

Port City Jubilant as Regatta Rolls to Shore

By Adam Williams

Tico Times Staff

LIMÓN – As night fell on this Caribbean port city, hundreds of residents and members of the boating world gathered along the narrow concrete strip of Pier 70 to welcome the first finisher of the Jacques Vabre Trans-Atlantic boat race.

As the lights of the Crêpes Whaou! boat neared the pier around 10:45 p.m. Monday, fireworks illuminated the sky and a chorus of carnival drums, cheers and flashing cameras welcomed the two-man French team to Costa Rica. It was quite a warm welcome for the crew, who over the course of 15-and-a-half days traveled 5,805 miles since leaving from the southern French port of Le Havre on Nov. 8.

“The arrival here has been an extraordinary reception,” said co-captain Franck Yves Escoffier. “We have seen some great welcomes, but here in Puerto Limón between the fireworks and the whole world out to greet us on the dock, it was a great moment.”

The Crêpes Whaou! team easily won the Multi50 competition against the other three remaining multi-hull boats, which still are days away from completing the race. The Multi50 boats are sailboats of a non-traditional body style, with the mast and sail on the central hull and with smaller hulls on either side.

Four hours later, at around 3 a.m., Safran, the first of the single-hull Imoca Class boats to finish the regatta, successfully traversed the murky waters of the Caribbean and cruised into Limón port. Exhausted from nearly 16 days at sea, co-captain Marc Guillemot discussed the rigors of sailing the Atlantic.

“It was the most difficult race of my career,” Guillemot said. “There were several difficult moments, in particular on the passage past Guadeloupe, off Marie Galante. We tore a spinnaker that really was a superb sail. We were quite anxious for the rest of the race because it was the one key sail we would have used in the Caribbean.”

The Safran crew held off their closest competitor, Groupe Bel, which arrived in Limón almost nine hours later.

All of Limón on Deck

Judging by the turnout of the crowd on Monday, it appears the people of Limón understood the importance of supporting the arrival of this first-ever international sport-



Ronald Reyes | Tico Times

High Spirits: Captains Franck Yves Escoffier, left, and Erwan Leroux pop the cork, letting the champagne foam and flow on the deck of the Crepes Whaou, in celebration of their first-place finish in the Jacques Vabre Trans-Atlantic boat race Monday night.

ing event here. The scene on Monday night was one of enthusiasm and commitment, as dancing groups and bands from local schools performed for the better part of two hours as the crowd gathered to wait for the first ship to arrive. Similar entertainment events were scheduled nightly during the week, as boats continued to sail into Limón throughout the week and into the weekend. Some boats are even expected to arrive early next week.

The ceremonies in anticipation of the arrival of the boats officially kicked off last Saturday, Nov. 21, when President Oscar Arias visited Pier 70 to cut the ceremonial inauguration ribbon for the race. After a colorful welcoming party featuring traditional Caribbean dances and performances, Arias commented on the significance of the race to Limón, one of the poorer provinces in the country.

“Many times I have said that I am convinced that Limón is more than a poor province, it is an overlooked province,” Arias said.

“There isn’t another region of the country that has better conditions to integrate itself with the world economy, has similar tourist potential or the invaluable resource of a population that has a majority of bilingual residents... We have made the arrival of the regatta a true party, a carnival of development that will encourage the sailboats to return.”

According to the National Statistics and Census Institute (INEC), in 2009 the province of Limón was home to more than 477,000 people and had a poverty rate of 21.6 percent. The unemployment rate in the province was 7.9 percent.

Why Limón? A Surprising Answer

The eight previous Jacques Vabre Trans-Atlantic boat races have crossed the finish line in only two ports – Cartagena, Colombia, and Salvador de Bahía, Brazil – with each hosting four consecutive races.

After the race in Brazil in 2007, regatta organizers pondered their next destination and considered Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama as potential hosts. Costa Rica was given the final nod for a surprising reason: coffee.

“When it came down to making a decision between Mexico, Panama and Costa Rica, the biggest reason we chose Costa Rica was because (Jacques Vabre) gets its coffee from here,” said Jacques Lanusse-Cazalé, the official representative of the Transat. “We’d already been to Colombia and Brazil and, naturally, Costa Rica was the next place to bring the race.”

Jacques Vabre, the brand name of one of the most important coffee distributors in France, was named after the son of the company’s founder, who pioneered the idea of selling coffee grown in Latin America under the label. Three of the major suppliers of coffee to Jacques Vabre are Colombia, Brazil and Costa Rica.

In Costa Rica, Jacques Vabre buys coffee from the Aquieres farm in Turrialba, on the Caribbean slope. That farm is certified by the Rainforest Alliance, which gives accreditation to companies for their commitment to responsible and sustainable production practices (TT, Nov. 20).

Reaping the Benefits

The biannual Transat will return to Limón for the next three races – in 2011, 2013 and 2015. According to the Costa Rican Tourism Board (ICT), the port of Limón expects to make just over \$30 million from the investment and tourism generated by the race. Over 70 French media outlets were on hand this week for the conclusion of the race, and hotels throughout the city were at full capacity.

The six-year commitment of the regatta undoubtedly will assist in the renovation of Limón, which has been one of the top priorities of the Arias administration this year. In June, Arias signed an \$80 million investment agreement to be distributed among five primary development activities in Limón, including the restoration of cultural buildings, drainage and sanitation improvements, enhancement of municipal functions, small business development and port modernization (TT, June 19).

Perhaps the smiles and dances of the jubilant crowd on Pier 70 Monday night represented more than just the excitement for the arrival of the first boats. Perhaps they were also celebrating good times on the horizon for the city. ■

Transtica – More Than a Race

By Chrissie Long

Tico Times Staff

Brenda Williams started running just five years ago.

She would run as far as her legs would take her, starting at 5 or 6 kilometers and building up to 10 or 12.

Soon after, she was gone for entire days, taking off on trails and roads in the mountains that surrounded her home in Canada.

Her passion for running – combined with a strong desire to escape the icy winters of the Canadian Rockies – led the 46-year-old to Costa Rica for the second annual running of the coast-to-coast Transtica.

“I tend to sign up for races not knowing whether I can complete the distance,” said Williams on the eve of running four days of back-to-back marathons (around 40 kilometers each day). “I started running shorter races and soon began taking on greater distances.”

Last Friday, Nov. 20, Williams and 31 other

runners began the grueling trek from Manuel Antonio on the central Pacific coast over the spine of the Central American isthmus to finish Thursday on the Caribbean coast.

Last year, intense rains caused bridge outages and unplanned detours, leading runners to face muddied roads and heavy downpours.

Race director Vincent Gallois, who coordinated the race through the French tourism company Authentic Tour, said he hoped for better luck this year.

“The competitors’ spirits seem high,” he said at an inaugural reception at the home of the French ambassador last week.

Yet the Transtica isn’t just about running. On the cross-country tour – which climbs from Manuel Antonio to Esperanza and passes near Turrialba before descending through Siquirres and on to the Caribbean coast – runners donate to rural communities. Last year, the assistance consisted of more than \$33,000 worth of sporting equipment and medical supplies.

“Running is a self-absorbed sport,” said

Williams, explaining that training programs can take one’s attention away from others and turn it to oneself. “The thing that attracted me to this competition was its humanitarian angle. To me, it’s a beautiful combination.”

Partnering with Costa Rica firefighters and several other organizations, the event began as a social effort and it’s been anchored in the mission of helping others since then.

While Gallois and other organizers spend all year gathering the supplies to donate, runners are busy preparing their legs, all in anticipation of a joint effort on race day.

Williams tends not to train during the winters, but as soon as the ice begins to thaw in April, she spends every non-working moment on the trails.

“I am not fixated on being fast,” she said. “I do it because I enjoy it.”

And while Williams expected to see more muddy roads than open beaches, she added that it will be “a cross-section of Costa Rica, but I am sure it will just be a tease and I’ll want to come back for more.” ■



Photo Courtesy of Transtica

Amazing Race: Runners from all over the world get absorbed in the natural beauty of Costa Rica during the annual coast-to-coast Transtica race, while helping communities along the way.