



Ahoy There! Open your Wallet!

We read a lot about 'pirates' in our newspapers these days. Hundreds of years ago, the term referred to criminals at sea who attacked ships, but in recent decades the word has taken on other meanings - people who broadcast radio signals without the proper license are known as pirates, as are those who use computer software without paying for it properly, as well as those who download music illegally from the internet. There are pirates all over our community these days!

But what is certainly no joke is that real sea-borne pirates are also very much in the news again, something that seems difficult to believe. Pirates in 2009? It seems impossible! As we have seen though, it is indeed true. Severe economic hardship in some areas of the world where there is poor governance has resulted in a resurgence of such horrible behaviour.

But my story about pirates today is far less threatening! I saw one the other day - a fierce man in a bright red pirate coat, with a patch over one eye, a thick black beard, a pistol jammed into his belt, and who brandished a large cutlass as he strode down the boat deck towards us.

I can well imagine your guess - Disneyland, right? - and you wouldn't be far wrong. Sadako and I had taken a day off and were doing a quick circle tour of the Hakone resort area. One of the 'stages' of the circuit is a short cruise on a tourist boat down the length of Lake Ashi, with a wonderful view of Mount Fuji in the distance. Over the years, these tourist boats have been built in a number of different guises; I remember seeing one about thirty years ago that looked like a giant swan gently floating on the water. But these days, pirate ships are very much 'in', and the tourist companies have gone to great pains to make the boats look as 'piratey' as possible, with fake cannon sprouting from the bulwarks, and giant sails overhead.

We arrived at the terminal ready to board our ship a little bit early, and I greatly enjoyed hearing the announcements that came over the P/A system: *"The next sailing of the pirate ship will be in fifteen minutes." ... "Please use door number 2 for boarding the pirate ship." ... or, "Please watch your step while boarding the pirate ship."* I'll bet Blackbeard was never that polite to *his* guests!

And when we boarded I had to laugh out loud at one thing I noticed - the name of the ship. It was written in large gold lettering along the black side of the craft ... "Victory"

Why is this funny? Well, England has a very long, and very honourable naval tradition, going back many hundreds of years. In the entire breadth of that tradition, one episode stands out above all the rest - Admiral Nelson's defeat of the French fleet at Trafalgar in 1805. His flagship was - of course - HMS Victory. Now I'm pretty easy-going, so this particular Englishman was not upset at all by the use of this name on a 'pirate ship', but I rather suspect that some of the British tourists who make their way through Hakone may not be so amused. After all, imagine if the situation were reversed, and a tourist agency in Britain rigged up a phony pirate ship and called it ... 'Yamato'. I wonder how the Japanese tourists would respond ...

But I suppose it is all in fun, although the pirate Captain we encountered was indeed looking for ways to liberate 'treasure' from those who boarded his ship. He was accompanied by a photographer, and was of course ready to strike up a fierce pose with anybody willing to pay the fee for a picture.

As he worked his way down the deck towards us, I thought about how to respond to his 'predations'. I didn't get a chance though, as we arrived at the dock before he reached us. Too bad ... after all, *my* beard is real (if not black), and I think I could have given him a pretty fierce glare in return!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>