

Latitude 38

SOUTH SEAS RENDEZVOUS

— TAHITI TOURISME CUP '07

excerpted from: AUGUST 2007 VOL # 362

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As the fleet's lead boat drew close to Moorea's outer reef, two dugout canoes approached, hailing the crew with a long, low blast from a conch shell. Shirtless, tattooed men paddled closer, their chiseled physiques glistening in the Tahitian sunshine, while several beautiful young *vahines* wearing garlands of fragrant flowers atop their long flowing hair smiled and waved a warm welcome.

No, we're not recounting the arrival of legendary explorers from centuries past. This was the scene as the second annual Tahiti Tourisme Cup fleet arrived at Moorea last month for a day-long celebration of friendship and fun.

Although nearly 250 years have passed since the French explorer Louis

Antoine de Bougainville first described these islands as "an earthly paradise where men and women live happily in innocence," the fundamental nature of both the Tahitian people and their dramatically sculpted islands remains the same today. True, luxury hotels and gourmet restaurants can now be found in some parts of these islands,

but craggy, jungle-covered peaks still tower above tranquil lagoons, while exotic flowering plants and fruit trees still grow profusely throughout the lowlands. The Tahitian people's long association with France has given them modern conveniences such as cars, motorbikes and cell

phones, but they have never abandoned their rich cultural heritage or their genuinely friendly nature.

With this fact in mind, The Tahiti Tourisme Cup was designed with the dual purpose of welcoming visiting sailors and introducing them to traditional Polynesian music, dance, cuisine and watersports.

Because Pacific Puddle Jumpers — as we like to call them — converge on French Polynesia from several points in Mexico, as well as from Panama and Ecuador, and they all travel at their own pace once they get underway, choosing an ideal date for a celebratory rendezvous was a challenge. July 7 proved to be the best possible compromise. By that time most visiting cruisers had arrived in the Tahitian island chain, having al-



Left: "Pinch me. I think I'm dreaming!" Handsome Tahitians draped in fragrant flowers paddle out to welcome the fleet. Below: The 30-meter 'Dharma' approaches Moorea's fringing reef. Right: Even when you call it a 'rally' every skipper does his best to be first across the finish line.



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ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE/ANDY

ready explored the Marquesas and Tuamotus. The date also coincided with the annual Heiva festivities, a month-long celebration of Polynesian culture which showcases traditional music, dance and athletics.

Of the two dozen boats represented at this year's Tourisme Cup, some had been planning to attend even before setting sail from Mexico, as representatives of Tahiti Tourisme had flown out specially to invite them, while co-hosting Puddle Jump kickoff parties with *Latitude 38* at both Puerto Vallarta and Zihuatanejo. Other entrants, including Europeans and Brazilians, who'd jumped off for the islands from the Panama Canal,

only learned about the Cup at Papeete's Marina Taina, where the opening ceremonies were held.

After everyone had a chance to register and grab a free event T-shirt and a complimentary Hinano beer or cocktail, event coordinator Stephanie Betz — a French sailor who has adopted Tahiti as her home — detailed the event's schedule: there would be a music and dance program that night, a sailing "rally" to Moorea the next

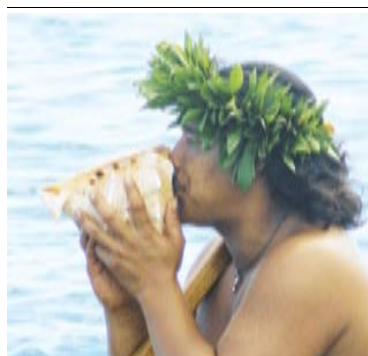
pirogue to quickly slide ahead of the fleet, as if sailing in its own special wind. The other standout was the Cayman Islands-registered Farr 30-meter sloop *Dharma* which easily outran the rest of the fleet — especially after the wind picked up — flying only a massive light-air genoa.

The fleet's crossing was specifically intended to be a "rally" rather than a race. But whenever any two sailboats find themselves in sight of each other on the same patch of water, their skippers instinctively do everything they can to out-sail each other. Such was the case here, and the lighthearted competition added to the fun.

One of the most glorious things about sailing in Tahiti — besides the clear, warm water and moderate breezes

— is that ever-changing panoramas are always laid out before you as you leave one island and approach another. Lying ten miles in the distance, Moorea at first appeared as a wide patch of deep green with a cluster of cottonball clouds glued to its lofty peaks. As the fleet drew closer, its deep valleys and jagged pinnacles became more clearly defined, affirming the

The highlight of the day was teaming up with broad-shouldered Tahitians for a series of canoe races in the Moorea lagoon.



morning, followed by a traditional Polynesian lunch ashore, outrigger canoe races with mixed crews of cruisers and locals, an awards ceremony and another dance show featuring Moorean kids. With no charge to partici-

pants (apart from the lunch), the visiting cruisers were thrilled to be honored with such elaborate preparations. After all, sailors have been migrating across the Pacific for decades, but to our knowledge no government has ever before rolled out the welcome mat like this.

Those who hadn't yet attended one of the big Heiva dance shows downtown got their first look at Polynesian music and dance at the Marina Taina party. Accompanied by the sweet strumming of ukuleles and guitars, a visiting troupe of dancers from the Tuamotus sang, danced and chanted in the centuries-old tradition of their ancestors.

Although skies were clear the next morning, winds were uncommonly light at the start of the rally to Moorea. There was, however, enough breeze for most boats to set spinnakers, and for a gaff-rigged outrigger



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oft-heard comment that Moorea is one of the most beautiful isles in the South Pacific.

"**I**a Orana! Maeva!" cried the Tahitian greeters from their outrigger canoes as the fleet arrived at Passe de Vaiare, a cut through the island's encircling reef. Those cruisers who'd done their home-

work knew these typical greetings meant "Hello! Welcome!" in Tahitian.

Ashore, at an idyllic beach called Plage Temae, tents and tables were set up where representatives from Tourisme gave out literature and advice, staff from the Marine Area Management office explained their efforts to protect the ecology of the lagoon, local growers

offered tastings of local jams and fruit juice, and associates of award-winning jewelry artist Tahia Collins gave insights into shopping for black pearls.

It took at least 20 feet of table space to lay out all the courses of the elaborate "Maa Tahiti" buffet, which included delicious barbecued pork, fresh-caught fish, yams, taro, breadfruit, rice and several



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types of *poisson crue* (a delicacy of raw fish in coconut milk).

No sooner had the crews begun to digest this feast than the main event of the afternoon began: a series of races across the lagoon in six-person outrigger canoes. It would have been laughably unfair to pit cruisers against local men and women — even *elderly* local men and

women — as paddling is a favorite Tahitian sport practiced by many islanders since childhood. Instead, three cruisers from each boat joined three Tahitians, with an islander always in the sternmost steering position and also in the bow, giving signals to the neophytes when to switch their paddles to the opposite side.

Even with the help of accomplished local paddlers, some teams veered far off the rhumbline of the half-mile course, and there were more than a few collisions. Needless to say, though, it was all great fun.

This writer was shanghaied to join Eric and Gisela Gosch of the SoCal-based Island Packet 420 *Far Niente*, as they had no additional crew. Despite our



Clockwise from upper left: The 'Adelia' crew was all smiles; Cap'n Charlie of 'Cyan' went home with a black pearl for his paddling prowess; the 'Sol Searchers' (right) hitched a ride on 'Southwind III'; 'Far Niente' gets a warm welcome; Cap'n Richmond, the pirogue skipper, and friend do a victory dance; canoes prepare to race; the happy 'Dharma' crew; musicians serenade young dancers on the beach.

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best efforts to steer clear, our nearest competitor collided with us seconds after the start, leaving his outrigger riding up over our bow, and costing us precious seconds. Once we broke free, though, we eventually caught the leaders at the turn, then overtook them during the final sprint to the finish. Although we were immensely proud of ourselves, we undoubtedly owed our win to the three

Tahitian piroques are fast and fun. With their light weight, shallow draft and relatively large sail plan, they're ideal for inter-island travel.

broad-shouldered young men who served as our mentors.

At the brief, low-key awards ceremony which followed, winners of the rally and canoe races received shimmering black pearls, and all participating boats received a shell memento, etched in gold

with the event logo.

Afterwards, as the sun sank low in the west and a gentle breeze wafted across the beach, a troupe of young dancers arrived to give a splendid performance at the water's edge, eventually seeking dance partners from among the cruisers as a finale.

"**W**hat a fabulous day!" yelled one skipper as he dinghied back to his boat that evening. For him and all the others who participated, the Tourisme Cup served as an unexpected reward for having crossed thousands of miles of open water — as if simply being able to call these waters home for a few months wasn't reward enough!

— latitude/at

A similar event will be held on June 28 next year. Its name will be changed to the Tahiti-Moorea Sailor's Rendezvous to more accurately describe its purpose. We heartily encourage all 2008 Pacific Puddle Jumpers to attend. See www.tahiti-tourisme.pf for extensive info on the islands of Tahiti.

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