



Race of the Millennium

It was a battle down to the wire for contenders in New Zealand's epic Millennium Cup.

After three days of racing, only a matter of seconds separated the first and second-placed yachts at the conclusion of the 2016 New Zealand Millennium Cup. This 'big boat' regatta, held amid NZ's spectacular Bay of Islands, offers thrilling close-quarters racing for the growing numbers of superyachts visiting the region for summer cruising.

The January event saw eight yachts competing across two divisions, ranging in size from Sydney Hobart contender, *Allegro* (20m) to the mighty *Janice of Wyoming* (41m).

Of the five yachts contesting the Millennium Cup division, four entered the final day on equal points after some inspired handicapping, and the regatta was there for the taking. It was going to be close ...

It all came down to the final leg – a downwind blast from the Ninepin Rock – and as they set their spinnakers for the run home, *Kealoha*, *Tawera* and *Shamoun* each had their sights on the line.

By Ben Keys
Photography:
Jeff Brown



As part of the foredeck crew on *Kealoha*, I had played my part in helping to pull off a tricky gybe-set of the downwind sail as we rounded the Ninepin. All that was left was to watch on nervously as the battle with *Tawera* teetered first one way, and then the other.

Shamoun took a wide line into the bay seeking more wind, but this failed to pay off and the big Andre Hoek yacht was soon falling behind.

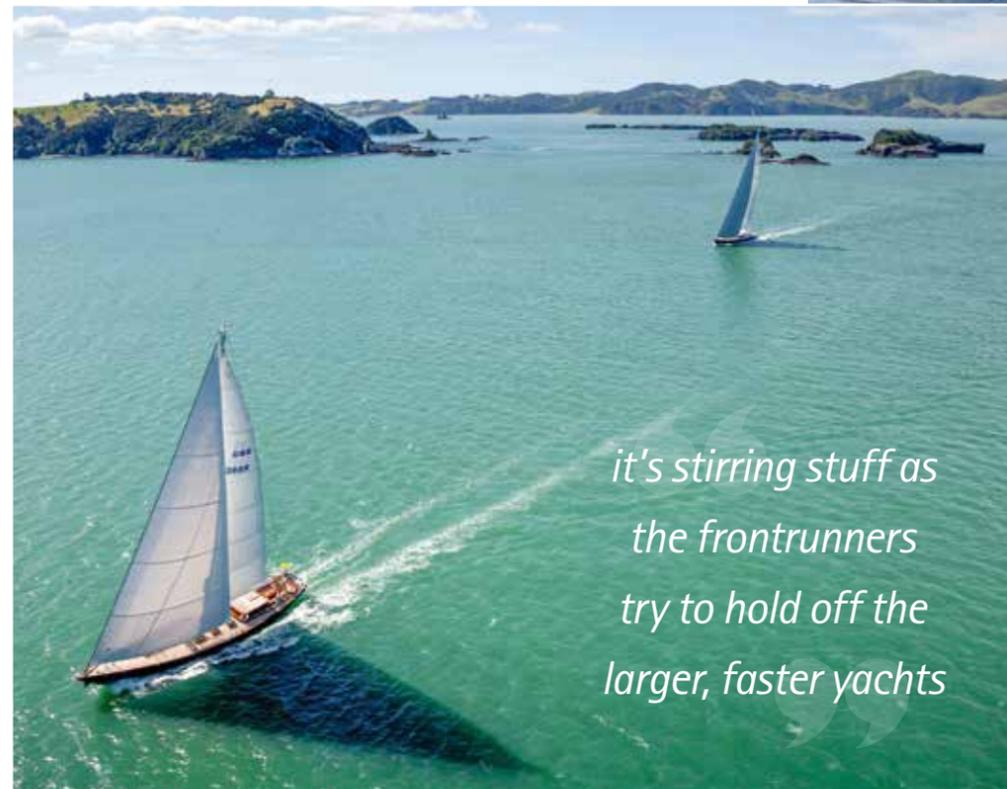
PERFECTLY MATCHED

From the deck of *Kealoha* it became clear we were perfectly matched with *Tawera*. As the finish line drew closer, it would be the final few miles of tactics which would decide the winner.

In a shifty 10 to 12 knot breeze, *Tawera* gybed off toward Paihia, while the *Kealoha* crew crossed



Previous page: The skipper of *Silvertip* taking a supremely confident approach to this rounding of the Ninepin Rock.



it's stirring stuff as the frontrunners try to hold off the larger, faster yachts

their fingers and hoped standing on a little further would have us come out ahead.

But then, with two more quick gybes, it was over – *Tawera* snuck across the line just 19s ahead of *Kealoha* for the win, while *Shamoun* held off the fast-finishing *Janice of Wyoming* and *Silvertip* for third place.

To an outsider, it could seem unfair pitting smaller, older yachts such as *Tawera* against

modern race machines such as *Silvertip* but, over the years, regatta organisers have devised a clever system of handicapping.

The catchily-titled International Superyacht Rule (ISYR) sees each boat's handicap based around past results and their expected performance in the forecast wind speeds.

Each day begins as a pursuit race, with the slowest yachts starting first and the

thoroughbreds given the task of hauling them in before the finish line.

Out on the race course, it's stirring stuff as the frontrunners try to hold off the larger, faster yachts amid ever-changing conditions.

The fact that four yachts were fighting for victory on the final day is a real testament to the handicappers – to have a superyacht regatta decided by mere seconds is simply unheard of.

REEL 'EM IN

This pursuit style of racing led to some epic battles throughout the regatta. For the crew of *Kealoha*, the first of these took place at the end of day one,



Above: *Shamoun* leads *Janice of Wyoming* as the two yachts head for home, with the spectacular Bay of Islands as the backdrop.

Main: Up close and personal with the foredeck crew on *Tawera*.

Opposite: Onboard *Kealoha*.

Some spirited radio banter took place, followed by some polite reminders that this was a 'gentleman's race'



Above: The afterguard of navigators, tacticians and skipper appear to be all business in this overhead angle on Shamoun.

Main: Iconic Kiwi ketch Steinlager II rounds another mark on her way to victory in the Pacific division of the Millennium Cup.



when we found ourselves in a surprising position on the final leg – leading the race!

Some deft tactics out on the bay had seen our pretty cruiser (hardly a speed machine) overtake both *Tawera* and *Shamoun* after starting around 30 minutes behind this pair.

The finish line drew ever-closer. But then along came *Janice* ...

With just a few miles remaining, the sheer waterline speed of the larger yacht became very evident as she stormed up on us from behind.

The rules of this regatta state that any overtaking yacht must keep at least 40m clear of the boat in front, and as *Janice* of Wyoming's

skipper drew closer, it was clear they might choose to ignore this guideline.

Some spirited radio banter took place, followed by some polite reminders that this was a 'gentleman's race', but there was no stopping *Janice* as she blasted for home and first place.

START YOUR ENGINES

Day two proved to be a marathon race in varied conditions – an extra-long course in shifting winds

WHAT'S IN A HANDICAP?

To ensure close finishes, each yacht is handicapped with different start times, based around what the forecasters expect the wind strength to be on that day.

The first (and slowest) boat starts from 'scratch', with other yachts crossing the startline in a staggered fashion dependent on their time penalty. These can include substantial gaps – on day two, *Silvertip* started more than one hour after *Tawera*.

Of course, the weather can change quickly, or the wind can die altogether, so there's always something interesting going on for the skippers and tacticians.

The goal of the International Superyacht Rule is to ensure that "... any well-sailed boat should have a reasonable shot at the podium in every race."

The other advantage is that sailors know at all times how they are faring against the competition.

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meant the tacticians and navigators would have their work cut out for them.

This all climaxed spectacularly at Ninepin Rock, where two race fleets found themselves approaching from different directions.

This would have been fine, normally. But then the wind died.

Kealoha and *Steinlager II* found themselves drifting anti-clockwise round the craggy pinnacle, while two yachts appeared from the other side. At one point, the two smaller boats even started their engines and deployed fenders, certain a collision was imminent.

Somehow we all avoided an expensive tangle but, in the meantime, the yachts in front had powered away and the back-runners were approaching fast. This produced an epic sprint to the line, providing *Tawera* with her first win of the regatta.

On the third day of racing, it was a real surprise for *Kealoha's* crew to find ourselves in a genuine battle for Millennium Cup line honours.

The Bay of Islands event is the first regatta *Kealoha* has undertaken and her last-minute collection of race crew headed north from Auckland with their sights set on having an



enjoyable time in an amazing location, rather than expecting to trouble the trophy engravers.

To enjoy such a nail-biting conclusion was a satisfying finale for our crew, who thoroughly enjoyed both the spectacular location and the post-race functions hosted nightly by the Millennium Cup sponsors.

For information on the 2017 Millennium Cup and the announcement of race dates, go to: millenniumcup.com. To see some amazing overhead video shot by *Shamoun* crew member Chris Troup, go to: vimeo.com/157378486.

THE CONTENDERS

Millennium Cup division

Tawera (28m) – built in NZ by Alloy Yachts, this ketch (formerly called *Catalyst*) was purchased by new owners Mike and Tracy Mahoney just one month before the race.

Kealoha (28m) – this pretty Andre Hoek classic was my ride for the Cup. It was her first regatta as she explores the Pacific en route to Asia and Europe.

Shamoun (33m) – another Andre Hoek 'Modern Classic' design, the curvaceous *Shamoun* is also on a round-the-world voyage, heading to Tahiti and Fiji this winter.

Silvertip (34m) – a true thoroughbred, *Silvertip* is a serial competitor at the Millennium Cup, winning in 2009 and 2012.

Janice of Wyoming (41m) – this graceful girl now calls NZ home and 2016 was her sixth appearance at the Millennium Cup.

Pacific division

Allegro (20m) – the Aussie crew of *Allegro* thoroughly enjoyed the chilled vibes at the Bay of Islands after recently punishing themselves in the Sydney Hobart race.

Antaeus (20m) – the extensive racing resume of *Antaeus* includes setting a record in the Auckland to Musket Cove (Fiji) regatta.

Steinlager II (25.5m) – this famous maxi ketch, known as 'Big Red', is a familiar sight in NZ waters. A genuine icon. 

RESULTS

Millennium Cup

- 1st *Tawera*
- 2nd *Kealoha*
- 3rd *Janice of Wyoming*
- 4th *Silvertip*
- 5th *Shamoun*

Pacific Cup

- 1st *Steinlager 2*
- 2nd *Allegro*
- 3rd *Antaeus*



Above: The size difference between *Janice of Wyoming* (left) and *Kealoha* is apparent in this shot as the two yachts fight for dominance with the finish line looming.

Right: *Tawera's* foredeck crew prepares for a final spinnaker hoist on their way to a close win on the final day of the Millennium Cup.

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