The King's Cup Regatta has something for everybody -- everyone from the hotshot racers to classic yachts like BUCCABU. The name of the game is fun.

“Eating and sleeping is for poofers.” Or so suggested Capt Jamie, upon being offered peanuts at 9:15 that morning. He slugged at his beer.

This was the last race of the 1992 King’s Cup Regatta. The cruising and classic divisions had taken off at 9:00 AM, the catamarans were just starting now. In another 15 minutes, the real racing yachts were going to set out. We were sailing in the Classic Division aboard BUCCABU, a heavy wooden vessel with lots of character and few pretensions. Over the past few days of racing, given her handicap, she had nevertheless been doing very well.

BUCCABU was not necessarily the slowest yacht in the Andaman Sea, though she might have been, but for this regatta she was blessed with seven of Phuket’s finest yacht skippers, including Capt Andy, the owner, and his business partner, Capt Jan. The rest of the crew consisted of Capt Jamie, Capt Jeroen, Capt Rowdy, Capt Daniel, Capt Roger, myself, who was along as resident scribe and B-team beermeister, and the charming Dr Daeng, who was an excellent dentist but who had never been on a boat before, much less a racing yacht. Much less BUCCABU. At this particular moment, she was looking back towards the beach at Nai Harn Bay in a speculative manner, as if to say, “Maybe I can’t swim that far but, if I can’t, drowning probably won’t be so bad by comparison with staying where I am now.”

BUCCABU offered many features though, as I say, speed was not one of these. Among her attributes was an expanse of teak deck suitable for either ballroom dancing or rugby, and a couple of nice big deck chests fashioned of the same material. It was to
these latter containers that Capt Jamie had gone immediately upon boarding at 8:30 AM. “Look at this!” he said, chortling and waving a couple of bottles, one of them gold and the other green. “Who’s for a Gold, then? Who’s for a Green?”

Almost everyone in the crew decided that one or the other would make an excellent breakfast, especially in light of festivities suffered the evening before.

“What’s the matter?” Capt Roger asked Dr Daeng, when she declined Capt Jamie’s offer of a Green. “Don’t you drink beer for breakfast?”

“No!” she replied, fairly unequivocally; and she looked around wildly at all the bearded and otherwise alarming sea captains to whom she had entrusted her safety. Then she looked shoreward again, but we were already well off Nai Harn, and it really would have been quite a swim.

“Hey, ma’am,” asked Capt Roger, “where are you from, anyhow?” He was plainly intrigued at finding someone aboard a boat the likes of Buccabu who didn’t drink beer for breakfast.

Buccabu had crossed the starting line only six minutes late. Capt Jamie reported this event from up on the bow back to the cockpit. “I’ve crossed the starting line,” he announced. “So should the rest of you, in another five minutes or so.” There wasn’t a lot of wind and Buccabu was a heavy boat. But the news that we were underway was cause for celebration back in the cockpit, where Capt Jan, Capt Andy and Capt Jeroen were in the mood for action.

“Gold!”
“Green!”
“Gold!”

Capt Daniel was resting on a tarp, conserving his energies for the battle ahead. Capt Roger was looking at Dr Daeng; and Capt Rowdy was looking around, possibly for a belaying pin.

“Gold!”
“Green!”
“Green!”

“Isn’t there any Coke?” Dr Daeng was looking shoreward again and flexing her swimming muscles in an experimental sort of way.
The race once underway, the uninitiated might have discerned in it all the system and order of a Bangkok street scene. Yachts were going this way and that, spinnakers up, spinnakers down, everybody jockeying for position, the vivid little cats darting through the keelboat fleet on the first leg of their own contest.

Given the staggered starts for the various divisions, Buccabu enjoyed an early but very brief lead over Buzzard, three-time winner of the King’s Cup and a favourite going into this year’s regatta, and Australian Maid, another hot prospect. This occasion called for another round of beer, as Capt Jamie was quick to point out, and Capt Daniel suggested it might even merit two of them.

“Green!” hollered Capt Jan.

“Gold!” bellowed Capt Jeroen.

And so on. In no time, Buzzard and Australian Maid were little more than distant rumours, and they weren’t behind us.

Out of curiosity I looked inside the two deck chests and found myself impressed at how much beer and ice they held. We were evidently prepared for a long race, which was just as well, given the pace we had set. Taken together, all this fuel must have weighed a ton. I asked Capt Andy if the race committee had taken into account the beer when calculating our handicap.

“No,” he told me. “If they knew we carried an advantage like this, we wouldn’t stand a chance.”

Nevertheless, as the race progressed, I was aware of a growing sense of unease. I had read, somewhere, of how Eskimos are sometimes prone to an acute malaise when confronted with the immense emptiness of the Arctic wastes, and I could appreciate this as I looked around at the sea around us. If I squinted, I could make out what appeared to be sails far to the north of us. I thought there were also a few to the west, but I couldn’t be sure without binoculars.

“Why is everybody else ’way over there?” asked Dr Daeng.

Several of the skippers were in the cockpit cooking up a broth of navigational plans that included two different tacks and three different configurations of sails. Capt Andy had retired below decks to reflect upon the meaning of things, including the reasons he hadn’t crewed on somebody else’s boat instead.
Then new developments brought him topside once more. Not only had another yacht come within sight, she seemed to be headed the same way we were. It was *Mystic Moon*, another classic wooden boat and one just about as fast as *Buccabu*. Now that it started to look as though we could actually take her, Capt Jan had hustled up to the bow to stare anxiously ahead at our victim, shouting commands back to Capt Jamie. “Take in the jenny!” he suggested in forceful tones.

“Aye, aye, sir,” Capt Jamie responded, swigging at his Gold with one hand and rattling the winch handle enthusiastically with the other, just as though he were indeed taking in the jenny. In his opinion we were already running right down the slot, and if it ain’t busted you don’t fix it.

“Take it in some more!”

“Aye, aye, sir. [More rattle of winch handle.] Gold!” cried Capt Jamie in the traditional manner.

Even Dr Daeng picked right up, now that there was something to engage the interest beyond 360 degrees of calm sea plus a motley collection of also reasonably calm beer locusts. In fact, she went so far as to put aside her paperback novel, briefly, and ask, “Is that boat in the same race, then?” Upon hearing that indeed it was, she looked surprised, and looked surprised again when Capt Rowdy tried to claim we were gaining on it.

“What’s the next one to catch, then?” asked Capt Daniel, in an excess of optimism.

“What are you talking about?” said Capt Andy. “The rest of them have already finished. They’re all on the beach and half legless by now.”

“Green!” “Gold!” “Gold! “Green!” “Take in the jenny!” “Aye, Aye, sir!” (Rattle of winch handle.) “Green!” “Green!”

There followed a classic duel, with *Mystic Moon* using every trick at her disposal. At one point we ran through the hind end of the regatta fleet on some other leg of the race and, as we tried to round a marker buoy, almost got rammed by *No Fixed Address*, a super-fast ocean-going catamaran. This generated a certain amount of heat in the cockpit, not to mention salty language fit to make a dentist blush. We ran up a red protest flag, but
Capt Roger, for one, expressed some doubt whether we were going to finish the race in time to file our protest anyway.

In the course of events, however, we did find ourselves back off Nai Harn Bay and headed for the last buoy. *Mystic Moon* was well ahead at this point -- the only other boat in sight, aside from the rest of the fleet where it rested at anchor, a forest of masts and not a sail to be seen.

Capt Daniel had disposed himself on a pile of canvas in the bows. “You should take it easy, now, Daniel,” Capt Jamie was yelling up at him from the cockpit, clearly worried that his friend was overdoing it. Capt Rowdy had in the meantime bypassed the chain of command and was intent upon his own exploration of the deck chests.

Then there was a sudden bang. We had managed to blow the spinnaker, never mind there were only two knots of wind. A couple of minutes later, as he and Capt Roger were stowing the rags, Capt Jeroen was heard to remark, “Damn. Now we’ve ripped the spinnaker bag as well.”

“Hey!” Capt Jan told me. “Write that down -- we were going so fast we ripped the spinnaker bag.”

Some time later, Capt Roger had taken over the wheel. Capt Andy was sprawled on the genoa, which was piled on the bow, sipping Gold and hollering in his customary sardonic tones, “Jenny in!”

“Green!” “Gold!” responded the crew. “Green!” “Gold!” “Green!” “Gold!” “Green!” “No, I want a Coke!”

There was some discussion as to whether *Buccabu* was going to make it back soon enough to qualify at all and, more importantly, whether there was going to be any champagne left by the time we did finally get in. Capt Rowdy was trying to explain to Dr Daeng that we could still do pretty well in this race, given our handicap, even if we were going to be last in by a long sea-mile. But she looked skeptical.

Then *Mystic Moon* sailed into a patch of dead air in the lee of an island just off Nai Harn Beach. At almost the same instant, our sails filled with a fair breeze from the hills to the north, and it had become a new ball game, a real race. Maybe we weren’t going to be last after all.
As we came up on Mystic Moon, Capt Andy, aiming to minimize wind resistance, was yelling, “Lie flat; lie flat on the deck!” Capt Jeroen, amazed at the speed we had developed, wanted to know if there was a water ski aboard; and, as we passed the buoy just ahead of Mystic Moon, Capt Jamie was screaming, “We did it -- we won!”

“What’s the time?” asked Capt Andy. “Three o’clock? Hey! We’ve made it. We’ve qualified!”

Jubilation. We had won. And it was amazing, but those deck chests just never ran dry.

Half-hearted claims by the crew of Mystic Moon that we had started our engine and motored in ahead of them were of course malarkey. We had won fair and square. Not only that, we had done it in the proper spirit of the race, which is not to win but only to do it right. And to drink beer. And to wait for the evening’s party, when you could drink champagne instead.

By the time we got to the bar at the Phuket Yacht Club, everybody was sailing three sheets to the wind. We kept trying to tell anyone who would listen that we had just won. But they had a hard time understanding which race it was we were referring to. To them, it all seemed so long ago.

CUTLINES

She was looking back towards the beach at Nai Harn Bay in a speculative manner, as if to say, “Maybe I can’t swim that far but, if I can’t, drowning probably won’t be so bad by comparison with staying where I am now.”

Mystic Moon was well ahead at this point -- the only other boat in sight, aside from the rest of the fleet where it rested at anchor, a forest of masts and not a sail to be seen.