

MODERN-DAY PIRATES

In the movies

Hollywood has always loved pirates. From the swashbuckling adventures of Errol Flynn to his modern-day equivalent, Johnny Depp in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, they have been portrayed as attractive, daring characters. Inevitably handsome, they make piracy acceptable through their witty one-liners and their hearts of gold. They are shown as being sea-faring Robin Hoods and we are made to feel we should love them for it.

It would be nice if the movie version of pirates was correct. However, it isn't. Pirates were ruthless criminals who had no regard for their victims. Somehow, the fact that their crimes took place at sea, often in exotic locations, a long time ago has made them glamorous.

Modern piracy

It would also be nice if pirates had stayed in the past or in the cinemas. Unfortunately, they haven't. Modern-day piracy exists and is as dangerous today as it was 300 years ago. Forget any romantic notions you may have. Today's pirates don't wear striped T-shirts, or eye patches or have the obligatory wooden leg. They don't talk in Pirate, sea-mates, and they don't tell jokes. In fact, they just aren't funny at all. They use speed boats and carry assault rifles and rocket-propelled grenades to commit their crimes. They attack ships of all sizes, from small yachts to huge oil tankers and cruise liners. So who are today's pirates and where can they be

found? You are unlikely to encounter them if you are sailing around the Isle of Wight or off the coast of England. They operate in much poorer areas of the world, for instance the coasts of Somalia, China and Indonesia. Of these, Somalia is the most dangerous region. In 2010, out of a worldwide total of 53 attacked ships, 43 were hijacked there. The targets might be those on board, as much as the cargo. The current trend is for pirates to kidnap crews and demand a ransom from their employer, families or governments. This is proving to be a most profitable trade, with figures for the release of prisoners running into millions of pounds.

Somalia is not a rich



country. Money is a big incentive for the pirates. Many used to be ordinary fishermen, but had their fishing grounds stolen or polluted. The rewards of piracy are tempting. Successful pirates live well. They are able to afford big houses and flashy cars. They can buy increasingly sophisticated weapons, enabling them to expand their pirate industry. Some of them even have accountants to manage their finances! It is easy to see why, in a poor country, piracy is seen not so much as a crime but as an acceptable business activity.