

NOV/DEC 2013

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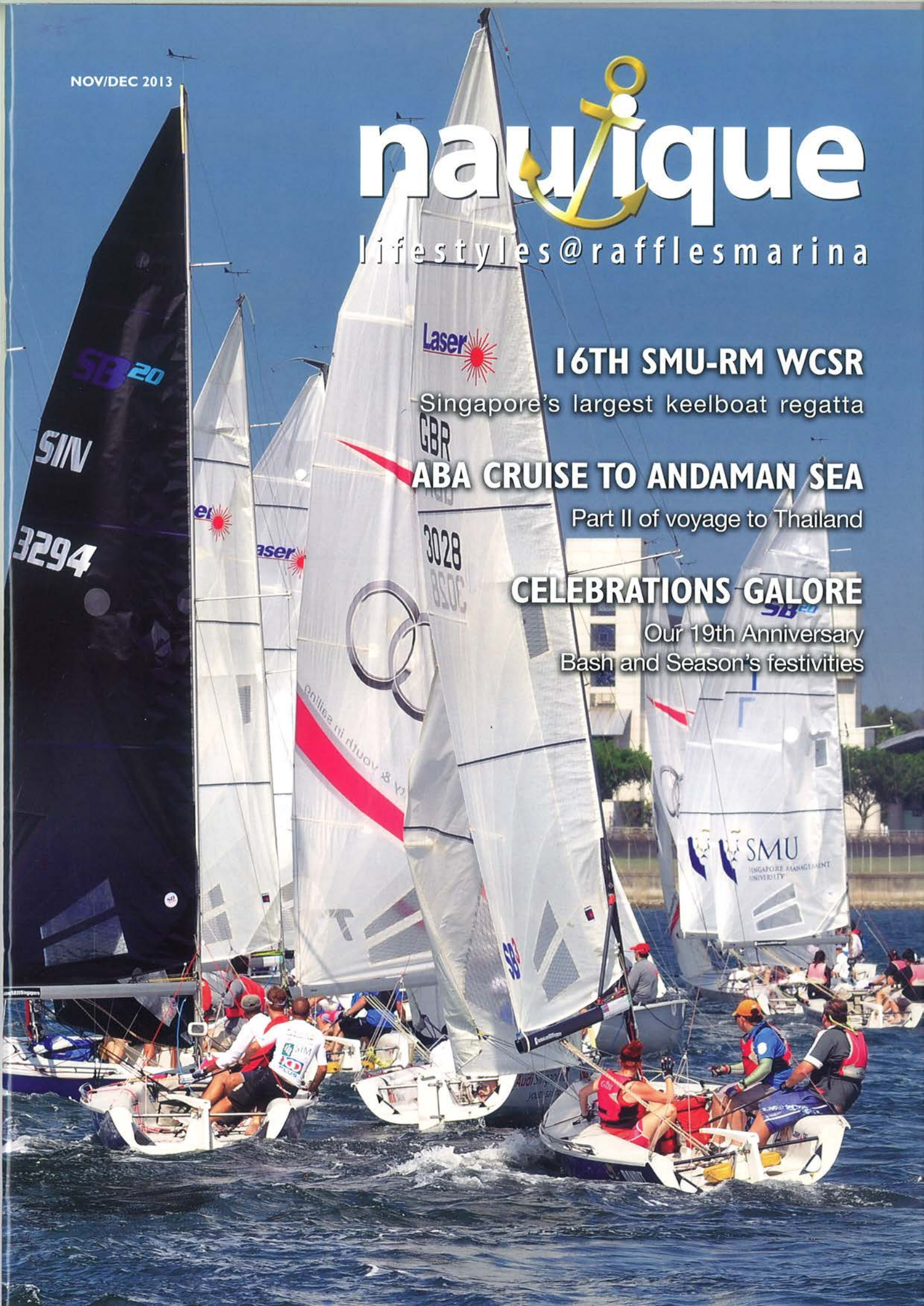
Singapore's largest keelboat regatta

ABA CRUISE TO ANDAMAN SEA

Part II of voyage to Thailand

CELEBRATIONS GALORE

Our 19th Anniversary
Bash and Season's festivities



A Whale Of A Time!

By Abigail Alling

It was a *whale of a time* in April when we found pygmy blue whales and sperm whales off the coast of Sri Lanka, and a whole lot of them too. The weather was in our favour and the seas were calm through the day and night. We hove-to in the evening, and woke in the morning to the sound of their breathing when whales surfaced near *Mir*. Wow! It does not get any better than this.

While enjoying the spectacle of seven or more pygmy blue whales that surrounded *Mir* with their gigantic spaceship-like appearance and 7 metre-high blows, we took turns at the helm collecting data or photographing their flukes (tails) to identify individuals. This information will provide baseline data to learn about their distribution and abundance.

Once we were sure we had photographed each pygmy blue whale in our vicinity, we turned our attention to sperm whales. Sperm whales, in comparison, look a bit crumpled and misshapened with their one blow hole situated on the side of their head. However, their appearance is deceiving and having spent weeks living with them offshore, they are the most loveable and engaging of whales.

After several days of following one group of about 30, our happiest moment arrived when a pod of eight females/juveniles turned towards *Mir* and came alongside, nearly touching the hull as the sun was setting. Although it was a brief moment, we felt they had come to acknowledge our steady persistence in "hanging out" with them these past days. Somehow they knew we were leaving and thus came to bid us goodbye.

Just hours before this marvelous encounter we had seen the same pod interact with an enormous bull sperm whale.



striking and when he left "our" pod, we saw in the distance, his giant head rise out of the water. His white lower jaw opened and closed – a behaviour known as jaw-clapping. Few have ever seen this behaviour, and we're not sure of its meaning, but it is generally thought to be an aggressive communication.

Our time in Sri Lanka was fulfilling: We had not only secured a long-lasting collaboration and friendship with Captain Raja of *Raja & the Whales*, but also with the faculty and students of the University of Ruhuna. We look forward to working with them in the coming year at the newly formed Indian Ocean Marine Mammal Research Center to understand the distribution of these great whales vis a vis the heavily-trafficked shipping lane along the southern coast of Sri Lanka. On behalf of us all, we wish to thank the Ward Family and Kopcho Family Foundations, Swire Pacific Offshore and all our sponsors for your help in making this programme possible.

Please follow our progress at www.biospherefoundation.org