CRACKER OF A REGATTA

As the Cornish coast disappeared into the murk, some remarked that this was not much like a superyacht regatta. But the Pendennis Cup has good racing, excellent race organisation, a superb deepwater bay and cracking after-sail parties, reports David Glenn.
There was much to applaud in this fledgling event, including excellent race management and a peach of a racecourse blessed with flat, deep water overlaid with uniform tidal streams.

In the historically significant packet-town of Falmouth competitors found a welcoming destination with excellent restaurants, pubs and small hotels. Refreshingly, it wasn’t Rip-offville.

Pendennis Shipyard, which had attracted key movers and shakers in the superyacht world, provided the pitstop for those in need of running repairs and as a networker for local business, the event was highly effective – a marketing coup for Pendennis.

For spectators, Pendennis Point and St Anthony’s Head provided grandstand viewing across the length and breadth of the racecourse, of which the race committee took full advantage by setting finishes off Pendennis and Black Rock. Dramatic stuff.

If I had to nitpick, something should be done to improve the visibility of marks – bigger and brighter, please – because even with electronic aids they were a devil to identify, especially small black inflatables against the rain-lashed Cornish coast.

This was an eclectic fleet, to say the least, comprising not only genuine classics like Mariette and Mariquita, but also Spirit of Tradition yachts such as Velacarina (Hokk Truly Classic) and Bequia (Shepherds Waring White) on route to the Baltic from her home in the US. Then there were the modern sloops like the Frers 112ft/34m Unfurled, the fiendishly fast Santa Cruz 70 Breakaway and the Oyster 82 Bare Necessities, ironically named as she was festooned with electronics and sported a weirdly psychedelic colour scheme on her spars.

With no size limit, there were a number of smaller yachts competing and four of them enjoyed a closely fought contest under IRC for the delightfully named Little Dennis Cup. They included the Lallows-built, S&S-designed 1965 Admiral’s Cupper Firebrand, owned by Ed Dubois, the lovely S&S ketch Tomahawk now under new ownership, the immaculate 8-metre Pinicria which, when not competing, is one of the more unusual features on offer at the Hotel Tresanton in St Mawes across the water.
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The biggest yacht in the fleet

Race day one dawned wet and it stayed like that until the finish, so being aboard the biggest yacht in the fleet, the good-looking 203ft/62m Athos, was a boon. Her fixed bimini offered plenty of shelter and a vast crew including remnants from the previous week’s J Class regatta meant she was in the right hands. With just under an acre of plain sail, it was just as well and skipper Tony Brookes delivered an excellent safety briefing prior to racing, highlighting the excessive loads a 470-ton schooner can impose on equipment. You could hear a pin drop.

The owner of Athos is a stickler for belt and braces management so the yacht has twin engines, two vast generators, an additional emergency generator and 700kW of power to drive the plethora of hydraulic pumps, which perform 23 functions just to put this yacht through a tack. Her other distinguishing feature is a swing centreboard which when down draws almost 30ft/9.1m but can be reduced to 12ft/3.6m.

As we were by far the largest yacht in town we were last in the start sequence. Initially, it looked as though we’d have our work cut out to get near the front runners, especially with the blisteringly fast Mariette with Rodney Pattisson aboard leading the fray. A short beat took us out to the left layline to get into stronger tide and reduce the tack count and then we started a long, fast, cloud-shrouded run to Gull Rock, which eventually loomed out of the murk. By then we’d hauled in the entire fleet apart from Mariette, Adela and Unfurled, which rounded in the gloom just ahead.

There was an almost prehistoric look about the dark Cornish cliffs clad in swirling low cloud. But there was an appeal about it as we powered into the turn that brought wistful looks to the faces of hardened crew like Cappa, Jonah, Basic and Classic. Unfurled had completed the run with a Code reacher, which she duly furled for the beat, but just as she began to harden up the downwind sail – er – unfurled from the top down and shredded, bringing the big white sloop to a standstill.
Out ahead were Mariette and Adela and we sensed an opportunity. By now the breeze was up to 28 knots true and our helmsmen, of whom there were a variety, were having difficulty getting Athos into the groove. We tried board up, down, halfway down and eventually rolled a reef into the vast main.

Still the schooner’s hefty bowsprit hunted across the horizon and although we eventually got to Mariette, the recovered Unfurled got seriously into her stride to lead at the mark while Adela did an excellent job hanging on in her unfavoured upwind mode.

There followed three short sharp reaches to the finish and as we topped 14 knots we fancied our chances against Stan Pearson steering Adela. Unfurled was home and dry on the water and in the end we couldn’t quite squeeze through Adela – another mile and it would have been a photo-finish.

Mast damage
Back on the dock aboard Athos there was concern about an alarming amount of movement at the mast partners where the Spartite compound that seals the aperture through which the mainmast passes, had been opened up, resulting in a 0.5 inch crack. In short, the 200ft/61m mainmast was on the move!

Although Athos sailed the next day it transpired that there was damage to the heel of her mast and she had to withdraw to get repairs done in time for the Superyacht Cup in Cowes.

From the longest to the shortest yacht in the regatta, the 43ft Firebrand. She has been owned by naval architect Ed Dubois since the mid-1990s and with her new racing sails and an owner/driver who knows her every idiosyncrasy, she was hard to beat.

Immaculately built in edge-glued mahogany on elm in 1965 (now epoxy sheathed to stop her moving), she was part of the successful British three-boat Admiral’s Cup team that year.

Add key ingredients such as John Boyce on the main, who has an uncanny feel for the racecourse, and veteran bowman Adam Ostenfeld and the mix was potent. We were keen to stay ahead of the somewhat longer ketch Tomahawk whose sails, to be fair, weren’t doing her any favours and the quick Mikado whose rating meant we had to keep her well astern, not at all easy when the wind dropped below ten knots or when Firebrand was forced to reach under plain sail, conditions she disliked.

With Ed Dubois steering, I found myself trimming the big overlapping genoa helped by his chauffeur, a Pole called Blazej Kowalczyk – “just call me Blazer” – whose ability to keep winding winches was quite unnerving. He proved his worth not only aboard the yacht, but also ashore keeping the crew vaguely under control.

We sailed a just about fault-free race, including some neat pole-less kite gybes with Ostenfeld giving us a masterclass in foredeck trickery. We came home 1st on the water and did enough to keep Mikado at bay on corrected.

Pendennis made layday one to remember, although some might have difficulty recalling the detail. The interesting combination of a gourmet lunch hosted by sponsors Moet & Chandon offering different vintages for each of the five courses, and demonstration drives in co-sponsor Aston Martin’s 6-litre V-12 Rapide forced us into a choice.

Lunch won the day (and the night, as it turned out) and what a lunch it was. For some, the postprandial entertainment went on...
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into the small hours so it was with some surprise that we mustered an entire crew, due to press-ganging, by 0930, ready to continue the Firebrand campaign, but this time without our owner. ‘Blazer’ had whisked him away on business.

To be frank, we had a shocker, mainly owing to an inability to identify the weather mark and then a distant wing mark. We were not alone. It eventually turned into a beautiful day’s sailing and as the wind picked up, we were blessed with two long beats which Firebrand relished. We clawed our way back into the fight and posted a 2nd, leaving everything to play for on the final day.

The same situation existed in the big class in which Mariette and Unfurled, appropriately from entirely different ends of the design spectrum, lay neck and neck. The Pendennis Cup certainly left the best until last when, finally, the sun illuminated Cornwall’s gorgeous coastline.

Unfurled hadn’t put a navigational foot wrong all week and now it looked as though she was going to put the final nail in Mariette’s campaign coffin as she did a horizon job on the fleet. Mariette got everything up including the tablecloth as she hammered down the penultimate reach in glorious fashion, the coastline a vivid patchwork of green and gold. And then it happened.

“Race committee, Mariette.” “Go ahead Mariette.” “Can you confirm a change of course?” “We cannot confirm a change of course” came Peter Craig’s clear reply. We picked up this exchange on the press boat VHF and then we looked over our shoulder. Unfurled was only metres away. How had that happened?

It transpired she’d missed the mark, continued at high speed on the reach and then watched the chasing pack, including Adela and Breakaway peel off behind her on a different – but correct – heading. Nightmare, because on big boats like this getting back is a long slow process.

Unfortunately for the otherwise faultless Unfurled, it was game over. Mariette, though still behind, was way too close to be beaten on handicap. A classic case of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory. Frightful.

Sunshine and gunsmoke
Meanwhile, Firebrand had once again sailed a blinder, especially in the fresher breeze on two longish beats where she was very hard to catch. The regatta ended in sunshine and gunsmoke off Pendennis Point and it’s that scene that will remain in the memory rather than the sodden one on the first day.

Charlie Roe, skipper of the winning Mariette, paid tribute to a fine regatta and reckoned the spectacular prizegiving party for 450 in a marquee on the Pendennis headland, with its truly panoramic view of Falmouth and its bay, was the best he’d attended. Few disagreed. From the Cornish food and the Moet & Chandon reception to the RWD chill out Rum Bar – 90 bottles in about as many minutes saw them run dry – and the excellent Martin Harley Band it was a fittingly lively end to a very lively week. Cracker!

The Pendennis Cup is run once every two years, but there is talk of an event next year to coincide with the Fife Regatta in Scotland, a pilgrimage without peer that could do with a pit-stop. Falmouth to host it? Seems like a sound plan.