

Why Ships Are Choosing the 4,000-Mile Detour Around Africa

Date: May 02, 2026 | Model: anthropic-batch:claude-opus-4-7

Source: Screenshot (OCR via AI)

Contents

1. Reading Passage
2. Explanation
3. Key Terms Glossary
4. Reading Comprehension Quiz (10 questions)
5. Answer Key with Explanations

Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).

1. Reading Passage

In April 2026, more cargo ships rounded the Cape of Good Hope – the rocky southern tip of South Africa – than at any point in modern record-keeping. According to Veson Nautical, a shipping data firm, tanker traffic on the Cape route reached a record 24 million deadweight tonnes during the week of April 13. On its face, this is a strange milestone. The Cape route is the long way: ships travelling between Asia and Europe could shave at least two weeks off their voyages by going through Egypt's Suez Canal instead. So why are they choosing the detour?

The answer begins in late 2023, when Yemeni Houthi militants started attacking commercial vessels in the Red Sea. The Houthis, an armed group aligned with Iran, said the strikes were retaliation for Israel's military campaign in Gaza. Shipowners responded by abandoning the Red Sea and routing around Africa instead. That alone wasn't surprising – companies routinely avoid war zones. What's surprising is what happened next.

A ceasefire eventually halted the immediate fighting in Gaza. The United States and Israel launched military strikes against Iran beginning February 28, 2026, targeting the Houthis' main sponsor. By traditional logic, that combination – ceasefire plus decisive military action – should have brought ships streaming back to Suez. It didn't. Tanker traffic to the Red Sea did make a 'tentative' return in late 2025, but the Houthis have not taken any significant action during the latest conflict. Even so, container giant Hapag-Lloyd told customers it had attempted 'first cautious attempts' to return to Suez but 'had to stop'. Bulk-grain carriers also peaked on the Cape route in mid-March, only marginally below a previous high in July 2024.

Here's the catch: shipping is a business, and businesses serve customers. Hapag-Lloyd's chief executive Rolf Habben Jansen explained that clients now value supply-chain stability over saving money or time. The longer Cape route is more expensive – freight rates climbed from about \$2,500 per 40-foot container to roughly \$3,000 in mid-March before settling around \$2,700 – but those costs are predictable. A missile attack is not. Customers, in effect, are paying a premium for boredom.

The ripple effects are visible across southern Africa. Average container arrivals at South Africa's five main ports – Maputo, Durban, Port Elizabeth (Gqeberha), Cape Town and Walvis Bay – are up 21% since the first strikes against Iran. The week of April 6 saw the highest arrivals yet, 71% above pre-conflict weekly averages. The reason isn't a sudden boom in African manufacturing; it's logistics. Longer voyages mean more refuelling stops and more demand for port services. According to supply-chain intelligence firm Project44, this resulted in 'much higher traffic and an increase in refuelling at southern African ports.'

The broader lesson is about how supply chains remember. A waterway as critical as Suez – through which roughly 12% of global trade once flowed – cannot simply switch back on the day a ceasefire is signed. Shipping contracts, insurance policies, and routing decisions all carry inertia. As Habben Jansen put it, the longer voyage 'resulted in higher costs', but customers preferred stability anyway. For now, Africa's coastline is the global economy's safer bet.

2. Explanation

When Yemeni rebels started firing missiles at cargo ships in 2023, they didn't just disrupt one waterway – they redrew the map of global trade, possibly for years.

What's Going On?

Sea traffic around the Cape of Good Hope – the southern tip of Africa – hit a record high in mid-April 2026. Tanker volume measured by ship capacity reached an all-time peak in the week of April 13, according to data firm Vescon Nautical.

The reason: shipping companies are still avoiding the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, the much shorter route between Europe and Asia. They started detouring in late 2023 after Houthi militants in Yemen began attacking vessels, claiming retaliation for Israel's war in Gaza. Even after a ceasefire and a US-Israeli military campaign against Iran (which backs the Houthis), most shippers are staying on the longer route.

How To Think About It

Imagine a highway shortcut that saves you two weeks of driving – but there's a small chance someone shoots at your car. Even if the shooting stops, you might keep taking the long way for a while, just to be sure.

- It's like when a restaurant has a food-poisoning scandal: even after they fix everything, customers stay away for months. Trust takes far longer to rebuild than to lose.
- Or think of airlines after 9/11 – security and route decisions made in a crisis became the new normal long after the immediate threat faded.

Key Things To Know

- The Cape route adds at least two weeks to an Asia-Europe voyage compared with going through the Suez Canal.
- Freight rates around the Cape jumped from about \$2,500 per 40-foot container to roughly \$3,000 in mid-March 2026, then settled back to around \$2,700.
- Hapag-Lloyd's CEO Rolf Habben Jansen said the company tried returning to Suez but 'had to stop' – clients prefer reliability over speed.
- African ports are booming as a side effect: arrivals at Cape Town, Durban, and other South African hubs are up 21% since the first strikes on Iran in February 2026.
- Most people assume that once a conflict ends, trade snaps back instantly. It doesn't – supply chains have memory, and insurance costs, contracts, and routing decisions lock in for months or years.

Why It Matters

Almost everything you own – your phone, sneakers, even some of your food – moved across an ocean on a container ship. When ships take a longer route, costs ripple through to retail prices, delivery times, and ultimately inflation. For students thinking about careers in logistics, international business, energy, or geopolitics, this is a live case study in how a regional conflict can rewire global commerce in real

time.

The Bigger Picture

The Suez Canal opened in 1869 specifically to avoid the Cape route – it was one of the great engineering shortcuts of the modern era. If shippers stay away for years, expect long-term winners (South African ports, alternative logistics hubs) and losers (Egypt, which collects billions in canal tolls). Watch whether insurance underwriters at Lloyd's of London lower Red Sea risk premiums – that's the real signal that traffic will return, not any politician's announcement.

3. Key Terms Glossary

Cape of Good Hope

The rocky headland at the southern tip of South Africa. Ships travelling between Europe and Asia round it when they cannot or will not use the Suez Canal.

Suez Canal

A man-made waterway in Egypt connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea, allowing ships to skip the long voyage around Africa. It carries roughly 12% of global trade in normal times.

Houthis

An armed political movement based in Yemen, aligned with Iran. They began attacking ships in the Red Sea in late 2023, saying it was in solidarity with Palestinians during the Gaza war.

Deadweight tonnage

A measure of how much weight a ship can safely carry, including cargo, fuel, and crew. Used here as a way to measure total shipping volume.

FEU (40-foot equivalent unit)

A standard size for measuring container shipping — one FEU is a single 40-foot-long shipping container. Freight rates are commonly quoted per FEU.

Freight rates

The price shippers charge to move cargo from one port to another. They rise when routes are longer, riskier, or in high demand.

Supply chain

The full sequence of steps — manufacturing, transport, warehousing, delivery — that gets a product from raw materials to your hands.

Proxy (in geopolitics)

A group or country that fights or acts on behalf of a more powerful sponsor. The Houthis are widely described as Iranian proxies, though they make their own decisions too.

4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

Circle the best answer for each question.

Q1. The passage primarily argues that:

- A) The Suez Canal has been permanently closed to commercial shipping.
- B) Shipping firms continue to avoid the Red Sea even after the immediate threat has eased.
- C) African ports are now more profitable than European ports overall.
- D) Iran has successfully blocked all Western trade with Asia.

Q2. According to the passage, freight rates around the Cape of Good Hope:

- A) Have fallen steadily since the start of the conflict in 2023.
- B) Rose to about \$3,000 per FEU in mid-March before easing to roughly \$2,700.
- C) Are now identical to pre-conflict Suez Canal rates.
- D) Doubled in a single week during April 2026.

Q3. The passage indicates that the Houthi attacks began as a response to:

- A) US sanctions imposed on Iran in February 2026.
- B) A dispute over Suez Canal transit fees charged by Egypt.
- C) Israel's military campaign in Gaza beginning in 2023.
- D) Competition from South African shipping companies.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'structural' most nearly means:

- A) Architectural or related to buildings.
- B) Deep-rooted and likely to persist over time.
- C) Temporary and easily reversed.
- D) Required by international law.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'tentative' most nearly means:

- A) Aggressive and forceful.
- B) Final and binding.
- C) Cautious and uncertain.
- D) Illegal under maritime rules.

Q6. Which inference about shipping companies' decision-making is best supported by the passage?

- A) They prioritise customer preference for predictable delivery over short-term cost savings.
- B) They are legally barred from using the Suez Canal until 2027.
- C) They only respond to direct government orders when choosing routes.
- D) They always pick the cheapest possible route regardless of risk.

Q7. The passage suggests that the surge in arrivals at South African ports is most directly a consequence of:

- A) New trade agreements signed between South Africa and China.
- B) Ships needing to refuel during longer Cape voyages.
- C) A decline in piracy off the East African coast.
- D) South African government subsidies to foreign shippers.

Q8. The author's tone in describing the shippers' return to Suez is best characterised as:

- A)** Openly sceptical and dismissive.
- B)** Measured and observational, noting hesitation.
- C)** Enthusiastic about a swift recovery.
- D)** Alarmed by an imminent crisis.

Q9. Which statement can most reasonably be inferred about the relationship between military action and shipping behaviour?

- A)** Military strikes against Iran caused an immediate full return to the Red Sea.
- B)** Direct military action does not automatically restore commercial confidence in a route.
- C)** Shipping companies coordinate directly with military commanders before each voyage.
- D)** The ceasefire in Gaza ended all shipping disruption within days.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A)** 'Yemeni Houthi militants started to attack vessels.'
- B)** 'Tanker traffic... reached a record high of 24mn deadweight tonnage.'
- C)** 'Freight rates on the routes around the Cape of Good Hope increased.'
- D)** 'The number of ships carrying bulk cargo such as grain also peaked.'

My Score: _____ / 10

5. Answer Key with Explanations

Q1. The passage primarily argues that:

Answer: B

B captures the central thesis: traffic around the Cape hit a record in April 2026 because shippers are choosing reliability over the shorter Suez route, even after a ceasefire and strikes on Iran. A is wrong (Trap C – true-sounding but unsupported; the canal is open, just under-used). SAT Tip: For 'primarily argues' questions, ask which option a one-sentence summary of the whole passage would include – not just one detail.

Q2. According to the passage, freight rates around the Cape of Good Hope:

Answer: B

The passage explicitly cites the rise from \$2,500 to about \$3,000 in mid-March, then a settle-back to around \$2,700 per FEU. D is the main trap (Trap B – uses passage vocabulary like 'April' and price movement but invents a doubling that isn't there). SAT Tip: When numbers appear in answer choices, locate the exact figures in the passage before choosing – don't trust your memory of 'roughly what it said'.

Q3. The passage indicates that the Houthi attacks began as a response to:

Answer: C

The passage states the Houthis began attacks 'in retaliation for Israel's assault on Gaza' in 2023. A is the trap (Trap A – right region, wrong direction of cause and effect; the Iran strikes came later, in February 2026, as a response, not a cause). SAT Tip: Watch the order of events carefully when a passage gives multiple dates – distractors often swap cause and effect.

Q4. As used in the passage, the word 'structural' most nearly means:

Answer: B

The passage describes a 'structural shift' towards the longer route – meaning a fundamental, lasting change, not a quick fix. A is the trap (Trap B – common-meaning trap; 'structural' often refers to buildings, but here it means systemic). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option into the sentence – only the option that preserves the original meaning is correct.

Q5. As used in the passage, the word 'tentative' most nearly means:

Answer: C

Tanker traffic 'had begun to make a tentative return' – meaning a hesitant, exploratory return, reinforced by the phrase 'first cautious attempts' later in the passage. B is the trap (Trap A – opposite meaning). SAT Tip: Look for nearby synonyms or repeated ideas in the passage; authors often echo a key word with a paraphrase that confirms its intended meaning.

Q6. Which inference about shipping companies' decision-making is best supported by the passage?

Answer: A

Hapag-Lloyd's CEO says they 'had to stop' returning to Suez, and the passage explicitly notes customers 'preferred to prioritise supply chain stability' even at higher cost. D is the trap (Trap C – sounds like a sensible business assumption in the real world, but contradicts the passage). SAT Tip: On inference questions, the right answer paraphrases something the passage says; wrong answers often state real-world generalisations the passage doesn't actually support.

Q7. The passage suggests that the surge in arrivals at South African ports is most directly a consequence of:

Answer: B

The passage links the 21% rise in arrivals to 'much higher traffic and an increase in refuelling at southern African ports' – a logistical consequence of longer voyages. A and D are Trap C distractors (real-world plausible but unsupported). SAT Tip: For cause-and-effect questions, the right answer is usually the mechanism the passage actually describes, not a more glamorous reason you might invent.

Q8. The author's tone in describing the shippers' return to Suez is best characterised as:

Answer: B

Words like 'tentative', 'cautious attempts', and 'had to stop' show the author reporting hesitation neutrally, without celebrating or panicking. C is the trap (Trap A – opposite of the cautious tone the author conveys). SAT Tip: Tone is set by the author's word choices, not by the topic. A story about danger can be told in a calm, observational tone – focus on the adjectives the writer picked.

Q9. Which statement can most reasonably be inferred about the relationship between military action and shipping behaviour?

Answer: B

Despite a ceasefire and strikes on Iran, Cape traffic hit a record – proving that military events alone don't quickly restore route confidence. A is the trap (Trap A – opposite direction; the passage shows the strikes did NOT bring shippers back). SAT Tip: When a passage describes an action followed by an unexpected outcome, the inference is usually about that gap – what didn't happen that you'd expect to.

Q10. Which choice provides the BEST evidence for the answer to the previous question?

Answer: B

Option B directly shows that despite military action against Iran and a ceasefire, Cape traffic hit a record – the strongest evidence that military events didn't restore Red Sea confidence. C is the trap (Trap B – uses related vocabulary about the Cape but speaks to prices, not the cause-effect inference). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, first re-read the previous answer in your head, then pick the quote that most directly proves THAT specific claim – not just any quote on the same topic.