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Know how: Safe Sailing

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Long ago, back in the last century, I had my first introduction to dinghy theft when we lost our new Achilles RIB and 20hp outboard in California's Catalina Harbor on New Year's Eve, 1984. It was the only one stolen among about 50 dinghies at the town docks that night. Maybe the bright red color and jet black shiny new Mercury engine attracted the thief. It was a good lesson learned; shiny new equipment attracts thieves.

In 1999 we had a close call in the Caribbean's Tobago Cays when two dinghies floating behind charter boats on line painters were stolen on either side of us. Luckily, we religiously hoisted our dinghy up on a halyard alongside our CSY 44. But the halyard could have easily been cut, and then we too might have lost our dinghy, as happened to friends in Venezuela. A week later we had proper high davits welded to our stern arch, so we could pull our RIB up a good 7ft off the water.

Meanwhile, I fabricated strong hatch bars for our opening deck hatches. These allowed us to leave the hatch open without worrying about someone coming in through the hatch at night.

Now, having been around the Caribbean and across the Pacific through a number of high-theft areas over the past 20 years, we are far more security conscious. On our St. Francis 44 cat, *Soggy Paws*, we use a number of boat and personal security measures ourselves and have seen and read about many more.

Understanding the Threat

The first step in being a security-conscious cruiser is to be aware of the "hot spots." These are described on various websites and change monthly. In the Caribbean, the best place to see what's happening is the Caribbean Safety and Security Net, safetyandsecuritynet.org. Out in the wider world, one of the best websites for cruisers to check on security issues is noonsite.com. In the event you do hear of an incident, try to gather as much information as possible about it—was it daytime or nighttime, was the boat occupied, how did the thieves get aboard?—and so on.

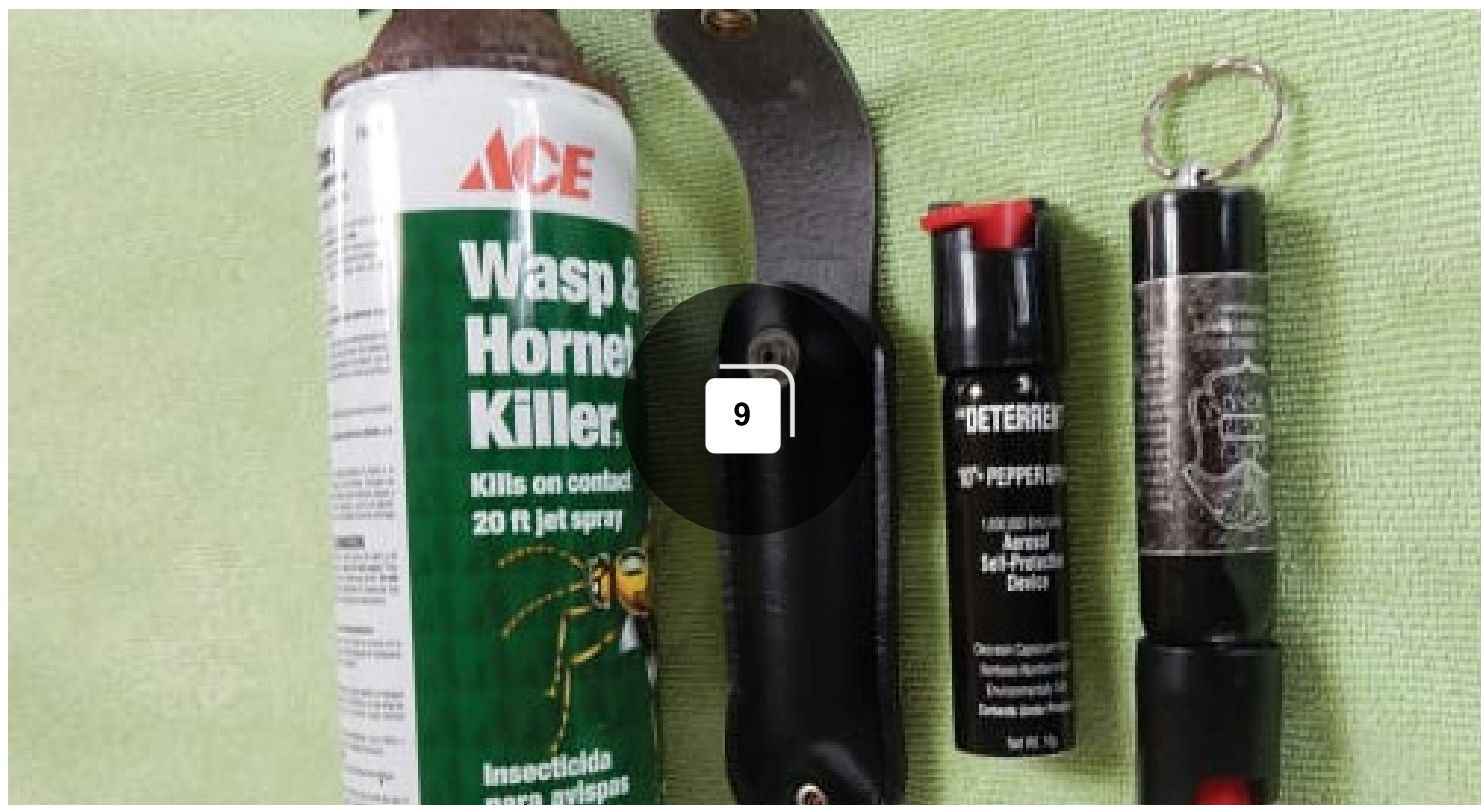
Matching the Threat

Some defensive measures work best during the day or in port. Others are more useful at night or while at sea. You are usually most vulnerable in port, so being on high alert and having someone aboard when in risky ports should be a high priority. Boardings at sea are rare but have occurred off dangerous coasts, so close-in transits in these areas are best avoided. If approached at sea there are numerous defensive measures available, but some are not effective if the threat is heavily armed.

When cruising risky areas, it is always a good practice to "buddy boat." In one high-crime area in Guatemala, cruisers actually took turns standing a night watch—everyone kept their VHF radios on and were ready for action if something happened.

Defense in Depth

This term, often used by the military, refers to having more than one defense option as the threat gets closer or more intense. For instance, in a high-threat area a cruiser might want to protect their dinghy by not only lifting it high off the water at night, but locking the motor to the dinghy transom and chaining the gas tank and dinghy to the davits. A motion alarm aimed aft might also be used as a first line of defense.

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Measured Response

Of the numerous defensive measures we are aware of, ranging from use of lethal force with firearms to a simple friendly discussion, not all will be appropriate for the threat situation. You would not want to shoot a fisherman coming alongside your boat asking for food or water. Having a handout ready will not only usually solve the problem, but get a big smile in return. Guns aboard can be a significant problem in many countries. As a visiting cruiser, shooting a local, regardless of the situation, will often land you in prison while the locals take their time sorting it out. If you carry weapons aboard and don't declare them, and they are discovered by officials or you use them, you could lose your boat. We have all read the stories and should know the issues with guns aboard. For many reasons, I am not a fan of carrying guns on a yacht.

Personal Defense Options

There are several good options when it comes to personal defense. They include:

Awareness. Be acutely aware of what is going on around you, especially when out at night. If you have the “cell phone disease” and walk around staring into a screen, it may be best for you to always take a taxi. These are usually safer than using local transport or walking in dangerous areas.

Personal Defense Course. It's very worthwhile to take a personal defense or martial arts course. It will give you self-confidence, teach you situational awareness and give you other valuable skills to help you deal with a variety of situations.

Sprays. Various types of sprays are available, including pepper, Mace, deer and hornet/wasp deterrents. Spray streams can reach out almost 20ft. They come in both large spray cans for use on the boat and small sprays for carrying in a pocket or purse. Based on our research, police-grade pepper spray is the most effective against people, with their debilitating effects lasting at least 10 minutes. Wasp/hornet spray has limited effectiveness but could be used for a less serious situation.

Stun Guns. These devices come in a variety of sizes, shapes and strengths. Some are included in combination with a strong light that can blind an intruder momentarily. They are very debilitating, but the effect only lasts a short period of time. They are especially effective during a close encounter with an intruder, assuming you are able to maintain control of your stun gun. A set of handcuffs can also be useful to keep the intruder subdued after the effect wears off.

Abandoning Ship. If you are in a harbor, simply jumping off the boat when threatened by a superior force will usually save your life. The boat and its contents are always expendable. Your life or the life of your crew is not.

Boat Defense

The following ideas may be useful for protecting your boat from intrusion. Some are passive, requiring no further action on your part. Others require you to take action to activate them when threatened.

Outboards. Probably the most sought-after item on your boat, after cash and computers, is your outboard motor, especially if it is shiny-new and in the 10-20hp range. To a thief, it is worth several months' work at developing-world labor rates. Even other cruisers have been known to steal unsecured outboard motors. Recently 10 dinghies were stolen over two nights in one harbor in Indonesia; their motors were removed and the dinghies were set adrift.

With this in mind, it's, therefore, a good idea to lock your motor to the dinghy or your boat with a secure stainless steel tube lock over the clamps. Adding chain through the motor handle, gas tank and dinghy will further improve their security.

Dinghies. If you want to be certain that your dinghy will be there when you return, wire or chain-lock it to something solid while ashore. Again, also be sure to use davits to lift your boat clear of the water at night. As a side note, don't print your boat name on your dinghy where it is easily visible. A thief seeing that you are ashore will know the boat is unoccupied. Instead, paint your boat's name on the undersides, or give your dinghy a different name.

Locks. These come in a variety of sizes, strengths and shapes. The best padlocks are the round Abus all-stainless steel keyed locks. They are very robust, hard to cut at the hasp and work well in the saltwater environment. Locks with a hasp marked "hardened" will eventually rust, while brass hasp locks are easily cut. Combination locks, like the bronze Abus or Brinks with stainless steel hasp, work well as companionway locks, because you don't need a key for access.

Chain versus Wire. Chain is better than wire for locking up equipment because both sides of a chain link must be cut rather than just a single cut through wire. G4 chain is even harder to cut. Chain also makes lots of noise when dragged over a RIB floor. Dyneema line is very difficult to cut with a normal knife or scissors and may also be useful in some applications.

Motion Sensors. Battery-powered motion sensors aimed aft from the main cabin access can be very effective at detecting an intruder. On a catamaran you might want to install two, one on each side of the main cabin door. When activated by motion they emit a loud shriek and possibly a light that will scare off most intruders. You need to remove all laundry and other topside motion-makers, though, for them to be effective.

Siren Strobe Combination. One of the more effective alarms you can use is one with an emergency siren and strobe combination, such as those offered by Amseco Inc. These come in a variety of siren strengths and strobe colors. We have ours wired to parallel switches in both our bunk and in the main cabin, so that if we experience any kind of emergency we can quickly turn it on. The idea is to alert any and all nearby boats that we are in trouble. We think the noise and light would also scare off most intruders.

Lasers. Strong green lasers are available from many sources on the internet. Not only are they great for localizing your boat during a night rescue at sea, they will also temporarily blind the driver of an approaching boat at over 100 yards, making them a good non-lethal defense.

Lights. Modern lithium-ion battery-powered multimillion candlepower LED lights can be a good night deterrent to a boarding, especially when the boat is moving. The blinding light will make it difficult for the driver of an approaching boat to hold course or any intruder to look your way. Simply leaving on your deck and cockpit lights will also deter an intruder at night.

VHF Radio. If you discuss your shore plans on the VHF, successful local thieves may well know when and for how long you will be away from the boat. (Although do keep your VHF on channel 16 as required while at sea, and listen on an appropriate harbor channel in case of emergency while at anchor or in port.)

Hatch Bars. Strong hatch bars will prevent intrusion, especially on hot nights in the tropics. They can be easily made of lin stainless steel tubing, bent, flattened and drilled at each end to take big sheet-metal screws fastened into the hatch coaming. If you epoxy the heads or use unusual star or square-head screws, an unprepared intruder will find them very difficult to remove. Measure the spans carefully before you cut and bend the tubing. Consider easily removable locked bars if you are concerned about exiting in an emergency.

Floating Lines. Towing a floating line behind the boat, especially at night, can be a surprisingly good deterrent against approaching boats, as it will foul the prop of an outboard motor approaching from astern. Two lengths of 1/4in polypropylene line, one from each transom aboard a catamaran, are even better.

Companionways. A strong companionway door is a must on a cruising yacht. Catamarans usually have strong sliding glass doors, which if locked will usually keep an intruder out of the interior. Monohulls can replace weak teak doors or slats with drop boards made of 1/2in polycarbonate/Lexan. The edges may require some modification, like doubling up on the Lexan thickness so they fit well and slide smoothly. These kinds of clear panels will also admit light and allow you to see out into the cockpit.

Flare Guns. A flare gun can be a risky but very effective weapon, as it can cause a serious injury, especially if it hits a person in the face. Remember, though, that the flare fire is intense and not easily extinguished—you would not want to use it inside your boat. Also, common USCG approved boating flares often don't activate, even when still within their expiration date. SOLAS-approved flares, on the other hand, are much more reliable. Flare gun inserts that can fire common ammunition, while harder to identify than guns, have the same issues as firearms.

Cattle Fence. I once saw an electric cattle fence wire installed around the perimeter of a big monohull. The owner said it had worked well against intruders in Papua-New Guinea. It was fastened to, but isolated from, the lifeline stanchions. The installation is somewhat complicated and requires 120/240 volt power when in use.

Catamaran Issues. One problem modern catamarans face that older monohulls do not is their low sugar-scoop sterns, which make it especially easy for swimmers to come aboard. This is one of the reasons we've installed our motion sensors: to detect boardings while we are sleeping. Also, in a coordinated attack situation, bad guys might be able to land two boarding parties on your boat 20-plus-ft apart, making defense that much more difficult.

As you can see, there are many options that can help you protect your boat. Some involve advance preparation. Others are just a matter of awareness and good sense. Each situation is different, so cruisers should carefully prepare multiple strategies from which they can then choose an effective, measured response. And if you don't like any of the above, you can also just resort to Joshua Slocum's trick of leaving carpet tacks on deck overnight, although be prepared to do some tedious rust removal in the morning!

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Dave and Sherry McCampbell are currently cruising around Papua-New Guinea; follow their adventures at svsoggypaws.blogspot.com

Photos by **Dave and Sherry McCampbell**

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