
Latitude 38

WIND, FIRE & RAIN —

TAHITI-MOOREA SAILING RENDEZVOUS

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According to Polynesian legend, when strong winds blow across the face of Moorea's sacred Mount Rotui, they announce the arrival of special guests. We don't know how the ancients defined "special," but if their concept included sailors who've come from afar to soak in the magic of these fabled isles, then the arrival of the 2010 Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendezvous fits the folklore perfectly.



Keith and Shirley were eager to visit Tahiti, but never expected a welcome like this.

Driven by the strongest winds in the event's 5-year history, the fleet flew across the channel from Tahiti's Papeete Harbor to Moorea's Opunohu Bay in record time. In fact, with beam winds gusting to 30 knots, every boat seemed to be sailing faster than its theoretical hull speed, and at least a dozen skippers reported that they'd hit their fastest speeds ever.

"We came in dead last in the yacht race, and last in the foot race," said Keith Bowen of the South Africa-based Lavranos 40 *The Road*. "But we still had a fabulous time." And no wonder. We

can't think of another cruising destination in the world where cruisers get such a generous welcome. This year's fleet of salty passage-makers was showered with kindness and treated as VIPs, from the moment they arrived at the Rendezvous Village on Papeete's downtown quay June 18, to the final dance show two

The whole fleet broke out of the island's wind shadow and shifted into overdrive as winds increased into the mid-20s.

days later beneath the coconut palms of Moorea's idyllic Mareto Beach.

Why all the fuss? First and foremost, French Polynesians — who seem to be an innately friendly people — love to expose visitors to their highly-revered cultural traditions in the realms of music, dance, sport and cuisine. Secondly, the local government has come to realize that visiting sailors are a small but important part of their overall tourism picture. After all, no other niche group spends money throughout the islands of this French territory's vast archipelagos.

With the worldwide recession still plaguing tourism all over the world, it's a refreshing irony that more cruisers seem to be arriving in Tahiti than ever before. *Latitude's* Pacific Puddle Jump Rally alone had 217 entrants, and the 65-boat rendezvous set a record as French

Blasting to the finish. It's hard to imagine a more idyllic anchorage than the lagoon off Mareto Beach, beneath sacred Mount Rotui.

Polynesia's largest sailing event ever!

The brainchild of longtime Tahiti resident Stephanie Betz, the rendezvous is supported by the Port of Papeete, Tahiti Tourisme and several other partners, including *Latitude 38*.

For 15 years we've been reporting on the annual cruiser migration from the West Coast of the Americas to French Polynesia — and hosting bon voyage parties on the front end. But it wasn't until the rendezvous concept took shape that arriving cruisers had a forum in which to celebrate their successful 3,000-mile crossings from the mainland.

Each year a disparate fleet of Puddle Jumpers sets sail from many points along the West Coast. The largest numbers jump off from Puerto Vallarta and Panama. While en route to the islands, they share anecdotes and weather info via high frequency radio nets, but it isn't until the rendezvous that many of them finally meet face to face.



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ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE / ANDY

In the Tahitian isles, traditional music and dance are deeply revered customs that are passed from generation to generation.

Several days before this year's event, fleet members converged on the docks of the downtown quay — which are gated and guarded 24/7 — filling them to capacity. Impressed, Port of Papeete General Manager Patrick Bordet announced that he'll add more docks next year, and he even has plans to build a sailor's bath house with a laundry and wi-fi.

At the Village Friday afternoon, entrants from more than a dozen countries received their welcome packets — complete with two free T-shirts and other goodies — and were reminded that they definitely did not want to miss the

reception that evening, hosted by the mayor's office.

At 6 p.m. sweet Tahitian melodies drifted on the breeze through the harbor, as a Tahitian band led fleet members along the quay and a few blocks inland to Papeete's classic, colonial-style town hall (*Mairie de Papeete*). Inside, they were adorned with fragrant flower leis, welcomed by a variety of dignitaries, offered Tahiti's signature Hinano beer, and white wine produced on a Tuamotu atoll, and offered an elegant spread of hors d'oeuvres.

"What did we do to deserve all this?" asked one gray-bearded cruiser, obviously blown away by the elaborate effort. The highlight, however, was an eye-popping dance show accompanied by a troupe of six versatile musicians who set the mood

with their ukuleles, guitars and hand-made wooden drums.

Winds were deceptively light outside the harbor mouth Saturday morning as the fleet jockeyed for position at the start of the 18-mile race/rally to Moorea. Within minutes, the 40-ft X Yacht *Exabyte*, with the Danish Ernst family aboard, walked away from the fleet as if they were motorsailing, while many boats wallowed in light, fluky air. "We came so close to stalling completely," said Jim Milski of the Schionning 48 cat *Sea Level*, "that we almost started slipping backwards."

A couple of miles out, however, the whole fleet broke out of the island's wind shadow and shifted into overdrive as winds increased into the mid-20s, just aft of the beam. All along the course, the smaller boats were nearly broaching as the prevailing swells hit them beam-on. But as many skippers confided later, no one wanted to be the first to reef.

Somewhere in mid-channel, Frank and Karen Taylor's St. Francis 50 cat *Tahina* broke ahead of the well-sailed X Yacht and set a daunting pace for the other multihulls. But neither *Sea Level* nor Steve May's Corsair 41 cat *Endless Summer* was about to give up the fight.

As the three fast cats arrived along the coast of Moorea, winds began gusting to 30. At one point *Endless Summer* got going so fast — 17+ knots — that her rapidly spinning prop "bump started" her engine.

"We were going 10 to 14 knots," Steve recalls, "when *Sea Level* passed us as if we were standing still!" From the first

The 'Bubble's crew serves as evidence that not all cruisers are old and gray. The fleet encompassed all ages.



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point of land to the finish line at the entrance channel to Opunohu, she and *Tahina* were in an all-out drag race, with *Sea Level*, the eventual victor, clocking a record speed of 19.3 knots!

With the fleet tucked in behind the outer bay's long reef, there was plenty of time for the adrenaline to dissipate

before Moorean drummers summoned everyone ashore for a splendid kids' dance show and Tahitian barbecue that lasted well into the evening. It was there, while watching a series of short educational videos, that we learned Opunohu's entrance, named *Passe Terau*, means the place where the four winds meet. It

certainly seemed well-named, as strong winds whistled through the anchorage most of the night.

It was a different story at dawn, however. As predicted, the passing weather system gave way to heavy overcast and occasional downpours. But few were dissuaded from coming ashore for the



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ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE / ANDY EXCEPT AS NOTED

variety of traditional Polynesian sports that had been scheduled, which were not to be missed — especially the six-person outrigger canoe races.

With accomplished local racers seated in the bow and stern, teams of four sailors climbed into the four middle seats of each sleek canoe, and paddled as though

their lives depended on it during a series of heats, with four or five canoes in a line. Even for those who inexplicably capsized — in one case, prior to the start — it was a heart-pounding experience that will not soon be forgotten.

While cruisers of all ages learned the proper technique for husking and harvesting the meat of coconuts, other games were played whose roots go back

Top row, left to right: The 'Furthur' crew psychs up for the canoe race; extracting coconut meat the island way; sweet Tahitian melodies; an eco-friendly 'chapeau'; tug-of-war tussle. Middle: "Hit the coconut, not my hand!"; mid-channel knockdown; shakin' it like a Tahitian; canoe race conquerers. Bottom: Deceptively light winds at the start; learning to weave; bringing home the bananas.



JULIE TURPIN

TAHITI-MOOREA SAILING RENDEZVOUS

centuries. Tug-of-war was a big hit, as was the fruit carrier's race, where runners must circle a short course carrying a staff weighted with stalks of bananas at each end. As many contestants found out, it's a lot harder than it looks, especially when it's raining.

More than a dozen classical Polynesian dishes were sampled that afternoon by those who opted to expand their culinary horizons with a traditional *Maa* lunch — eaten without utensils, as Tahitian forefathers did. The list of menu items included roast pork, taro, *poi*, pumpkin, a mixture of chicken and spinach, roasted breadfruit, sweet pineapple and delicious *poisson cru* — fresh fish marinated in coconut milk.

At the awards ceremony, prizes included hand-carved hardwood trophies, and every boat took home a polished mother-of-pearl shell, engraved with the rendezvous's distinctive logo. Afterward, a final music and dance performance dazzled the crowd yet again. And as always, the lovely Tahitian girls and buff, tattooed men sought out dance partners from the fleet. It's a rare cruiser who can



Don't even think about trying this at home. The fire-dancers' stunning performance gave extra sparkle to the final dance show.

shake their hips and shuffle their feet like an islander. But it was all in good fun, and they all left the dance floor smiling ear to ear.

The capper was a trio of fire dancers

who stunned the crowd with their dangerous antics — twirling flaming batons in unison, licking the flames with their tongues and more. Although genuinely impressive, that's one sport we're sure none of the sailors in attendance would dare to imitate.

Based on the effusive compliments from many participants, it's probably safe to say this year's Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendezvous was a high point of the season for all who attended. And with any luck, it will continue for many years to come. As the name implies, it established not only a gathering point for westbound passage-makers, but served as a window on Polynesian cultural traditions that many solitary cruisers might never have experienced otherwise. And it was a boatload of fun!

— *latitude/andy*

Readers — By the end of the summer info about the 2011 event should be posted at www.pacificpuddlejumps.com.