

The Governor's Cup

Cape Town to St Helena

The second running of the Governor's Cup, the race from Cape Town to St Helena enjoyed both surprisingly close competition and a good sail, as well as delightful hospitality on the island, reports Alex Petersen.

The excitement approaching St Helena must have been electric. After one thousand six hundred and ninety-five miles of racing, competing for line honours were *Merlin*, a 65-footer, and *Nina*, a Santa Cruz 50. A couple of days out *Merlin* was well in the lead, but in the last few days of light airs, *Nina* managed to gain rapidly. In the event, the two yachts crossed the line in Jamestown less than six minutes apart. *Merlin's* time was eight days, 23 hours, five minutes and 40 seconds. *Nina* made the passage in eight hours, 23 hours, 11 minutes and 31 seconds.

It was exciting stuff for a race that in reality is regarded as a fast fun cruise to a Christmas holiday in one of the world's most historically interesting islands, but with the favourable breezes, most of the 20-strong fleet finished in under 12 days.

Merlin had taken the lead early on, heading due west from Cape Town to hit the Trade Winds about 180 miles out, and after the first two days of beating, enjoying a 300 mile run in 24 hours when the wind switched to the south.

The winds lessened as they approached the island, said *Merlin* skipper Hugh Brown, and the light *Nina*, exceptionally fast downwind, began to gain on them. A high settled south-east of the island, which *Merlin* just managed to skirt, but they sighted the tell-tale St Helena cloud cover at dawn on the final day, and at the 07h00 position report



Hugh Brown took *Merlin* to a close line honours victory in a tense final dash for the finish line with *Nina*.
Pic by Neil Corder

they learned that *Nina* was north of them, but equidistant to the island.

As they closed the island, and rounded the point in James Bay, *Merlin* crossed *Nina's* path a mere 20 metres ahead, and gybed, and with biggest bag, managed to stretch their gain as they approached the line.

PHRF winner was Bat Tromp's *Apricot*, a Miura, dicing with an Ocean 31, *Waterman*. *Apricot* was just three minutes and 15 seconds ahead on corrected time.

Apricot made a good start, said Tromp, by staying inside Robben Island, and by the end of the first two days of beating into a 20 knot north-wester, was just some five miles behind *Merlin*. "Miuras beat extremely well," said Tromp, who sailed with former WP dinghy sailer Alec Cousins, and his son Michael as crew. When the wind switched to the south, *Apricot* continued good runs, and with Michael, a keen windsurfer on the helm looking to surf the swells, the boat clocked 12,9 knots at one stage. "We knew we had a chance, and we were definitely racing," said Tromp, but it was still a nice surprise to earn first place, particularly by such a close margin.

Their other surprise of the race was to find themselves sailing over Valdivia Bank, "and just missing the ruddy great buoy that marks it by about three metres."

Once on the island the fleet was greeted by wives and families who had enjoyed a voyage on *RMS St Helena*, and the week included a reception hosted by Governor David Smallman, and other events, including both cricket and football matches with teams of the local "saints", as well as a yacht race around the island, when the locals came aboard as crews.

"The people are so friendly, everyone wants to stop and talk to you, and it's an amazing place to explore," said Tromp. "It is what makes it so different from any other yacht race. It really is a fun family affair."

Interestingly entrants were from all four of the keelboat clubs in the peninsula region, but also had a strong international component, including a German crew on *Susan II*, two visiting cruising yachts, one French, the other from the US, and two UK entries, *Sprint*, and *Group Four Securitas*, the BT Challenge yacht whose crew included nine "saints".

The locals have been developing their sailing skills on Saldanha 16-foot dinghies donated to the island by Nina McLennan, and the Leathersellers Company of London, who are based in St Helen's Place.

Needless to say, the return voyage, in the comfort of *RMS St Helena* for most of the sailors and their families, was something of a party under the care of the genial Captain Dave Roberts, whose initial idea the race was. Said Hugh Brown, "They spoiled us rotten, we had Christmas dinner at sea, and they really spoiled us."↓



which counted in the end as she powered to the finish a mere five minutes, 51 seconds ahead of *Nina*.

Their times, just shy of nine days, told of a light wind race with mild conditions. Jan Cleavaux, co-skipper on *Merlin*, said they had only one day in which they logged 300-miles in 24 hours. "For the rest it was light going and it became a real battle to stay ahead of *Nina* in those conditions."

Nina was robbed of a handicap third place when she was displaced to fourth by a determined *Carpe Diem*. Again it was a close call, a mere one minute 53 seconds that separated third and fourth. Mel



Hawtrely drove his *Compass 47* — fitted out with all the mod-coms for comfortable cruising — like a man possessed and it paid off as *Carpe Diem* worked her way through the fleet after the family-oriented crew found their sea-legs and set their sights on a trophy and a placing.

Even before *Alexis*, the final finisher, sailed into Jame's Bay the second leg of the Governor's Cup had begun with the Governor's reception, island tours, diving expedition and the cricket match between islanders and yachtsmen. Many vowed to be back in two years time because they had not had time to explore thoroughly this fascinating island. The island experience culminated in the prize giving on 23 December and the loading of eight of the contesting yachts aboard the *RMS St Helena* for the voyage back to Cape Town.

The final leg began on Christmas eve when the guardship with contestants and yachts retraced in six days the distance it had taken the yacht almost two weeks to sail.

At a debriefing aboard the *St Helena* on the way back Hugh Brown, the co-owner and skipper of *Merlin*, summarised general feeling towards the race when he said, "It's a fantastic race, just the right distance and time-frame, and one which can involve the family. Having the *RMS St Helena* as a guardship makes the event as does the final destination — St Helena."

The next Governor's Cup race will take place in December 2000.



The winning crew of "Merlin" with Skipper/Owner Hugh Brown on the Bridge of *RMS St Helena* during the Return voyage December 1998



Above: *Merlin's* crew with Jan Clavaux and Hugh Brown holding the cup. Below: Shipping home aboard the *RMS St Helena*.



FAX MESSAGE

GOVERNOR'S OFFICE THE CASTLE ST HELENA

FOR: Mr Hugh Brown
Yacht "Merlin" (Pty) Ltd

NO. OF PAGES INCLUDING COVER: 1

OUR REF: FR 100/33

FAX NO: 027 11 833 4192

DATE: 8 January 1999

FROM: Governor, St Helena

REPLY TO: FAX: (290) 2598 or
2476
TEL: (290) 2555

IF YOU DO NOT RECEIVE THIS NUMBER OF PAGES TELEPHONE US IMMEDIATELY

MESSAGE

Hugh,

GOVERNOR'S CUP RACE, 1998

Many thanks for your fax dated 3 January. We are very pleased to know that you thoroughly enjoyed the Race and that 'Merlin' might be entered again in 2000.

We look forward to the Race going from strength to strength, but without loosing its special features which distinguish it from other (major) international events. Sandi and I wish you good luck in that and your other racing endeavours, including the forthcoming Cape to Rio Race.

Thank you for your invitation. We shall, in time, take you up on it! In the meantime: Cowes 2000?

With best wishes to you and all your family,

D L Smallman

D L Smallman

