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A Brief Trip to Pirate Island

An inside look at the rise of modern-day swashbucklers.

Text by Alex Perry, adapted from his new book *Falling Off the Edge: Travels Through the Dark Heart of Globalization* (Bloomsbury USA).

As the pirate captain waits for his next sortie, he tells the story of his last. A crew member on a Thai palm-oil tanker working for the captain gives him the layout of the freighter and an exact time and place to hit it in the Singapore Strait. The captain phones the boss of a Hong Kong triad, an organized crime syndicate, who agrees to pay him and his crew \$9,000 up front, another \$50,000 on delivery of the stolen ship, and arranges fake papers for it under a new name.

On the appointed night, two speedboats race west out of Babi Island off the northern tip of Indonesia, within sight of the Singapore skyline. After an hour or two, they cut their engines and wait, bobbing in the swell of passing vessels near the world's busiest shipping lane. The pirates are split into two groups, one in each boat. In the first are the captain and his men, all experienced sailors with years in the merchant navy. In the second is the muscle—specialist boarders known locally as *bajing loncat*, literally "jumping squirrels." In their boat, the boarders assemble their 65-foot boarding poles, called *satang*, tying lengths of bamboo together with twine and attaching a hook to the end of each one. They also use twine to make sword belts and rudimentary handcuffs.

In the early hours, the Thai tanker appears as a collection of bright lights on the horizon. The two teams wait for it to pass. Then they slip on their balaclavas, fire up their outboards, and circle around behind. As they approach, crashing over the bow wave and skidding on the bubbling sea thrown up by the tanker's immense screws, two men from the second team stand and lift their poles, as though for a joust. They hook over the stern and, as soon they have a fast grip, begin climbing, the speedboat pilot accelerating in short bursts to keep the poles steady.

In seven seconds, the first boarder is over the side and crouching by the rail. Five men follow and head straight to the bridge. They take the ship's skipper and pilot hostage and cut the freighter's communications. Then they assemble the rest of the crew. The sailors' hands are slipped behind their backs into the twine handcuffs, which are then looped around their necks, rigged to tighten if they struggle. The skipper's hands are tied in front so he can open the safe. The boarders communicate in rudimentary English to disguise their origins. "Those guys are the experts," the pirate captain tells me later. "We call them the Kopassus [the nickname for Indonesian army commandos]. They signal to us that it's OK, and we take over." After emptying the safe and taking whatever they find—computers, watches, refrigerators ("shopping," says one of the crew)—they hand the ship over to the pirate captain and leave. The whole hijack is over in ten minutes.

At daybreak, the pirate captain and his men drop their hostages with food and water on a deserted island off the east Sumatran coast near Kualatungkal. They also leave their inside man, so as not to identify him.

Then they head northwest, back past Singapore, skirting Malacca and Medan. Over the next seven days, while the captain takes care of navigation, the crew of 14 works the boat, repainting the entire ship and plastering a new English name over the Thai lettering on the bow.

Off the Maldives, they rendezvous with another tanker and the Hong Kong crime boss. The palm oil is pumped into the second boat. Then an auction is held at sea for the stolen ship, a Filipino buyer outbidding a Thai with an offer of \$100,000. Their work done, the pirate captain and his crew are paid and catch a ride on the stolen ship to Manila. From there, they fly to Jakarta and split up, lying low for a year before returning to Babi Island. The captain has no idea where the palm oil was sold but says shipowners often organize pirate attacks as part of an insurance fraud. Only the triad bosses know all the details, he says.

Piracy's New Golden Age

Pirates are as old as ships. The first pirates preyed on Greek, Roman, Carthaginian, and Phoenician cargo vessels in the Mediterranean. Sometimes they robbed for themselves. At other times, they were hired by the state, extracting reparations for perceived injuries in times of peace or simply attacking the enemy in times of war. That was how British pirates came to plague the Caribbean in the 1600s. Possessed of a far smaller navy but the same appetite for colonies, Britain employed privateers like Blackbeard—also known as Edward Teach and based on the North Carolina coast—to attack Spanish possessions and hijack Spanish ships transiting the Caribbean from Latin America back to Europe filled with New World gold.

Pirates need lawlessness on land and traffic at sea. Thankfully, today that largely rules out the Mediterranean and the Caribbean—both modern yachting paradises. Rather, pirates have moved with the times. Now they cluster in poorly policed states around the new bottlenecks in global shipping: the Strait of Malacca and the Gulf of Aden, gateway to the Suez Canal. The first, the name given to the narrows between Indonesia and Malaysia, is Asia's link to the globe and an aorta of the international economy: More trade passes through there than any other sea-lane. Indonesia also happens to be one of Asia's more corrupt and less guarded nations. Not coincidentally, for the past decade, the Strait of Malacca has been the most consistently dangerous waterway in the world. While thugs will occasionally attack a private boat (see map on page 55), their main target is freighters, worth millions but barely protected. Nearly 20 percent of the world's 263 pirate attacks took place here in 2007, according to the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre in Kuala Lumpur.

The waters off Africa are fast becoming even more treacherous. Centuries ago, pirates used to hit freighters near the continent's east coast: the island of Réunion is littered with the graves of old pirates and, supposedly, chests of buried treasure. Now, as Africa shakes off its aid dependency and becomes a business destination once again, the pirates have returned. Of the 83 pirate attacks or attempted hijackings in the third quarter of 2008, the IMB reports that 24 were off Nigeria, lawless on land and teeming with oil tankers at sea, and 26 off Somalia, a failed state since 1991. Somalia's pirates are the most daring. They will stage multiple attacks in a day and see anything as fair game: Once, in November 2005, they even tried to board a cruise ship, Seabourn Cruise Lines' *Spirit*, which managed to outrun them.

Two hijackings off Somalia in 2008 briefly threw piracy back to the top of the world's security agenda. On September 25, a group of Somali pirates hijacked the M.V. *Faina*. The *Faina* turned out to be carrying 33 Russian T-72 tanks from Odessa, Ukraine, to Mombasa, Kenya. There have been scores of ships seized and crews taken hostage off Somalia in the past few years. But tanks were different. Shipping documents suggested the cargo was ultimately destined for southern Sudan, sparking fears that Africa's longest running and bloodiest civil war—between northern and southern Sudan—might be primed to erupt once again. In response, an international armada descended on the *Faina* and cornered it in a bay along the Somali coast. A tense standoff ensued as the pirates tried to negotiate a ransom for the tanks and U.S. and

Russian warships tried to prevent their being unloaded. In addition, eight European countries agreed to contribute ships and men to an international antipiracy task force.

Less than two months later, however, another group of pirates captured one of the largest ships in the sea 450 miles off the Somali coast. The *Sirius Star*, a Saudi-owned supertanker, was carrying two million barrels of crude oil to the U.S. worth \$100 million. The pirates had apparently extended their range and evaded law enforcement by operating speedboats launched from "mother ships" disguised as fishing vessels. As ADVENTURE went to press, both the *Faina* and the 1,080-foot *Sirius Star* remained under pirate control.

I first came across this new breed of swashbuckler in the summer of 2000, when I was living in Hong Kong and working as a reporter. One morning, my newspaper contained a report of the execution of 13 Chinese pirates in Shanwei, a port city along China's southern coast. The pirates had operated off Taiwan where, disguising themselves as Chinese customs officers, they had boarded the Hong Kong-owned *Chang Sheng* cargo ship on November 19, 1998, bludgeoned the 23-man crew to death, dumped their bodies at sea, and sold the ship for about \$300,000. The story was shocking, but what really caught my attention were the pictures. Moments before they went in front of the firing squad, the pirates were photographed laughing, joking, and falling down drunk as they climbed the steps to the execution grounds. In his book *Blood Brothers*, veteran Asia correspondent Bertil Lintner describes how one 25-year-old pirate, Yang Jingtao, was "jumping up and down in his rattling chains . . . [and] led the chorus with a boisterous rendition of Ricky Martin's theme song for the 1998 World Cup, ironically called 'The Cup of Life': 'Go, go, go! Olé, olé, olé . . .' Before Yang and his fellow convicts had time to sober up, they were trucked away to an open field on the outskirts of Shanwei, forced to kneel in a row, and dispatched one by one by an executioner with a Kalashnikov—one bullet through the back of the head, one bullet through the heart. . . . Then, in the Chinese tradition, the families were billed for the price of the bullets."

The pirates were brutal killers. But it was impossible not to be impressed by their swagger. I wanted to meet some. A little research unearthed scattered information about the island of Babi, then the most notorious pirate hideaway in Asia and the world. I asked a magazine stringer in Jakarta, Zamira Loebis, to help set up a meeting, and a week later I was on a plane to Singapore, where I caught a ferry to Babi Island to meet the captain and his friend, the pirate king.

An Audience with the Pirate King

Hopping out of a stubby speedboat and strolling down a shaky wooden pier in flip-flops and Hawaiian shorts, the pirate king reels off the history of the other boats tied to the jetty. The craft are all small, wooden, and weathered—unremarkable but for the monstrous twin engines weighing on their sterns. There's something else they have in common. "That one's stolen from Malacca," says the pirate king. "That's taken from Singapore. That one was picked up from Malaysia." We come to a cavernous bungalow on spindly stilts over the black mud shallows.

A sign reads SKYDOG KARAOKE AND LOUNGE. Next to it is the Babi Island Billiards Hall, a dimly lit shack with four new-looking tables. A plump prostitute calls out to the pirate king from a window in the Skydog. From the billiards hall, a group of boys watches us pass. "You going out? You need anybody?" they ask. The pirate king ignores them, pulls out a mobile phone, and stabs at it with a finger ringed with a gold-and-diamond band. We round a corner to find three men huddled over beer cans at a battered table, hiding from the midday sun under a corrugated overhang. One looks up and breaks into a gold-plated grin. "Hey!" he hails the pirate king warmly. "I thought you were dead!"

Two full plastic bags of beers arrive at the pirates' table. All four men are modern-day pirate chiefs and headquarter their crews on Babi. The town is a waterside refuge of stilted shacks, whose thousand or so

souls get by almost solely on piracy and prostitution. Such a small place breeds close bonds. The pirates share raids, money, and women. Like the pirate king, the men at the table are short, middle-aged, and tanned. Their wiry arms speak of physical work, their beer bellies of the bars and nightclubs it pays for. The pirate king checks with a burly buddy at the table to see if he has removed a forearm tattoo.

The pair had the same insignia drawn on their arms with a third friend decades ago, when all three were teenagers in a gang of muggers. A few weeks before, the third man had been shot and killed holding up a truck. The police announced they were looking for other men with the same tattoo.

"Feelings" starts up on the jukebox, and the men seem to take it as a cue to begin trading stories about the old days. Remember the time they boarded a U.S. Navy warship by mistake? Or the Russian tanker that turned out to be full of guns? Or the time when one group boarded a ship to find another hijack already in progress? They drink hard, each pirate handed a fresh can as he drains his last. One of the four, a gray-haired man, teases the pirate king for leaving one of his crew to guard his speedboat at the jetty. "What are you so worried about?" he laughs, a gold watch jiggling on his wrist. "If it gets stolen, we'll just take another one." Gray Hair has an unnerving schizophrenic manner, guffawing uproariously one moment and turning bitter and narrow-eyed the next. You've got to expect a few mood swings, the pirate king explains later, from a guy who lost a testicle sliding down a boarding ladder.

The afternoon is slipping away when the captain runs me through the ticktock of the mission for the Hong Kong crime boss. He also explains that he turned to piracy in the late 1970s and reckons he has stolen and sold 20 ships since. He and his crew are from the coastal villages of the Sangihe Islands, thousands of miles east of Babi near the southern tip of the Philippines and renowned for producing Southeast Asia's best sailors. The squat 54-year-old captain has been arrested twice, once in Malaysia when he was busted for smuggling bales of Cambodian marijuana, and once in China. Both times he was released after his bosses intervened and bribed the authorities. Both times he suspects his employers of arranging his arrest so they could cut his fee. Choosing who to work for is a delicate business, he says. The piracy world is not noted for its trustworthiness. "Sometimes we just take the front money and disappear," he laughs.

The pirate king tells me there used to be times when, on a moonless night, he and his crew would routinely loot 15 cargo ships before dawn. But he says he has now largely given up on hit-and-runs. There is still traffic enough—300 ships a day pass through the 2.5-mile-wide east-west bottleneck of international waters between Singapore and Babi. But because of the pirates' notoriety, fewer and fewer ships carry cash. More lucrative and safer, says the pirate king, is the type of mercenary work as a bajing loncat that the captain is describing. Among bajing loncat, the Babi pirates represent the elite, specialist raiders hired to steal mammoth 330-foot, 10,000-ton ships and their entire cargo for as little as \$5,000. Most are from Palembang in South Sumatra, which over the centuries has developed an unrivaled reputation for hijacking and robbery on land or sea. The men still carry machetes, cutlasses, and homemade samurai-style swords like their forefathers before them. "You don't need guns," smiles the pirate king. "Indonesians are very skillful with knives."

The World's Problem

If cargo and locations have changed, the pirates' motive has not. It is still, as the Somali pirates showed, about one thing: treasure. The Somalis initially demanded \$35 million for the tanks, then \$20 million, then more than halved that again. A report by the British strategic think tank Chatham House estimates that the Somali pirates may have earned more than \$50 million in 2008, an income that on land has allowed them to turn a few dust-bowl fishing villages into boom towns like Babi, full of flashy cars, flashy boats, and alcohol.

But there are other, deeper reasons to become a pirate. "We were forced into this work," said Ali Sugule, [...nationalgeographic.com/.../alex-perry...](http://nationalgeographic.com/.../alex-perry...)

the commander of the group that hijacked the *Faina*, speaking by satellite phone from the ship's bridge. "We were fishermen. But ships from other countries fish our coasts illegally, destroy our nets, and fire on whoever approaches them. They even dump toxic waste. We couldn't work. So we decided to defend ourselves." Some of the pirate gangs refer to themselves as "coast guards."

It is the same with the Babi pirates. They say they still live as sword-wielding buccaneers in desert island lairs in the 21st century partly out of tradition. "Our culture is a water culture," says the pirate king. "There have been pirates here since the 12th or 13th century." But piracy is also about survival. The Indonesian economy has never matched its Asian neighbors. Economic growth in the Philippines, where the captain comes from, is also concentrated in the cities and among the ruling elite. "The salaries for sailors have got lower and lower," says the captain. "It's just getting more and more difficult to find legitimate work." Their choice is a life of subsistence poverty or a life of crime, ripping off the fat riches that pass daily through the Singapore Strait.

This isn't quite a war. There aren't enough deaths or battles in the cat-and-mouse games the world's pirates play with security forces in Asia and Africa, and the pirates are criminals, not revolutionaries. But pirates are also rebels. They are rivals to the state and society, as Cicero recognized two millennia ago when he defined pirates in Roman law as *hostis humani generis*—"enemies of the human race."

They also share many traits with antiglobalization insurgents, such as the Maoists in Nepal or the Naxals in India. They target big business. They kill if they have to. They reject the place they've been given in the world and decide to live beyond society as outlaws, stealing from the global economy that shuts them out.

This is worrying for advocates of globalization. With all the riches that the rising traffic of world trade flashes before the pirates, as globalization accelerates, so will the criminals that feed off it. The multinational antipiracy fleet now bearing down on Somalia is proof of how seriously the world has taken the threat. In addition, the pirates' actions fit a pattern of rising violent opposition to globalization around the world. The Maoists, the Naxals, even al Qaeda, all take the perceived inequalities that result from globalization as a righteous grievance, and one to be addressed through violence. Pirates will never take their fight to the world as al Qaeda has done—they prefer to cut and run. But piracy will continue.

The deadly seriousness of that analysis doesn't cloud the pirate life. Far from it: Like their Chinese brothers waiting to be executed, the Babi pirates revel in their existence. As they see it, rebellion might be necessary, but it's a lot of fun too. The pirate king admits to "throwing a lot around" on women and booze. "We never count our money. We just take it out of our pockets and give it out." And he loves outwitting authority. Except for 1992, when a raid on a tanker belonging to former President Suharto's wife prompted mass arrests, he boasts of successfully evading his pursuers for 25 years. Affecting a serious tone for a moment, he declares that being a pirate requires "courage and spiritual strength." And discipline, I venture? The pirate king almost chokes laughing.

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