

Latin America/ Uruguay

Battling against Wind and Tide

A profile of two women from the port town of Punta del Este who have made careers as seafarers

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(http://www.cedepesca.org.ar:80/foroclaral/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=52&Itemid=3)

The view of yachts and supplies of fresh fish draw visitors like a magnet to the Uruguayan port of Punta del Este. Among the bustle, people go about their business virtually unnoticed. However, in their midst are two women who one cannot ignore.

At first glance, Laura Sosa and María Biaño seem quite different from each other. The former is extrovert, passionate and talks quite openly. The latter is reserved, cautious, and initially seems sullen and distrustful. But these women share a common passion: the sea. Laura is the first woman captain of a racing yacht in Maldonado. María is the skipper of a fishing vessel, with a crew to look after.

Laura is 28 years old, has been married for 12 years and has a six-year-old daughter. Born into a family of five boys, she grew up amongst mooring lines and wharfs because her father was the captain of a deep-sea fishing boat. Six years ago, she got a sales job on the vessel *Calypso*, but as she did not get seasick and was bold, she gradually landed seagoing jobs. “My colleagues made bets about how much I would put up with — and I just carried on”, she says happily, like a winner.

Today Laura is the captain of a private yacht. Her work encompasses all the tasks from steering to cleaning, cooking and looking after the boat. Her day starts early in the morning with cleaning the boat. “You must soap it, rinse it and dry it before each voyage”,

she explains. She must ensure that there is no shortage of supplies, and as soon as her bosses arrive, they put to sea. She shares the navigation with her employer, but when he turns in to rest, she is left in command. Despite skipping an English yacht of the latest generation—unique on the River Plate (Rio de la Plata)—she still remains on the alert when the auto-pilot is on. “I don’t trust it”, she says.

Being a woman did not help with her training. Laura had to face the prejudices of her colleagues, who often made out that she was not up to the job. “This is man’s territory, and you are too feminine for this cruel life”, they would say. But this did not bother her. Her passion could not be crushed by mere sexist remarks. “I made fast a large mooring rope under torrential rain and I am happy”, she laughs.

To get where she has, Laura took courses and sat for complex exams. First she got her cabin boy’s card, then a sailor’s certificate and had to do practical tests in first aid and fire control at sea, to pass a course of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). She also learned how to follow routes and to deal with maritime charts up to the standard of Grade B.

María (45), a fisherwoman and the mother of three children, aged 14, 19 and 24, had to face very different circumstances to become the captain of an artisanal fishing vessel. A marriage break-up, advancing pregnancy and a distressing financial situation were the motors that drove this woman to sea. Though she has been sailing since she was three because her father owned a boat, María’s previous occupation was as a lorry driver.

“To start with, I was frightened,” she explains about her days at sea. “You think that a 5-m vessel with three people on board and with an outboard motor is not a very safe place to work. But my ‘needs’ pushed me out to sea, and today, almost 20 years later, I am convinced that I have a wonderful job.”

Time permitting, María sets out “as night falls” to fish for *brótola* (codling), *pescadilla* (croaker), and *cazón* (dog fish/tope) from a small vessel named *Piruleta*.



Before leaving, she prepares and baits 100 hooks, work that is “very time consuming”. Out at sea, she does not get sick, but when she was pregnant and fishing, she “was sick all the time”. Her work is not only at sea; when she gets back on land, the fish must be cleaned and sold in a stall at the port. Her summer earnings, after deducting fuel costs and taxes, provide barely enough to survive for the rest of the year.

Moreover, in the last eight months, she has not caught a single fish. The reason? Destruction caused by vessels fishing with trawls or *barrido* out at sea. The nets used by these vessels catch everything in their paths, and the small fish—that have no commercial value—end up dead, and are thrown back. “In artisanal fishing, small fish are not taken on board, and are returned to the sea alive,” explains Maria.

On the wharf, the fish is divided into equal shares between the crew, and sold. Daily earnings vary between 200 and 1,000 pesos (US\$ 7-32). In any case, they don’t go out every day because they depend on good weather. Costs for fuel and vessel repairs are borne by the owner, in this case, Maria.

As for the future, says Laura: “Now I would like to continue up to Grade A and to start making longer voyages”. She is just about to make her first long voyage, to Angra dos Reis in Brazil, a voyage that will last three weeks, requiring 14 hours of navigation

per day. Despite the prospect of being away from her husband and daughter for so long, the joy of the anticipated trip is reflected in her shining eyes.

And Maria says, “You really feel at ease at sea. To spend six hours in the silence of the sea, listening to the seabirds, takes away all your stress. What’s more, I am at a stage in life where money is not everything. So, although it’s not very lucrative, my work brings me much peace”. What she would like is to have a larger boat to be able to catch *corvina*, which fetches better prices. But she will need to invest US\$30,000 for a new boat. Maria has placed her hopes on a project that aims to renew the fleet with larger fibreglass vessels.

Maria and Laura are well known on the wharfs. A brief walk with them shows how much affection and respect their colleagues have for them. Evidently, these two intrepid women have already found a place in the history of the port of Punta del Este.

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