

How to survive a regatta

Guy Venables offers advice on the social etiquette of yachting and how to ignore it

The first thing to consider when attending a regatta is which booze, if any, is sponsoring it. You can judge and decide whether even to attend by this easy to remember ancient poem:

*If it's beer, away ye should veer,
If it's wine stay off the brine,
If its champagne watch the
weather vane,
If it's rum, as a rule of thumb
drink your fill till your face goes numb.*
Godfrey Church 1823

Powerful stuff I think you'll agree. But it is a very real dilemma. Drinking free cognac all day in the hot sun can play hell with operating a 50ft yacht in 30 knots of wind. Especially when it's not yours.

From Antigua to Ullapool all regattas have their "types." There will for instance always be a famous yachtsman that you cannot identify, in sponsored clothing that make him or her look like someone else has dressed them, being interviewed on camera by someone who doesn't know anything about sailing, probably from The One Show. It will soon become apparent that it's a sport in which the famous person is very good at doing, but utterly untrained at talking about.

A small man in a big blazer will be talking loudly, much to the annoyance of the The One Show, into a microphone, which comes through the un-synched speakers as a series of loud echoing quacks. Standing next to him, prompting, is the Commodore, highest ranking of the race officials. The lower race officials have confusingly military monikers that all seem to outrank each other like an Escher stairway.



'The crews are involved in drinking competitions which should really be renamed spilling competitions'

There will be areas that you are allowed to go into and areas that you are not. These are depicted in coloured blocks on the wristband or lanyard and do not correspond at all to any of the coloured flags. The only way to behave is to allow everyone to assume you are the owner of the land on which the regatta is held. You can only be proved absolutely wrong in the unlikely event that you meet the actual owner.

There will be stalls. The first selling clothing that two fashion students from Exeter imagined was what sailors wear. Then one, inexplicably selling antique French turn-of-

the-century furniture. Then a man who looks like he has taken apart someone else's boat and is selling every single fitting off it, a man who has once again reinvented teak oil and finally, the modern day equivalent of the snake oil seller, the magic magnetic wrist band vendor with claims to solve all problems in the same way Jesus did. (and yet when I upturn their tables I'm thrown out of the ExCel centre).

If it's a regatta of classic boats there will be someone there with a spirit of tradition boat not knowing quite where he fits in. Likewise if it is a contemporary regatta.



'A sailing race is a white-hot combination of kindergarten competitiveness and deafening bellowing... Deep rooted childhood friendships rarely survive a yachting race intact'

The first thing to do is to get a little drunk. Not 'trapdoor' drunk but just a bit 'cobbled road'. That way you can still smile benevolently upon the man who had the time, money and freedom to make a 20ft clinker launch in his own garage and bring it to the regatta to show people. It also softens the memory that you haven't managed to move the broken washing machine and soggy plywood out of your own garage for several years.

If you are entering the sailing regatta yourself, be warned, the entry form will ask you impertinent questions about your boat's lineage and history that would make most shipwrights blush and it will be several volumes long. Although from land a sailing race can look serene, even beautiful, on the water it is a white-hot combination of kindergarten competitiveness and deafening bellowing, usually culminating in months of ostracizing whoever is the skipper.

Deep rooted childhood friendships rarely survive a yachting race intact. So my advice is to always race with strangers. Firstly they are less inclined to shout at you and secondly you may accidentally make friends in the unlikely event you actually win but, importantly, you won't lose any if you come second or below.

Before the race starts you should race up and down near the starting line. The start line will be a rumour, possibly between that Dunkirk Little Ship and an arbitrary point of land. This assumption is usually scuppered as the motor boat heads off for lunch and you're left to decide between a wreck buoy, a black

flag that turns out to be a cormorant and a partially submerged container. If you have been told the race will start with a flag then it will start with a blast on a horn. If you've been told it's a horn then chances are it'll be a flare or a cannon or someone shouting "GO!"

If all the boats then look like they're going one way, immediately go the other. People will think that you've got a clever tactic up your sleeve. This will worry the other competitors into distracted errors but to be honest boats are expensive and having that many, that close to each other looks rather dangerous to me.

Back on dry land the award ceremony will begin. You'll need several more drinks because people totally unaware of the art of entertaining are about to hold a microphone for well over an hour. This is where you find that, although there were only around twenty yachts in the actual regatta, the number of people that

'Someone famous but untrained in talking about it being interviewed by someone who doesn't understand sailing'



Although there were only about twenty yachts in the regatta the number of people who warrant a trophy runs into hundreds

warrant a trophy runs into the hundreds. The trophies themselves range from a small copper coin to a silver urn the size of a wine barrel with a list of previous winners the length of a large town's war memorial. These are handed out to applause of diminishing enthusiasm whilst sozzled journalists take flash photographs in bright sunlight of people they will never recall.

By this time you haven't eaten for six hours and you're beginning to wonder if tobacco has any nutritious value. Here you usually have two choices. The first is a line of vans selling all manner of foodstuffs including noodles served on paper plates that immediately distribute them onto the floor. Or the burger van selling grey burgers in an airy bap with nothing else inside and strangely labelled bottles of sauce. Or the "hog roast" (mechanically separated meat in a wet pile flopped onto a bun with some apple sauce by a fat man in a vest with a half-smoked fag in his mouth for £8). Finally there's an optimistic vegetarian alfalfa van patronized by nobody but the two Exeter fashion students who spend the entire day's takings on a bean sprout salad and some green tea.

The other option is to head in to the organisers' tent where you can get a square meal, but are not allowed in. The way to circumvent this is to grab a waiter by the arm and lead him past the check gate saying loudly "and I want more tables in the east section and is the champagne cold yet? We CAN'T have warm champagne." Once in you won't have an allocated seat. This doesn't matter because all the press will ignore the seating plan, take one table for themselves and the knock-on effect will be that the seating becomes a free for all. Try to sit at a table of foreigners. This will ensure that you're not found out as an imposter and with a bit of luck will allow you to eat in relative silence. You can also convince them of certain customs like the pouring of the wine starts at you because you are facing north (change where applicable) and goes to the left.

By the time dessert approaches you want to be thinking of heading outside and get to the beer tent. This is where foul weather gear comes in handy as the crews are now involved in drinking competitions which should really be renamed spilling competitions.

If you can't get home, sleep on any boat, the bigger the better. By this time everybody will be so drunk they won't remember who their crew is and with a bit of luck you might get a free breakfast the next morning. ★