

Outrigger Odyssey

The 350-kilometer Holopuni Va'a takes paddlers from Tahiti to Bora Bora and into Polynesian canoe racing's ancient past

"*Cinq* minutes!" Race director Mauna Bennett hollers the five-minute warning into a bullhorn from his perch aboard the escort boat. Just off Point Venus, the spit of black sand that marks the northernmost tip of Tahiti, seven small sailing canoes tack back and forth behind an imaginary start line. Mauna waves a large green flag over his head. "Hep!" The race is on!

Like horses out of the gate, the canoes surge forward, their triangular sails puffing in the wind in a burst of lollipop colors. The sporty, three-man paddling-sailing hybrids are known as Holopuni—modern incarnations of ancient Polynesian vessels. From the flybridge of the escort boat, I'm following the ninth annual Holopuni Va'a Hawaiki Nui Voyage—an epic, 350-kilometer odyssey across French Polynesia. Over the next week the canoes will link the six main Society Islands: Tahiti, Mo'orea, Huahine, Ra'iātea, Taha'a and Bora Bora. Each channel crossing doubles as a race.



Aboard the Holopuni Manu Iva, Tuteahu Cardiles sets a fast pace for the first channel crossing of the Holopuni Va'a Hawaiki Nui Voyage—a weeklong odyssey across French Polynesia. Each day of the journey, three-man teams race modern sailing canoes known as Holopuni from one Society Islands landing to the next. Designed by Kaua'i resident Nick Beck, the Holopuni is a sporty interpretation of the ancient Polynesian sailing canoes that once carried people across Oceania. Smaller and lighter than most modern six-person sailing canoes, Holopuni can sustain hurtling speeds of twenty-five knots and higher.



Crossing channels at high speed requires focus and serious seamanship, but the voyage includes plenty of opportunities for leisure, too. Day four is reserved for rest and recreation. At right, Manuarii Poulain steers *Terematai* while Heivarau Hiro jumps into a paddling seat for an unhurried pleasure cruise to Hana Iti — a remote beach on Huahine’s southwest coast. The two-hour excursion is designed to give supporters a chance to helm the *Holopuni* and explore the area the way voyagers did for millennia.

Among the competitors are five paddlers from Kaua’i, including Nick Beck, the formidable 78-year-old creator of the *Holopuni*, his son Hobey and his grandson Braden. Hobey steers the turquoise-hulled *Océane* while Nick navigates the trusty *Kuhela*. For the first half of the fifty-kilometer crossing to Mo’orea, *Océane* remains at the front of the pack. Braden is stroking—setting the pace—in seat one, getting drenched whenever the boat’s nose

dives into a trough. Jeff McBride, also from Kaua'i, hammers away as the powerhouse in seat two. They're stoked that Mother Nature is cooperating, churning out the steady fifteen-knot winds they're accustomed to in Hawai'i.

The canoes depart Mo'orea at first light on day two to find a glassy ocean and not enough wind for sailing. Race organizer Kavika Knight cancels the day's competition and prepares to tow the canoes behind the escort boat.

Thanks to its one-hundred-square-foot Dacron sail, the Holopuni can sustain adrenaline-pumping speeds of twenty-five knots and higher. Compared with six-man outrigger canoes that have been retrofitted with sails—like most sailing canoes that race in Hawai'i—the Holopuni is smaller, lighter and faster. It has no stays and can be sailed solo. With a focus on simplicity and performance, it's the Laser Standard of sailing canoes. And like the Laser, the Holopuni became its own internationally recognized racing class. "Like a little sports car," Hobey says, explaining its instant appeal. "When you see a wave, you can turn down, power up with the sail and take off."

After a two-hour sleigh ride with multiple lead changes, the red-hulled *Terematai* is first across the finish line. It slides into its home waters at Coco Beach, a ribbon of white sand on a tiny *motu* (islet) off northwest Mo'orea. Topless sunbathers wade out to watch, and stingrays glide by unfazed. "Allez!" the spectators cheer. "Allez!"

Once ashore, the paddlers and their entourage devour a mid afternoon feast prepared by the Coco Beach Restaurant. Kavika Knight, the tireless voyage organizer and president of the Association Va'a Ta'ie Tautoru (French Polynesian Sailing Canoe Association), stands on a table to present the Coco Beach trophy to *Terematai* captain Vatea Quesnot.

As daylight fades to a golden dusk, paddlers retire to their quarters aboard two giant catamarans that will accompany the voyage, carrying families, friends and supplies. Tomorrow's crew call is 4:30 a.m. for the grueling 169

kilometers to Huahine. Those of us who are “boatless” crash at Vatea’s home across from Coco Beach. Hosing off my sandy feet at the bottom of the stairs, I start wondering about my slippers. I haven’t seen them since we left Point Venus. My colleague Hayden Ramler also lost his in the shuffle of boat-hopping. “Don’t worry,” he says. “They’ll turn up tomorrow.”

DAY 2. Mo’orea to Huahine

If someone placed a classified ad soliciting crew for this voyage, it would read something like: “Seeking fit waterman and team player. Must be willing to paddle until entire body cramps and then paddle some more. Can sleep anywhere. Prefers ginger and lime with dark rum. Sings on key.”

A rooster breaks the silence as the household stirs around 4 a.m. Vatea refills empty water bottles as his girlfriend pours us coffee. Vatea is the quintessential sailing canoe captain—a rare breed whose commitment and accountability is an order of magnitude greater than the waterman described above. The anticipation of a long race kept him from a restful sleep. A basic tattoo with a canoe paddle circles his toned biceps. No trophies adorn his shelves, but the sponsor stickers on his equipment are the badges of an accomplished athlete.

“I used to paddle my canoe from Tahiti to Mo’orea at night, at 3 o’clock in the morning. Just me and my friend. For us it was a small voyage, from one island to another island, by our own power. I like this feeling,” Vatea says. “We did it during every full moon for three years.” In 2013 Vatea’s friend Yves Sauzier invited him on an early Holopuni Hawaiki Nui voyage. Back then there were only a handful of Holopuni canoes in French Polynesia. Yves let Vatea steer the leg from Taha’a to Bora Bora; Vatea was hooked. The following year he purchased *Terematai*, graduating from canoe paddler to sailor.

Outside, the stars twinkle as paddlers don headlamps to ready their canoes. Kavika outlines some safety precautions: The course is 291 degrees on the

magnetic compass, radio check every three hours, prepare for evening arrival. At departure the island is still asleep. The canoes skim across the glassy surface while the sunrise takes over the sky, silhouetting the mountains behind Vatea's house. The majesty of Mo'orea, even as it shrinks into the distance, is so, so grand.

One of the signs a traditional navigator looks for is the clarity of the horizon line. If it's windy, the sea spray will blur it. This morning it's tack sharp—not enough wind to fill a sail. What that translates to, in paddling terms, is two guys killing themselves to move four hundred pounds of canoe. This crossing took fifteen hours in 2016—and that was with a bit of breeze. Paddling without any wind for 169 kilometers would be a recipe for injury. On a multi-island voyage like this, there's not enough flexibility in the schedule to wait on the weather. At 6:10 a.m. Kavika grudgingly radios a decision to tow.

In the shallow waters off Fare, the crew of *Holopuni Moorea* preps for the next day's race. It was here on Huahine Island that the only voyaging canoe ever found in Polynesia was excavated – estimated to be sixty-five feet long and a thousand years old.

In all of fifteen minutes, the canoes are tied up in tow behind the escort boats, and we're en route to Huahine again. Surfing the boats' wakes, the canoes dance to the hum of the twin two-hundred-horsepower motors. The paddlers sprawl out on the catamaran decks, taking the opportunity to rest. Occasionally, a school of *marara* (flying fish) breaks the surface, and blue-footed boobies fly by. Time stretches out.

After five hours the faint outline of Huahine appears. "It's such a different perspective to see the islands from the ocean, to travel to them the way they were discovered," Hobey says. "If you fly in on a plane, you're just there and it's overwhelming. But when you paddle and sail for hours, people welcome you, and you feel good about being there."

His father, Nick, built the original *Holopuni* in 1981 for just this kind of

interisland voyaging. On assignment for *National Geographic*, Nick's task was to canvass cultural sites across the Hawaiian Islands. He wanted to arrive at these places—noted in the journals of early explorers—the traditional way, by canoe. "I went to all the islands, all the way to Ni'ihau. I saw so many amazing and untouched sites." He decided not to write the story. "I didn't want to be part of the exposé."

Nick designed the Holopuni as a vessel he could operate solo or with others, to surf, fish and cross channels. After decades of refinement, he's reshaped the hull with cockpits that can handle high-speed torque and deeper gunwales that minimize the threat of swamping. Currently, Holopuni canoes are produced in Hawai'i, Tahiti and New Zealand for \$25,000 to \$30,000. The community of Holopuni owners is small—around fifty—but it's growing, and extends from Hawai'i to Sardinia and Mauritius.

To name his canoe, Nick visited Rachel Mahuiki, a kupuna (elder) he greatly respects on Kaua'i. "I was talking with her about what I was going to do," he recalls. "She sat for a while, closed her eyes. She opened them and said, 'Holopuni.'" "Okay," Nick said. "What are you going to do?" she asked. "Sail all the Hawaiian Islands," he reiterated. She looked at him and said, "You're going to sail everywhere in that." Holopuni means "to sail everywhere," and the little canoe is living up to its name.

About six kilometers away from the town of Fare, the crews unhitch their canoes and paddle ashore to loosen their muscles. The late afternoon light softens the brilliance of Huahine's carpeted green peaks as we approach the beach fronting the Maitai Lapita Hotel. I dive in to refresh after a long day at sea. A bewildered boatman pulls up in a Zodiac to ask where we came from. "Mo'orea!" someone answers. Amazed, he gives us a hearty "*la orana* [good day]!" and zooms into the sunset.

DAY 3. Huahine

Because yesterday's "race" turned into a tow, Kavika organizes an hour-long

circle lagoon dash to determine the winner for this leg. It's a feisty jaunt that goes out the pass, past the macking surf, in through the next pass, around a gargantuan cruise ship and along the shoreline back to the Maitai Lapita. The wind makes it a sailing race outside the lagoon; inside it's a paddle battle. *Terematai* prevails again by a few boat lengths.

The rest of the day we're free to soak up Huahine. Hayden and I stroll barefoot into town, where we stock up on water and relish some *coco glacée* (ice-cold coconuts). At 5 p.m. the voyagers reconvene poolside at the hotel for today's trophy presentation. From its fish trap chandeliers to its striking hull-shaped roofs, the hotel's design honors the canoe. It was here in 1977, during the construction of the original Hotel Bali Hai, that Yoshihiko Sinoto of Honolulu's Bishop Museum excavated the only voyaging canoe ever found in Polynesia—estimated to be sixty-five feet long and a thousand years old.

Sinoto's team unearthed twenty-three-foot-long planks with lashing intact, a thirty-nine-foot mast and a twelve-foot steering blade, all incredibly preserved in the saltwater-soaked sediment. This profound discovery provided material evidence for the theories of Polynesian migration that *Hōkūle'a*—the Polynesian Voyaging Society's flagship—had been built to validate. Until then, these mighty ocean-bound canoes were known only through legends, petroglyphs and European shipboard drawings.

Moving from boat to boat and from boat to shore requires the assistance of a nimble water taxi. Captain Teiva Veronique shuttles paddlers between catamarans and canoes.

Kavika buys a celebratory round of mojitos, and everyone toasts the crew of *Terematai*: Vatea, Heifara Germain and Ronald Teraiharoa. "'Tere' means 'to ride.' And '*matai*' is the wind," Mauna translates with a grin. "That's why they're always in the front!"

At twilight Hayden and I head to the Huahine Yacht Club for a bowl of *poisson cru* and a fat cheeseburger. On the way back we hear music on one of the catamarans. I can make out Lili Tapa, the onboard chef, strumming her

'ukulele and boat captain Teiva Veronique accompanying her on guitar. Raucous voices chime in for the chorus of "Three Little Birds" by Bob Marley: "Don't worry about a thing ... every little thing is gonna be all right."

DAY 4. Huahine

Day four is a built-in recreation and recovery day. On the itinerary: an unhurried excursion to a remote beach on Huahine Iti's southwest coast. The two-hour pleasure cruise gives everyone who's not racing—family, friends and support staff—the chance to practice canoe sailing in the relative safety of the coral-ringed lagoon and to explore the coastline the way voyagers did for millennia. This is the stuff of which French Polynesia daydreams are made: lounging on the canoe's trampoline suspended inches above the crystal-clear water, landing on sand as white as coconut flesh, and lunching on *poulet fafa* (chicken and spinach) and *po'e* (taro and mashed banana pudding).

After stuffing ourselves, we hike barefoot up to a lookout once belonging to the bar of the Hana Iti Hotel, which was destroyed by a typhoon in the mid-'90s. The cerulean seascape is hypnotizing, each gradient of blue popping through my polarized glasses. When we get back to Fare, the voyage's production crew kidnaps me. We take a Zodiac out to the pass, where they've spotted a whale and her baby. Videographer Allison Poisson hands me a mask, and photographer Ariitea Graux gives me his left fin.

Every time I ask someone what the most rewarding part of this adventure is, the immediate answer is, "The people." Nick regards the Holopuni as a vessel of connection. "Wherever you go, you make really good friends—people who are talented, giving, concerned and want to share whatever they've got," he says. Terrified, but with those sentiments in mind, I blindly follow Ariitea and Allison into the sapphire void. When I see their bobbing heads look over and smile, I relax. The whales surface in the distance.

DAY 5. Ra'i'atea and Taha'a

“This is where it starts,” says Tahiarīi Pariente, motioning everyone to step into the water on a sliver of beach on Ra’iātea that marks the traditional entryway to Taputapuātea, the most sacred place on Earth for voyagers. “This is the gathering place where for hundreds of years all the high bloodlines from all Polynesia have been meeting, greeting, sharing, deciding.”

Tahiarīi is a navigator who spent eight years in Hawai’i training with *Hōkūle’a* and Maui voyaging canoe *Mo’okiha o Pi’ilani*. Sporting a palm hat, red *pāreu*, elaborately carved pendant and mod pair of white-rimmed Maui Jims, he guides us to the main *marae* (stone temple) of the 5,200-acre complex, which was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2017.

He tells us about Tumu Ra’i Fenua, the giant octopus whose eight arms correspond to star paths that lead to each corner of Polynesia. “An octopus whose head is set right *here*,” he tells his reverent audience. “Back in the day, all the *ari’i* [chiefs] would send their kids here for study—the best dancers, the best fighters, the best canoe builders, the best practitioners of all traditional arts. In these stones is set the history of our knowledge.”

The crew of *Hōku Lōa* races past a gargantuan cruise ship moored in the lagoon at Huahine. The *Hōku Lōa* is one of six Holopuni that raced in the 2018 voyage.

“Today we are modern Polynesian people. We have carbon fiber canoes—that’s fine. If my ancestor had a chain saw, he would have used it, I’m pretty sure. But here in this very primitive space, we still get *mana* [spiritual power],” Tahiarīi says, encouraging us to walk the grounds. “Feel a bit from this mana. It’s been here for a long, long time.”

The group quietly processes the emotional weight of standing in a cradle of Polynesian culture. Tahiarīi takes the opportunity to chat with Nick and catch up on Hawai’i connections, before presenting the Navigator’s Trophy for the morning’s thirty-eight-kilometer jog from Huahine to Ra’iātea to Hobey, Jeff and Braden. The Kaua’i crew is proud to win this leg, having capitalized on

the billowing swells that pushed them forward. The afternoon crossing, twenty-five kilometers to neighboring Taha'a, will be contained in the lagoon shared by the two islands—which means less wind, smaller waves.

"Come out of the sun," scolds Kaua'i crewman Steve Baker's wife, Barbara, handing me something in a plastic bag. "What is this?" I ask. "It's a peanut butter-banana sandwich, since you're going in the canoe," she replies. Uh ... wha? Before we left Huahine, Nick had muttered something about Hayden and I subbing for him and Steve during the second leg today. He knew we were both seasoned paddlers who could go the distance, but I didn't think he was serious. When Nick hands Hayden the race jersey off his back, I realize this is really happening.

My heart rate jumps as I switch to competition mode. On our way to the dock where the canoes are tied off, Hayden explains the signals he'll give to pick up the pace or decelerate. Our steersman, Manuarii Poulain, gives me his hat. Carefully, he maneuvers us across the shallows, dodging coral heads until we get to the start. It feels good to pull the paddle through the water.

Off the start, I catch glimpses of green pinwheels—tall palms—sprouting from Ra'iātea's verdant slopes. Soon they disappear, and we settle into a steady rhythm, a waterborne state of meditation sustained by the swish of ocean grazing the hull. Even as my arms burn, it's not lost on me how extraordinary it is to be paddling a canoe in the motherland of canoe paddling.

"Push! Push!" Hayden hollers, intent to catch a tiny roller. "I am pushing!" I scream back. Ninety minutes in, I'm running on fumes. My sandwich is long gone. I swallow a granola bar and force a gulp of warm liquid from a stray Camelbak under my seat. "Don't give up!" I hear Manuarii call as we approach a small motu, ostensibly the finish line. Leaving nothing in the tank, we persevere until we hear the bullhorn's siren.

Ecstatic and disoriented, I climb onto one of the catamarans, which are tied

together off the east coast of Taha'a. There are hugs and congratulations all around. A few glasses of apple juice and handfuls of nuts restore my blood sugar, and before I know it the rum is flowing as the sun starts to set. Yves Sauzier, who is racing with his son Auto'a and Tehani Tehuritaua, is thrilled to win the Vanilla Isle Trophy. Yves's twelve-year-old canoe, *Holopuni Moorea*, has more miles on it than any Holopuni in French Polynesia. It pioneered the interisland crossings that now comprise the official Holopuni Va'a Hawaiki Nui circuit.

"We started going from Tahiti to Mo'orea. You do this about twenty times, you want to go farther. After we came here—five, six, ten times—we wanted to push the limits again," Yves says. Charismatic and intense, he barely blinks as he explains the wanderlust that motivated him and Kavika to sail their canoes, unescorted, all the way to the Tuamotus, 280 kilometers away. "This was a very extreme experience. When we got there it was magical for us."

"Unfortunately, as the years went by, our people lost this kind of sailing," he says, referring to the introduction of outboard motors, which rendered sailing canoes—the primary mode of transportation for thousands of years—obsolete. He mentions that Teiva recently opened a school that uses Holopuni canoes to teach sailing. "Now people see us, they get involved, they get hooked. That's the purpose of what we're doing: to make people come back to traditional sailing," says Yves. "We are a bunch of friends that are—how do you say this? *Passionate*. And we try to transmit that passion to others."

Lili picks up her 'ukulele, and the intoxicating lilt of Tahitian song becomes the soundtrack for this little flotilla in the middle of the Pacific. I marvel at the simplicity of this sailing life: I've visited five islands so far without having to put on a pair of shoes. In the darkness Kavika pulls out his flashlight to check on the canoes. Seeing that everything is still quite all right, he returns to the party.

DAY 6. Taha'a to Bora Bora

It's hard to overstate the sublime beauty of sailing into Bora Bora. The final lagoon entry is the most mesmerizing: collective fear as the canoes dodge reeling slabs of water at Teavanui pass, collective awe as we drift into the impossibly blue lagoon to face the iconic belltower peak of Mount Otemanu. A group of drummers herald our arrival at Matira, and dozens of local kids welcome the sailors with lei. Bora Bora vice mayor Tafirai Tehihipo presents the Pearl of the Pacific Trophy to the indefatigable crew of *Terematai* and invites everyone to indulge in overflowing platters of tropical fruit. After the ceremony the kids jump aboard for a cruise, turning the canoes into floating jungle gyms.

The voyage ends as quickly as it began. The group forms a tight circle, arms over shoulders. Before any bittersweet good-byes can be exchanged, Kavika reminds everyone that next year's voyage—the first-ever Holopuni World Championship, November 23–30, 2019—is already in the making. Reluctant to accept that it's over, I remember what Kavika said when we first arrived on Mo'orea, seemingly weeks ago. "There's a natural high that just keeps building. If you do this trip and you go all the way to Bora Bora—that high? I've had it last three or four weeks afterward."

Clinging to this promise, Hayden and I pack our bags—now full of wet clothes—and enjoy one last bottle of Hinano with our new friends. Before we board our flight home, we make one more stop: to the store to buy some slippers.HH