

The Fat Virgin

by **ALBERTO QUARATI**, Monfalcone

CHRISTOPHER Columbus called her the Fat Virgin because from far away he thought the Caribbean island resembled a giant fat woman lying on the sea. The ship docked in the port is called, "**Cielo di Virgin Gorda**" (*Sky of the Fat Virgin*). Many shipowners name their ships after cities, **seas or family members**. For this class, the d'Amico family chose the skies; firstly naming them after coastal towns and cities nearby, Livorno and Amalfi, and then after ports farther and farther away: Tocopilla and San Francisco, **Cartagena and Virgin Gorda**. The Pisacane wharf is the latest tooth of the commercial port of Naples, before the passenger port: the orders for the crew on ferries to Palermo and Catania come from the transceivers, while the smaller shuttle boats are constantly running, one manoeuvre after another, **every day the same route from one point on the Gulf to another**, under the sky turned grey by the sirocco winds. The port workers' trucks are spitting smoke, **spluttering and coughing**. The paper pulp in the hold must be unloaded before it starts raining again. The ship departed from Chile just over a month ago, sailed the Atlantic after the Strait of Magellan, then continued to France and Spain with its final calls in Italy at Livorno, **Naples and Monfalcone**. In Italian no one would call the

Cielo di Virgin Gorda a "*rinfusiera*" or "*porta-rinfuse*" (bulk carrier) any more: **over the last 30 years Italian maritime vocabulary has been abandoned like the rest of the language**, as piece by piece Italy lost its industrial culture to take refuge in the promises of the service sector. The ship is therefore a "bulk carrier" of the "handysize" class, **even in Italian**. Tortorella, the *chauffeur* who was famous for driving a British taxi through the tortuous streets of Genoa, **once said that the English had a unit of measurement for everything**. If the question was taxis, Britain was the answer, but in the maritime field the answer is found in all directions of the compass, and cuts across cultural obstacles and continental prejudices: London, **which no one but an Englishman would call a city of the sea**, is in reality a legislative and financial capital, but most importantly, a cultural capital. Above the world of national coastal shipping, of ferries that follow the demands of island dwellers and the desires of tourists, **there is only shipping**. That is, the international maritime transport industry, **which only follows the logic of freight**. "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" is handysize because the ships in this category (15,000-50,000 dead-weight tonnes - in this case 39,000) can easily manoeuvre, they don't have the volume of Panamax class ships (the largest that can



LEFT The pulp is placed on the Molo Pisacane in Naples

RIGHT The Captain giving instructions to his First Officer on the departure of the ship





pass through the Panama canal (before the enlargement) nor that of even larger units, but they have cranes on board and can transport anything in their hold, from dry cargo to bulk like coal, grain, ferrous minerals, and fertilisers, **break-bulk like paper pulp**, iron and steel products, blocks of granite. Cargo hatches on deck can accommodate special cargo (boats, **industrial components**), or unusual cargo, like sawmill timber in bundles. To load and unload, all one needs is a dock, **and sometimes not even that**. The ports at the major cities are often, in fact, only a comfortable stopping place: outside of the terminals and maritime stations, handysize ships can sail up the Amazon river between sandbanks that move at every flood, **reach Murmansk taking advantage of the last waff of the Gulf Stream**, or reach places that still have no name and are hundreds of kilometres from the nearest paved road, or bays whose coasts one only glimpses at a distance, with slow barges that come and go carrying minerals from the bowels of a mine over the horizon.

THE SHIP LIVES AND MOVES

The merchant ship lives and moves according to the goods it transports; in Naples paper pulp must be kept dry, **so operations on the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" take place when the weather gives respite**.

The ship stays at anchor for two days in Monfalcone because the docks are overcrowded, then the ship must enter the port on Saturday at dawn and possibly return to Turkey the same evening, **or in any case unmoor to allow MSC's new super cruise ship out of the nearby shipyard for technical testing**.

Sometimes it is necessary to wait a day, two days, **or ten**. Every sailor with a few years of experience has one of those never-ending stops on his record: a month, **or even up to 45 days**. Sometimes it happens on the crowded mining or coal routes; the entry into the loading and unloading area is delayed from one day to the next - be-

cause in those cases instead of a port there is only a bay, or a small harbour - **creating a long string of delays**. And that is when rationing begins: the local fishermen know it, and they approach the waiting anchored ship in small motorboats waving and offering fish and lobster to barter for lubricant, diesel oil, **or paint**. For agricultural products, which the fishermen themselves have to buy at the market, there is no bartering: **thus any box of fruit or vegetables is worth more than an entire marlin freshly caught**. One starts to wash with sea water, to measure out the fresh water that is usually provided generously by the on-board desalination system, **which doesn't work when the engine is stopped**, as it is interlocked with the propeller. **It cannot operate if the ship is at anchor**. And yet, those who have been through **these experiences swear that this is when team spirit comes out**. Grumbling, impatience and minor frictions come to an end. They grit their teeth and say, **"We are sailors**. It happens. It's all part of the job..." This is the seaman's life, the younger sailors are told as they are slapped on the back.

HARD WORK

Hard work, it is a life divided into two thirds on board and one third home every year, along with difficulties of communication, children one sees grow in bursts, **and the worry that one will not get on well with the other crew members on the ship**. But there also a high salary, a solid career, and one's family's future secure. In long-distance sailing, **there are no longer any Italian crews**. They survive in coastal shipping because they are protected by law, and on a few Italian-flagged ships with international registration, **where shipowners have enormous tax credits compare to land-based businesses**. In the global maritime industry, ordinary seamen come from countries with low costs of living: today most sailors come from India and the Philippines, **they are**



LEFT The entirety of the ship's documents: onboard everything is recorded

RIGHT The control room of the holds



qualified workers who speak good English. Now China is also ready to introduce a huge number of crewmen and officers, **both engine-room and deck officers, onto the labour market.** The interests of Italian shipowners in training officers in Italy has returned since '98, precisely because of the tax benefits introduced by the International Register, without which - given the costs of labour and the high salaries - **Italy would be nearly out of the business entirely;** once they reach a certain age, few officers are called to hold positions of responsibility on land, transferring precious experience matured at sea to offices and companies. It is clear that if Italy lost its knowledge of the trade, it would be in danger of losing its companies over a few generations, **as took place in so many other industrial sectors which haven't been replaced.** In the last 20 years, the gap between the contracts that come under European Community flags and those under flags of convenience has gradually shrunk. Many and frequent serious naval accidents have further led the sector to create protocols and international safety regulations, verified by register or flag-country inspectors, **and by the Coast Guards,** which are further updated year after year based on case law and on changing needs. Consequently, the most active flags remain Liberia, Panama, the Marshall Islands, **and Malta.** In short, countries that have tax benefits for shipowners - multinationals that can shift their tax arrangements as they see fit - **operating in competition,** also guarantee the standards required by the commercial shipping industry. In other words, the shipowner is given the chance to pay less taxes, but is constrained by the international regulations dictated by the IMO (the equivalent of the ICAO in the aeronautical field), by the laws of the market which also take the quality ratings of each shipping company very seriously - **brokers assiduously monitor these ratings.** Ratings also oblige them to guarantee fair treatment for their crews, and respect the environment, and to maintain high standards for carriers. The higher the standards, **the better the charter rates for the ship.** The more credible the register, the more guarantees will be given by the ships registered in it. If the shipping company



The dashboard with vector maps



The pilot of the Messina Strait



The tugs are approaching to lead the ship out of port



The pilot of the Strait before getting onboard the ship

proves to be virtuous and attentive in recognising ever changing and new regulations, **it will succeed in keeping its entire fleet at play on the global market.** Having said this, pirates still do exist: on the minor routes of the Black Sea, **in Asian seas and in West Africa,** little men without scruples profit by taking people onto their infamous ships with the complacent help of corrupt local authorities. But this way of thinking is only comfortable to those who work at the margins of the shipping business, and it is not by chance that these sub-standard ships depart from their usual routes during periods of crisis, when life becomes more difficult for fakers, **“the market is cleaned up”** as the lingo has it; pirate ship owners know that outside of their habitual area of activity, their ships will be stopped at the first inspection. The owners abandon their ship and escape with the strongbox, and after a few months of assistance, in one way or another, **the international union pays for the return trip of sailor-hostages,** which is only one round trip of an infinite journey which pays the pirates' salaries. Outside of this marginal business, the serious shipowner is interested in keeping the ship in order, because it is worth more: **not only when and if the moment to sell it comes,** but most importantly to win the best price from the shipper or charterer.

MANAGEMENT, MAINTENANCE

Since seafarers aboard a ship are mostly occupied with managing and maintaining their ship in working order, **it is in the interest of ship-owners to make sure their vessels carry crew that can work well together.** Hence, to promote a conflict-free environment it's a good idea for crew members to be team-players, **with some awareness on how to manage bullying and mobbing.** It's good to sense, when necessary, when a mariner's temperament is at odds with an assigned task. **On board “Cielo di Virgin Gorda” there's a small cross-section of this world.** The d'Amico is a multinational company, conceived and grown in Italy: the ship was built in China, it flies a Liberian flag, the contracts they offer are those in line with two international regulatory bodies: the ITF (International Transport Workers' Federation, the union) and the IMEC (International Mari-

time Employers' Council, **the employers' association**). Unlike on board ferries, with scores of people milling about, or the thousands that embark on modern cruise ships, **aboard this freighter the soundscape resembles more that of a quietly humming factory**. The "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" has a crew of 20, which is rarely seen gathered together: only when the ship is at anchor, during safety drills, **during monthly meetings or whenever the captain calls the crew to assemble for the rare special occasion**. Sometimes, in the narrow deck spaces or the lunar space of the bridge, the ship appears to be a kind of **"nowhere place"**: like a parking lot, a warehouse, a port or an office block. And, **considering that other 9,000 standard-type vessels like her have been built, in some ways it is**. And, just like those other anonymous urban spaces, **the Cielo eventually**, gradually, is lived-in, understood, loved and endured.

SUNSET: THE PILOT DESCENDS

The lights of Naples disappear behind a curtain of rain. As the pilot gets dropped off, **the bridge is lit only by the on-board instrumentation**. The officer on watch paces back and forth, picks-up then lays down the binoculars; he scrutinizes the night, **looking for clues of possible hazards along the route**. The crew aboard "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" is made up of Filipino officers, Indian sailors, **a Ukrainian first-deck officer and an Italian captain**. On board there are Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Today, the Philippines, as stated above, is the largest maritime nation in the world, **almost every family in that vast archipelago-nation has a member working on the high seas**. India is almost a continent all by itself, encompassing vast differences, with its social stratification and cultural and linguistic variety: the guys who come from big cities like Mumbai, Chennai and New Delhi, who, judging by their training and ambitions could come from any other metropolis in the world are Indians; the seafarers who come from the countryside or from ancient maritime districts like Goa are Indians; and Indians too are the sailors from the island of Minicoy, a lonely atoll north of the Maldives, which for centuries was a call along the Malacca and the Far East sea route;



The pilot leads the ship through the Strait of Messina



The technical superintendent (in blue) and the chief engineer in the heart of the ship



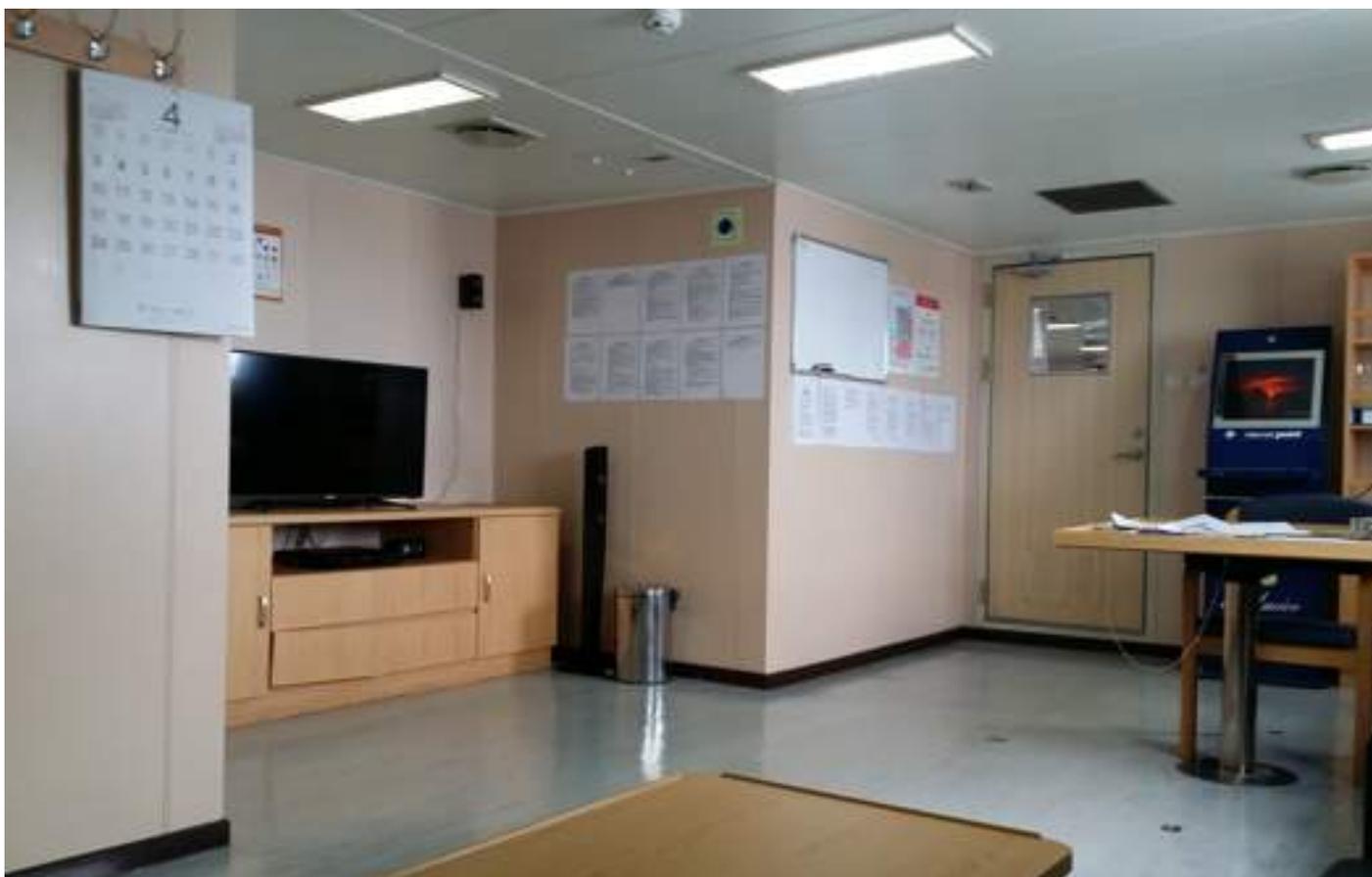
The engine room control panels: electrical panels on the walls, tripled compared to the needs of the ship



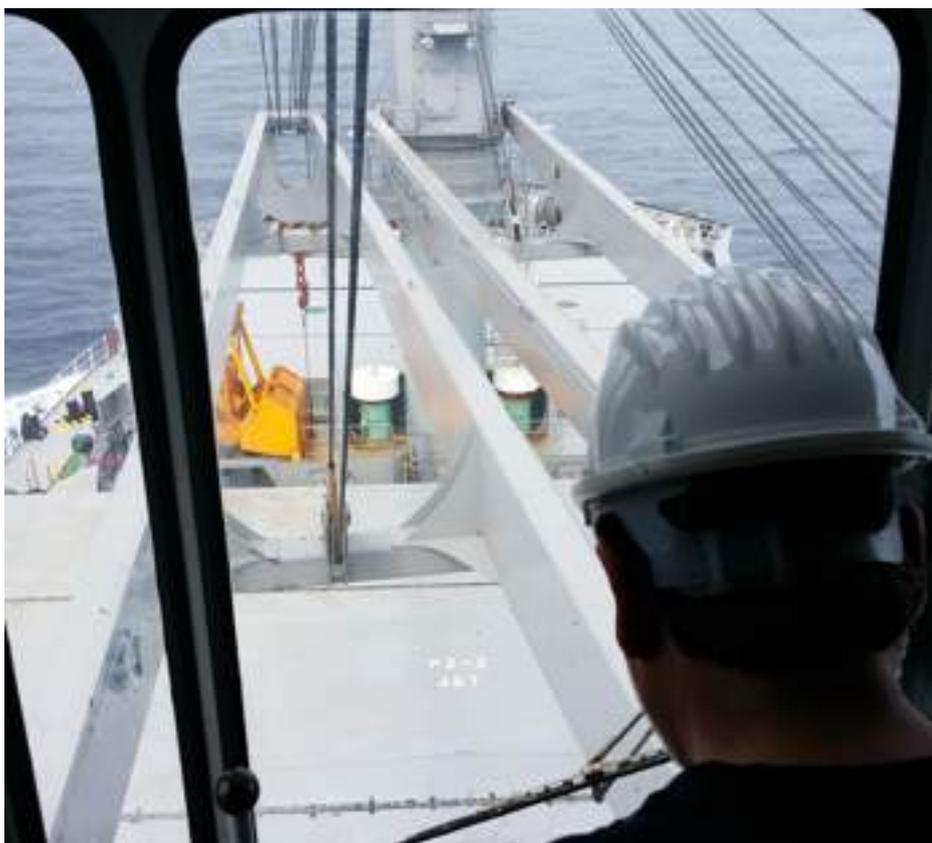
The cook in the kitchen: meals are the first thing the crew needs to feel at ease



The crew during a meeting. On a merchant ship it is always difficult for the entire crew to meet at once



One of the smaller recreation rooms. The Internet access area visible in the background



The location of one of the four indoor cranes of the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda"



The ship's captain announcing the arrival of Wi-Fi on board

with a population of just 10,000 distributed in 12 villages, built using salvaged wreckage, ropes and assorted tools found on their sea shore, and with vast houses with dirt floors, which could now have expensive home theatres, as the sailors from Minicoy are now among the industry's most sought after mariners, **and shipowners pay well for their centuries-old skills**; so that, while these seafaring people return home for a short spell, on their small piece of land in the ocean, they're never far away from the sea. From below, through the darkness, **the propeller vibrations are felt up on the bridge**. They begin in the ship's bowels, in the engine room, aft, **in the back of the vessel**. All merchant ships have a mandated cruising speed, it's 14 knots, about 26 kilometres per hour, **for "Cielo di Virgin Gorda"**. The propeller rotations sound heavy, regular, a staccato thud. A neverending march, trip after trip, **on the lookout for goods to be transported in every corner of the world**. Every day that the ship sails with an empty cargo hold, **operating costs drain the owner's pockets**. The role of the bulker ship, is basically that of the "work horse" of shipping. It's considered the most basic of cargo ships, because the goods it carries do not require any particular care, such as controlled temperatures, special handling methods for liquids or dangerous loads, special loads, motor vehicles or, of course, **transport of passengers**. It is at risk of sinking even with just one load. A typical cargo is mineral bulk, ferrous, heavy, **with a very fine grain**. If boarded with water content over a certain limit, after a few day of navigation, the ship's vibrations may cause it to liquefy, and suddenly make the ship unstable, **overturning it without giving the crew time to react or escape**. These occurrences do happen, and sometimes happen without any mention in the news if not reported by specialist maritime safety magazines. The culprits are poor boarding controls, **and the lack of adequate internal procedures**. But even a work horse of the sea has more technology at its disposal than is generally understood by landlubbers. The ship's route is plotted on digital maps, **and the route that the ship has to follow is accessed digitally**. The maps display information along the main

points of the itinerary, **which explode into pop-ups when clicked on**. The engine of the ship, as well as the auxiliary services, are controlled through a management system that runs with specialized software, **exactly like that used in factories on land**. Data to monitor the state of the ship's engine, fuel consumption or the usage of generators are displayed on board, and on land as well, **by the technical inspector on land using a PC or on a smartphone**, in order to track the ship. In the case of d'Amico Shipping, each **"technical superintendent"** controls four ships, under the direction of one technical director who reports directly to the fleet manager. A marine superintendent provides other kinds of assistance to the ship, not just technical, and above all the DPA (**Deputy Person Ashore**) is a key figure of every shipping company. His role is similar to that of a fleet commander in bygone times, but he's responsibilities are greater; it is the DPA who oversees, modifies and keeps up to date the entire corpus of safety procedures on board, **according to IMO regulations**, both those pertaining to the flag state, as well as those of the states in which the ship calls, and ultimately sees to it that the values expressed in the company's policies do not remain on paper, but are reflected in the daily management of the entire fleet. He's the commander of commanders, available 24/7, who must provide - with few words and much wisdom - **real assistance to his captains in a difficult or an emergency situation**. While the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" roams the oceans, she is controlled by the operations room in Rome, **through servers located in Ireland where the shipping company's computer terminals and financial offices are located**. The ship's loading is also managed through monitors, both from the bridge as well as from the dedicated loading monitoring office, equipped with sensors to read drafts and the angle of inclination of the vessel, and capable of calculating the shear stresses and the bending the hull is subjected to, and remote commands to perform routine or emergency procedures. One of these control panels manages intake of ballast water, essential for the balance of the ship, and its waste discharge system, **closely monitored because**



The crew's dining room



The "Cielo di Virgin" Gorda at sea



The fitness room and table tennis area



Pulp being unloaded in the port of Naples

cargo ships are always targeted for environmental issues. As 90% of the world's goods are transported by sea, international organizations **(and the EU)** are particularly strict with shipowners. The regulations for ballast water are very stringent because cargo ships, uploading and discharging thousands of cubic metres of seawater or brackish water at a time, from one part of the world to another, carry microorganisms that are alien to new natural ecosystems; In some instances the introduced organisms don't survive, while in others they multiply, **unbalancing the marine ecosystem.** Thus the need for ballast water to be filtered, treated and sterilized at boarding, **to avoid any contamination.** The whole process of ballast water treatment is recorded and stored in electronic databases, **and is viewed and analysed during inspections in ports.** So the vessels are clean, with a good team-spirit on board, **controlling pollution as much as possible.** As national interests in global shipping don't exist, there is just one evolving international legal framework, **the industry is managing to reconcile ethical principles with the need for maintaining profits.** No other entrepreneur thinks about the environment as much as shipowners do: 10 years of increasingly restrictive legislation, a system that evaluates ships increasingly in terms of their environmental impact, have led the sector to pay strong attention to these issues; **proof of that is the scramble by certification companies to adopt new standards and sell "green" certificates,** which are used to increase the prestige of a particular shipping company. **Seldom will a counterpart company on land be subject to such a degree of prodding and poking or have as many constraints as shipowners.** The former is shielded by many interest groups, firstly its own business sector, followed by political affiliations, **and ending with national and international arrangements.** A trivial case to illustrate the contrast between sea-land based business: look, on one hand, at the difficulties encountered in the global application of environmental protocols, **or the far from swift introduction of the carbon credit system.** And on the other hand, no one has to scrape tar off their bodies after returning from a swim in sea.

The people of the sea between ambition and disenchantment

The ordinary life on board ship, far from legends and preconceptions sailors tell their stories, waiting for Wi-Fi

di **DI ALBERTO QUARATI**, Monfalcone

"THERE ARE DIFFERENCES... differences of taste. In my work one day you are a hero, the next you could be a zero. I learned from my very first time on board ship, when I was a ship's boy at the Shipping Corporation of India. I could hear the discussions at the dinner table."

Biju, 36 years old, half smiles taking his arms off the counter. Like every sailor, he knows the importance of his role. He is a cook.

In a confined environment, far from home, with people one meets on the job who set aside their languages, origins and religions to be life companions for three to six months, eating well is extremely important.

A dish prepared carefully makes people feel less alone and puts them in a good mood, it is a pleasant occasion after a

hard day's work. Tobacco is tolerated on board, but alcohol is not. Meals are the most important activities that fill a sailor's free time, and this is not only on merchant ships, judging from the vapour trails that are often smelled downwind from cruise ships.

With a daily budget of about six euros per person, a storeroom that is stocked with fruit and vegetables every month, and meat every three months, Biju from India must attempt to put everyone at ease around the same table. Italian ship's captains - who are more sympathetic on this subject than others - often suggest recipes, or techniques, and inspect the larder to ensure that it is always fully stocked. Breakfast is from seven to eight, lunch at noon, and dinner at six.



At sea, especially when near the North or South pole, when the route twists and turns from one turning point to the next, the schedule is adjusted to the effective solar time, and may even be changed more than once in a week, **unlike the fixed Greenwich Mean Time**, which regulates the electronic and mechanical life of the ship regardless of longitude. **Biju's kitchen has two doors:** one to the officers' dining room, and one to the crew dining room. Through one door goes pasta with porcini mushroom sauce and focaccia for the captain and on-board inspector, or corn flakes for the first officer's breakfast, while rice, seasoned meat, **and free flowing tea go out the other door.** Pizza and chips, which are universally loved dishes, **go out both doors.**

When the weather and work obligations allow, there is time to organise barbecues: **they are careful to set the pork to one side to avoid offending Muslim crew members.**

But at the dining table, everyone agrees on fish, **at least until the conversation turns to fishing techniques.**

If the captain is able to create a good environment on board the ship, if the crew feels that they are a team, **there can be space for some fun.** Baptism at the equator, for example.

In this ritual, an officer dressed up as Neptune and covered with water balloons gives a new name to the seaman who is crossing "the Line" for the first time - **as the equator is called on board ship.**

The parallel that divides the Northern from the Southern Hemisphere also reverses the seasons and the stars in the sky.

It makes them smile, creates a group dynamic and releases tension, **not to take oneself too serious while remaining professional.** Strictness must not become sourness, nor confidence laxity.

In its closed space, surrounded only by the horizon, the ship must embody the rules of life and cohabitation, which must be accepted by the entire crew, regardless of culture, **creed or origin.**

The captain knows it, the cooks know it, **and the ship's boy knows it,** and they would make a good



Greasing the anchor

example for those on land who are often unable to do the same.

LIKE A FACTORY

As in a factory, working hours are organised in shifts, the on-board schedule is subdivided into watches suited to the demands of the journey: the captain and first officer, **the chief engineer and his officers technically have an 08:00 to 17:00 schedule**, and don't officially belong to a particular shift. **Since before Columbus**, the first officer has been on watch from four to eight in the morning and then from four in the afternoon to eight in the evening together with the deck cadet and one of the three able seamen. He navigated the ship by the stars at dawn and sunset, **the only moments when both the stars and the horizon are visible.**

Nowadays there is a hi-tech gyroscopic compass with the precise azimuth of a sun that sits on the horizon twice per day.

The slight discrepancy observed is not due to the sun, but to the instrument, **as sophisticated as it may be.**

A cadet is assigned to the first officer so that they can learn from

them, **whom he follows like a shadow throughout the voyage.**

The organisation of the work on deck for the each day starts from this crucial watch, depending on the weather, the wind, **and the conditions of the sea.**

The second officer and his AB are on watch from midnight to four in the morning, **and then from noon to four in the afternoon.**

This was called the "dog's watch" in the past, the darkest hours of the night, keeping watch while everyone else sleeps, **and then sleeping when everyone else is awake.**

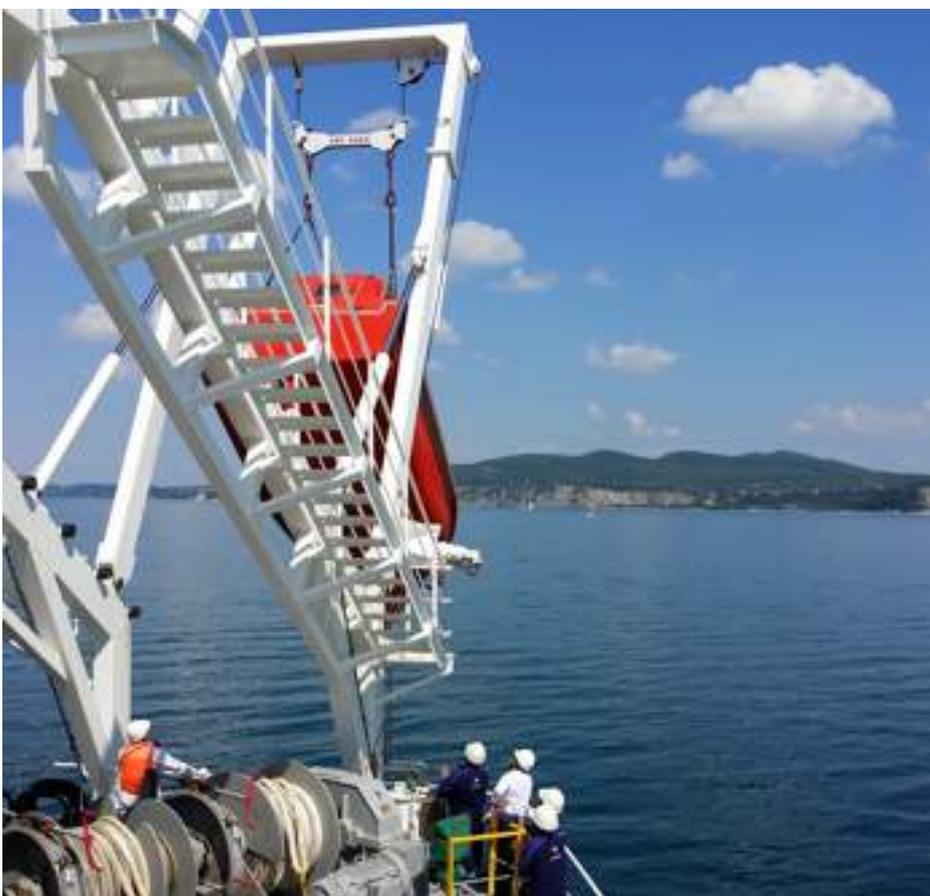
The junior officer and his seaman are on watch from eight to noon and from eight in the evening to midnight, the easiest watch, **assisted by the captain.**

These were the three watches in the past, and they remain the same today, schedules that have not changed for centuries now, perfect in their straightforwardness, **recalling the strong link that ties the past to the present in this trade.**

The schedule for the three officers, **the cadet and the ordinary seamen in the machine room were originally set up based on**



The first officer does a visual inspection before giving anchor



Safety drill: testing the lifeboats

the system of watches on deck when engines first appeared on ships.

Today, with modern nautical automation, it is closer to a factory shift, **which runs from eight in the morning to six in the evening.**

Machine room staff have had to face the transition from mechanical to electronic systems in a few short years, **they have gone from learning an engine by disassembling it many times to having to study it in the simulator before ever encountering it in the field.**

Cooks and mess men work from seven in the morning to seven in the evening with a two to three hour break in the afternoon; the cook wakes up before everyone else, **because as a baker he must make the bread for the start of the day.**

It has been mentioned that is difficult for everyone to meet at once.

There are three communal leisure areas on the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda": a small gym equipped with a ping-pong table, and two small rooms near the lunch room - with a television some board games, cards, checkers, **and most importantly the Internet access point.**

Ranny, the bosun, looks at it and shrugs his shoulders: "No, **that's not for me.** I call my wife in Goa every eight or ten days. I like to hear her voice. It's not the same on the Internet, all black and white in writing, **too impersonal.** To tell the truth, I don't understand the people who go to the gym, **either.** Our work is already physical exercise in itself, **and should be taken as such.** One must do things in the cold, without warming up. I am 42 years old and I first sailed at 20, starting out on Greek ferries, **my uncle worked at the Poseidon company.** Those were quite different times, with a captain who didn't understand English... **Today many things have changed,** yes. There is a different approach to labour, **I myself attempt to transmit these principles to the five guys that I have working under me.** First of all, I have to know how to conduct myself, to counter their tendencies. In short, **I have already taught them that what's important is building a team."**

THE SHIP AND THE SATELLITES

The ship is hooked up to the Internet via satellites, **and has a rather limited exchange of data.**

Sailors write home from the two public Internet stations, there is no Wi-Fi to call home and to see what friends are doing on Facebook, **one has to buy international telephone cards in port for \$25 for 40 minutes of telephone calls, which can be used only where there is a signal when the ship is moored.**

Calabria passes under the golden sky like a black streak, Captain Bencini calls a meeting on the bridge: technical updates for the next call in Turkey, the announcement of two days at anchor off the coast of Trieste which will be an opportunity to conduct safety exercises, the observations of the technical inspector who was visiting on board, and before giving any reassurances about the journalist who is going around the ship like a phantom, the news: **the company will soon install Wi-Fi on board.**

Leaning on the windows of the bridge, in their blue overalls, **it is mainly the thirty-year olds who smile.**

They are no longer young enough to look at the work with the detachment of ambition, **and they no longer belong to the generation that grew up without the internet or with little access to it.**

At home they have young wives and small children, family members who chat on WhatsApp, **friends who post on Facebook pictures of their dinner plates morning and night,** along with other trivia of the day.

While they are at work, the whole world suffers from the anxiety of hyper-connectivity: "The question of Wi-Fi is very delicate," **Salvatore d'Amico, the company's fleet director, explained over the telephone.** "Communicating via Facebook, WhatsApp, and Viber with relatives, fiancées, and friends certainly allows sailors to feel less alone, **less cut off from everyday life.** But on the other hand, we are still studying the best forms of access, for us and for them: we want to provide the service, **but we don't want this to be to the detriment of life on board.** In short, we don't want everyone to be shut in their own



Work on the ship's bridge

cabin with Wi-Fi chatting with people who are far away, **even if they are on opposite time zones from where we are sailing.** One whole night on Facebook means not having slept, not being very sharp at work, **and we might not be able to allow this."**

The experiment that d'Amico is moving forward with on three ships in the fleet is a limit on the number of gigabytes of Internet available, about eight gigabytes per month for the entire ship, **so 350 megabytes for each sailor.** This is to avoid the overuse of smartphones, but guarantee the use of the Internet and instant messaging with ease (although not videos, **which require a much greater bandwidth).** "We are finding out," the shipowner explained, **"that many people still have 25-30% available at the end of the month."**

The other announcement, which d'Amico is keeping to himself for now, **is the arrival of a Nintendo Wii on board the ship.**

It is intended to keep the crew together, to create a team, **and to recreate a family atmosphere as**



A fire drill conducted by the First Officer



Third officer and assistant engineer in discussion at the ship's stern



much as possible. But this may come at the cost of ping pong.

GROWTH AND PLANS

"I don't know... I just think that I will continue to sail the sea, **even when I have a family.** It's what I studied to do, it's my aspiration. I wouldn't know what else to do, business administration type stuff, **or something like that.** I have a particular plan, and I don't want to end up like several of my friends who are now working in call centres and who know what they will be doing in the future. Without growth, **without any plans.**"

21 year-old Vasu, comes from Delhi, he is a cadet engineer officer on his first voyage: "**I want to improve myself until I can become a chief engineer,** I would also like to work on tankers or gas tanker ships. I don't think it is so much the company that counts, **my goal is to always seek out the best shipboard job.**"

Having arrived in Livorno, Vasu and some colleagues rented a car and went to visit the Leaning Tower of Pisa. **That doesn't always happen.**

Many prefer to stay on board the ship, **perhaps to read or watch movies on DVD,** preferably in their own cabins.

Also because leaving the customs precinct is no longer as simple as it was in the times when sailors disembarked directly into the narrow streets of the old city, bringing with them tales of their life on the sea, **of varying degrees of truthfulness.**

Today more than ever the borders of countries are like fortress walls, **the gates are look-out towers:** those who cross them are watched with suspicion.

Even the sailor receives irritable looks, **as if he might abscond from the ship and from the income from his own job.**

But curious people like Vasu can benefit from temporary permits. **"In places like Central America or in the Arab countries they immediately understand that you came from a ship.** They are all around you, they know that you might have money, **they try to sell you all kinds of things.** In Europe it is different, you can go without being bothered. France, **Spain and Italy are countries that are**



All lend a hand to unload goods into the pantry. Fresh produce comes once a month



The access gangway to the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda"



Boxes of produce hooked to the crane



Oriental flavours on board: a supply of ginger, pumpkins and yellow melons

similar. You go out, you have a beer, and you mix with people." The sailor knows only two currencies, the euro and the dollar.

All the rest look the same, **they are difficult to keep track of despite currency converters on mobile phones.**

Often if one buys gifts for one's children, wife or parents, **they find out the true cost at home when the bank statements come.** It's not always a pleasant surprise.

A KINGDOM APART

The machine room is a kingdom apart. Access is controlled with alarmed doors and a profusion of yellow and black stripes, **the international sign for danger.**

The controls are closed off by two walls of control panels and electrical boxes: the ship has generators to produce triple the power it really needs, **to avoid a power shortage.**

With his jacket and tie hung up, Ignazio Santaera, the technical inspector visiting on board the ship, has slipped into a pair of dark overalls, **and has been verifying that everything is working as it should on the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda" since the ship left Naples.** He started with the things that he had already seen from his office in Rome, then gradually moved on to the maze inside the ship, **getting his hands greasy bustling about behind screens with chips and precision screwdrivers.**

Santaera enters the engine area - **it thrusts three decks high through the ship like a demon from Dante's Inferno.**

At the bottom, at the lowest point of the hull, many metres below the level of the sea, **is the transmission and immediately behind the steel hull one can hear the vibration of the propeller.**

Roberto grew up in Nueva Vizcaya, 200 kilometres north of Manila, his mother didn't work, **his father drove small trucks.**

At 37 years old he is the chief engineer officer: he built his career piece by piece, with the intelligence of a mechanic, one scholarship after another, because **"my family was very poor.** I have been sailing since I was 21, like everyone I was a cadet, back then in the machine room with

the title of wiper, **essentially I was responsible for keeping the space in order and wiped clean.** Then I was an oiler, third, second, first... **and finally the chief engineer."**

At home he has a wife, two daughters who are 16 and 11 years old, **and a seven-year-old boy waiting for him.**

With his little eyeglasses and kind manners, Roberto shakes his head at the question of whether he would like his children to be sailors too: "No, **no.** Too much hard work. This is a hard job, it takes determination, and sacrifice. **I would like for them to become engineers...** but on land."

IN ORDER TO SAIL

First of all, in order to sail on a merchant ship one must know and thoroughly understand 200 words in English, **and always know what needs to be done.**

For every fact, even the most residual, there is always a procedure, **a *modus operandi* that must be clear to everyone.**

Some things are learned through courses and training, **and then through lots of practice.** As always, it is hardest to learn the things that rarely happen.

Rust aside, the invisible enemy of a ship is an accident: a fire or collision that could cause pollution or lead to the loss and abandonment of the ship; an engine or rudder breakdown that cannot be repaired, which in a stormy sea would leave the ship to the mercy of the waves; a serious injury in the middle of the ocean when it is impossible to receive specialised medical assistance, **which could be fatal...** Everything is planned from the point of view of "it doesn't happen, **but if it did...**"

It's like a medieval castle, or a Roman camp at the borders of the empire.

Some emergency procedures one understands immediately, from putting on a wetsuit and life preserver to the launching of lifeboats, **to fire-prevention exercises.** Others are difficult to explain, and even more difficult to simulate.

Like the scenario where the controls for the control systems between the bridge and the helm station stop working, **both the main controls and the backups.**

What does one do? The captain is a practical leader: for the most



The smokestack of Cielo di Virgin Gorda



A tug prepares to bring the ship into the port of Monfalcone

difficult procedures he is equipped with a camera and a PC, **and has put together grown-up picture books that describe the procedure**, with seamen posing and speech bubbles indicating what should be said and how to respond.

This idea is very typical of Guido Bencini: the attention to detail, the involvement of the crew, **a certain degree of very Italian sarcasm even in the face of difficulty**. The more serious the company is, the more the ship is an important element in the running of the company, and not a little world of its own, **exposed to the dangers of the waves**.

Head hunters are less and less interested in Captain Hook-type captains, because the ideal for companies is to have a leader on board, not a boss, and even less an arrogant and capricious tyrant, holed up on the bridge, **perhaps even a bit racist**.

On the contrary, the captain should be an expert navigator, a mediator between the company and the demands of third parties on land, a psychologist who understands the mood on board the ship, a first aid doctor in case of injury, **a manager who takes everything into account and every once in a while even acts as a cook with the right techniques in the kitchen**.

The ship becomes a reflection of his work, of his character, and at the same time, he becomes the face of the ship to the port authorities at any port of call.

At his side are **Dmytro**, a reserved and precise first officer, **Mike** the second officer, who in the morning draws up the list of all the things that must be done. There is **Francis**, the fitter, who after five years would like to change jobs and settle down a bit on land, **Dolphy** an OS trainee who speaks perfect English and likes professionalism on the job, **Kumar** the messman who used to work for the Genoese company Finaval, **Kavi** the deck cadet who is happy not to have a girlfriend on land, because he doesn't have any worries, **Aslam** and **Ibrahim**, both ABs from the Island of Mini-coy, **who met on board this ship**. Everyone is indispensable to the relentless march that is life on board the Virgin Gorda.

Seafarers in figures

A growing demand for officers, less for lower rank personnel. We take a look at the salaries of those on board a bulk carrier adhering to international work contracts



Mission accomplished, the fire is extinguished: a fire drill concludes

According to the latest Drewry report, the average daily operating costs of a bulk carrier, like the "Cielo di Virgin Gorda", is **\$6,000, or a bit over two million dollars per year**. By category, operating costs can be broken down into crew costs, insurance, spare parts and lubricants, **maintenance and administration**. As far as crew costs go, the monthly expenditure is about €2,000 a day. A captain receives about **€10,000 a month**, a first, second and third officer earns **\$7,300, \$3,600 and \$3,100** a month respectively; a chief engineer receives **\$9,300**, the second engineer **\$7,300** and the third engineer **\$3,600**; a cook gets **\$2,200**, a boatswain or a mechanic get **\$1,800**, a steward **\$1,550**, an Able Seaman and an oiler both receive **\$1,500**, **\$1,100** for an ordinary seaman and a cleaner. Both the deck and engine room cadets earn **\$600**.

On vessels registered in open registers, there are two types of employment contracts: ones covered by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) also known as the Blue Certificate, and the so-called Green Certificate, the result of a contract between the International Maritime Employers' Council (IMEC) **and the ITF**. The former is issued by the ITF, if the shipowner or the Ship Manager (i.e. the company that on behalf of the shipowner or charterer manages the ship and crew) has an agreement with that international trade union; **the contract provides agreed upon minimum ITF wage standards and assurance that pay will not fall below those levels**. The Green Certificate is instead the contract between ITF and IMEC, **the result of negotiations between the two entities within the IBF**, the international bargaining forum.



Seafarer's cabin

This type of contract too is based on a minimum agreed pay scale, on which, however, some costs are calculated (first and foremost, those related to training) normally borne by the seafarer, which are instead paid by the shipowner. The baseline for seafarers' wage bargaining is the net monthly pay of an Able Seaman (AB): \$850 regular wage, \$631 for overtime, \$198 holiday pay, \$126 for food, **which amounts to \$1,805**. Of the 36 different professional qualifications that can be found on board a ship, the higher paid ones have a multiplier factor ranging from 1.117 (boatswain) to 3.369 (the captain) or 0.852 (waiter) down to 0.599 (**steward**). As one moves up the qualification ladder, the range set by the market between the minimum wage and actual pay increases; **today it's impossible to find a trained captain for less than \$5,786 per month**.



Mission accomplished, the launch is back on board: the exercise concludes



The "Cielo di Virgin Gorda"

The expected wage of captains and senior officers is about twice that of the pay scale. As one descends the qualification hierarchy, the deviation from the minimum wage decreases, **so that from an AB down the premium on specialization disappears**. On average, the salary of a captain is \$9,000 net per month, and \$10,000 if an EU national. The IBF agreement (**Green Certificate**) has a lower net pay but provides greater benefits to the seafarer. Out of the \$1,518 an AB earns each month, **about \$300 are for health care and training**, which are expenses usually borne by the seaman. And, as skill levels rise there are corresponding bonuses, so that even the basic net pay is higher than the minimum wage; d'Amico employs a crew of 20 on board, which is slightly more than the international average, **generally crews on a handy size bulker are 18**. The number of crew members is pretty standardized across the entire merchant marine sector: container carriers, **multi-purpose cargo ships**, refrigerated cargo ships. Bigger crews are required for ships carrying liquid cargo, with gas tankers having the largest, **(27)**. The typical period of time at sea varies from 3 to 6 months.

According to the 2015 Manpower Report - drawn up by two major international shipowners' associations, BIMCO and ICS - globally there was a demand for 1.5 million seafarers: 790,000 at the officer level and 754,000 for lower rank crew, while the available supply was 774,000 officers and 873,000 low or unlicensed sailors; **there was a gap of 16,500 licensed positions compared with a surplus of 119,000 for low rank crew**. The demand for officers has grown by 24.1% since 2010, only +1% for unskilled seafarers. The report also found that China could well have surpassed the Philippines as the main source nation of qualified seafarers, and, while the Philippines remains the main source of unskilled labour, it's also, together with Russia, among the main countries of origin for officers, **followed by Ukraine and India**.



Sailors, the captain and the technical superintendent