

The Fast & Bonnie Sumurun

LUCY TULLOCH

From concept and build to worldwide trophy-winning, *Sumurun's* life reads like a novel, an exotic early Merchant & Ivory film. But, unlike the movies, this is a true story.

Commissioned in 1914 as a gift to her husband by the beautiful and flamboyant Lady Victoria Sackville, she remained Lord Sackville's yacht until his death in 1928.

Named *Sumurun* after a beautiful harem girl in a popular production in London at the time, this was indeed appropriate as Lady Sackville herself was a compelling beauty and daughter of a celebrated Spanish dancer of gypsy descent. She was the mother of the renowned writer Vita Sackville-West, herself daring and notorious amongst genteel society.



The legendary Fairlie Boatyard in Scotland built Fife's elegant gaff-rigged yawl in 1914. Fifes are no strangers at Antigua's Classic Regatta: *Dione, Adventuress, Tuiga, Altair* and *Belle Aventure* to name a few have all raced Antigua's waters. The first William Fife declared that the secret to creating a great yacht was to make her both "fast and bonnie", characteristics *Sumurun* does not fall short on.

Fitted out to the finest standards above and below decks (she was one of the first yachts with electric lights as well as kerosene lanterns) her interior is still in exquisite condition, with no hint that the original Chinese oak panelling in the companionway is anywhere near a hundred years old. The saloon and cabins of beautifully carved English oak and other rare woods are fine examples of the high standard of workmanship of this golden era.

To my mind, down below, her pièce de résistance is her library. An eclectic collection of antique anthologies, first editions, signed copies and leather-bound beauties is the literary feast awaiting the *Sumurun* guest. Cuttings from a 1925 *Country Life* and photographs from Sackville-West's cruise adorn the bulkhead alongside the beautiful poem

"Evening" by Vita Sackville-West written on board *Sumurun* in Cornwall in 1920.

*When little lights in little ports come out,
Quivering down through water with the stars,
And all the fishing fleet of slender spars
Range at their moorings, veer with tide about;
When race of wind is stilled and sails are furled,
And underneath our single riding-light
The curve of black-ribbed deck gleams palely white,
And slumberous waters pool a slumberous world,
- Then, and then only, have I thought how sweet
Old age might sink upon a windy youth,
Quiet beneath the riding-light of truth,
Weathered through storms and gracious in retreat.*

And best of all, Lord Sackville and his family really enjoyed sailing her. There are evocative excerpts from Vita Sackville-West's diary on board, describing moonlit sailing off the Cornish coast and sleeping on deck at sea, nestled in the gig watching the stars "... never liked anything better!" she wrote of this.

But what is a lovely, fast yacht without her owner?

A devoted owner for 35 years, he loves ocean passages the best, he tells me. As well as Transatlantics, he loves the many and varied people he meets sailing *Sumurun* and regales me with stories. Taking the helm during racing, he cuts a dapper figure braced against the wheel with his famous skipper's cap.

Heavily involved with the Film Society of the Lincoln Centre and a dedicated promoter of Independent Film, he was at the Cannes Film Festival in the late '70s and one day, he was "bored with the film people... so I went sailing". He chartered *Sumurun* and fell in love with her and soon after was able to buy her.

As a proud member of the Royal Yacht Squadron, the New York Yacht Club and the Royal Ocean Racing Club, he was inspired by the fact that no one had broken the record of a 12½ day Transatlantic for nearly a hundred years and he worked with the RYS and NYYC to start the Rolex Transatlantic Race in 2005, the Classic Class of which she gracefully won.

When I ask what essence sailing *Sumurun* captures for him, he replies that it is "the nearest thing to living in another age".

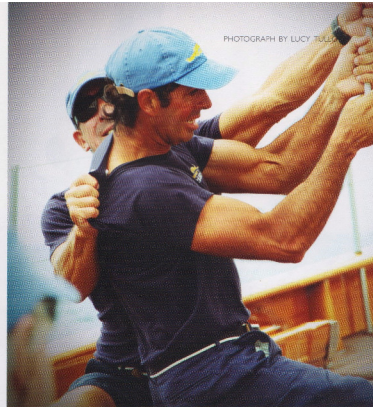
Designed as a "fast cruiser", *Sumurun* raced in the 20s and 30s with the Big Class yacht racing circuit in good company with such noble yachts as schooner *Westward* and the Royal Yacht *Britannia*. But as World War II consumed Europe in the 40s, she, like many of the pedigree sailing yachts, was taken to the Hamble where she was secured in a mud berth to preserve her wood.

Following the war, she was resurrected and in 1948 she was re-rigged as a Marconi ketch for easier sail handling. She has gone on to become a renowned winner in the racing circles, winning honours in European, Caribbean, American & Transatlantic events. She has won Antigua's Classic Regatta overall three times and collected no less than four trophies last year.

Playing a huge part in this trophy collecting is the captain, Armin Fischer, who has skippered *Sumurun* for the past 23 years. The owner's huge respect for Armin and his family is evident in their delightful relationship. He runs the boat with serenity, picking faithful and hard-working crew, many of whom have sailed with him for decades.

In refits and maintenance of *Sumurun*, Armin says her owner cuts no corners "We wouldn't be sailing her as we do, if it wasn't for him". He talks enthusiastically about all the successful racing, which he loves "...cleaning up in the Med regattas after the Transat Race...just one after another after another" he grins. When I ask him what he likes about the Classic Regatta in Antigua "I like it because it's windy" and the weather Gods did not disappoint him in this.

Plans for her 100th birthday? There is talk of the Isle of Wight, of the Fairlie Fife yard in Scotland and of Maine too... who knows where the winds will blow her for this notable occasion.



PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCY TULLOCH

ABOVE: Muscles over electric power to haul up sails on this 99 year-old Fife.

BELOW: Strong winds and big seas at Classics, good conditions for *Sumurun*.

OPPOSITE: A strong grip is essential as seas fill her leeward deck on the windward leg.



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