

TURNING THE TIDE

Is there a future for traditional wooden boatbuilding in Spain?
Daniel Caparrós Torres continues his journey as he explores Galicia

It's 7 a.m. in Malpica, a small harbour town tucked at the beginning — and end — of the Costa da Morte, the so-called "Coast of Death," a rugged stretch of shoreline known for its treacherous waters and dramatic cliffs. Winter darkness still hangs over the quay as the crew of a *cerqueiro*, a large purse seiner, moves quietly across the deck, preparing for departure. But today, they won't be heading out to sea. A knock to the hull has forced a change of plans. Instead they'll steam east, toward the Gulf of Ártabro — and the workshop of one of Galicia's last traditional boatbuilders.

Pepe Gómez has spent decades repairing wooden fishing boats on the Sada estuary. "When I started, there were boatyards all along the coast," he says, ticking them off on his fingers: Betanzos, Pontedeume, Perbes... all gone. Today, only he and Martín Senande in Estaleiros Baladiño remain. "We're the last of the Mohicans," he says with a shrug.

From his modest yard in Lorbe, just 12 miles (20 km) from A Coruña, Pepe continues to serve one of Europe's most active fishing regions. Towns like Muxía, Camariñas, Laxe, Malpica and the cities of A Coruña and Ferrol still depend, to varying degrees, on his craftsmanship. Surrounded by weathered timber, worn tools, and benches dusted with sawdust, the centuries-old trade endures — essential to keeping the region's artisanal fleet afloat.

"New builds have fallen off a cliff," Pepe admits, though he proudly points to a couple of recently completed fishing boats. What keeps the yard going is repair work. The fleet remains

active, and the wear and tear never ends. "This one had a broken prow; that one took a hit to the side," he says, swiping through photos. The waiting list for repairs grows longer by the month.

To outsiders, traditional wooden boatmaking seems almost extinct. Headlines speak of retirements, closures and obituaries. Yet, a paradox emerges when you talk to those still practising the craft: wooden boats are still in use, many skippers prefer them, and the few remaining boatyards are overwhelmed with work. So why, with demand, a fleet and proven expertise, is this trade which once defined Galicia's coastline fading into silence?

A craft in decline

A drive along Galicia's estuaries tells its own story. Once-bustling boatyards now stand as rusting sheds, algae-covered slipways and shuttered doors. In Serra de Outes, A Coruña — which once hosted more than thirty yards, as both Juan García Aguado (2001) and García Suárez (2008) recall in their excellent accounts of the region's shipbuilding trade — only a handful remain. Many have switched to GRP or steel; others have been repurposed as museums. The collapse has been steady. From a dense network of shipyards employing hundreds, only a dozen or so survive today, loosely grouped under the Galician Association of Traditional Boatbuilders (AGALCARI). Each closure represents more than just the end of a business; it marks the loss of knowledge, supply chains and mentorship. This is living heritage — and if it's not passed on, it will vanish.

Ironically, wood is experiencing a renaissance elsewhere — in architecture, design and urban planning, where it's lauded for its ecological and sustainable qualities. Yet, in shipbuilding, it's being abandoned. Why? To understand, we need to listen to the voices of those who have kept the craft alive against all odds.

One of these voices is Gerardo Triñanes, owner of Estaleiros Triñanes in Boiro, A Coruña, and former president of AGALCARI (2007–2014). His shipyard, perched on the Chazo peninsula across from A Ladeira beach has a near-cinematic presence. Under a crane that swings over the yard, fishing boats lie in wait on ramps — *bateiros* in for repair before returning to the Ría de Arousa. Amongst stacked planks, tools and a traditional launch undergoing restoration, Gerardo welcomes me with open arms.

Stumbling blocks

"The problem isn't the wood," Gerardo explains. He's repeated this countless times — at conferences, sector meetings and in published articles — but he's happy to say it again. Wood, he insists, remains a safe and reliable material. It provides great stability to boats due to its natural buoyancy and with modern technologies and treatments such as laminated wood and resins, many of the previous maintenance issues have been addressed, making it even more durable and competitive as a building material. Added to this is its ecological value, being a renewable resource and easily recyclable. If boat owners have stopped using it, Triñanes argues, it's not due to a lack of trust in the material itself, but because of a range of obstacles which have made its use increasingly impractical. Chief among these is the regulatory framework.

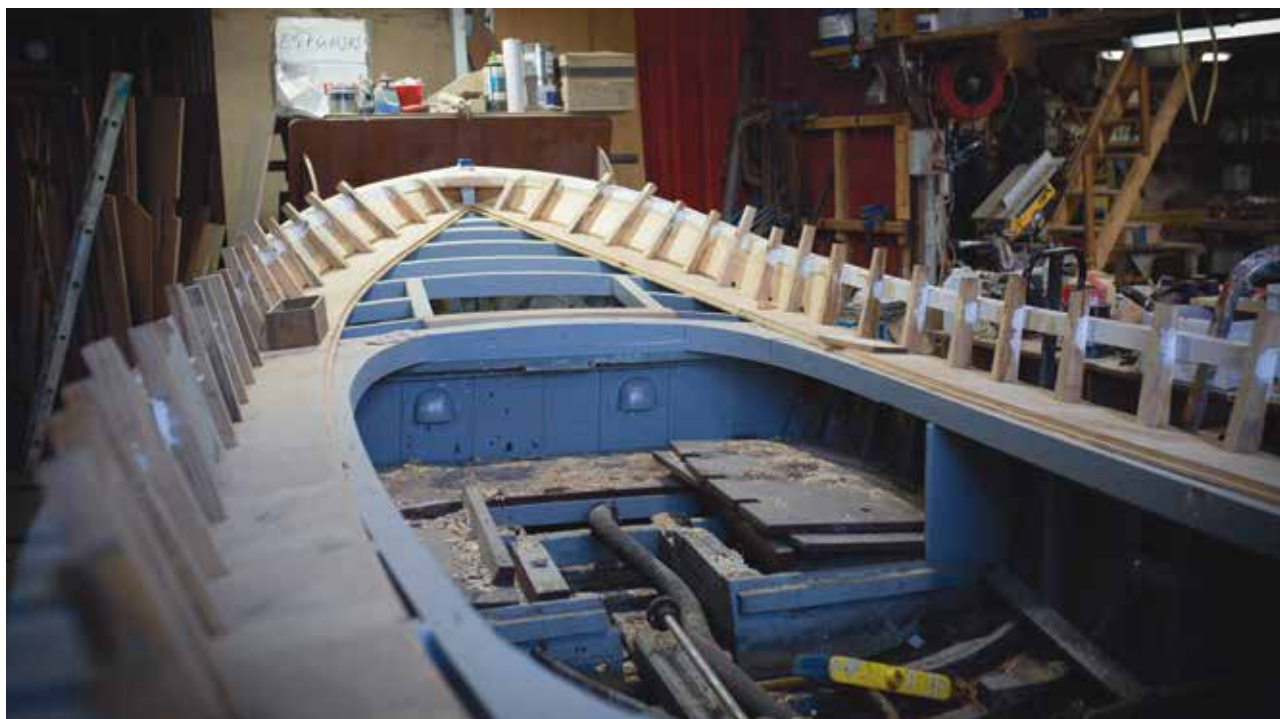
The clearest example, he explains, is Royal Decree 543/2007, which mandates annual inspections for wooden vessels, while GRP boats only require checks every three years. On paper, this might seem like a minor difference, but in practice, it significantly drives up maintenance costs in a sector already plagued by slim profit margins. "It's like taxing electric cars more than diesel ones," Triñanes points out.



This spread: *Pepe Gómez runs one of the last traditional boatyards on the Galician coast. Photographs: Branco.*

Behind this legislative bias lies a deeper issue, according to the boatbuilders: institutional ignorance. "The authorities don't understand wood," says Triñanes, echoing a common grievance heard across workshops along the coast. Neither the technicians drafting the regulations nor many of the politicians enforcing them are familiar with the material or its processes. And what isn't understood is often over-regulated, leading to absurdities such as the fact that, since the approval of Decree 1837/2000, traditional boatbuilders can no longer sign off on projects for boats up to 20 tonnes — a task they had been performing for centuries. Now, these projects must be approved by naval engineers.

This lack of understanding has created a form of legal paralysis, leaving the sector in limbo. Responsibility is spread across multiple agencies, creating a bureaucratic labyrinth which halts any meaningful progress. Each change in leadership resets the conversation. Meanwhile, older boatbuilders retire and the industrial ecosystem shrinks. Each workshop closure





worsens the crisis. Fewer yards mean fewer jobs, and without apprentices or masters to pass on the craft, the trade slowly dies. Repair costs increase too, with longer travel distances and extended waiting lists. And when a boat can't wait, it's replaced — not by another wooden vessel, but by a fibreglass one, which is quicker to build and certify.

The crisis has even reached the supply chain. Essential materials, like hand-forged nails, are increasingly hard to find — in some cases, no longer produced at all. What was once a robust, well-oiled industry is now a fragmented patchwork, lacking structure and continuity.

The struggle for revival

During his seven years as AGALCARI president, Gerardo Triñanes became a relentless advocate for the craft; holding meetings with ministries of Culture, Industry, and Transport, forging alliances, lobbying and presenting proposals. His objective was clear: to ensure traditional boatbuilding was no longer seen as a quaint relic of the past but recognised as a sector with not only cultural importance but also tangible industrial and economic value. If the decline of the sector was cemented by decrees and mired in technical jargon, then the road to recovery would have to pass through those same bureaucratic channels.

In 2008, Triñanes' efforts saw the launch of the Xornadas de Construción en Madeira (Wooden Boatbuilding Conferences); the first time boatbuilders, owners, engineers, policymakers and technicians had gathered to exchange ideas and strategies. The event catalysed several important initiatives, including the strengthening of the Encontros de Embarcacións Tradicionais — Galicia's traditional boat festival, — and formal agreements with the regional government to revitalise the sector.



A key outcome was Proxecto Dorna, a collaboration between Galicia, the Basque Country, Scotland and Portugal, supported by Culturmar, the Galician Federation for Maritime and River Culture. This project sought to catalogue traditional boat types — "*racú, galeón, buceta, dorna xeiteira...*" Gerardo reels them off with pride — while also mapping historic shipyards and laying the groundwork for an unprecedented documentary record of Galician maritime heritage.

But, as Pepe Sacau, spokesperson for Culturmar, points out, there's a critical issue. "Too often, these studies and projects end up as beautifully printed books, but without real-world effects," he says with frustration. "Unless we protect the actual boats — ensuring they're used and maintained — all we're doing is fossilising heritage."

One of the most significant steps in protecting the craft came in 2019, when traditional wooden boatbuilding (*carpintería de ribeira*) was officially recognised as an Asset of Cultural Interest (BIC) by the Xunta de Galicia. While the designation didn't solve the sector's structural challenges, it marked a turning point: for the first time, the trade was protected under a legal framework.

The BIC status opened up dialogue between historically disconnected players — public administrations, fishing guilds, naval engineers, shipwrights and cultural associations — and paved the way for tangible progress: the revival of the Censo de Embarcacións Tradicionais, which now lists over a hundred vessels, and the creation of an official registry of traditional boatbuilders. It also led to practical improvements, such as reduced port fees for certain traditional boats.

Still, regulatory hurdles persist. Registering a restored, previously abandoned *dorna* can quickly become a bureaucratic nightmare. On top of that, there's the risk of enforced scrapping, the difficulty in obtaining CE certification and the fact that shipwrights are no longer allowed to sign off on their own builds. Each of these barriers adds to the legal disadvantage traditional boats face compared to their GRP or steel counterparts. "The core issue is the economic lens through which traditional boats are viewed," Sacau argues. "They're treated solely as work tools, with little regard for their cultural or heritage value."

Despite the red tape, he acknowledges real progress in a field that, in his view, "is evolving — and in which Galicia stands as a reference point." Much of the credit goes to groups like Agalcari and Culturmar, with the latter playing a pivotal role in establishing the Rede de Mariñas Tradicionais — a groundbreaking initiative in Spain. These organisations continue to promote sailing schools, craft workshops, outreach events and publications. However, there's still much to be done. "It's telling," Sacau says with a wry smile, "that under current legislation, a Seat 600 — a classic Spanish car from the 1960s — gets more heritage protection than a *lancho xeiteira*. That's a boat handcrafted by a master shipwright, passed down through generations, designed specifically for the sea it sails, the fishery it serves, the climate it withstands and the needs of its owner."

Beyond heritage

Gerardo Triñanes is adamant that without economic sustainability, traditional boatbuilding cannot survive. "For this to make sense, shipwrights need to be able to keep building boats for the fishermen — the people of the sea."

For a brief moment in the early 21st century, it seemed the authorities were listening. In the small museum Triñanes has set up in his shipyard, old newspaper clippings capture that fleeting optimism: "Shipwrights to receive new regulations," "Wooden boatbuilding gains state recognition."

The plan was clear and transmissible: to promote a sustainable industrial model built on local resources. "We work with biodegradable timber sourced right here. Galicia produces half of Spain's wood," Triñanes explains. A report by the Proxecto Dorna, in collaboration with CIS Madeira and the Xunta de Galicia, strengthens his point: over its lifetime, a wooden boat emits around 19,615 kg of CO₂, compared to 112,000 kg from a fibreglass-reinforced polyester vessel.

AGALCARI proposed specific measures: removing regulatory barriers—such as the mandatory annual dry docking which disproportionately affects traditional vessels—modernising naval construction regulations and integrating technologies adapted to wood-based work. These ideas were captured in two key documents; a technical regulation aimed at establishing a clear and viable legal framework for building traditional boats and a strategic plan to revitalise the sector.

The only thing left was to turn plans into action. But that step was never taken. The Galician regional government initially backed the strategic plan but never allocated a budget, while the technical regulation was rejected by the Directorate-General for the Merchant Navy in Madrid, citing incompatibility with national legislation, and remains stalled there since.

Today, the headlines which once heralded a new dawn hang in Gerardo Triñanes' workshop like relics. "It all came to nothing," he laments. Triñanes, who once built dozens of wooden boats, no longer works with the material. "I have twelve people on the payroll. If I hadn't switched to polyester, I'd have had to shut down and end up repairing a single *dorna*. And that's bloody tough, excuse the language."

The next generation

As I reach Rianxo, a furious storm pummels the coast with relentless rain and wind. In front of the Catoira shipyards, a century-old schooner, freshly restored, stands defiant against the elements. Inside, Ramón Collazo, head of Estaleiros Catoira and current AGALCARI president, greets me amid the hum of tools, the scent of timber and walls lined with old photographs. One of them, in black and white, shows him as a toddler on the balcony of his family home, watching the boats take shape below. "I must admit I'm not the best person to modernise this industry," he says with a mischievous smile.

Many still refer to traditional boatbuilders as "romantics," a label which Collazo doesn't begrudge. "It doesn't bother



Above: Wooden boatbuilding training programmes at CIFP Ferrolterra and below: A Aixola. Facing page above: Culturmarm works to protect Galicia's maritime heritage. Facing page below: *Estaleiro do Ciprián*, restored by architects Óscar Fuertes Dopico and Iago Fernández Penedo. Photograph: Fuertespenedo Arquitectos

me," he smiles. However, he's quick to clarify that AGALCARI is very much an industrial organisation. As he shows me how to mark out the boat's frames on a plan, I realise just how misguided the perception of this craft can be. These aren't nostalgic artisans resisting progress; they're business owners who believe their model offers real advantages—in sustainability, efficiency and quality. AGALCARI's mission goes well beyond heritage preservation; it aims to ensure the sector's survival by positioning it as a modern, competitive force within the wider maritime industry.

In addition to running his shipyard, Collazo also teaches courses at CIFP Ferrolterra, a vocational training centre in Ferrol, A Coruña. At first, he confesses, he wasn't sure what he had to offer. Now, he speaks of the role with confidence and pride—so much so that he makes the nearly three-hour round trip from Rianxo every couple of weeks. "If there are no hands to carry on the work, no regulation will be of any use."

The current landscape for training in traditional boatbuilding is fragmented. There are valuable initiatives, such as the A Aixola training centre in Marín, Pontevedra—founded in 1997 to retrain former fishermen—or the programmes at CIFP Ferrolterra. Cultural associations such as Os Patexeiros, in Sada, also offer courses, workshops and public events. Yet what's needed is a coordinated strategy which recognises the sector





Above: From the balcony, a young Ramón Collazo watches work in the family boatyard. Photograph: Estaleiros Cotoira
 Left: Collazo training the next generation. Photograph: CIFP Ferrolterra
 Below: Traditional Galician dornas compete in the annual Copa Morling race. Photograph: Culturmar

as a viable route to employment and industrial development.

"Most young people don't even consider this an option. They see traditional boatbuilding as something from the past," Xiana Zapata and Lucía Fraga from A Aixola explain. Juan Santalla, a teacher at CIFP Ferrolterra and a leading advocate for dedicated training pathways, agrees: "Traditional boatbuilding—and carpentry in general—isn't on the radar for young people. They associate it with long apprenticeships, tough working conditions and limited career prospects." In a society which prizes immediacy, it's hard to compete with sectors offering faster routes into the workforce. As Triñanes observes, "It's a trade that takes time to master. It takes about ten years to become competent."

Tradition meets technology

Juan Santalla's vision is a solution which breathes new life into the craft, without stripping it of its soul. "In most workshops, knowledge is concentrated in just one or two people. If we could share that know-how more broadly, we'd be able to specialise tasks, speed up production and take a step towards a more industrial model," he explains.

By "industrialisation", Santalla doesn't mean soulless automation, but the thoughtful adoption of tools long embraced by other industries, such as CAD design and CNC machinery. "The goal," he says, "is for tradition and technology not to

eye each other with suspicion, but to work hand in hand." This philosophy is already taking shape at A Aixola, where the training programmes teach modern wooden boatbuilding techniques and CNC machining. Gerardo Triñanes has long argued for the integration of modern tools into traditional practice. "Technology doesn't distance us from tradition—it strengthens it."

As I walk through the shipyards the work never stops. The boatbuilders' hands keep moving, shaping wood, joining parts, giving form to vessels. Speaking with Pepe, Gerardo and Ramón as we watch the timber being cut, sanded and assembled, there's a quiet defiance in the air—a constant struggle to keep ancient knowledge alive. But it's not all sawdust. Technology is increasingly present and it's in this alliance between old and new that the hope for the survival of Galician boatbuilding lies.

I'm struck by the feeling that I've witnessed something fragile—yet still very much alive. For all the beauty of Galicia's traditional boat festivals—the Encontro de Embarcacións Tradicionais celebrates its 17th edition this year from 17–20 July in Ribeira, A Coruña—traditional boatbuilding here is not a relic, nor a picturesque backdrop for tourists. It's a sector fighting to assert its relevance in the present. A trade which builds boats to last generations deserves more than nostalgia. It deserves a plan for the future.

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