



5. Red Sea 2020



by Johan Kjellander 2020



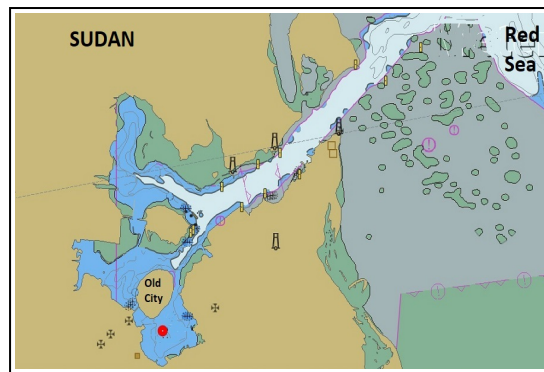
Sailing up the Red Sea is not easy. Statistically there is little chance to get good winds from the south, so motoring is a must. Even that can be difficult. Northerly winds of 10-15 m/s (20-30 kts) are not unusual. We sailed out of Djibouti on the 3:rd of March and had good sailing up to the entrance of the Red Sea and past Bab el Mandeb. Then the wind turned to northerly and slowly increased. After 620 NM we anchored in Souakin on the 8:th of March and we had then used 350 liters of diesel. The last 200 miles were slow with strong northerly winds, breaking seas and a lot of spray over the boat. Bird of Passage however is a good boat in such conditions. She takes the sea gently and sitting inside in the deck house keeps you dry.



Andrei loves fishing. Once again he caught a tuna and once again we had fresh meat for dinner.



This beautiful Hoopoe (Sv:Härfågel, Lat:Upupa epops) joined us early one morning. I was asleep, but Tove was quick with the camera. I wonder what it did such a long way from land?



And so we arrived to Port Souakin, a place I had really looked forward to see. The old city was built on an island in the middle of a bay with a narrow channel leading out to the Red Sea. A fantastic natural harbour.



Souakin has roots back to the 12:th century as an important port and later became the leading African Red Sea port for trade and pilgrims crossing on the route to Mecca. Around 1920 Port Souakin was abandoned in favor of the new port in Port Sudan further north, and the buildings were left for rain and sand storms to be ruined.



After the usual procedures with check in and contacts with an agent we were allowed to go ashore.



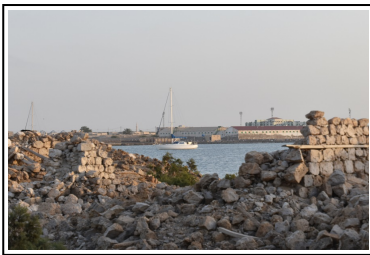
And now we could study the ruins of the old city more in detail. Not more than one hundred years ago this was a big marketplace and harbour with thousands of people and now there is almost nothing left.



One reason why the buildings have fallen apart so quickly is the building material itself. Coral is not like stone. Much more fragile. And coral was the only affordable building material available here in old times.



There were many big dark brown birds among the ruins. First I thought they were eagles but when I saw the tail of the bird I understood that it must be the Black Kite (Lat:Milvus Migrans, Sv:Brun Glada).



As the sun went down we walked around in the ruins on this fantastic island.



A small causeway leads over to the mainland and a very poor village of bad houses without water, electricity or sewage. Goats, donkeys, cats and very poor people. I don't think I have ever seen anything worse.



A few old cars but there were many vehicles of this type.



And this is how people got their electricity working. Old engines pulling simple generators. We saw them everywhere. Puff, puff, puff... running on any kind of oil you could think of.



There were many signs of economic help from the United Nations but also from EU and and other places.



And suddenly a new bird again. Reminds of an ordinary Pigeon but look at the red spot on the head, around the eye. I think it's a Speckled Pigeon (Sv:Guineaduva, Lat:Columba Guinea).



And here is a whole colony of Jackdaw's (Sv:Kaja, Lat:Corvus Monedula) living in the ruins.



On our last day in Souakin we got water delivered to the boat. 800 liters of drinking water in 20 liter cans.



And a few hours later the diesel was delivered. 6 jerry cans of 65 liters each.

Next morning we were on our way. You have to take whatever chances that are given to advance north in this part of the Red Sea and we now had a window of two days with only weak winds so we could motor up to one of many bays (or marsas) along the Sudanese coast and anchor for the night. Marsa Inkeifal, 125 NM north from Souakin. Shortly after our arrival a strong wind started blowing from the south, 10-15 m/s (20-30 kts), and it continued until the next morning at 4 o'clock when it turned around and started blowing from the north instead.



It's not fun to anchor in strong wind. One of us was up all night to check that we were not dragging. The next day the wind continued, now with sand and rain. We had to stay one more day.



This was a good opportunity for engine service. The sea water pump on the port engine had been leaking for some time. This is usually due to worn sealings and/or shaft and I had a kit with all necessary parts (sealings, shaft, bearings etc.) that solves the problem. I also put in a new impeller. Nice to know that engines are in good shape for so much motoring in the Red Sea.



We continued north, motoring against the northerly wind, from one marsa to the next and soon we came to Marsa Umbeila, right on the border to Egypt. A beautiful little bay with lots of coral and sand. A group of camels were grazing on the beach not far away.



This is what their tracks in the sand look like. Like a horse without shoes but pointing in the wrong direction. I tried the filet of camel on a restaurant some time later but it was not easy to tell the difference between this and ordinary beef.



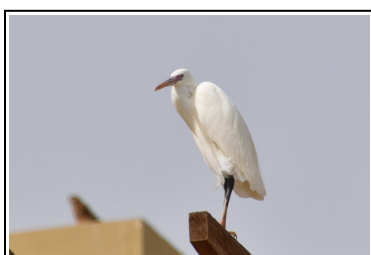
And now finally, we fixed the oar to the dinghy that had been broken all the way since Langkawi. Andrei & Co. went ashore to explore the beach and came back with a big load of shells, stones, pieces of wood and other findings.

This was the last stop in Sudan. Next stop would be in Egypt and the closest port of entry is Port Ghalib, 250 NM north of us so we decided to try to reach Ghalib in one go. We had diesel enough to motor all the way but we did not have an up-to-date weather forecast. I tried several times to download a GRIB-file through Winlink but the only station available (EA8URF) did not respond. Saudi Arabia sends weather on NAVTEX but only for the next 24 hours. Luckily however, the SSB Radio network on 8173kHz that we had been following since India was still running and the radio conditions were now good so I could get a valid forecast from one of the other boats, thank you Sunny Spells.



So we arrived to Port-Ghalib after a week at sea and during that time the world had gone crazy. Port Ghalib is a typical tourist village built far away from any other civilization with only desert around it. Very fancy with glass bottom boats in Disney style and lots of souvenir shops, hotels and restaurants. But now there were no tourists! Everything was closing down because of the Corona virus and we were not allowed to enter the port.

After a long time of discussion with the Port Captain over the VHF radio he sent out a boat with two "doctors" to do a quarantine visitation. The doctors checked our temperature to see if we had fever (which we of course did not have) and after that we were allowed to enter the harbour and stop at the customs dock.



We now had to wait for our papers to be processed so I took my camera and shot some Herons. White and Black. After one or two hours we got our passports back with a 30 day visa and were finally allowed to move the boat into the marina. Egypt has a bad reputation among cruisers for extensive bureaucracy. Europe is a paradise compared to this.



In the marina we ended up side by side with S/Y Joana that we met earlier this year in India. Joana is a Bruce Roberts 53 design that Wade built himself in Canada. Nice to see Wade and Diana again and of course we had lots to talk about. There are not many people who build their own boats this size and also sail them around the world.

Wade and Diana updated us about the Corona pandemic and slowly we began to understand that we would probably have to stay in Port Ghalib much longer than we planned for.

During our stay i Souakin a week earlier I had booked a berth for 9 months in Alanya marina in Turkey. The plan was to to go there after we passed the Suez canal, leave the boat and return to our home in Aland for the summer. Now I got an E-mail from our Turkish marina that it was closed because of Corona and we could not come until further notice. It was the same situation in many countries, marinas were closed and boats were not allowed to enter or exit. We were prisoners in Port Ghalib.



Well, we had a better situation than many others. We could go ashore, there was water and electricity on the dock and a few shops still open. We heard that people anchoring in Djibouti and Souakin were not allowed to leave their boats.



Suddenly we had lots of time to do nothing. Cleaning the boat from the sandstorm in Sudan took several days. Tove worked with the laundry and I fixed a number of jobs on the boat that had been pending. We also explored our surroundings. Close to the harbour entrance we found a wrecked sailboat. From what we heard it had been there for many years. The skipper missed the entrance to the port in the middle of the night and hit the reef.



We wanted to see more of Egypt, and so did Wade and Diane, but we knew it would be difficult because of the Corona pandemic. Rumors said that traveling inland was forbidden but nobody knew for sure. It was all very confusing, but when we met the captain of a local boat who offered all four of us a ride to Hurghada and back, two hundred kilometers north of Port Ghalib, we all said yes.

It's a nice ride from Port Ghalib to Hurghada. The road is good and the landscape is beautiful with the Red Sea on one side and dark peaky mountains on the other. Hurghada is a relatively big place with a population of more than 200.000 people so we hoped to find some spare parts for our boats and we also wanted to see the marina and ask the management if they would let us in if we sailed from Port Ghalib.



We found the marina office and we talked to the manager. Moving from Port Ghalib to Hurghada with the boats seemed possible, in spite of the Corona crisis, but it was not clear what it would cost. We also found some spare parts, had lunch and then returned with the car to Ghalib. On our way back we stopped to take a picture of a Nauticat 44 that seemed intact but was lying on its side on the beach. We later learned that the boat had stranded and the owner was missing.



Egypt closed down for Corona. Nobody was allowed outdoors from 18.00 to 06.00 and no boats were allowed to enter port. All shops and hotels in Ghalib closed. Staff sprayed ashtrays outdoors with chlorine. (I wonder how that helps?)



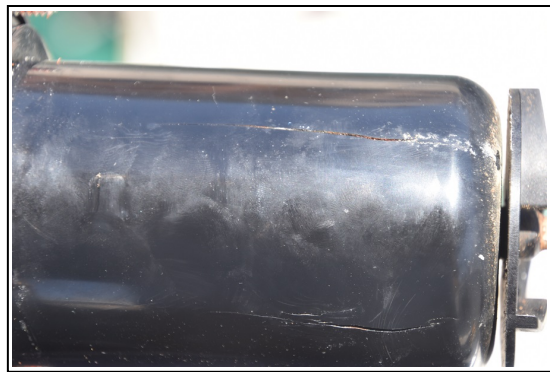
All plantations were carefully looked after however. Flowers and grass watered every day and palmtrees cut regularly. No machines used, a barefoot man climbed up to the top and cut leaves down with an axe. The garbage was collected on the ground and carried away by his companion.



Now I knew we were going to stay here a long time. Tove had problems getting off the boat, so why not fix a gangway (or passerelle as our Canadian neighbours say)? A local boatman offered me an old plank for 40 US dollars! I did the rest.



Another job was to repair the hatch of the forward anchor box. Water had found its way inside and the wood was rotten. New wood, micro balloons, glass fibre and epoxi and the hatch was as good as new. It's quite easy to repair a strip plank boat, and not expensive.



One of our bilge pumps had stopped working so i removed it and took it apart. As you see in the picture the black housing around the electric motor has several cracks. Water has come inside and corrosion has killed the motor. Why the black plastic is cracked I don't know. The pump worked when we left Malaysia a few months ago.



We also had time for party. One of the restaurants opened up for a private sitting to celebrate Diane's birthday.



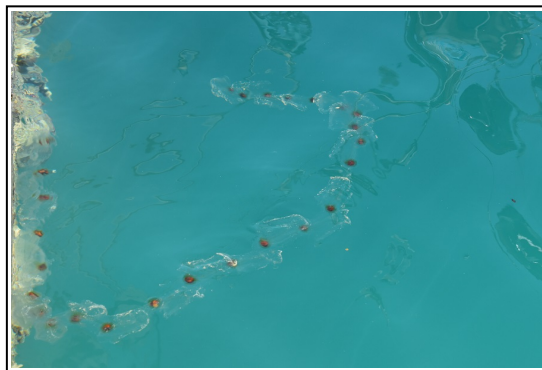
Outside the restaurant I found a table upside down and I just could'nt stop from taking this picture. Everybody knows how irritating it is when a table is unsteady. Securing the top of the table to the legs is clearly important and here they do it well. Four extra clamps have been used to increase stability, but why did the clamps all have to be different? They are not even proper clamps. (Yes, I know I'm an engineering nerd, but you have to kill time somehow).



Studying the local wildlife is another way to kill time. Here is a Striated Heron (Sv:Mangrovehäger, Lat:Butorides striata) giving us a show.



And here is a curious looking White Wagtail (Sv:Sädesärila, Lat:Motacilla Alba). We have them in our garden at home during the summer but just like our boat, they are Birds of Passage.



There was also a lot of fish in the water around the boat.



We stayed where we were and waited for good news about marinas opening up, but didn't hear anything. I wrote to the Turkish marina again and they confirmed it was still closed until further notice. I wrote to the Swedish Foreign Ministry in Stockholm but they could do nothing. If we had been ordinary tourists they could have arranged a flight to Sweden. We had to take a closer look at our options.

No countries open anywhere and no signs of change. In June Port Ghalib would double its mooring fee from 500 USD/month to one thousand. The only countries that would welcome us was Sweden (because we are Swedish citizens) and Finland (because we live there). We saw only one option. Scandinavian summer was approaching and sailing all the way home should not be impossible. A total change of plans for Tove and me with many practical implications but after a few days of consideration we made up our minds. Lets go home!

Our crew joined us in our descision and we started the preparations for the long journey immediately. After a whole month in Ghalib we were eager to continue. We knew that we might not be able to come ashore anywhere but we were confident that some European ports would at least help us with provisions. With full diesel tanks we motored all the way up to Port Suez, about 300 miles.



In Port Suez we were not allowed to go ashore but Capten Heebi (the local agent) helped us with some provisions for a good fee. He was short on diesel and could only give us about half of what we needed and we got no drinking water. From our anchorage we saw the big ships pass by closely. The canal is one-way so they came in groups. First the container ships, then the tankers and LPG, then a mix of special transports like cars, animals etc.



The Suez canal has no locks, so there is no restriction on the size of the ships that can pass. We talked a lot about this and compared it with the Panama canal that we passed 2017. Even the biggest locks in Panama can not take the biggest ships that we saw in the Suez.

After two nights in Port Suez we started the canal voyage. First to Ismailia, which is half way and the next day finally out into the Mediterranean at Port Said on the 25:th of April.

If it hadn't been for the fact that we were not welcome to stay or get ashore, I think we would have enjoyed Egypt better. We had a strong feeling that all Egypt did was trying to get rid of us as soon as possible and make us pay for it. That really killed the usual feeling of excitement and I think we were all releived to finally get out of there.



End of Red Sea 2020



