



Sietse Koopmans

ZEEPAARD

You can't blame Sietse Koopmans for not wanting to hurry back to Egypt. During his three-year circumnavigation aboard the 37.2 metre Vripack explorer *Zeepaard*, he and everyone on board were held hostage for three days while anchored off a town near Alexandria. "That was the end of our tour in Egypt," he says matter-of-factly. "I decided there and then never to return." Koopmans, now planning his second circumnavigation on a boat expected to go into build shortly, also intends to take a concierge with him next time, someone to establish where to shop, eat, find the best diving, what to do and where, in order to save time and get the best out of every location.

The first thing to consider when planning a circumnavigation, though, is your choice of boat, says Koopmans - go for the wrong one and you'll be paying for it all the way around. "My experience is that yachts are designed in committee by people that have no cruising experience," he says. "My boat, *Zeepaard*, is an explorer which is as close as you can get to the best boat. I don't believe in sailboats - I like day sailing and racing - but cruising with a sailboat is cumbersome. For the same price you have a motorboat with three times the space." Koopmans' new boat will be another explorer, incorporating all the things he learned in those three years travelling around the world.

Zeepaard's voyage started in Malta in 2009. The yacht cruised the Med before setting off west across the Atlantic - the best way, says Koopmans. "Go with the current and the winds, then you will stay in the bandwidth of good weather." The homeward journey

across the Indian Ocean took *Zeepaard* into pirate territory, something Koopmans was well prepared for. "We made extensive modifications, including wrapping her up in chicken fence, barbed wire and electric fencing," he recalls. "We also stuck a military number - ZP01 - on the bow, fitted shooting bunkers on deck and modified the engine room into a citadel from where we could operate all controls." For extra security, four Dutch Navy Seals joined the yacht for the journey.

Ironically, the only piratical act was committed by a crew member, and Koopmans learned the hard way to pick crew with great care.

"You learn to work with crew and their wits. Generally we had a great crew apart from one criminal chef who made transfers to her own account and disappeared." Another headache was caused by red tape on the trip, most notably in Cuba, where it took a whole day to check in and out of the country. "Watch out in Cuba," Koopmans warns. "Eleven government officials came to inspect, fill in and sign the same papers."

But no matter how onerous the bureaucracy of various jurisdictions, it's soon forgotten. "Spotting humpback whales breaking next to the boat in Niue, to catching a mahi mahi twice during a crossing in the Pacific on a \$12 fishing rod, and seeing rays jump out of the water when chased are just a few of the unforgettable experiences," Koopmans says. "Our favourite part of the world is the San Blas Islands off the coast of Panama; it is like walking into *National Geographic* magazine. Then there is Fiji, where we donated all the clothes we accumulated on board and went for an island tour

after drinking cava with the head of the island. It was touching to see the standard of living and happiness there."



Clockwise from above: a street market in Thailand; diving with manta rays in Indonesia; the famously beautiful Whitehaven Beach, in Australia's Whitsundays



THE BESTS

- Best beach: Whitsundays
- Best anchorage: Montenegro
- Best fishing: Indonesia
- Best diving: Indonesia
- Best food: Thailand



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Friendly locals in Indonesia



Above left: arrival in port, Thailand. Above right: *Zeepaard* in Indonesia. Right: the Corinth Canal, Greece. Below: with the local police in Indonesia. Below left: the Panama Canal. Left: swimming with humpbacks off Niue, a remote island in the South Pacific



ROBERTHARDING.COM; GETTY IMAGES; SHUTTERSTOCK



Zeepaard off Panama's San Blas Islands. Left: smiling for the camera in Fiji



PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE OWNERS.



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