

Fear and Oil on the Gulf Coast

The Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill didn't stop the 555-mile Regatta al Sol, but its future impact on Gulf Coast yachting remains to be determined. **by Troy Gilbert**

Our Gulf Coast is a realm of tropical water, sugar sand beaches and bountiful marshes. It's where Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto intuited that the fountain of youth was located. We cruise to small American islands sprawled off our coast that are home to decaying Spanish forts, and distance race through narrow marshes to the open Gulf. We can nearly toss a stone on the last Bolshevik holdouts in Cuba.

We are the waters and the people that Jimmy Buffett croons about. We uphold traditions and we defy them. We remove our caps in the yacht clubs and then are nudged for a hit from our bottles of smuggled Cuban rum. We had 18 of our 33 respected Gulf Yachting Association clubs destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, and then laughed because we needed a laugh as we raced our salvaged and scarred boats just 60 days after the storm.

I race with oilmen and women. An oil and gas geologist and his Dutch offshore crew taught me to sail nearly 20 years ago. A quarter of my yacht club members work in the oil and gas industry, as do half of my relatives. My beloved aunt lost her fiancé during the Deepwater Horizon explosion on April 20, 2010. All there was to bury of him was a box filled with mementos.

Just over a week after the funeral services, and less than a month after the explosion, with the well still puking crude oil into the Gulf, I had a responsibility to a boat and a crew. Meticulously planned for nearly a year, the 555-mile Regatta al Sol was set to run from Pensacola to Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula, and understandably, it was now up in the air.

Sailing through and around the eddies and vortices of the massive Loop



Lunami, a Beneteau 40.7 participating in the Regatta al Sol, sails through sargasso and dispersed oil.

“A giant blanket of oil was subject to the whims of current and wind, all the while growing and consuming our racecourse.”

Current, flowing north at more than four knots past the Yucatan Strait, is not for slouches. But this time, there was a new issue. A giant blanket of oil was desecrating the Gulf and it was subject to the whims of current and wind, all the while growing and consuming our racecourse.

I assumed organizers would cancel the regatta because of the wildly fluctuating or non-existent information coming from British Petroleum's handlers and the Coast Guard regarding booming and the subsequent closures of a multitude of bays and inlets. Crews and owners didn't know whether they could even get their vessels to Pensacola, Fla. for the start, let alone return them to their home marinas after the finish. The race committee was hard-pressed to answer

the racers' questions about whether the regatta would actually be sailed.

We were all oil spill newbies then. We have since learned that these largely ineffectual booms were employed only in the waterways where the media was likely to see them. We've also learned that these oil booms are only fairly effective in still water—not on any shoreline with wave action. And even if they did work, there's nowhere near enough of them in existence to protect our coast. They are a lie and a joke. The only booms we actually saw in Pensacola before the start of the race were in the marinas where people could easily see them, put there to protect man-made breakwaters from getting soiled.

The regatta finally obtained Coast Guard approval after the race commit-

INSIDE STORY

tee opted to send us 40 miles east, away from an oil slick that was then the size of New Hampshire. We sailed south past the white sands of the Pensacola beaches, and the emerald-and-white surf diminished as we entered the open waters of the Gulf. Thoughts and fears of oil and loss drifted away after the first six hours passed without a sighting, and

we fell into our race routine.

We averaged eight knots through electric blue waters for five days. At night, we watched the phosphorescent trails left by “ghost” dolphins as they feigned attacks on our broadsides before turning at the last moment and riding our bow wake. During the day, we saw giant bluefin tuna pop, and massive endangered Kemp Rid-

ley turtles telescoped their heads to check us out. Man-o-war slipped by us. All was good in this tropical sea.

I partied in Mexico. Our destination, a six-mile long island, was overrun by Gulf Coast sailors and racer chasers. We had all achieved another Gulf of Mexico crossing without anyone dismasting. We lived a crazy beach song that is best left unwritten. Three days in, however, I sat down at a beachside bar and had a long conversation with an offshore oil consultant who was part of a return delivery crew. He explained at length the unbelievable negligence and criminal behavior it would take for an oil company to have an “accident” of this scale. It was a sobering discussion.

After returning home, the summer progressed and crude continued to flow. The filth reached past Louisiana’s eroding marshes and onto pristine Alabama and Florida beaches. In my family, there were quiet conversations regarding replacements for traditional winter holiday meals requiring fresh Louisiana seafood. Offshore regattas were cancelled. People I knew lost their jobs. Out-of-town friends would say, “That’s terrible. You just can’t catch a break down there.”

It became political. With the media and the nation beginning to grow bored, articles discussed how a ruined Gulf Coast economy wouldn’t have a significant impact on the country’s financial health as a whole. We have stopped talking about it so much, but I know that deep down on this coast, we are still very scared.

I recently drove out to the point at West End in New Orleans. My girlfriend’s two daughters were out on the water, enjoying their first day at junior sailing camp. I knew they were a bit anxious and I quietly watched them sail, jealous of their fun and proud of their courage.

A couple of days earlier, the first tendrils of oil had finally navigated their way through the maze of marsh and channels into eastern Lake Pontchartrain. I sat there by the water and wondered if de Soto had it all wrong. If, instead, there is a fountain of oil, and it’s offshore, and it means death. I wondered if it would be those children who might eventually know a Gulf Coast restored, sailing it as I have, with me old and hearing through them the stories and the beat of those unwritten beach songs. 