



Not Just a Day at the RACES

Sea of Cortez Race Week has off-the-water activities popular with cruisers



Mac and Gail MacLaughlin

By Gail MacLaughlin

LA PAZ, Mexico — The annual Sea of Cortez Race Week is something of a paradox.

While most cruisers come here to get away from it all and share idyllic coves with only a few boats, Sea of Cortez Race Week participants gather in droves for the week-long beach party staged at Isla Partida, 22 miles north of La Paz.

The 1994 event brought more than 200 cruisers together. One morning, I counted 92 vessels at anchor in the small bay.

And the title of this fiesta is somewhat of a misnomer. Race Week isn't so much about racing as it is about cruising families, couples and singles, both power and sail, sharing friendships, sea stories, beach

activities and merriment.

My husband, Mac, and I have been cruising in the Sea of Cortez for more than a year aboard our 65 foot power boat *Scot Free*. This year's 11th annual event was our first.

During opening ceremonies April 8, we were elected and crowned king and queen and asked to reign over the week's events. Our "royal" title included beautiful custom, hand-painted T-shirts and gilded straw-hat "crowns." We accepted our new duties along with a previous agreement to provide a race committee boat.

The week's agenda was packed with activities. Daily beach contests attracted enthusiastic competitors in volleyball, horseshoes, dinghy races (both sailing and rowing), sandcastle making, card games and board games with tournament play in backgammon, gin rummy, scrabble and cribbage.

Bathing beauties and beer bellies vied for honors, while competitors matched their abilities in tug of war, running in flippers, and balloon blowing.

An evening Shipwreck Party featured live music by Paul and Vivian Simonis, retired entertainers from Portland who are cruising aboard their sailing vessel *Inshallah*.

Prizes were given to participants with the most outrageous sea stories

and shipwreck attire.

Nightly Partida Downs horse racing was a favorite among participant jockeys and bettors. The entertainment package was rounded out by those cruisers who brought their instruments ashore for an evening of music and singing.

Cruising chefs offered up their culinary talents in a chili cook off, a dessert contest, fabulous potluck feeds and the fish fry finale.

Racing

Twenty-one boats entered the four-race series in three divisions: spinnaker, non-spinnaker and multihull.

Gary and Anna Citchenal of Santa Cruz took overall and spinnaker class honors with *Runaway*, a Spencer 36 sailboat built by Gary prior to launching into cruising life in 1986.

"It was close, racing our cruising boat against a lightweight J 29," Gary said. "*Runaway* is our home, loaded with everything you would have on a long cruise. But it can still be a good performing sailboat."

"This is my third race week. We won our division two years ago. That year, racing was a much bigger part of the event, with a lot more boats competing."

"Although we don't race often, we really have a good time here and enjoy meeting new friends," he said.

Sponsored by Club Cuceros de La Paz, Race Week has a number of regulars, but most participants are new recruits from each year's cruising class. By nature, cruisers are transient — stopping in one place only briefly while en route to distant seas and lands — and thus, many of the event's organizers and volunteers change with the season.

Ernie Carson of San Pedro attended Race Week in 1991 and 1992, and he was back for the 1994 event aboard his sailboat, *Unicorn*.

"This year was a little more casual," he said. "I don't think you can have two (years) the same."

"This year's group seems to be

more involved and enthusiastic about their participation. And there's more kids here than before. That's a good sign that people are getting away earlier and younger, enjoying life and their children," he said.

"There were more potlucks this year. It's a great mixing vehicle that gets more people together. After this week, everybody's going to be ready for the beer belly contest."

First-timers Roy and Cole Gregory of San Diego were just completing a year in the Sea of Cortez when they showed up at Race Week aboard their 35 foot sailboat *Night Song*.

"We have read about it every year for many, many years," Cole said.

If anything stood out about the 1994 Sea of Cortez Race Week, it was the enthusiasm, thanks to chairman Don Crownover, the backbone of this year's organization.

Don and his wife, Adele, have been cruising out of La Paz aboard their 43 foot steel-hulled vessel, *Steeldiver*, for nearly two and a half years.

He said that dozens of cruisers volunteered to help stage events and activities, and to transport tables, chairs, a sound system, portable restrooms and other gear from La Paz to Isla Partida and back.

A monumental effort was made to set up and run the beach facilities, which were used each day and evening by more than 150 party-goers. Crews also cleaned and restored the beach to its natural state once the party was over.

Closing ceremonies in La Paz on April 17 were attended by about 250 cruisers and friends. The farewell fling featured great food and entertainment, folk dancers in native costumes, live music from both Mexican and American combos, a superb Mexican rap/dance group and awards, awards, awards for all the beach game competitions, food contests and racing.

A reprise of Partida Downs horse racing was a final crowd pleaser for the 1994 event.

The Gregorays said they enjoyed most playing beach volleyball, especially with Mexican fishermen participating. Watching the children build sandcastles was also a highlight.

"And, of course, the food," Cole said. "I could have tasted food all day."