



THE BOATS OF SARTENEJA

by Edward Le Rouvre

The Sarteneja Easter Regatta is a very popular event in the north of Belize, gathering the fleet of traditional wooden fishing boats and bringing hundreds of visitors from the surrounding inland and coastal communities of the Corozal and Orange Walk Districts.

canoes before storing it in the vessel's icebox.

When the lobster season closes (formerly on February 15th; the closed season was changed to March 1st to June 30th this year) the fishing boats head back to where they were born and it's time for the traditional haulout on the waterfront for the yearly maintenance job.

The village is boiling with activity, the waterfront packed with wooden boats hauled out one next to the other, masts tangling. One freshly painted sloop is launched, pushed by the men, and another one takes its place with the same rollers and crowd pulling on the rope. “¡Hallamos!”

Shipwrights are in high demand; rot has no mercy and shipworms are not a legend. Two planks here, a few ribs over there, and this one goes for a new *esperjo* (transom) and will need a new *zapata* (keel shoe). All this teeming activity is cadenced by the hammer hitting the caulking iron on decks for new *estopa* (caulking).

The date of Easter affects the number of participants, and definitely the number of freshly painted boats on the pier ready to race. Who is going to finish in time? The days before the new shiny sets of sails float on the horizon, teams of crews are practicing. The public pier of Sarteneja is now the most active of Belize. Pickup trucks are bringing the sandbags for moveable ballast, and the special rigging and sails with long bamboo booms, the *botabajas*, that are significantly longer than the working spars, the booms reaching far behind the stern. For the most serious about the race, a set of Dacron sails replaces the cheaper polyester.

The first date of a regatta here appears to be 1956, when Sarteneja was a farmer's community with a fleet of cargo boats delivering produce to San Pedro (Ambergris Caye) and Belize City. A testimony of that time is the nickname for the Sartenejeños: *los Tomateros*. The shallow waters of the Chetumal Bay (on the border between Belize and Mexico) were also a major navigational and commercial hub for the Mayas, and then later for the wood loggers of early British Honduras and even for smugglers going to and from Mexico.

Alexandro Gongora, or “Tiger,” like most Sartenejeños, was a fisherman most of his life. He was also administrator of the local former cooperative (closed in 1982). Now he is the postman of the village (and therefore he collects my monthly paper, *Le Monde diplomatique*, while I'm away on my boat for the season).

Alexandro knows many stories of the village, also because he was seriously engaged in politics with the People's United Party (PUP), one of two major political parties in Belize. He tells me, “Sarteneja Village's tradition before venturing into the fishing industry was agriculture.

—Continued on next page



EDWARD LE ROUVRE (3)

Artisanal fishing is an important activity in the country, mainly with the lobster and conch exportation to the USA, supported by a network of national cooperatives (first established in 1953) and extensively regulated by different zone management entities and the Fisheries Department (the first Fishery Act dates back to 1948).

This artisanal fishing in traditional gunter-rigged wooden boats from Sarteneja, Chunox and Copper Bank villages of northern Belize is unique in Belize and the region. The Sarteneja Fishermen Association has membership of 140 fishermen. Sarteneja is the most important fishing community of Belize and is the only remaining boatbuilding village, with four shipwrights still active.

Ten months a year the traditional fishing sloops are mostly stationed in the iconic Haulover Creek in Belize City (next to the historic swing bridge on the Belize River). From there, each small sailing vessel with dugout canoes piled on deck, the icebox loaded with ice supplied by the cooperatives, and its ten fishermen (more or less, plus one cook and a stove) goes to its working zone for a fishing campaign of eight to ten days. They anchor all along the Barrier Reef and the three outside atolls, and the men free dive with only their mask, fins and hook, keeping their catch in their

Top: The starting line of the class with 24-foot keels.

Above: Boats at the pier, Easter 2019

Right: Master Shipwright Juan Guerrero of Sarteneja building Zayann.



ERIC MAILLET



'Los Gindoleros' (the crew on the trapezes) compensate for the boats' shallow draft and great sail area in a fresh breeze.

—Continued from previous page

The need to diversify for economic development was recognized by youths who saw that the agricultural sector was not in such a good position by then.

"Fishing started in the village around the years 1966 to 1970, with a massive turnout by the youths. The fishing industry kept them busy through the fishing season each year. But the off season brought the youths home just to idle and have their boats repaired and overhauled."

He continues, saying that the Sarteneja Easter Regatta (the way we know it now) was first started by a group of boatowners in the year 1969-1970. The first participants were Jacob Cantun, Enrique Salazar Senior, Raphael Rodriguez, Grimaldo Cobb, Amelio Munioz, and himself. The event came up to its peak in the 1970-1975 when more participants joined.

We use length-of-keel to describe a boat in Belize. The categories of participating boats were for under 18-foot keel, 20- to 22-foot keel, 22- to 24-foot keel, and over. The number of boats varied from 20 to 25 or more. The boatbuilders' participation was very little, taken over by their children who were boatowners.

To organize the regatta event, fishermen or boatowners were invited for a meeting at least two weeks before the regatta where they tendered their participation, and so the categories of boats were organized. Entrance fees varied according to the number of participants. The prizes were also discussed and approved by the

ALAIN BADSTUBER



(c)www.papayer-edition-photo.com_2013

boatowners so the organizers could seek donations. Rules governing the event were also discussed and finally approved by the majority participating.

Boatowners getting ready for the regatta usually tried to launch their boats a few days before so as to get their ballast in position and their crew in shape for the occasion.

—Continued on next page

Below: Crispin Cantun ('Crispo'), owner of two boats.



Call: 784.458.4308 Marina: VHF 16 or 68 Email: info@bluelagoonsvg.com



- ✓ Fuel Dock
- ✓ 24 hour Security
- ✓ Port of Entry
- ✓ Customs & Immigration Office - 9am to 6pm
- ✓ Electricity 110V/220v & Water
- ✓ Complimentary Wifi
- ✓ Laundry Service
- ✓ Supermarket & Boutique
- ✓ Cafe Soleil & Flowt Beach Bar
- ✓ The Loft Restaurant and Bar
- ✓ Indigo Dive Shop
- ✓ Swimming Pool
- ✓ Beautifully Designed Hotel Rooms



—Continued from previous page

I asked Tiger about the favorites. “*La Estrella*, a boat winner in the Baron Bliss event in the old capital Belize then came to Sarteneja to also be a favorite. The *Delma R* was another yearly winner. We had the *Virtue*, another boat from the city, the *Pinta* owned by Daniel Andrade, and *Soleidy*, another winner.”

I then met another former fisherman who now works on his farm (*milpa* as we say



EDUARDO LE ROUVRE

in northern Belize). Cristino Mora, or “Russian,” as a notorious United Democratic Party (UDP) militant always wears his red cap, and so he was when I embarked with my camera on the referee boat in 2009 for my first involvement in the Easter Regatta. Russian has been the Easter Regatta referee for many years. He remembered several more favorite boats: *Cecia*, *Ella*, and *Doris* of Evaristo Verde.

I could remember the winner of that year, *Ardeny*, skipped by Nelson Ortega and

Above: The Saturday before the regatta is a general practice day for the teams.

Below left: Every year the boat is sanded down and entirely repainted from the keel to the mast. Great attention is given to the name and boatowners contract artists for their preferred font and ornamental designs.

built by master shipwright Juan Guerrero. The boat unfortunately blew up in Haulover Creek from a butane explosion several years later, sinking in the Belize River. Fortunately the watchman didn't get injured by the massive explosion.

At the regatta meeting, participants draw lots for the starting line. The starting buoys are on angle to equalize the chances of winning.

In April the wind usually tends to be from east to southeast as a strong breeze, and can pick up in the afternoon sometimes with gusts up to 30 knots.

The markers are simple sticks in the shallow (ten to twelve feet) bottom with a piece of cloth attached, usually red (UDP) or blue (PUP) depending on the village council's party.

The race is captivating and the view from the pier is perfect. Spectators are able to see the boats very close together on different courses. Since the boats have no reefing system and the sails are big, when close-hauled the crew use trapezes or *gindola*. The sails were sewn by two men, Udal Munoz (“Parrot,” a major master shipwright) and John Rivero (“John Crow”). They have unfortunately passed away recently.

The winner will bear a little flag showing its position in its category.

While the pier and the waterfront are buzzing with activity with boats from different communities, the Belize Coast Guard patrol and conservation NGOs, plus myriad private skiffs, famous Belizean bands get ready at the *parque* for the longest night of the year, with people dancing until daylight.

Due to the pandemic, the Sarteneja Easter Regatta wasn't held last year and won't run this year either. Hoping for 2022!

Note: For those interested in Belize tradition there is a very interesting, detailed article from the former magazine Maritime Life and Heritage (unfortunately discontinued) written by Tom Zydler: “Sailing Craft of Belize.” It is available at <http://sustainableboat.bluegreenbelize.com/belize-maritime-heritage>

Visit Edward's website at <http://bluegreenbelize.com>



OCEANPLUS

Built by sailmakers dedicated to building the finest, most durable and technologically advanced sails possible.

Barbados

Doyle Offshore Sails, Ltd
Six Crossroads, St Philip
Tel: (246) 423 4600
joanne@doylecaribbean.com

Antigua & Barbuda
Star Marine
Jolly Harbour

Curacao
Zeilmakerij Harms
Kapiteinsweg #4

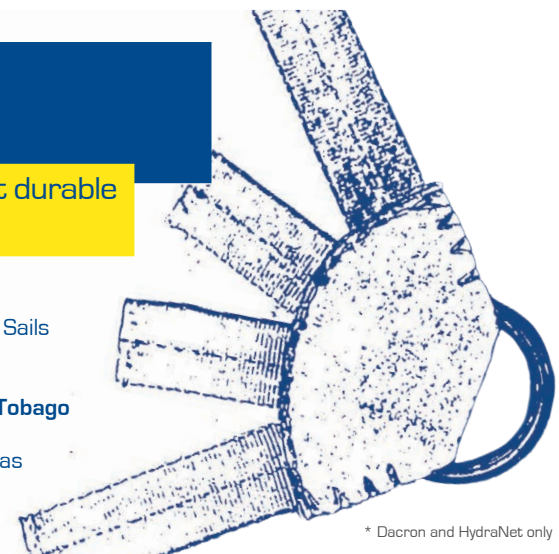
Grenada
Turbulence Sails
True Blue St George

Martinique
Voilerie Du Marin
30 Bd Allegre

St Lucia
Rodney Bay Sails
Rodney Bay

Trinidad & Tobago
AMD
Chaguaramas

www.DOYLECARIBBEAN.com



* Dacron and HydraNet only