

TAHITI-MOOREA SAILING RENDEZ-VOUS —

What fun is completing a major accomplishment, if you don't take time to celebrate?

As if to answer that very question, 11 years ago our friends in Tahiti created



When asked to dance by a beautiful Tahitian, Allen Valkie of the Wisconsin-based Leopard 40 cat 'Nauti-Nauti' didn't hesitate.

the annual Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendez-vous, which has the dual purpose of welcoming the newly arrived fleet of international cruisers — which we call Pacific Puddle Jumpers — and introducing them to time-honored Polynesian cultural traditions in music, dance, sport and cuisine.

This year's event, June 24-26, was the biggest ever, drawing 66 cruising boats from nine countries, with roughly 200 salty sailors participating, including a couple dozen kids.

Ever since we coined the phrase Pacific Puddle Jump two decades ago, we've dedicated lots of effort and ink to reporting on this annual westward migration of cruisers, as we consider the 3,000-mile nonstop passage from Mexico to the Marquesas — or 4,000 from Panama — to be

Neil and Jeanette Hay's Freemantle, Australia-based Beneteau 47 'Echo Echo' sails into Cook's Bay under cloudy skies.

a pretty big deal. At our annual sendoff parties every March in Mexico (at the Vallarta YC) and Panama (at both the Balboa YC and the Shelter Island Marina), we're always fascinated to meet these adventurous offshore sailors. And we're always amazed by the diversity of their backgrounds. This year several were on their second lap around the planet, while others had just bought their boats a few months earlier. But they all seemed to share a deep fascination with the South Pacific islands that they were

about to explore — especially the storied isles of French Polynesia.

As in the past, this year's Rendez-vous began in downtown Papeete Friday afternoon in the plaza outside the Tahiti Tourisme office, a stone's throw from the city's one-year-old marina.

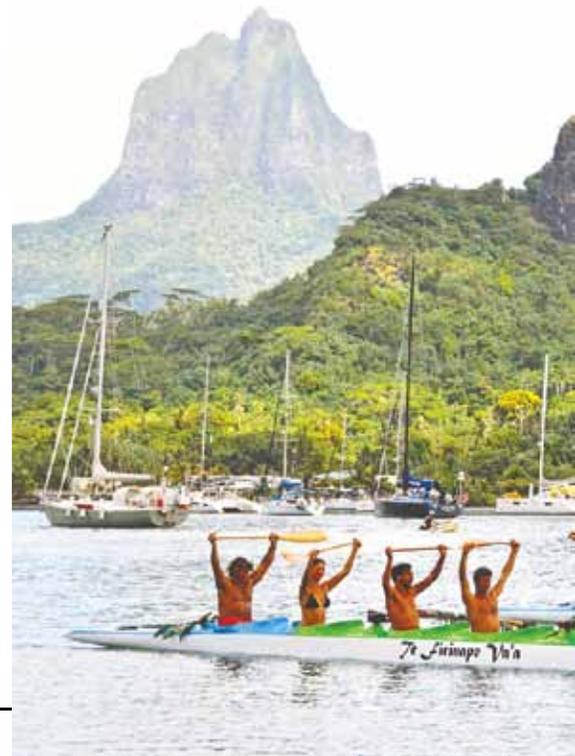
After months spent at sea and in the company of only a few other boat crews, many old friends had fun getting reconnected, while new acquaintances compared crossing tales. Meanwhile, event partners from New Zealand, Australia and Fiji set up information tables in the adjoining garden. They'd flown in specifically to educate fleet members about the attractions of their home waters, including info on long-term berthing, repair services, immigration formalities and inland touring.

Our longtime Rendez-vous partner Stephanie Betz — who dreamed up the Rendez-vous concept years ago — kicked off the afternoon's activities with an impressively detailed chart briefing on cruising Tahiti, its sister island, Moorea, and the five islands of the Leewards: Raiatea, Taha'a, Huahine, Bora Bora and

Maupiti. Not only has she sailed these waters for 20 years, but her company, Archipelagoes, is tasked with keeping local charts up to date for the bareboat charter companies. So her attentive audience members were scribbling notes as fast as they could.

We helped out by explaining the ultra-simple starting sequence for the next day's 15-mile rally/race to Moorea's majestic Cook's Bay. Since few in the fleet were diehard racers — and all of them were sailing their 'houses' — we assured them the starting line would be long and the start time would be obvious: "When we say, 'Go!' on the VHF."

Fleet members then assembled in the adjoining garden, where they were warmly welcomed by Minister of Tourism Jean-Christophe Bouissou. Director



A WELL-EARNED CELEBRATION

of Tahiti Tourisme Paul Sloan and the mayors of Papeete and Moorea were also in attendance, leading us to believe they recognize that visiting cruisers comprise an important niche in their tourism economy.

After a large, heavily tattooed dance troupe from the Marquesas appeared, all the skippers and first mates were called up for a traditional blessing of the fleet by the group's chieftain — in Marquesan dialect. We had no idea what he was saying, of course, but by the intensity of his delivery we knew his sentiment was deadly serious.

The music and dance show that followed was both beautiful and sensual. And by the enthusiasm of the cruisers in attendance, we could tell this was probably their very first exposure to one of Polynesia's most highly revered traditions. A cocktail party followed, featuring wines made from grapes grown on the atolls of the Tuamotus.

Thanks to the influence of El
Left: The Mexico-based crew of 'Avatar' was thrilled to enter Cook's Bay. Below: Paddles up and ready to rock. Right: Puddle Jumpers record the moment on the lawn of the Bali Hai.

Niño, and perhaps other factors, this year's fleet experienced more than the usual amount of squally, unsettled weather, in addition to occasional calms, on their passages from the West Coast of the Americas.

It was a bitter irony that while several boats missed the event because they were held up in the Tuamotus (250 miles away) by rough weather, in Tahiti

"We're just thrilled that you've brought us to this amazing place."

the trade winds shut down almost completely prior to Saturday's scheduled race/rally to Moorea.

With less than five knots of breeze blowing at the appointed start time, we reluctantly instituted a 'rolling start',

With extra muscle provided by Tahitian hosts, Kiwi and Fijian partners paddled to a hard-earned victory in the final heat.

where all boats were allowed to motor down the rhumbline until the breeze filled in. Sadly, it never did, except under a few small squalls, so an hour and a half later we officially canceled the race — a first in the Rendez-vous' history.

No one seemed to care in the least, though. As one skipper put it, "Who cares about racing? We're just thrilled that you've brought us to this amazing place."

Cook's Bay really is breathtakingly beautiful — in any weather. And we couldn't have a better partner there than the Club Bali Hai Hotel, which lies right along the edge of the anchorage. Former Southern Californian Jay Carlisle and two buddies bought and developed it many years ago and, being a sailor him-



self, Jay is always thrilled to meet our well-traveled fleet and hear about their adventures.

After a few hours of playing and relaxing in the anchorage, fleet members came ashore in the late afternoon to schmooze over cocktails. Then the event's various South Pacific partners each gave 10-minute presentations about their home waters that were so packed with useful, up-to-date info that

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many sailors probably wished they'd recorded it.

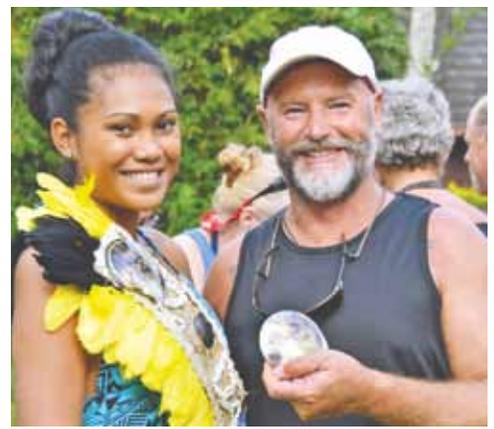
Dinner was served afterward, and as twilight set in a fantastic dance troupe arrived to entertain the sailors with a series of exotic dances, accompanied, of course, by ukuleles, hardwood drums and singing. The finale was a group of bare-chested fire dancers who dazzled the crowd with their seemingly dangerous antics.

Not long after dawn on Sunday, a member of the event staff went from boat to boat in the anchorage, quietly dropping fresh baguettes in each cockpit. It was an impressive gesture, and thoroughly French.

Traditional Polynesian sports were the main focus of Sunday's activities,

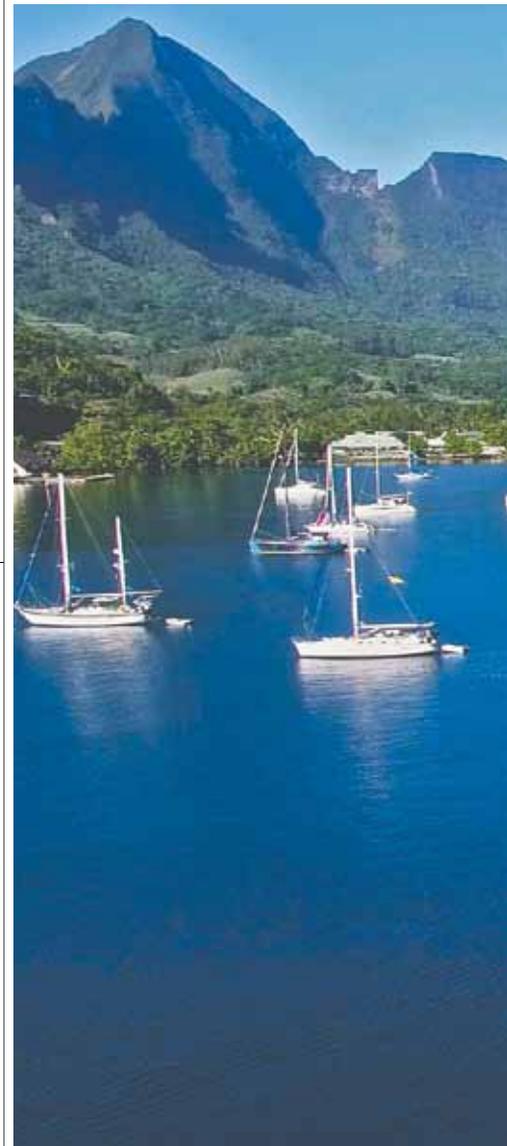
and most fleet members were eager to participate. The highlight, as always, was a series of six-person outrigger canoe races staged on the lagoon, right in front of the Bali Hai. Although few of these sailors had ever paddled an outrigger before, 40 teams signed up to compete in a round robin-style elimination. The local canoe club lined up five brightly painted canoes on the beach and gave the eager cruisers a quickie paddling lesson in both French and English. With an accomplished Tahitian paddler in the front position 'calling tactics' and another in the stern seat steering, the four middle seats were taken by paddlers of all ages and physiques.

As the non-racers cheered from the waterside deck of the Bali Hai, the high-



Rijnhard Keet of the Roberts 55 'Enchanter' poses with Miss Moorea. Every skipper got an etched and polished clam shell as a memento.

energy battles began. Each heat took the armada of canoes roughly 100 yards down the lagoon, around a buoy and back again. It became obvious during the first heat that turning on a dime is not



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ALL PHOTOS LATITUDE / ANDY EXCEPT AS NOTED

an option in a 30-ft outrigger. Gaining an advantage had almost as much to do with how you rounded the turning mark as with muscle and paddling technique.

In the end, a combined team of Kiwi and Fijian event partners took top honors. But it's probably fair to say that every paddler was glad to have given it their best effort, especially since it would be hard to find a race course more dramatic than this one — surrounded by jagged, volcano-formed peaks — anywhere on the planet.

Our old friend Mako was on hand to guide the foreign sailors through other activities on the lawn of the Bali Hai. An

affable bear of a man, he would be intimidating by his size if he wasn't so friendly and funny: "Years ago Tahitians used to eat white people. But not anymore. Too much cholesterol."

He and a gentle Tahitian named Jordan oversaw other traditional sports competitions including stone lifting, tug of war, coconut husking and the ancient fruit-carrier's race. When Tahitians do this, each competitor runs around a course carrying a heavy wooden pole with a huge stock of bananas tied to the each end. But our hosts gave the visiting cruisers a break: the poles they carried were skinny and relatively light, with

only a couple of coconuts tied to each end. Rather than asking them to run a long distance, each member of a four-person team ran a short lap, then handed off their cargo as if passing a baton in a traditional relay race. Sounds simple enough, right? But it always turns out to be hilarious, as competitors stumble, drop their poles, or simply run out of steam. All in all, these games are always great fun, and most who attend the Rendez-vous are inspired to participate.

By the middle of the day many sailors had worked up an appetite, which was a good thing because our hosts had prepared a traditional Tahitian luncheon that introduced them to a wide variety of favorite Polynesian dishes including sashimi, poisson cru (a sort of Polyn-

Clockwise from upper left: Cruiser kids won the tug of war; the music and dance troupe was stellar; the largest fleet you'll ever see in Cook's Bay; sampling 'poisson cru'; a cruiser kid shoulders the lifting stone; the fruit-carriers race; playing with fire.



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sian ceviche), poi, taro, roast pork, and delicious island-grown pineapple for dessert.

In the afternoon, Mako gave a comical demonstration of how to tie a *pareu* (sarong) on a lovely *vahine* (woman) — and how not to. Once again, he got everybody chuckling.

The finale of the afternoon was another sensual, high-energy dance show, where cruisers were invited to join in. They did their best to keep up, but probably all came away with a greater appreciation of how physically difficult some of the classic moves are — especially the rapid-fire hip gyrations that the female dancers seem to do almost effortlessly.

The Rendez-vous ended with a short and simple awards ceremony during which the top three paddling teams received a hand-carved hardwood plaque



Probably no Rendez-vous'ers were more excited to try their hand at paddling than these cruiser kids.

commemorating their hard-fought success, and every skipper got a polished black pearl shell that was engraved with the event logo — a classy memento of the event that's small enough to display aboard a cruising boat.

Although most participating sailors had already been in French Polynesia for a month or two, the Rendez-vous

undoubtedly gave them insights into Polynesian culture beyond what they'd previously experienced. Catching up with fellow cruisers was a bonus.

We're proud to be associated with this ambitious event, as we believe it's a win-win for all concerned. So if cruising Tahiti is in your future plans, be sure to include a Rendez-vous on your 'must-do' list.

Tentative dates for the 2017 event are June 23-25

— **latitude** / andy

Next month, look for our comprehensive recap on the 2016 Pacific Puddle Jump, including crossing data and cruiser insights.

Special thanks to Air Tahiti Nui, Tahiti Tourisme, Port Autonome de Papeete, the Club Bali Hai, and our other South Pacific partners for their support, which helped make the Rendez-vous — and this article — possible.