



Our video

REPORT

Text: François Trégouët - Photos: By the author & Nautitech Catamarans

You don't need much more than the afternoon thermal breeze to liven up the Nautitech fleet.



A WONDERFUL NAUTITECH GETAWAY

An Owners' Meet Up in Martinique

For its fourth edition, l'Echappée Belle invited Nautitech owners to Martinique. Around ten catamarans came together over three days to discover, on the water but also ashore, a destination that has earned the charming moniker of the Flower Island.

The rough weather encountered last year in Martinique on the windward side of the island was certainly still on the minds of the Nautitech shipyard and Neo Marine (a service provider based in Le Marin, including one of the brand's dealers) when they came up with the idea for this 2024 edition. Unfortunately, this winter the trade winds have been rather irregular, and have often been absent during this current season. These particularly calm conditions encountered by the crews who had just made the transatlantic crossing were of course at the heart of the initial discussions. But, bring sailors together and the first thing they'll talk about will be the weather! Beyond this cliché, the first success of this event is to enable Owners - above all sailors from all points on the horizon - to get to meet

each other. It's a chance to share some particularly rich discussions over three days. Only two of the ten boats were based in the Caribbean. The other catamarans had only just arrived, were about to leave, or were passing through for a stay of as yet undetermined duration. But none of the Nautitech crews would have missed this event for the world. Like Luc and Agnès on *Breathe*, who come from Guadeloupe every year to take part. While the French tricolour flag is in the majority, there was also a Swiss cross, a Canadian maple leaf and, of course, the Stars and Stripes. On board *June*, Peter and Nathalie's young children are English-speaking, but it doesn't take them more than five minutes on the beach in Saint-Pierre to make friends with their three French-speaking counterparts from

Macoya. The children would be in charge of the proceedings over the three days, adopting Chico, the faithful basset hound of Bruno and Isabelle, owners of the Nautitech 40 *Chico Blue*, as their mascot.

Rendezvous at the foot of Mont Pelée

The dynamic Neo Marine team met up with all the participants on Wednesday evening in the bay of Saint-Pierre in the north-west of the island. For this first day of acclimatization, we're boarding the 40 *Open Croix du Sud*. Given the weather forecast for the day, the catamaran's owners Jean-Claude and Michèle suggested we meet early in the morning on the pontoon at the far end of Le Marin Bay. This extraordinary natural shelter, frequented by sailors from the



The moments shared ashore allow all the crews to get to know each other.



world over for three centuries, is now the largest marina in the West Indies. The engines were running as the mooring buoy was released; we steered our way out of this refuge, taking care to watch out for the many boats at anchor, the heavy traffic and the shallows, while taking care to scrupulously respect the navigation marks. Yours truly had a brief moment of doubt when we appeared to pass on the wrong side of a red channel buoy. But I soon realized that we were in the "Americas" and that the green and red marks are reversed. Unfortunately, the 32 nautical miles that separated us from our destination would have to be covered under motor, in the absence of the slightest breeze. As we passed the famous Diamand Rock, occupied for 17 months by the British at the beginning of the 19th century - a historical fact that Jean-Claude didn't miss - a breath of air prompted us to hoist the mainsail. Putting up this canvas will

'only' allow us to halve our fuel consumption, so we continued on our way on a single engine at 5.5 knots. We were happily distracted by flying fish and turtles, but not enough to relax our surveillance of the numerous fishermen's traps, simply indicated by two transparent plastic bottles on the surface of the water. Shortly before the bay of Fort-de-France, we met up with Breathe, the 40 Open owned by Luc and Agnès, the 'title holders' of the Echappée Belle 2023. If these inveterate racers are also motoring, despite having clocked up barely 300 hours in over 16,000 miles of sailing, it's because there really is no wind. Luc will make the best of a bad situation by telling himself that he will have less diesel to carry for the regatta, and he will admit to us at dinner the next day that he didn't make any water so he was able to run on empty tanks! Although the Echappée Belle is intended to be a convivial event and not a high-level



All hands on deck! On board the Nautitech 44 Open Roccatéa, they take racing seriously, but not too seriously!



Sonnen at the sheet winch of the 44 Open June, and enjoying the regatta.



Arriving at Fort de France under motor: The Nautitech armada of the Echappée Belle 2024 will soon be able to set sail...



The distances between the boats are small at the start of the downwind leg: the Nautitechs are lined up as if on parade.



No wind in the morning: the catamarans are itching to get going!

Nautitechs present are almost outnumbered. The tenders then line up on the beach: it's time for the aperitif-briefing.

Long live the Code 0!

The next morning, the Caribbean Sea was like a millpond. The locals can't believe it, they've never seen anything like it. As for Mont Pelée, it keeps its head in the clouds, as if to assure us that we're in the right place, despite everything. The total absence of wind won't disrupt the day's program, but it will make the walking and discovery tour all the hotter. Fortunately, Nico, our young guide with an encyclopedic knowledge of his island, makes sure everyone stays well hydrated. We discover the historical remains of the martyred town destroyed by the two terrible eruptions of 1902 that claimed 30,000 lives. The sugar cane fields, the flowers, the birds, the trees, the rum

sporting competition, «two boats on the same route is already a race», one of the participants whispered in my ear. At the finish, in front of the long grey sandy beach, Guillaume, a former member of the Neo Marine team, helped everyone understand the newly installed mooring

balls. Preserving the seabed is an urgent priority, but views sometimes differ between yachtsmen, fishermen and landlubbers. So the first line of buoys already installed will be moved back and the southern part of the bay will be reorganized... at a later date. In the meantime, the dozen or so

A visit to a distillery - here Depaz rum - is a must in Martinique.



factory: our guide is relentless and for the sailors, whatever their age, the hour and a half walk just flies by - despite the steep gradients. Nonetheless, no one was too reluctant to get into the air-conditioned bus to take a picnic up to the heights of Morne Rouge, the starting point for the trail to Mont Pelée. At an altitude of 820 m (2,700 feet), the heat was already becoming less oppressive, and the panoramic view was certainly breathtaking... in the absence of clouds. On the way back down, however, we were all able to marvel at the Domaine d'Émeraude, Martinique's Regional Nature Park. Here you'll find all the island's rich biodiversity in a splendid setting. The trail winds its way through the landscaped forest. Nico is delighted to show us the hundred or so native species present, the endemic plants - not forgetting his exceptional imitation of the melodious song of the Rufous Throated Solitaire, a bird from the Lesser Antilles. Back on the dock in Saint-Pierre, we discovered that a thermal breeze had picked up in the afternoon. Some of the dinghy covers suffered from the chop, although they proved their usefulness. More annoyingly, the Nautitech 46 Open *Macoya's* RIB got stuck under the dock, no doubt because of the waves combined with the rising tide (the average tidal range in Martinique is 30 cm – just one foot). It was impossible to get her out. It took a lot of patience and skill on the part of Maxime and Pierre to dismantle the engine and finally get the dinghy out. Fortunately, by dinner time on the beach, everything was sorted out and all the crews were enjoying the dishes prepared by Ettore, the engaging owner of the Bela Beach.

A convivial aperitif-briefing...

On Friday morning, the whole Neo Marine team joined us, each of us embarking on a different catamaran. But at eight o'clock, at the pontoon where the dinghies were picking us up one after the other, there were some puzzled looks on our faces: there was not the slightest breath of air, with the sea blending into the sky on the horizon. But that wasn't enough

to dampen the spirits of the crew of *Roccatéa*, who welcomed us for this final day of sailing. Lydie and Bruno, recently retired, took delivery of their Nautitech 44 Open (hull no. 23) before the summer. After a short visit to their beloved Northern Brittany, the Channel Islands and an Atlantic crossing, they are delighted with their boat. The Pacific awaits them. For this *Echappée Belle*, they have taken on board their friends Christine and Xavier, who have taken the risk of leaving their monohull behind for a few days. They will then close their Atlantic circuit before the summer. Dominique, for his part, has come specially from Paris for these three days, which just goes to show how motivated the crew is. But aboard *Roccatéa*, if we're racing for

Discovering the vegetation in the foothills of Mont Pelée.





The battle rages between Code 0 and asymmetric: control is tight, but good humor remains the first rule of this regatta.

real, we don't take ourselves too seriously. With the race committee having decided to send us in a flotilla and motor towards Fort-de-France, the crew is concentrating on new activities: Domi is explaining the rules of bridge, while Xavier is preparing the best ti-punch in the world (see inset). As for Christine, she's having a deep soul-searching session in the cockpit, where the comfort of the benches doesn't really compare with the trampoline of the Hobie Cat 16 on which she's sailed so many seas. Lydie and Xavier remain focused on the route. Pierre from Néo Marine has insisted: no detours or impromptu stops are envisaged given the already overloaded schedule. At the stroke of midday, off Fort-de-France, a light thermal wind was picking up. It would never exceed 10 knots, but that's more than enough for sailing. The Nautitechs are multihulls with well-controlled weight, even in a blue water cruising configuration, and their reasonable hull widths combined

with a generous sail area make them good performers in light airs. Pierre and Baptiste initiated the start procedure. The tension was mounting, especially when an inter-island speedboat invited itself into the middle of the fleet within ten minutes. Unless it's us who are stuck in the middle of the channel? But everyone reacted like good sailors and pulled over to the south. It wasn't even necessary to restart the procedure. With one minute to go before the start, we were a little early on the line. Breathe, the leader of the fleet, was downwind of us, but Bruno still managed to sail along the line with all sails down to slow down. And they were off! Mainsail and self-tacking solent were tacked in a matter of seconds, and no sooner had we

Uno, a universal card game that brings children together without language barriers!

Roccatéa ti-Punch

25 % lime juice
25 % of dark cane sugar
50 % very good quality rum.

Mix with a shaker (not a spoon, James) with ice cubes and it's ready!

Xavier's tip for limes full of juice: choose ones with the smoothest possible skin at the ends.



picked up speed than the code 0 was unfurled. We hadn't taken it out before because it's impossible to tack very quickly with this sail. On the first full tack, our rivals who didn't have this lethal weapon were sailing under solent. Faster, we were already making good headway. To gybe at the mark, we preferred to roll up and then unfurl the Code 0; we certainly lost a little time, but it was safer. On the downwind leg, we inevitably lost a little ground, but remained in the

lead despite rolling up the Code 0 a little prematurely. The route then took us on a direct line towards Grande Anse, and was therefore a little rougher than the first leg. This time, our rivals were keeping their sails downwind - Code D or asymmetric spinnaker - and we weren't letting them out of our sight. Domi was even playing close to the wind by following the evolution of the distances on the AIS. We were worried that the wind would drop as we approached Cape Solomon -

it did, but we were still in the lead. Behind us, the young crew of *June* took a fine second place, while *Breathe* completed the podium after her victory in 2023.

But the leaderboard is not the story - What counts are the relationships between the crews - forged in the space of just three days - who will no doubt be delighted to cross each others' paths again, or even sail together in the four corners of the world in the

months to come. These three days have certainly been rich in shared moments, walks, sailing, aperitifs and, of course, meals. I'll remember the dozens of tips and anecdotes exchanged, the hundreds of spontaneous bursts of laughter - all memories that will stay with me forever. In any case, if I'm asked to escape again in 2025, I'll definitely be up for it!



The traditional family photo after the prize-giving ceremony perfectly sums up the friendly atmosphere that prevailed over the three days in Martinique.

