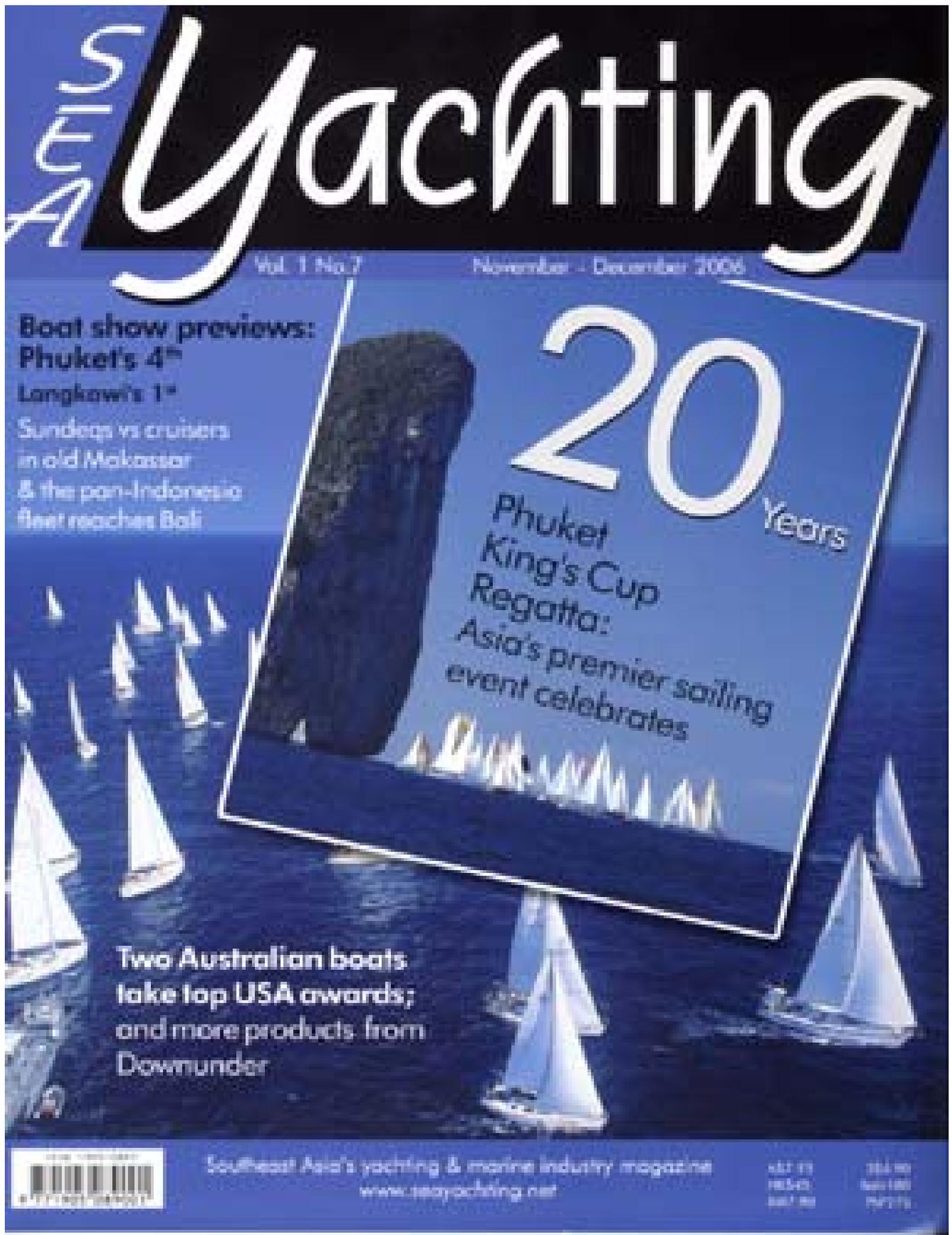


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# SEA Yachting

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**Boat show previews:**  
Phuket's 4<sup>th</sup>  
Langkawi's 1<sup>st</sup>  
Sundeqs vs cruisers  
in old Makassar  
& the pan-Indonesia  
fleet reaches Bali

**20 Years**  
Phuket  
King's Cup  
Regatta:  
Asia's premier sailing  
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Photo Essay by Senad Svraka, Skipper SY Alea

## A journey from Southeast Asia through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean

*The northeast monsoon season is the right time for the east-west journey across the northern Indian Ocean. Indeed, from December to February many cruising boats leave Southeast Asia bound for the Red Sea. The weather will not be a concern - at least until you enter the Red Sea - but what will be a bother are piracy matters in the Gulf of Aden and the treatment you will get in some of the world's most remote countries. Read on for some fresh information and a few words of warning.*



### India

India simplified the formalities for visiting yachts in 2006. When you reach Cochin, the customs official and the harbour master will come aboard to have you fill in some papers, and probably ask for a cold drink. Otherwise, they are easy-going. You will have to finish the paperwork on shore, but it will not take more than two hours. The anchorage in Cochin (off Bolgatty Hotel) is very well protected, and it's a safe place to leave your boat if you want to travel inland. Most supplies can be bought in Cochin, but the quality is not the best. Food, such as wheat flour and dried fruit, may contain bugs. The laundry service at the Bolgatty Hotel will return your clothes even dirtier than before.



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## The Maldives

The northernmost island of Uligan is a beautiful and convenient place to break the east-west passage. As many as 40 boats may occupy the anchorage in the high season. The authorities are very polite and friendly, just remember not to go ashore before they come aboard. If you stay less than 15 days, you will only pay US\$4 for the processing of your paperwork. Prepare plenty of crew lists - you will need five for check in and four more for check out.

The provisioning here is limited and not cheap. Water is available, but not great. Uligan, however, is a place of stunning beauty. It was my first visit to a coral atoll, and I immediately fell in love. The island is covered in thick jungle, except for a small village, where time seems to have stopped. Sea turtles and manta rays swim all around, all you need to do to observe the rich marine life is put your head in the water.



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## Oman

The approach to Oman might be marked with some anxiety. In fact, I had an encounter with what I believe was a pirate boat some 100 miles southeast of Salalah (16° 30'N 55° 30'E). One day after leaving the port, I received a call over the VHF from a boat that claimed it had been drifting for three days without fuel or food. I approached within a mile of a traditional Arab dhow, but I didn't want to go any closer. The radio operator spoke limited English, but I managed to explain that I had contacted the authorities in Salalah by radio, and assured the dhow that help was on the way. I continued on at a pace of five knots, but the dhow "without fuel" managed to follow me for five hours, keeping a constant distance of about two miles. I changed course two times and found myself on course 0° instead of my initial course 130°. But still the dhow was there. So I radioed over to the Sheid Egg, who was crossing with me at a distance of about 10 miles. I asked them to contact the allied forces on the SSB, and a few minutes later Kosta, the Sheid Egg's skipper, called back to say he had spoken to a British warship that promised to send a helicopter to fight "the pirates". Of course, no warship ever replied to Kosta's call, but 10 minutes later, the dhow "without fuel" disappeared on the horizon. The ruse had worked. We knew the crew was listening to our VHF conversation all along.

The men on the dhow were probably spotters and not interested in a small sailing boat. However, this kind of encounter does make one nervous. There is a lot of traffic on

the VHF in the Gulf of Aden, some of it actually coming from allied warships. That doesn't mean you will be able to establish contact, you might have better luck using the SSB.

The port of Salalah itself is very safe. I arrived here with the Vasco de Gama Yacht Rally, a group of 20 boats that sailed together down the Red Sea. When we arrived at Salalah, each boat was boarded by a customs official, who asked for our last port clearance (if you don't have it, the fine is \$300) and whether we wanted to use an agent.

Salalah offers plenty of sights, all within 100km of the harbour. You can hire a car in town for about \$15 a day, or you can ask around for Ali, Oman's cycling champion, who will take you around in his red BMW. Salalah also provides excellent provisions, bottled water, good and reasonably cheap food and many well-run laundries. This is the place to stock up on supplies for the Red Sea, as good-quality food is difficult to find before reaching Egypt.



## A note of caution:



Don't expect to pass unseen if you stay in the middle of the Gulf of Aden. Hundreds of speedboats cross the gulf daily - most of them with little more than a few men on board and no fishing equipment. Many of these boats will pass without stopping. Some will approach to ask for water or food. I passed the whole area without being bothered for more than five minutes at a time, but the experience left me with an uneasy feeling.

The so-called "piracy area" supposedly covers the southwest stretch of Yemen's coast, between Al Mukalla and Aden. But it is not clearly defined. After leaving Al Mukalla, I met speedboats all the way from Aden to near Salalah, so I can't determine whether the area between Al Mukalla and Salalah is completely safe. It is undeniable that a certain amount of risk exists, but it should be brought to its correct proportion. Take the American-flagged *Blue Star* as an example. The ketch broke her propeller shaft in the middle of the piracy area and drifted helplessly for three days without wind. When finally some wind arrived, she managed to reach the Yemeni coast some 20 miles west of Al Mukalla, where the crew found a friendly reception. If ever there was easy prey, *Blue Star*, with two men and two women on board, was it. Yet she survived unscathed.

to be continue in *SEA Yachting 2.1*