

# TAHITI-MOOREA SAILING RENDEZ-VOUS —

"*Maeval*!" said a smiling Tahitian girl as the foreign sailors stepped ashore at Cook's Bay. "Welcome to Moorea." With that age-old greeting, she offered each new arrival a fragrant *tiare* flower

Polynesian islanders feel for their cultural traditions.

With that in mind, the Rendez-vous was conceived 13 years ago with a dual purpose: to introduce visiting sailors to long-held traditions in music, dance, sport and cuisine, and to celebrate their safe arrival in the French Polynesian archipelagos. Each year that celebration is well earned because regardless of where on the West Coast of the Americas these voyagers start from, the Pacific Puddle Jump passage to Polynesia requires at least 3,000 miles of nonstop sailing before arriving at the first possible landfall.

Due to the vagaries of weather and the unpredictability of breakdowns, one of the hardest things for a cruising sailor to do is show up somewhere by a particular time and date. Yet a near-record 56 boatloads of international cruisers turned up in Tahiti in late June, having vowed months earlier not to miss the Rendez-vous, as it enjoys a stellar reputation among veteran SoPac cruisers. Their homeports were in 12 different countries — including China for the first time. And the

***The sleek Dutch trimaran 'Yana' glides into Cook's Bay on a light breeze. She finished second behind Sausalito-based 'Defiance'.***

backgrounds of participating crews varied as widely as the boats they sailed on.

We'd met many of them in March at our Puddle Jump send-off events in Mexico and Panama, so it was great to catch up with them and hear their stories.

*For many crews it was an odd feeling to be 'racing their houses'.*

Ironically, several crews claimed that the worst conditions they faced on the entire 4,000-mile crossing from Panama was the two-day hop from the Tuamotus Archipelago to Tahiti, due to a passing front. And one crew reported having to tow their heavy cruiser with their dinghy on the final miles into Papeete Harbor in order to make the event after their engine's gearbox seized up on approach to the island. (Look for our complete Pacific Puddle Jump recap article next month.)

Having staged Rendez-vous events for the past 13 years, we and our Tahitian partners — led by the Archipelagos organization — have refined a three-day schedule that's fun for all ages, while also highly informative.

On Friday afternoon, June 22, fleet members gathered in downtown Papeete



***Dancing on the Papeete quay. The visiting cruisers quickly learned that French Polynesians take great pride in their cultural heritage.***

to place behind the ear in the traditional manner. "On the left side if you are in love," she explained, "and on the right if you are, well, available."

Although this simple gesture was a minor element of the three-day Tahiti-Moorea Sailing Rendez-vous (June 22-24), its heartfelt delivery was symbolic of the centuries-old reverence that French



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(capital city of this French overseas territory) at the quayside Marina de Papeete, where the banners of many supporting organizations marked the venue. Among them were marine industry reps from Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand who'd flown in to give the westbound cruisers an advance look at the services and attractions their island nations have to offer.

After the Rendez-vous'ers had checked in and picked up their swag bags, the event's mastermind, Stephanie Betz, gave a detailed chart briefing on cruising the Tahitian islands, and shared the plan for the next day's rally-race to Moorea.

Afterward, various government dignitaries and business leaders welcomed the fleet to their islands with sincerity. They all seemed to understand that although cruising sailors comprise a relatively small niche within the territory's overall tourism picture, they inject

**B**ecause most cruisers are not experienced racers, we always try to make Saturday's 15-mile rally-race to Cook's Bay. Moorea, as low on pressure and high on fun as possible. So this year, with very light air at the appointed starting time, we announced a "rolling start" via VHF, whereby all boats could motor down the rhumb line behind the committee boat until the wind picked up.

Only a half hour later a light breeze of 8 to 10 knots filled in from the southwest, and the low-key race was on. For many crews it was an odd feeling to be 'racing their houses', but most seemed to agree that it was a treat to be sailing in the company of so many international cruisers after weeks of sailing alone as they crossed the Pacific.

The breeze reduced to a whisper as the fleet sailed into the lee of Moorea's tall, volcanic peaks, but many crews resisted the temptation to drop out and motor. The Sausalito-based Cross 42 trimaran *Defiance* took line honors at the harbor mouth (also first among the multi-

*It's not always big, burly men who win the canoe races. Lightweight paddlers with polished technique sometimes take top honors.*

hulls), and the UK-based Skye 51 *Blue Zulu* was first among the monohulls. She was one of a half-dozen boats that had volunteered to carry several islanders aboard on the crossing, a cross-cultural experience that was fun for all.

That afternoon, fleet members came ashore at the newly named Aimeo Lodge (formerly Club Bali Hai), which is perched at the water's edge, adjacent to the anchorage. With fragrant *tiare* flowers lodged behind their ears, they mixed and mingled with old and new cruising friends. Some had gotten acquainted previously over the airwaves, via the Puddle Jump radio nets, but met face to face for the first time here.

As the sun began to sink, casting long shadows on the lagoon, the event staff doled out cocktails, including punch made with an award-winning rum that's distilled right there in Cook's Bay.

*Moorean kids from the local paddling club, Te Firinape Va'a, invited every cruiser kid to have a try at paddling their sleek canoes.*



*Clearly, learning to do the classic Tahitian dance moves could take years, but that didn't stop some cruisers from trying.*

a good deal of money into the local economy during their stays in the islands, and they are essentially the only group of visitors who spend money in remote atolls and anchorages.

As twilight set in, a high-energy music and dance performance wowed the audience of sailors — you might say it was the first course in what would be a weekend-long cultural feast. Afterward, a round of cocktails topped off the day, amid animated conversations about the highs and lows of their international cruising adventures.



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A series of brief, yet highly informative media presentations followed, put on by event supporters from Tonga, Fiji and New Zealand. Their fact-filled overviews seemed to have been greatly appreciated, as many in the audience had not yet begun to research the attractions and regulations of these 'downstream' destinations.

Afterward, fleet members gathered on the hotel's broad lawn to watch in awe as a muscular group of fire-dancers performed a tightly choreographed, highly acrobatic show with flaming batons — the ultimate illustration of, "Don't try this at home."

Dinner followed, along with more storytelling and reminiscing among both old friends and new acquaintances.

**T**he final day of the Rendez-vous

always focuses on traditional Polynesian sports, with the six-person outrigger canoe races being the ultimate highlight. On Sunday morning, combined crews from different boats concocted silly team names and registered them on a giant signboard beside the hotel's small, sandy beach. At the water's edge, kids from the local paddling club, Te Firinape Va'a, stood beside their six canoes, eager to introduce the foreign first-timers to their sport.

To avoid total chaos, accomplished Tahitian paddlers sat in the front and back seats of each canoe, and cruisers of all stripes filled in the four remaining paddling positions during a succession



**The big cat 'China Dream' didn't win the race, but her crew scored plenty of style points. This was the first entry ever from China.**

of half-mile sprints across the Cook's Bay lagoon. It all seemed a bit like a dream, especially since this famous inlet,



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which is ringed by dramatic tooth-like pinnacles, is considered one of the most idyllic anchorages in the entire South Pacific.

Twenty-four teams competed in the round-robin elimination series, which eventually led to semifinals, then the final. In the end, top honors went to the young crew of *Sea Casa*, a Hunter 31 out of Marina del Rey, who were thrilled by their victory, yet exhausted.

Meanwhile, various traditional sport contests were staged on the hotel's lawn. In addition to weightlifting giant stones — "It's all in the technique," claimed instructor Jordan — and a tug-of-war, cruisers were taught the islanders'

method of quickly husking a coconut, cracking its shell into two equal halves, and carving out the 'meat' with a special tool. But by far the most amusing contest was a staging of the age-old fruit carrier's race. This tag-team foot race requires competitors to dash around a short course shouldering five-foot wooden poles that are weighted at both ends by stalks of bananas. Trust us, it isn't easy, but all runners — including a few adolescent kids — huffed and puffed their way to the finish line.

Around midday, fleet members took a break from the action to enjoy a traditional *ma'a* luncheon that included barbecued pork, delicious *poisson-cru*

(fish marinated in coconut milk), tuna sashimi, various fresh fruits, and root crops, such as taro and poi, that many attendees had only read about in Michener novels.

Later, as fleet members relaxed in the shade, a final traditional music and

*It all seemed  
a bit like a dream.*

**Rendez-vous memories, clockwise from upper left: joyful music on the Papeete quay, chiseled dancers perform ancient moves, a bountiful lunch, cruiser kids in a tug-of-war, the fruit-carriers' relay, Tahitian-style weightlifting, battling for glory in the Cook's Bay lagoon.**

dance show was staged on the lawn in their honor. From the chiseled bodies of the men to the rapid-fire hip gyrations of the women, the show was an eye-popping



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spectacle, and as always, several audience members were coaxed into joining the fun.

At the awards presentation that afternoon, the race and contest winners received hand-carved wooden sailing canoes (*vakas*), and all skippers received a polished mother-of-pearl shell with the event's distinctive logo etched into it in gold — a keeper souvenir that takes up very little space aboard.

**D**uring the Rendez-vous' 13-year run, hundreds of cruisers from all over the world have participated, and we like to think that each of them went away with a greater appreciation for the cultural heritage of their island hosts — and became curious to learn more about this



*It's not easy for cruising sailors to show up anywhere on a specific date. But these happy cruisers were glad they made the effort.*

fascinating patch of Oceania.

Although unknown to the western world until the 1700s, the islands that now comprise French Polynesia were a pivotal part of the ancient Polynesian civilization. In fact, it was from the island of Raiatea, in Tahiti's Leewards, that several voyages of discovery began, resulting in the colonization of Hawaii,

Easter Island and New Zealand.

To our way of thinking, traveling — especially under sail — nourishes both the soul and the psyche. And the more you learn about the cultures you visit, the richer your overall travel experience will be. We're proud to say the Rendez-vous has played an important role in that process for hundreds of international sailors — who've had boatloads of fun while participating.

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