

Trouble in Paradise

Unwanted Guests

by Laurie Corbett

Although some time has passed since these incidents occurred, I think MULTIHULLS readers might find this interesting. Dawn, my wife, and I were cruising the Windward Islands aboard our boat *Cat Tales*, a 35' Fountaine Pajot catamaran, in 2004-2006. During that time, we suffered through three boardings, and heard about some others. Although these were non-violent incidents, we developed some strategies that might help other cruisers in these situations. We'll share these with you as well.

The first incident occurred when we found ourselves in Soufriere, St. Lucia, on March 1st, with two Canadian visitors aboard. We had tied up the cat at Malgretout, with a stern line to shore, and had spent the early evening at Harmony Beach Restaurant. Benny does a great job at Harmony Beach and even offers, free of charge, both water taxis to and from your boat and a boat-sitting service to watch your boat while you are dining. We had returned to *Cat Tales* well fed and were sleeping at 1:30 a.m., when an individual en-

tered our cockpit and attempted to gain entry to our saloon. He was temporarily obstructed at the open door by a large mosquito screen that had been velcroed across the opening. Although the screen is not of much use for bug control in this part of the world, we had continued to put it up to provide some noise if it were removed by a burglar or home-intruder. As such, it worked; and I awoke while it was being slowly picked off the opening.

My first thought was that our boat-guests were going out for some air, but I felt obligated to check. I moved from my bed to the bottom of the stairs to see a dark arm and leg coming through the newly-made opening. I quickly decided not to tangle with the person, and instead yelled at as low and evil a tone as possible: "YOU GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!" The limbs disappeared and a splash was heard. Although we attempted to spot the culprit ashore or in the water, we were unsuccessful. I gave all details under a "securité" warning over VHF Channel 16, but was unable to reach any officials, nor

did I gain response from any of the many vessels moored in the Pitons area. Yelling and lights did awaken the charter catamaran beside us (after our ladies got some clothes on us), and resulted in the crew giving their boat a good check and better security. They were not new to such boardings, and suggested that cats, with their back steps, stability, and with goodies upstairs and sleepers downstairs, are prime targets.

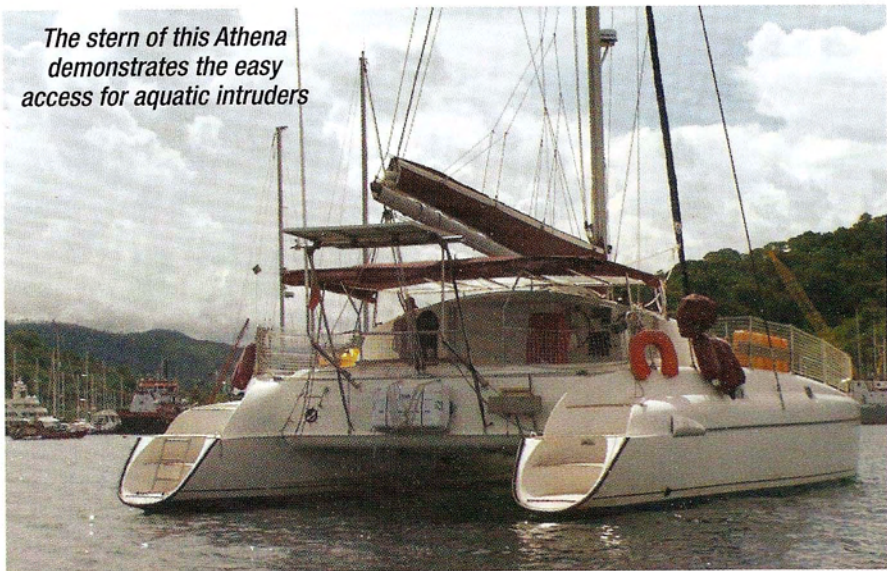
Members of the Soufriere Marine Management Association (SMMA) brought local police officers to our boat the next morning. Apparently, an SMMA employee had heard my VHF warning, and since a co-worker had his boat stolen near the same time, he believed the crimes were related. He decided to promote the involvement of the police. The police suggested they might have a likely suspect, and also suggested they would work hard to stop his activities. Two comments they provided were particularly memorable: The senior officer said that if it was the same guy, he could get away easily as he has the ability, resulting from a

Voodoo spell, to dive 60 feet without tanks. He also said they may wait until the suspect has some success in his evil ways, and then plant some evidence during the exercising of a warrant to search his premises. We found these comments quite educational, and think of them often.

We also think about other aspects of the incident. We had left a sharp knife on the cockpit table for cutting limes. Not only could this have allowed the boarder to cut the screen quietly, he could have used it to cut us. As well, we are convinced that if the fellow had ripped the screen off in one quick move, we would have dismissed the sound in our sleep. It was only the repetitive “rip, rip, rip” that brought me out of my slumber.

Two nights later we were in Rodney Bay, anchored near Second Millennium, the present net manager for the Caribbean Security Net, and heard that the previous night a nearby couple from Quebec, Canada, aboard a small Mirage monomaran, suffered a successful boarding. The captain had awakened to find a young man in his dinghy, still tethered, searching through his wallet and

The stern of this Athena demonstrates the easy access for aquatic intruders



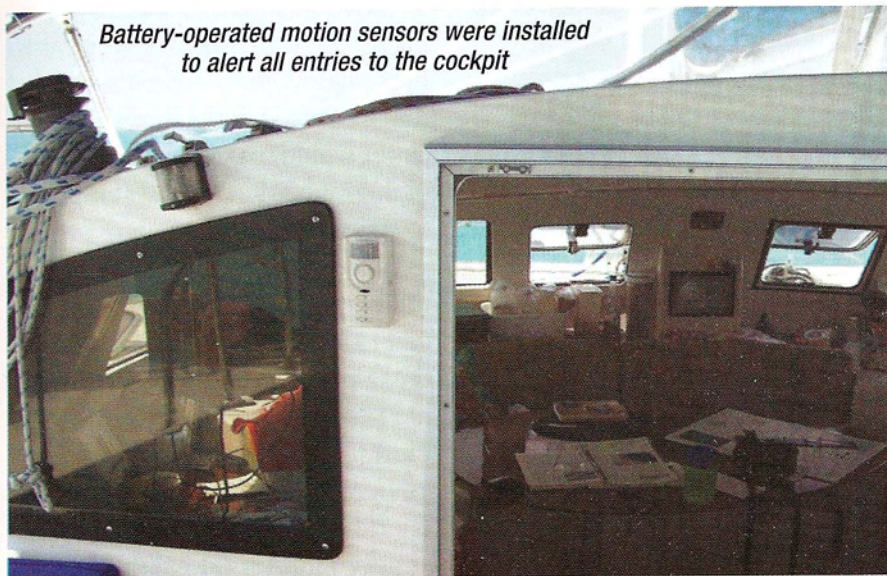
his wife’s purse. After answering the captain’s pleas to leave the credit cards behind, he slipped into the water and swam ashore. We would suggest that it was the same culprit, changing venues. We have heard no more regarding these specific St. Lucia incidents, but have heard that another cruiser failed in his attempt to grab a boarder the next cruising season, because he was naked and greased.

The second incident occurred while we were moored at Young Island Cut, St. Vincent, during the “wee” hours of March 27th, 2005. That time our door was locked; but we noticed a man walking

over our open hatch, from bow to stern, just after 3 a.m. I came out and gave him a “dressing down,” calling him a “dumb-ass” who was risking drowning after being pepper-sprayed, knifed, or shot for very little potential gain. He took this quietly, as he continued down my stern steps and into the water; all the while shielding his face from our view. We maintained a light on him as he swam all the way to Young Island, able to see unused resealable plastic bags floating away from his pockets. Again, although I called for assistance, and provided information under a “securité” notice, nobody acknowledged the issue.

Things might have been different for the culprit, if others had awakened and assisted in his apprehension. As it was, we listened on VHF early the next morning as a family who was chartering a catamaran attempted to get assistance from the Coast Guard after their young daughter surprised a person on the boat just before sunrise. Had he kept his radio on, he would have known to expect the unwanted company, and been able to better protect his family. As a

Battery-operated motion sensors were installed to alert all entries to the cockpit





This dog stands watch for her owners and neighbors

result of his efforts, and also as a result of the cold reception the Coast Guard was providing him, I decided that any contact from me to the authorities would not change future outcomes.

It was also interesting that the St. Vincent visitor had traveled from the bow, not the stern steps; meaning he had climbed up the bridle to get to the deck. This tells me that he was either so agile that it didn't matter, or too stupid to know how easy the stern access is.

After that boarding we put some thought into what we could do to protect ourselves. Locking the door in the heat of the Caribbean every night just isn't an option, as we crave every draft of air we can get. Instead, we set the door open about 5 inches, then drilled a hole through the bulkhead and into the corner of the door. Now, with a quarter-inch bolt, we can lock the door in an open position. We found motion-sensors that cost less than \$20 and employ one in the cockpit and an inexpensive alarm that can be manually turned on is kept near our bed.

We also pay more attention to what we leave in the cockpit at night.

A third boarding happened in January of 2006, near the public beach in Rodney Bay, St. Lucia. By this time, we had developed some strategies for deterring such activity, but did not deploy all of them. We knew not to be so close to the public beach, and also had the little alarm box set up. However, we were entertaining a friend we had not seen since the year before, and he had arrived with some very old and expensive rum. 'Ti punch, a mixture of rum, lime and cane syrup, makes a very effective disorganizer. We locked the door in the partially opened position, but did not turn on the motion sensor. The next morning, salty footprints showed we had been boarded, but the individual could not gain entry, and didn't find anything he wanted in the cockpit. Interestingly, the St. Lucia Coast Guard cutter, with the Police run-about, was anchored 200 feet behind us. This person was brazen.

We are aware of other occurrences as well, and we should comment on them before pro-

posing a list of suggestions for cruisers. During the 2005 season, a boarding occurred off Frigate Island, Union Island. The cruisers found the boarder busily carrying their equipment off the boat when a dog on a neighboring boat began to bark. This boarder escaped into the sea, and after stabbing the dinghy on his way by with the cruiser's own knife, used the cruiser's flashlight to find his way to the mainland. Although the thief had a half-hour walk ahead of him, efforts to organize the local police by radio were unsuccessful, and the culprit is still at large.

Another incident in Venezuela involved a catamaran named *Sylvester*, with a yellow tender named *Tweety*. They were awakened when a boarder climbed up the back safety line, received an electrical shock, and awakened the cruisers when he jumped back into a backstay. If there is a reader out there who knows this boat, please convince the captain to tell his story, and describe his "electrifying" experience and equipment for the rest of us!

While cruising the Caribbean we were also bombarded with stories of stolen outboards. Since upgrading to a size we like, we keep ours in the davits, with outboard and dinghy locked to the boat. A wire-cutter would make quick work out of their theft, but at least it is hard to swim with a wire-cutter.

What can we conclude about these occurrences? Although we can't say for sure, it appears that these people are seldom armed, are willing to settle for petty theft, and are hoping to avoid any contact with the cruisers or charterers. They apparently are simply looking for easy access

to wallets, cameras, and other items that can be placed in a sealable bag and floated to shore. Such fare is very often left on the tables of charterers after a fun night ashore, and I doubt that these young men can tell nor care about the differences between a charter party and a cruising couple. The fact that they risk death for such relatively low gain suggests that they are young and agile, but not very clever.

Although unqualified to provide much advice regarding armed boardings, I offer the following suggestions to deal with the opportunistic burglar:

- Proximity to shore: Do not be the closest boat to a public beach. Especially, don't be the closest catamaran to the beach. If a choice exists between a public beach and a patrolled resort, choose to anchor off the resort.

- Locks: Use a drill and bolt or other method to limit the distance your doors and hatches can open from the outside. Do make it easy to disable and get out, however. Also lock your outboard to your dinghy and your dinghy to your boat, using the largest stainless wire or chain you can manage.

- Sensors: US and Canadian chain stores now stock battery-operated motion detectors that run on infrared technology, and cost less than \$20. These can be velcroed into the cockpit to sense the entry of unwanted guests. They can be placed so that they will only sense the lower part of the cockpit, so that wet towels and flags do not cause false

alarms. Set them on "doorbell" until you are sure they work, so you don't bother your neighbors.

- Clean the cockpit: Stow all knives, bars, winch-handles, and fish-gaffs before bed.

- Noisemakers: Keep a horn or a spare magnet alarm that you can use to ward off a burglar if you hear one. We recommend scaring them off, not catching them. Carry on with the noise after the intruder is clear of your boat to wake others who can then help you and themselves.

- Radio: Keep the VHF on. You'll get used to sleeping with it, and you may get to save a life – it might even be your own. If you have a boarder, put out a "sécurité" alert.

- Get a dog: Failing that, look for opportunities to befriend dog-owning cruisers and anchor near dog-owning cruisers.

- Light: A strong flashlight should be handy, preferably a long metal one that can double as a billy club.

- Goodies: Clear the upstairs of valuables before bed. Find a good place for wallets, cell phones, binoculars, hand-held instruments, and cameras; and stow them properly. There is no need to tease boarders into working harder to get in.

- Weapons: I prefer a bar to swing at any arm or leg that might inappropriately enter a door or hatch. My wife likes the long metal flashlight.

- Contact the officials: Whether or not they will react, nobody

can fix something they don't know is broken. Bring each event to their attention, and let them know you care. Making the size of the problem known does help.

- Contact other boaters: Security nets alert other cruisers, who can then take precautions. They also work with local organizations and individuals for the betterment of all.

Sailing with a gun? That is always an interesting debate, but guns are not for me. I picture killing the daring but young nephew of the Chief of Police, who was attempting to steal beer money from my table. More likely, the youngster would grab it and shoot me. There are great gun discussions on a number of cruising web sites covering all sides of the issue. My favorite site is **Cruisersforum.com**. I do appreciate that having some cruisers carrying guns makes potential boarders wary of all of us; and that isn't a bad thing.

Some final notes: We believe we were simply unlucky to have 3 boarders. We have talked to cruisers who have cruised the Windwards for a dozen years and never had a boarder. We also hope to convince you that our boarders are the few bad apples, and not accepted members of the societies we visit. Those who serve the boating community, both ashore and afloat are above suspicion in our minds. We still assume that the people we meet are kind, friendly, and proud; and we intend to get back to the Windwards as soon as we can arrange it.