Sinbad Surveys Arabia

I am doubtful anyone has ever circumnavigated Arabia by sailing boat, and certainly not in a race. So, this probable premiere on Sailonline was something that could not be missed, and as we came out the Gulf of Aqaba, tuning our routers as best we could to weather systems rarely tested, I noticed that the patterns ahead of us were very specific and very steady. What was driving that, I wondered, and being on old-timer I didn't ask Sirra or Alexa, thought of Jeeves, but finally just googled it and this is what I found…

The Red Sea

Mountain ranges border the Red Sea on both sides, peaking on the eastern shore at more than 2000m and on the western shore at more than 4500m – the extensive Ethiopian Plateau. This orography (hah!) has a profound influence on the local dominant wind regimes, which are specified as the winter and summer seasons.

In summer, an almost permanent NNW wind blows along the whole length of the sea, with speeds of 20kn on average, frequently exceeding 30kn. In Summer, at the southern strait, the wind typically turns left, merging with the Indian Ocean SW monsoon.

In winter, the same NNW wind dominates the northern part of the basin, generally until about 18o N, but south of 18oN, a SSE wind prevails, associated with the NE monsoon in the Indian Ocean that turns right through the Bab el Mandeb strait.

The convergence of the NNW and SSE winds at 18o N results in a zone characterized by a cloudy sky and drizzle in contrast with the ubiquitous clear weather typical of the area, and of course light winds.

The Arabian Sea

Around September, with the sun retreating south, the northern landmass of the Indian subcontinent cools off rapidly, and air pressure begins to build over northern India. The Indian Ocean holds it heat, causing cold wind to sweep down from the Himalayas and the Deccan Plateau (India, duh) across the Indo-Gangetic to the Arabia Sea and the vast spans of the Indian Ocean further south – the Retreating Monsoon or Mausim (weather) in Arabic.

As spring breaks, the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Deccan Plateau heat up and the high pressure over southern Asia weakens. By May/June, a low has developed. Suddenly the wind direction changes, and a south-westerly sets in blowing from the hot land onto the cooled-off sea. This is the Advancing Monsoon, the stronger of the two monsoons.

The Persian Gulf

Winds over the Persian Gulf are predominantly from the northwest with an annual mean windspeed of 10kn. This dominant wind is called the Shamal and it blows regularly in summer, and more intermittently in winter. A northeasterly called Nashi can also blow along the Iranian coast for 3 to 5 days during winter. The winter Shamal is often preceded by episodes of southerly winds called Kaus or Suhaili. Closer to the Straits of Hormuz, the winds are more influenced by the monsoon cycle.

In short, the winds in the Persian Gulf are more variable. The sea is shallow at little more than 100m at its deepest points, and so cools down and heats up more in line with the surrounding land. However, Iran's Zagros Mountains with elevations of more than 4000m (similar to the Alps) sweep straight down to the Gulf, cooling down and heating up faster than the sea and the endless miles of

alluvial plain of the Tigris and Euphrates further north. The 2000m Arabian and middle eastern plateau also cool and warm quicker than the Gulf to the east of them. Thus, more in summer than in winter, the Shamal blows down the delta and onto the Gulf from cold high pressure to warm low pressure.

The Race

And there you have it – a gybe-fest down the Red Sea with the strongest winds mid-sea, friction slowing the windspeed down close inshore; a brief transition to headwinds at 18oN, followed by more than a week of beating into the Monsoon, generally staying inside the wind bend as it anti-clocked into the north east: a second transition through the Straits of Hormuz, and a mixed bag of stuff across the southern reaches of the Gulf to the shallow waters outside Bahrain harbour (keels canted, daggerboards up!).

As for bonknhoot – after a serious DC aberration early doors on that interminable beat, there were few enough opportunities to make up the half hour lost, and any gains were always going to be a function of the mistakes of others. Clearly then, FreyjaUSA made no mistakes, extending that half hour by a further quarter, and SKOVSER held on well too to finish second, but I was happy enough in the end to take the fifth (so, you may use it against me), less than a minute behind rafa.

A bit exhausting, but a great and most interesting race!
Thank you, all and SOL.

Bonknhoot/February 2023