in my cabin for about an hour," he recalls, "when the first officer called me and said, 'Captain to the bridge; pirates.' I told him to increase to maximum speed and headed for the bridge. It was 1 pm, broad daylight and an otherwise empty ocean.

"From the radar, we could see that they were using wolf-pack tactics. One skiff starts the chase and then as it closes, six more boats rush in from the sides. Running at maximum speed throws a big wake that keeps the skiffs from getting close enough for boarding, so they chase and hope we will make a mistake or that the boat will have a mechanical problem. Then they pull alongside to check access and bridge location. They know they have opportunities outside of the patrolled areas — merchant ships at anchor are their usual goal, but they might think of a lone yacht as a soft target.

"I took evasive action to shake them off from time to time as we undertook our piracy protocols. Under the laws of the sea and our flag state rules, you cannot fire pyrotechnics in the direction of the skiffs to frighten them

"When the first officer called me and said, **Captain to the bridge; pirates**"



as the signals might be interpreted as distress calls, and unsuspecting, unarmed vessels might approach to offer assistance and become targets themselves. The first step was to broadcast our position and direction, a description of the skiffs, and describe their threatening behaviour on channel 16 to all ships in the area. We also informed our agent ashore.

"I ordered non-essential crew to the citadel room. If boarding looked imminent, the rest would join them. It has been my responsibility to have selected and stocked a citadel with emergency communications, as well as food, water and sanitary provisions for the entire crew for seven days. In our case, that was 13 people in the bosun's locker, which we could lock and barricade from inside. We had brought aboard a three-man, professional, armed security detail. They arrived on the bridge in full tactical gear and issued me a helmet and a bulletproof vest. If boarded, I would shut down the engines, grab the keys and go.

"The seven skiffs continued to follow and buzz us as we steamed along at full speed — about 15 knots. Their intention was clear. We could see their weapons. They were just pushing us and hoping we would make a mistake. But we had weapons, too, and we were as prepared as we could be. The head of the security detail may, at his discretion and if he knows a crew member has professional arms training, bring a weapon to be used to defend the bridge in the worst-case scenario. Our team knew my military background and issued a shotgun for the bridge.

"More than an hour went by and the pirates were still chasing. International convention and our flag state rules say that the pirates must be closer to the yacht than 500 metres before personnel aboard the yacht can begin firing, and only after the captain gives the order. When the pirates began to test that distance,

## Yachts and guns

"Yachts are not allowed to carry weapons," says Varun. "To do so when entering a foreign port, even if the captain declares them, could lead to lengthy delays and perhaps arrest. If a yacht has to cross dangerous waters, it is best to hire a professional detail that boards the yacht at the beginning of the trip without weapons, and leaves at the destination the same way."

So how were the security personnel armed and prepared for a fight aboard Asya?

"You have to get a permission from the flag state to bring weapons aboard for the specified passage. There are floating and well defended arsenal ships in international waters offshore of the world's trouble spots. All the security agencies have their own cache and personnel on site. In our case, we left Dubai and sailed close to Fujairah off of the UAE. The security team directs the yacht to an offshore location where the weapons are retrieved. After clearing the pirate-prone part of the passage — currently, this is considered to be Eritrea — the yacht will rendezvous, again in international waters, to rid itself of guns and ammunition before entering port.

"For our size yacht, the detail is three and they are usually ex-military. I have used the company Allmode for seven years. The weapons are usually two sniper rifles, a shotgun and a minimum of 1,500 rounds of ammunition. We do not carry handguns."





## Top tips

- Hire a good security company. For the 10-day passage from Dubai to the Suez Canal this will cost €10,000 to €32,000 depending on the number and type of guards. Ex-military teams from Europe and the US command the highest prices because they tend to have the most combat experience.
- Plan to arrive at the bottleneck at dawn.
- Have a citadel space ready and stocked. It should have independent electrical, ventilation and communications systems.
- Like the silent alarms in banks, yachts have two security buttons for use in case of attack, which send an alarm to navy communications, the IMO, flag states, UN security agencies and "pretty much everyone." One of the buttons will be located on the bridge, the other will be hidden elsewhere in the vessel. Be sure crew know its location.
- Invest in night-vision cameras and binoculars and high-lumen searchlights that may dazzle boarders.
- Rig firehoses to deter boats trying to get close enough to board. Merchant ships can rig their fire systems or water cannons to spray scalding hot water mixed with a chemical irritant, but few yachts have enough hot water capacity for this.
- If waiting to join a convoy do not anchor, keep moving.

our security detail made their appearance. They held their weapons where the men in the skiffs could easily see them."

If the presence of three men in tactical garb and full body armour didn't dim their bravado, the threatening display of the sniper rifles probably did. Captain Varun continued evasive manoeuvres. Her wake and the height advantage of the guards were enough to make the pirates drop back, and after a further half hour, they broke off the chase. Asya resumed her course to the coast of Somalia, where the IRTC or International Recommended Transit Corridor begins, patrolled by international naval forces. Here, escorted convoys form for the 1,200nm westbound voyage around the Horn of Africa and through the narrow bottleneck between Yemen and Djibouti. This is the most dangerous part of the passage. With the convoy travelling at a steady 12 knots, it's a tense five days, even with the navy presence.

Captain Varun has also made passages through troubled waters in a 98-foot Azimut Leonardo named My Five, including a run from Dubai to the Maldives in 2014 without a security detail. Then, he had to use his wits to devise a way to repel borders.

"We were a fibreglass yacht; there was no way to put plating around the pilothouse or fill the deck with barbed wire without damaging the yacht. We had a low, wide swim platform where pirates would logically try to board. But to do that, they would have to get close enough to jump. I was determined they could not get that close," he says. He obtained a large bamboo pole the length of the yacht's beam. Every metre, he made a deep cut in the pole to weaken it and then he secured many long ropes to the pole. He and his crew attached the pole horizontally to the swim platform with just

enough slack that it floated slightly underwater. When underway, the pole was invisible in the yacht's wake. As they entered the known piracy area, running at night and with lights off, the crew tossed the coiled ropes into the water, where they, too, were invisible in the foam. "Pirates would logically approach from the stern," says Varun. "If they got close, their propellers would snag a rope, the tension would snap the weakened bamboo pole and it would entangle the prop and immobilize their boat instantly — the driver not knowing why or how. Other boats trying to approach would meet the same fate."

Did My Five encounter pirates on that passage? "Thankfully no, but we were prepared. In 2011 there was a mind-boggling number of acts of piracy. You might remember the sailing yacht Quest that was attacked and boarded by pirates off Somalia. I was the agent for that boat out

**"I can never forget that. Never"**

of Bombay. The two couples onboard were killed. I can never forget that. Never," Varun says. He noted that piracy around the Horn of Africa has declined with the organization of the IRTC and the presence of warships. But the April 2023 incident with the yacht Kalizma should be a reminder to captains to not relax.

"Be confident, but not overconfident," he says. "Oman to Bombay is a high-risk voyage. So are parts of Indonesia and even the coasts of Colombia and Venezuela."

