



BY MICHAEL PETERS

SIGHTLINES

Please Don't Nuke Austin, Texas

THE STRANGE AND EXCITING TRAVELS OF A YACHT DESIGNER.



Hyundai's Shipyard at Ulsan, South Korea, once dabbled (rather unsuccessfully) in pleasure boats for the US. Have a comment for Michael? Give him a shout at inbox@pmymag.com.

Over my years of travel as a yacht designer, several international incidents followed me so closely that I developed quite a complex about it. But after some psychiatric help, I was assured that I'm in fact really lucky, it just isn't a good idea to sit too close to me.

In November of 1979, for example, I traveled to the Middle East and met with the ruling family of Kuwait to offer a proposal for a high-speed SES yacht. The morning of the presentation to the Sheik we were greeted with the news that 52 Americans had been taken hostage in Tehran. Then in October 1985, I was on the dock in Genoa, Italy, when the hijacking ordeal of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* finally ended and many of her hostages were reunited with family. In August 1997, I flew to Italy for a meeting in Viareggio with an unnamed Saudi businessman who wanted to start an offshore racing team. I flew home the following day, rather pissed that the client was a no-show, only to be told later that the client was Dodi Fayed and he had died the night before our meeting in a Paris car crash. And then, in May 1988, I made a last-minute trip to Indonesia to present a 132-foot high-speed-yacht proposal to the Sultan of Johor. While on that trip, the Suharto government collapsed and, along with it, the Indonesian economy and our contract with the Sultan.

As I write this, North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un is threatening the world with nuclear attack. I sure hope he doesn't target Hawaii while my wife and I are spending our upcoming vacation

there. We already have nice Florida suntans. With all the news coverage North Korea is getting these days, I can't help but reflect on my time in South Korea in 1987 working for Hyundai.

I was part of an American team put together by former National Security Advisor Richard Allen to design and import production yachts built by Hyundai of South Korea. A 43-foot express and a 48-foot motoryacht were commissioned as the first boats. Back in those days Hyundai was one of the 20 largest companies in the world and could build a 1,000-foot tanker in six months. With its 5-mile-long shipyard and thousands of workers, building a couple of pleasure boats seemed like no problem. But it turned out ships and boats have nothing in common, and so after months of setbacks, I was sent to Ulsan to see if I could help.

I entered an alien world where I was Gulliver among thousands of bicycle-riding workers. They put me up for my long stay in an "American-sized" hotel room that had only 6-foot 6-inch headroom and a ceiling fan mounted in the center. They gave me two personal assistants, and one evening while shopping in a multistory department store, I asked them why all the sales girls were giggling. One young assistant turned and grabbed a bit of my chest hair and said, "Let me say, you have not developed much beyond the ape." One day, I was amazed to see a crew of ditch diggers, where they employed two men to dig one hole, one to push the shovel in with his foot and the other to pull it out with a rope. On my last night, after a month's stay, a Hyundai vice president from Seoul came to host a party in my honor. Fortunately there was plenty of sake to wash down the evening of raw fish. The parting gesture entailed each person singing solo to the crowd of 40 guests. Lots of John Denver. Having two small daughters back home, I sang a very drunken "Ten Little Monkeys." On the way home one of the guys from the back seat of our Hyundai Pony asked very seriously, "Mr. Mike, can you please explain to us the meaning of the song about the monkeys?"

The 43-footer debuted at Fort Lauderdale in 1988 with little acclaim and the venture was dead within a month. Now, some 25 years later, South Korea has assumed its place as a global economic power and I often think of those wonderful, hard-working people way back when. While we joke about North Korea nuking Austin, Texas, and other stateside capitals these days, I can only feel that such threats of war from the north are very real to them. So just in case, I'm staying away—I don't want to cause an international incident. □