

'We fell in love with the Ninigo Islands on a cruise to Papua New Guinea'

Tom Partridge and Susie Plume have the time of their lives at an outrigger canoe regatta when they sail to the remote Ninigo Islands in Papua New Guinea

Approaching the Ninigo islands, we spotted a large outrigger out at sea, steaming along with full sails up, coming in our direction. *Adina* demanded all her sails be set so she too could stand proud and we raced along. As we passed the canoe, all hands waved furiously; then and there we knew this was going to be a special place.

The Ninigo Islands consist of 31 small islands stretching over 750 square miles. They lie isolated 140 miles north of mainland Papua New Guinea. When we planned our season of sailing *Adina*, our Hylas 46, through Vanuatu, the Solomon



Susie chats with the competitors, accompanied by new small friends

Islands, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia, we'd ear-marked these islands as a 'must-do'. We'd read tales of hospitable people who use outrigger canoes to sail between beautiful islands and, come the south-east trade wind season, use them to race. As we got closer we learnt these races were to be held over the final week of August; we passed on a message that we'd like to attend and speeded up.

Once inside the island lagoon we were met by Michael, the Ward Councillor for the island of Mal, which was to host the canoe race. Chiefs no longer exist here, and councillors are elected by the locals. On board Michael's boat was Willy who stepped on to *Adina* to guide us to a suitable place to anchor. From the outset, conversation flowed easily and Willy, who had never been on a yacht before,

Adina forms one end of the line as two boats race neck-and-neck for the finish



was intrigued by our anchoring process as we took time to ensure we were secure and could sleep soundly at night. On his canoe he had a large rock tied off with polyester rope that did the same trick for him.

Later we were re-joined by Michael who introduced Justin, a teacher appointed to look after us during our stay, and we spent time learning more about the races. Races are held annually between various islands within the Ninigo group but this was the first time since the year 2000 that all the islands were taking part in one race. We later learnt we would be the first yacht to see what was grandly called, 'The Great Ninigo Islands Canoe Race'. The government agreed to sponsor the event and a whopping 97 canoes entered to do battle for the prize money, all important on islands with no regular source of income.

The following day we headed in to the island by dinghy and walked along an immaculately prepared white sand path towards the main

village. Final canoe preparations were well underway with groups of competitors and their families working by the side of the path. There was a buzz of excitement in the air. We stopped and chatted to people as we walked along. It was fascinating to learn how similar their racing is compared with our racing back home.

The racers from visiting islands camped out on one end of Mal Island and we went to meet them. Entire families were there; the wives and

mothers doing all the cooking with supplies they brought from their own gardens. Sails doubled up as canvas to sleep under at night. Canoes were out completing test runs with crews practising drills, making sure everything was in top condition. It reminded us of many happy days training and racing in the Solent.

We talked to different competitors, many of the men good naturedly assuring us sure that they would win. One man, Oscar, came from

neighbouring Longan Island and we were told he is one of the great racers. You wouldn't think it; he wasn't lean or muscular like some of the sailors but Oscar calmly reassured us with a big broad friendly smile, 'Yes, I will win.'

The island has an airstrip, built in the days when there was a trade in lobsters. It is seldom used now but a small chartered plane was due in and the airstrip had been cleared. An Australian John Dom Stokes, who lived on Mal Island as a seven-year-old



Mothers cook for the family at the regatta camp



CHART: MAXINE HEATH

when his parents managed the coconut plantation back in 1971, was flying in to see this famed race. Joining him was Betha, the daughter of the first Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea, and a retired journalist and her daughter. Food, known as Kai-Kai, was laid on; there was a welcome song, a speech was made by one of the race committee and the event was declared open.

Justin came up to tell us the race committee very much wanted to use *Adina* as part of the finish line for the five days of racing, would it be possible? Her high mast made a perfect mark for the competitors to see from a distance – as no-one has GPS, all navigation is done by sight alone. We felt honoured and excited to be included. And yes, there is a race committee; they set the rules, run the races and there is even an



Boats line up in position on the beach for the start

appeal process. We couldn't believe these friendly islanders would protest against each other but they do!

Race day arrived. From on board *Adina* we shared the weather forecast with the committee who relayed it to the competitors. On shore, strategies were discussed in group huddles, sails were selected, supporters sat in groups on the beach, competitors milled around wearing matching football shirts to denote a team.

For each race the canoes lined up on the beach, their starting position determined earlier by the drawing of numbers. No getting tangled up on the start line here! All were set to go, and you could feel the tension in the air. Anton, who was heading up the race committee, had a loud hailer and loved to use it, encouraging the competitors to do their best, talking non-stop

until eventually he allowed them to push their boats off the beach into the water. A count-down was given, they jumped on and were off. They swiftly unfurled the sails and the canoes raced away – it was a real spectacle.

Out on the water the crews were focused, working hard to get the most out of the canoes. That said, our cameras proved too much for one or two who couldn't help but give a wave. Again it reminded us of racing

Unique Ninigo outrigger canoes

The canoes are carved from driftwood – whole trees that wash up on the beaches. Canoe builders are always on the look-out for the best wood and a log is claimed by the first person to see it by carving one's name onto it.

The emphasis is on making the canoes as light as possible. Handmade wooden nails (dowels) are still used; the outriggers themselves are beautifully carved by hand, many made just for racing.

The biggest weight issue is water flooding over the low freeboard. Spray coamings help, as does decking the canoes, but they also use an 'engineer'. This is a young boy whose job it is to bail the canoe

as fast as he can, and it's a job done with pride.

Sails, traditionally made from woven pandanus leaves, are now made from plastic tarpaulin. The canoes use an array of different sized sails for differing wind conditions. Sails are treasured and the newer tarpaulins are saved for the race only and only for family commuting later. Here a tree provides the sail loft, with several rolled up sails sitting in the branches. Uniquely, sails are shared between friends and different boats.

The islanders use their outrigger sailing canoes primarily to commute between the islands and to fish. Entire families sit in the canoes cruising along, usually trolling a fishing line.

Crews trained hard for the racing, practising flying the outrigger for maximum speed



in England when camera boats come up, the skipper shouts at the crew to look the part but just like in the Ninigo Islands one person always breaks rank! There were five classes of racing: six, seven, eight and nine metres with single sails and then the big guns, the open class with double sails. Courses are set depending on the size of the canoe; the bigger canoes raced longer courses. A race typically lasted an hour and a half and was sailed on a course to an island and back, exactly which island is chosen depends on the wind direction. The seven and nine metre classes were the most popular and have qualifying pools to reach the final. Each class has a 'Grand Final'. The racing was planned out over a number of days, working through the qualifying pools first before

'A bond was quickly growing between us and the islanders. We liked them a lot'

progressing to the Grand Finals.

We chased around in a small boat and followed the canoes, lapping it all up. Without doubt our favourite thing was when the outrigger hull lifted out of the water into the air and agile men ran up and down trying to keep it skimming on the water. Oscar, the 'famous' sailor, is one of those individuals who can't help give a big smile or pose and we cheered him on. The canoes raced off until we lost sight of them and waited for their return. On their way back to the finish line, the leaders had a good advantage and celebrations started before the line with the waving of shirts and shouts of joy. And this was just a qualifier.

A daily routine established itself: Justin would stop by to tell us the plans for the day, Willy checked in to see how we were doing and then the race committee came up to chat and get the weather. One day I headed off with Willy to the half-way mark while Susie stayed on the boat and was joined by Slim who was monitoring the finish line. She served endless coffee, juices and biscuits from the boat for the passing visitors from the committee and a bond was quickly growing between us and the islanders.

Willy was a big, dark-skinned Papuan and I liked him, I liked him very much. We talked about our lives, he gave his thoughts on Papua New Guinea. And he was funny. 'We know you white people. Oh, time is so important to you. We have Papua

The winning open class double-sail boat charges over the finish line making them overall Ninigo champions



A member of the race committee watches the finish line, as racing was incredibly close



Willy holds a flag up high to show the halfway mark



The closing ceremony was a full-scale party with traditional dances and singing



Sailing Adina on passage to Longan Island, Oscar soon had the feel of the helm

New Guinea time, not a problem,' and laughed out loud. He taught me to 'tok pidgin'. 'You must tell Susie, "U lover blong me!"', he said.

For one of the races, our tender was used as a marker and the racers didn't know exactly where the it was when they started. With a change of wind direction many of the boats were struggling to make the mark, and this worried Willy, so he simply lifted the anchor and moved it, while shouting encouragement to the sailors.



Tom Partridge and Susie Plume

Tom and Susie have spent the past four years sailing around the world on board their yacht, *Adina*. They spent two years exploring the Pacific before continuing across the Indian Ocean last year. Having just arrived back in the UK, they quote their time in the Ninigo Islands as the highlight of their trip.

■ You can read more about their trip on www.yachtadina.co.uk

As the days progressed, we lent our handheld VHF radios out and gave the race committee free access to *Adina*, as they were now firm friends. The racing heated up and the finishes grew ever closer. In the finals, the finishes were right next to *Adina* and after one race resulted in a protest, the committee turned to Susie's camera to clarify exactly who won. The show-boating on the finish line became more and more impressive as the canoes flew past, lifting their outriggers high out of the water for a photo. We retired to bed each day exhausted and happy.

The time for the last race arrived, with the big double-sails and the big guns. There was also big money at stake, but most of all, pride was at stake, not just for the racers but for the whole island from which the winning boat came.

Everyone was down on the beach for the start. They set off. Polished crews worked hard to hoist the large sails and the canoes sped off. It was no different from watching superyachts in action. An hour and a half later the winners came roaring in. Cue celebrations – the pride and joy was tangible. The beaches filled with crews, and we shook hands with them as they arrived back on the beach, congratulating them. It was the same as any regatta anywhere else, just minus the beer tent.

For the closing ceremony, they



We were showered with gifts, as Susie receives a traditionally woven hat

decided that we were VIPs and dancers escorted us to seats under a small marquee aptly made from sails. We were each given piles of woven hats and bags as thank you presents. In return we gave speeches, and thanked the people of the Ninigos for their incredible hospitality, and we encouraged them to preserve their very special heritage. We all took turns to hand out the prizes for the first to fifth placed canoes in every class.

And with that, it was all over far too soon. With their farewells complete, people packed up and headed home to their own islands in racing boats converted back to family boats and laden with belongings.

'Some people are simply at one with the sea, finely tuned to the wind and waves'

We opted to visit Longan Island, where Justin our guide and Oscar the famed sailor both live, to spend some time and learn more about village life. We offered to take them and their families on *Adina* and they quickly accepted. Oscar asked for a turn on the helm. *Adina* is very different from a wooden outrigger but Oscar soon tuned in. He spotted an outrigger and

wandered way off course so he could race it. We could only sit and watch in admiration. Some people are simply at one with the sea, finely tuned into the way of the wind and the waves.

Our hearts had been truly warmed by this exceptional place, and we'd had the time of our lives. ▲



Racing finished, an outrigger heads into the sunset and home