



# TURNING THE TIDE

Is traditional boatbuilding in Spain at the point of extinction?  
Daniel Caparrós Torres searches for answers on the Cantabrian coast

A brief stroll through the docks of any Spanish seaside town today offers a clear picture of the dominance of synthetic materials in modern boatbuilding. Fibreglass, PVC and Hypalon, alongside the occasional metal hull, now define the scene, while wood has become a rarity, often relegated to the realm of artisanal fishing.

Once the backbone of the sector, traditional boatbuilding is now struggling to survive. Outcompeted by synthetic materials in recreational boating, in decline in fishing, and lacking a clear generational succession, its future is uncertain. Classic boat types such as the *sancosmeiro*, *batel* and *jábega*, as well as traditional trades like caulking and sailmaking, are slowly disappearing.

How did we reach this point? What has driven traditional boatbuilding to the edge of extinction? And in an era of decarbonisation, could wood once again take centre stage in shipbuilding?

The rise of heritage restoration projects—traditional marinas, interpretation centres and historic sailing initiatives—suggests a renewed interest in maritime culture. At the same time,

associations dedicated to preserving seafaring traditions are becoming increasingly active. But is this enough to ensure the survival of the trade?

To explore these questions, I set out on a journey along Spain's coastline in search of those who still preserve this ancient craft. My first stop is Pasaia, Gipuzkoa, the heart of Basque maritime heritage and home to Albaola Itsas Kultur Faktoria. Founded by Xabier Agote, a passionate advocate for the sea and traditional wooden shipbuilding, this remarkable shipyard museum has become an international benchmark for boatbuilding, heritage conservation and research.

Raised in Donostia-San Sebastián, Agote trained at The Apprenticeship, the prestigious boatbuilding school of the Maine Maritime Museum in the United States. Yet his heart was always with the Cantabrian Sea. Determined to revive the Basque Country's maritime heritage and ancestral techniques, he returned home and founded Albaola in 1997. His first major project—the construction of the *trainera Ameriketatik* in collaboration with The Apprenticeship—laid the foundation for what would become Albaola Itsas Kultur Faktoria in 2014.



Perched at the entrance to Pasaia's port, from where Basque whalers once set sail, Albaola is now undertaking a monumental challenge: the archaeological reconstruction of *San Juan*, a 16th-century whaling galleon which sank in Red Bay, Labrador, in 1565. Its discovery in 1978 led to three decades of research by Parks Canada's Underwater Archaeology Service. Today, that research serves as the blueprint for this ambitious project.

More than just a shipyard, Albaola is a naval archaeology laboratory. Each step of reconstruction not only revives a ship but also reveals the secrets of 16th-century shipbuilding and the industries that supported it. More than mere restoration, the work here sustains traditional craftsmanship, connects artisans and suppliers and trains the next generation of shipbuilders.

### A shipyard, an ecosystem

I arrive at Albaola on a grey, rainy day. From the harbour entrance, a colossal car carrier dwarfs the site as it enters the bay. The air smells of salt and in the distance the sound of waves crashing against the slipway adds a sense of tranquillity to the landscape. Erme, Albaola's manager, greets me warmly in the wood-panelled office.

As the rain patters against the windows, she explains that Albaola, a non-profit, generates 69% of its funding independently. Their model relies on revenue from visitors, cultural consultancy services, venue rentals, and private sponsorship—a rare practice in Spain—which currently supports a team of thirty people.

The *San Juan* project, now nearing completion, has not only revived historic shipbuilding techniques but also shed light on the supporting industries—sailmaking, ropework, ironmongery and oakum caulking. Every detail in this project follows a rigorous process of historical reconstruction. Oak is sourced from Sakana, Navarra, nails are hand-forged on-site and hemp comes from Cervera del Río Alhama, La Rioja. In Can Fraga, Girona, potter and researcher Josep Mates has revived a nearly forgotten technique to produce pitch in a restored kiln. Unsurprisingly, the project has gained international recognition



*Facing page: Oak for San Juan's huge frames came from historic shipyard timber forests. Above: The project has revived maritime skills such as traditional sailmaking. Below: Visitor revenue is an essential part of Albaola's fundraising. Photographs: Albaola Itsas Kultur Faktoria*

and is now a flagship for UNESCO's Underwater Cultural Heritage.

San Sebastián's designation as European Capital of Culture in 2016 provided the institutional backing and funding needed to launch the project. However, since then, it has faced numerous challenges and required significant public engagement. "We've had to make people understand that the process is what really matters – the ship itself is a gift," says Erme.

Despite early difficulties, institutional support has grown. "We now have a stronger seat at the table," Erme explains. Collaboration with regional administrations—the Basque Government, Gipuzkoa Provincial Council and Pasaia's Harbour Authority, among others—and positive relations with the local business community have been crucial in consolidating the project. This support has helped Albaola overcome challenges,



including a significant drop in visitors during the pandemic.

Yet the journey has been far from easy. Training—central to the project through the International Shipbuilding School, *Apreniztegi*—has proven particularly complex. But speaking with Erme leaves no doubt: the overall impact has been positive. The research conducted, the museum development, financial sustainability, socio-economic impact—including milestones such as the consolidation of the Pasaia Itsas Festibala maritime festival, which will celebrate its fourth edition in May 2026—and heritage preservation are undeniable achievements.

It's the very concept of "heritage" which sparks deeper reflection. "Historically, in Pasaia, everything revolved around the sea. The forests were cultivated to build ships. The iron was used for the boats. The farmhouses were cider houses that supplied the fleet," Erme explains. "Whalers were entrepreneurs."

The inevitable question arises: can traditional boatbuilding continue as a living industry in the 21st century, or is it doomed to become a relic of the past?

"Perhaps we're sometimes given an overly optimistic view of the situation," says Erme after a brief silence. "Sadly, commercial wooden boatbuilding has nearly vanished in much of the country." It's not just a lack of interest, she adds, but also government inaction and bureaucratic hurdles which have suffocated the sector.

The main obstacle remains the regulatory framework. "That's the knot that still hasn't been untangled," she concludes. Despite the advantages of wood as a building material — its strength, stability and lower environmental impact — its use in the shipbuilding industry is not only unsupported but practically discouraged. "It is, in fact, penalised," she laments. Regulations designed for fibreglass or metal boats impose requirements which are difficult to meet for wooden vessels, leaving wooden boatbuilders struggling to compete.

"The problems that wood faced 50 years ago no longer exist, but we still don't have policies that encourage its use or recognise it as a sustainable material," she says. All this is happening while the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda loom large. To this, one must add fragmented training, lacking a clear structure or institutional backing, making generational succession even more challenging.

The paradox is glaring. While Pasaia proudly celebrates the reconstruction of a historical galleon with extensive institutional support, in other ports, boatbuilders are struggling



*Above and below: Ironwork for the San Juan is made in the on-site forge. Photographs: Albaola Facing page: A 49' (25m) beech keel and 200 oak trees make up the vast hull of the 92' (28m) ship. Photograph: Daniel Caparrós Torres*

through a bureaucratic nightmare with little support to secure their survival.

"If there's one place in Spain where traditional boatbuilding is still alive, albeit struggling, it's Galicia. You should go there," says Erme. There, boatbuilding is not just a memory but a present reality.

## An industry in distress

From Donostia, I take the winding coastal road westward, following the Cantabrian Sea for nearly five hundred kilometres until I reach the province of Lugo. There, in Cervo, where the Covo River flows into the sea, forming the Ría de Lieiro — unexpectedly bathed in sunlight on this winter's day—I meet Francisco Fra Rico, a key figure in Galician traditional boatbuilding.

If Xabier Agote, founder of Albaola, is a visionary, Francisco is a fighter. The last heir of a boatbuilding lineage dating back to at least 1806, he watched his shipyard burn to the ground in 2023. Yet rather than give in, he set to work, establishing the Estaleiros Fra Foundation, which has since been officially recognised as being of cultural interest.

In the boatbuilding museum he is developing with the City Council, he enthusiastically shares his vision for a new shipyard—an open, spacious facility designed not only for boatbuilding but also to bring the profession closer to the public. After all, his foundation's mission is clear: "to promote, support, recover, preserve and develop traditional boatbuilding, primarily in Galicia, driving it forward into the future."

Inside the museum, we are surrounded by ancient tools, photographs of ancestors, memories of past ship launches and a collection of back issues of old wooden boatbuilding magazines. Francisco, a living archive of traditional boatbuilding, effortlessly names the parts of a *chalana*—a small wooden punt—"xxxxx, xxxxxxx, xxxxx..." ("the stem, the lower strakes, the upper strakes...")—to anyone willing to listen. He tells me he dreams of compiling all this knowledge into a book. His gaze is not fixed on the past, however. Fully aware of the industry's challenges and speaks about them with unfiltered honesty.











*Above: The schooner Eduardo Domínguez, built by a team including Francisco Fra's grandfather and great-grandfather (third from right). Below: Francisco's workshop, before the fire. Facing page: Until recently, boats at the Fra family shipyard were built next to the water and launches were important village events. Photographs: Francisco Fra Rico*

With 3,968 registered wooden boats in its fishing fleet, Galicia remains the last bastion of commercial traditional boatbuilding in Europe. This figure—just a thousand boats fewer than the entire UK fishing fleet, which counted 5,418 vessels in 2023—reflects the industry's significance in the region, even if its future remains uncertain.

Despite the scale of Galicia's fishing fleet, the outlook is anything but hopeful. "Traditional boatbuilding has never been in worse shape," Francisco states at the start of our conversation. In 1996, Galicia had 90 shipyards dedicated to this craft; today, his is the last one standing in a province with nearly 500 kilometres of coastline.

The decline of wooden boatbuilding began in the 1960s with the arrival of fibreglass and composite materials – actively promoted by the authorities. Fibreglass-reinforced resins promised to democratise seafaring through mass production, at a time when carbon footprints were of little concern. With incentives and policies favouring these new materials as symbols of progress, the administration sealed the fate of many traditional shipyards.

However, Galicia, with its deep maritime heritage, has an ace up its sleeve. The region still maintains a significant fleet of wooden artisanal fishing boats. Each active vessel generates

ongoing demand for repairs, providing a lifeline for workshops. While the construction of new wooden boats has nearly vanished, maintenance work keeps the trade alive, explains Francisco. He also points to occasional restoration projects for heritage vessels carried out by various associations.

Francisco's commitment to traditional boatbuilding extends well beyond his workshop. He runs courses, collaborates with maritime associations and works tirelessly to keep the craft alive. Amid wooden shavings and well-worn plans rests his sketch for the *Beagle* model, a boat he designed for Vigo Maritime Museum.

"If we stay shut away in the shipyard, no one will talk about traditional boatbuilding," he tells me. "We have to make it visible: we've organised talks, beach clean-ups... every little effort helps to connect people with the sea and the craft." His enthusiasm, evident in every word, contrasts with the reality of a sector struggling to survive. Yet there is more determination than resignation in his gaze. If one thing is certain, it's that Francisco is, above all, tenacious.

Francisco knows that raising the profile of his trade is essential. Yet despite his obvious passion for all things nautical, he is also keenly aware that passion alone is not enough. "If we're just heritage, we're in trouble," he reflects.



## A voice for the industry

Francisco is not one to stand idly by as his trade fades into history. For traditional boatbuilding to have a future, it cannot rely solely on subsidies or preservation efforts; it must be a viable sector. "We need more wooden boats," he says firmly. "And for that to happen, they must be competitive." But achieving that requires more than skilled craftsmanship—it demands structural change.

In 2007, recognising the need for collective action, Francisco and about twenty fellow shipyard owners came together to form the Galician Association of Traditional Boatbuilding (Agalcari). Until then, Galicia's wooden boatbuilding sector had no unified representation and no clear voice when dealing with authorities.

"The association's aim," Francisco explains, "is to speak with one voice and assert that traditional boatbuilding is not nostalgia—it is an industry. Given the right conditions, it can be competitive and forward-looking." While preserving heritage is important, ensuring the sector's long-term viability is just as crucial. Despite its struggles, traditional boatbuilding still holds enormous potential.

Among its main demands are updating national regulations so that wooden boats can compete on equal terms with other materials, creating incentives which acknowledge wood's ecological value and establishing formal training to ensure a new generation of skilled shipbuilders.

Without these changes, traditional boatbuilding will remain stuck in a paradox: celebrated as heritage while being systematically undermined as an industry. For Francisco, this contradiction is at the heart of the struggle. Wooden boats can be more than museum pieces—they can be a living, working part of the maritime world. But to make that happen, policies and perceptions must change.

After saying goodbye to Francisco, I make my way to the Punta Atalaia peninsula, where two lighthouses stand defiantly against the Cantabrian Sea. This rocky promontory was once an island – San Ciprianus, according to 16th century Dutch maps.



Sheltered by its cliffs, a whaling port emerged, later becoming the base for a thriving bonito fishing fleet. Here, the sea and the town are inseparable, a bond captured in the photographs I've just seen of the great ship launchings. For centuries, the relentless activity of its fishermen sustained both the local community and a flourishing tradition of wooden boatbuilding.

To understand the precarious state of wooden boatbuilding in Atlantic Spain, one must first look to the fishing fleet which still keeps it afloat. These vessels are, in many cases, the last stronghold of a craft under threat, but they also lay bare the challenges it faces. Equally vital is listening to those fighting for its survival—those who know that traditional boatbuilding is not just heritage but industry and who push for its recognition, demanding policy changes and working tirelessly to secure its future.

Reaching Cape Estaca de Bares, where the Cantabrian Sea meets the Atlantic, is not the the end of the journey but a turning point. The road south, tracing the storm-lashed cliffs of the Costa da Morte and descending into the sheltered waters of the Rías Baixas, leads to the heart of Galicia's remaining shipyards—and to those who refuse to yield.

[www.albaola.org](http://www.albaola.org)  
[www.agalcari.es](http://www.agalcari.es)

