

TURNING the TIDE

Is there a future for traditional wooden boatbuilding in Spain?
Daniel Caparrós Torres meets the *mestres d'aixa* of Catalonia

Mist drifts in from the sea as I approach Cadaqués, a village on Spain's Costa Brava. Its bay, dotted with moored boats, is one of the most recognisable images of Catalonia's maritime heritage. A stone's throw from the French border, this is where Drassanes Despuig operated until a few years ago; the workshop of Quico Despuig, *mestre d'aixa* – shipwright – and a key figure in preserving Catalonia's maritime culture. Founder of the Associació d'Amics de la Vela Llatina de Cadaqués and board member of the Catalan Federation for Maritime and River Culture and Heritage (FCCPMF), Quico has played a part in nearly every major effort to keep wooden boatbuilding alive along these coasts.

Unlike many of his peers, Quico didn't inherit the trade. In the 1980s—when few in his town pursued further education, let alone vocational training abroad—he crossed the Channel to England, where he learned wooden boatbuilding from the ground up. He trained and worked there for nearly a decade before returning in the early '90s, first working for others, then running his own yard in nearby Roses.

The Barcelona '92 Olympics brought a surge of interest in local maritime heritage. Initiatives like *Barcelona, fes-te a la mar*—which launched a school for *mestres d'aixa*—and the revival of lateen sailing marked a promising shift. There was momentum, even some institutional support. Quico envisioned a modernised yard; one which would keep repairing and launching wooden boats, but also train the next generation.

He launched several vessels and laid the foundations for what could have become a regional hub. But the economic downturn of the 2010s hit hard and he was forced to scale back, returning to Cadaqués to set up a more modest workshop – though his commitment never wavered.

Throughout his career, Quico has looked outward, forging ties across the Pyrenees, linking heritage groups in Roussillon with shipwrights in Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearics. As early as 1988, he became involved in the *Trobada de Vela Llatina* de Cadaqués—the oldest traditional lateen sail gathering of its kind still active today and a key meeting point in a movement too often marked by fragmentation and solitude.

"The outlook for the future," Quico tells me, his voice sombre, "isn't good." Just a decade ago, the book *De quilla a perilla* by Alegret, Badias and Mata listed more than twenty active shipwrights along the Costa Brava. Today, as across much of the Mediterranean, that number has plummeted. Drassanes Gay, Pere Carré, Pere Ventura—once-familiar names—have all closed.

The rise of GRP and the restructuring of the fishing fleet dealt the initial blow. But what followed, Quico insists, wasn't slow decline—it was something closer to erosion by design. Political neglect, the dismantling of training pathways and a legal framework which treats traditional boatbuilding as a liability rather than a cultural asset have all accelerated the collapse. These aren't inevitabilities, he argues—they're political choices. And choices can be reversed.



This spread: La Francisca, a replica of a barca de bou, a traditional Catalan lateen-rigged trawler, launched in 2024 by els Morales at Astilleros de Catalunya. Photographs: Associació Patí Català i Vela Llatina de Calafell



It's not a new diagnosis. As early as 1994, when hopes of revival were tentatively forming, Vicente García-Delgado—one of the leading voices in the lateen sail resurgence and co-author, with Francisco Oller, of *Nuestra Vela Latina*—warned in *Sirga* magazine that “the very institution that ought to promote our maritime heritage”—the government—“is the one creating the laws and mechanisms for its rapid disappearance.” Three decades on, the line reads less like alarm than confirmation.

What's striking is how different the story looks across the border in France. In Roussillon, traditional boatbuilding hasn't merely survived—it has been supported and embraced. Marinas like Barcarès accommodate heritage vessels. There is dedicated funding, and the trade is formally recognised as part of France's maritime patrimony.

“Here,” Quico says, “the message doesn't seem to land. We still see around ten heritage boats destroyed every year.”

As Jordi Rascado of the Patí Català i Vela Llatina de Calafell Association later pointed out, the imbalance is so stark that quite a few boats from this side of the border have ended up in France because it was the only way to save them. And that, he stresses, is not just a logistical issue—it's a loss of heritage.

As with so many inherited crafts, traditional boatbuilding survives more through personal resolve and grassroots networks than through any formal backing. Most workshops are one-person operations, with no apprentices, no succession plans and little capacity to train others. Continuity, more often than not, remains a distant hope.

Quico may no longer build new boats, but he hasn't stepped away. He remains active—organising events, connecting projects and lobbying for a vocational training programme which might ensure a future. “The lack of a next generation,” he says quietly, “is what worries me most.”

He's now working with local institutions on a specialised

course tailored to the trade's actual needs. “There's some light at the end of the tunnel,” he concedes. “But it's a very long tunnel.” And even if the programme is approved, he asks, “Where are we going to find the teachers?”

Drassanes Sala

The Bay of Roses and the Alt Empordà region are lands of striking contrast. From the flatlands of Empúries—once marshes, now fertile plains—the snow-capped Pyrenees rise dramatically in the distance. Following the coastline south, I make my way toward l'Escala, where Drassanes Sala—founded in 1853 and still in operation—holds the distinction of being Catalonia's oldest active wooden boatyard. My aim is simple: to understand what it means to keep a traditional yard running today.

Xeve Feliu greets me under the midday sun, hauling a hefty timber beam soon to become a mast, watched by his father Salvador. Xeve represents the sixth generation in a lineage of master boatbuilders. “The future looks bad,” he says, getting straight to the point. “I'm basically on my own. It's hard to find people willing to do this kind of work.” His concerns are grounded in experience: his brother teaches carpentry at a local vocational school.

The challenge isn't just about passing on the craft. The cost of survival is rising fast. Coastal land in Catalonia is valuable and traditional boatyards are being quietly edged out. Institutional support, Xeve says, is minimal. “We're not asking for subsidies,” he adds. “We just want to be allowed to work.”

Like many yards along the Mediterranean coast, Drassanes Sala now depends largely on recreational repair work. Occasionally, it collaborates with other shipwrights to handle more demanding projects—such as the recent restoration of *Aries*, a repurposed RNLI Barnett-class lifeboat, carried out in partnership with Nicolas Stoll from nearby Palamós.





Facing page: Sardine boat *Paca* was restored at Drassanes Sala, where she was originally built. Photograph: Museu de l'Anxova i de la Sal, l'Escala. Above: Father and son Salvador and Xeve Feliu, boatbuilders at Drassanes Sala. Photograph: Daniel Caparrós Torres

With traditional fishing in steep decline and GRP vessels now the norm, wooden boatbuilding has largely retreated into the realm of leisure craft. Yet every so often, a heritage job comes up. In l'Escala, the Museu de l'Anxova i de la Sal (MASLE) commissioned the restoration of *La Paca*, a traditional *teranyina* and Drassanes Sala's largest undertaking in recent years.

Projects like this bring welcome attention, but for small, underfunded yards, they also pose challenges. Taking on a heritage commission can mean months dedicated to a single vessel, at the expense of the steady maintenance jobs which keep the business going. The irony, Xeve notes, is that many of those regular clients have nowhere else to go.

Mariona Font and Jaume Badias, from MASLE, explain how *La Paca*—once used for sardine and anchovy fishing—was saved thanks to Salvador Feliu, Xeve's father and the *mestre d'aixa* who originally built her in 1982. A few years ago, Salvador learned she was about to be scrapped in the port of Arenys de Mar. Her last owner had acquired a new boat and, under current regulations, was required to destroy the old one.

The case points to a wider problem. Without specific legal recognition, heritage vessels face mandated destruction—even those built by shipwrights still working today. Bureaucratic hurdles also make registering newly built wooden boats exceptionally difficult. The rules are so restrictive that *La Paca*, despite being publicly owned, nearly had to sail under a foreign flag—a common workaround.

Institutions within the La Mar de Museus network, such as MASLE and the Museu de la Pesca in Palamós, have become key allies to local boatyards, organising hands-on courses and

funding restorations. The museum in Palamós maintains a fleet of ten historic fishing boats ranging from 10' (3m) to 72' (22m). Their repair has been entrusted to a few remaining local yards—Nicolas Stoll of Classic Yacht, Andreu Cassas of Fusteria Naval Massot and Rafel Mayor of Pint-Fust—partners with whom the museum runs its annual wooden boat repair course.

Yet despite these efforts, traditional boatbuilding can't rely on museums alone. If the craft is to endure as a trade—not just survive as memory—it needs more than goodwill. It needs stable revenue, broader diversification and consistent demand.

Astilleros de Catalunya

Now run by the fifth generation of the Morales family, Astilleros de Catalunya offers a rare example of how adaptation can sustain a yard. Originally based in Barcelona's old fishing quarter, La Barceloneta, the yard relocated to Badalona as the city's working waterfront gave way to tourism and redevelopment.

Known simply as 'els Morales', they broadened their scope for a time—working with GRP as well as wood—but now focus on the restoration and maintenance of classic wooden vessels. Their projects span both private commissions—*Yanira*, *Islander*, *Scorpion*, *Niña Luisita*, all regulars in the Copa Puig for traditional vessels—and public museum work; a flexibility which has helped them stay afloat where many others have shut down.

In 1997, els Morales were called upon to help restore the *Santa Eulàlia*, a three-masted schooner which now serves as the Museu Marítim de Barcelona's flagship. It was a landmark project and one which cemented their reputation as one of the few remaining yards in Catalonia capable of handling



Above and below: Built in 1918, the historic schooner Santa Eulàlia was relaunched in 2000, following an extensive restoration by the Barcelona Maritime Museum. Photographs: Museu Marítim de Barcelona

large-scale wooden vessels. Unthinkable in today's touristified Barcelona, the work was carried out outdoors, with the schooner drydocked in plain sight at the foot of La Rambla.

Almost 30 years later, *Santa Eulàlia* is back with els Morales for her yearly upkeep—this time in the unlikely setting of Marina Barcelona 92, a shipyard better known for superyachts than century-old working craft. I visit on a sweltering July afternoon. In a quiet corner of the yard *Santa Eulàlia* rests on blocks. Her hull, opened for inspection, reveals weathered timbers and thick oak frames. Around her, a full team of shipwrights moves with quiet precision. This is no one-man job. Given her scale and complexity, only a few yards in the region could take it on.

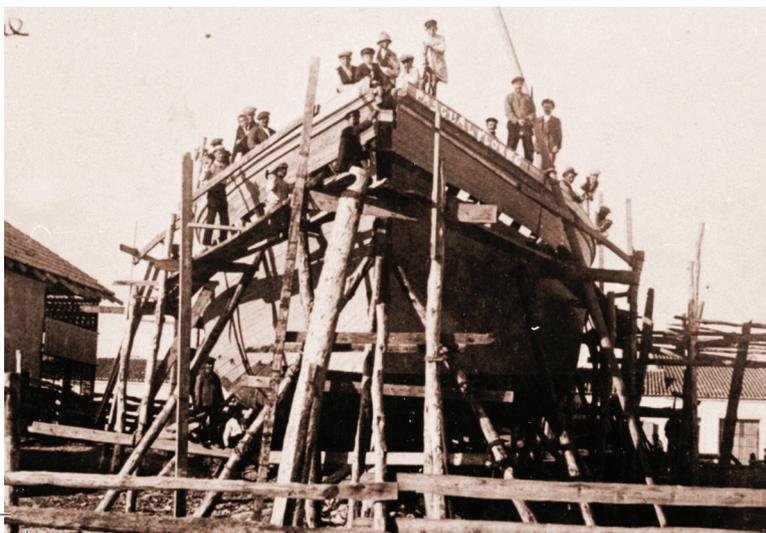
In 2024, els Morales completed *La Francisca*, a faithful reconstruction of a *barca de bou*—Catalonia's traditional lateen-rigged trawler and the last significant wooden boat to be built and launched in the region, thanks to a grassroots initiative led by the Associació Patí Català i Vela Llatina de Calafell, with

public funding from the local council. The project—pandemic delays aside—highlighted just how difficult it has become to launch a new traditional wooden boat in Spain. "At first," recalls Jordi Rascado, a member of the group, "the engineer told us we had to meet the same technical requirements as a commercial fishing vessel. Eventually, they relaxed some of it, but we still had to make changes—like increasing the depth and raising the freeboard. It's clear there's still a lack of understanding around boats like this."

La Drassana

And yet, signs of renewal appear—sometimes far from the sea. On a quiet hillside outside Terrassa, tucked among pines and tangled greenery, a stone *masia* hides a modest workshop: La Drassana. It's here that David Liñán, a former tech worker, now practises a very different kind of craft, restoring and repairing wooden boats, from local working craft to classic yachts.

With the help of friends, family and the occasional volunteer, David has built a working practice, a space to work and teach. It's taken years. "It's super hard to get through," he says. Established yards rarely welcome newcomers and going it alone means long hours, high costs and little visibility. In this trade, perseverance is all—and only now is he beginning to see the fruits. To help keep the craft alive, David now runs introductory courses in the workshop, drawing in a mix of people—most of them simply hungry to work with their hands. He dreams of something more structured: a small school, perhaps, where students could build a dinghy from scratch, learning by doing.



Aixa

I finish this trip in Badalona, Barcelona's northern neighbour, surrounded by towns steeped in boatbuilding history. Aixa's workshop sits just metres from the water, in a makeshift space temporarily ceded to the group under a concrete railway bridge, the surroundings in stark contrast with the collection of wooden boats. Today, they're working on *Pueblo*, a small boat inspired by the tender of the *Maria Assumpta*, a 19th-century brigantine built in Badalona and lost off the Cornish coast in 1995.

With limited support from the local GALP fisheries group—and a good dose of ingenuity—Aixa has pieced together a functioning boatyard. They've even built their own crane and steam box. But the project is about more than just maintaining a workspace or passing down skills; it's about creating a working fleet of traditional boats to bring sailing back to the people.

In a way, they've become a bridge themselves—turning to Quico Despuig for advice one day, and the next, guiding amateur enthusiasts armed with internet printouts and not much else. "Sometimes we ask Quico how to solve a problem," Aixa member Santi says with a grin, "just to get it wrong anyway. But that's how you learn, isn't it?"

Week after week, people return to sand hulls, replace frames, share food, argue and joke. This is the quiet strength of associationism: not just preserving boats, but connecting people and making difficult things possible. Aixa hopes the city will eventually help secure a permanent site, with cover and mooring space for their boats. As Santi points out, what sense does it make to repair and build boats if you can't sail them?

A shared strategy

Perhaps the real lesson from Aixa—and from kindred associations along the coast—is that collective effort still matters. What keeps the trade afloat isn't just funding or infrastructure, but people teaching, organising, showing up. Preserving boats like *dornas*, *bous* or *teranyines* is, by nature, a local task—tied to specific places and traditions. But the bigger challenges—training, legislation, recognition—echo from one coastline to the next. In Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country and beyond,



Above: Aixa members work on the build of *Pueblo*, a replica 19th century ship's tender. Below: *Guilova*, a local Badalona fishing boat restored by Aixa. Photographs: Aixa

traditional wooden boatbuilding faces many of the same structural hurdles: legal ambiguity, lack of training pathways, vanishing access to the sea. Greater coordination between regions could offer more than solidarity—it could build shared demands, stronger networks and longer-term resilience.

Back in 1994, Vicente Garcia-Delgado was already calling for cultural and participatory exchange among those working to keep maritime heritage alive. That vision is now, in part, a reality. In Catalonia alone, he notes, some 20 associations bring together over 1,500 members and nearly 300 boats. The same spirit lives on in gatherings like Pasaia's Itsas Festibala, the *xuntanzas* and *encontros* in Galicia and the *trobades* along the Catalan coast—now natural meeting points for a once-scattered community. Three decades on, with lateen rig nominated for UNESCO status, perhaps it's time to take that momentum further. Not to centralise, but to connect—and stand together, while there's still something to defend.

