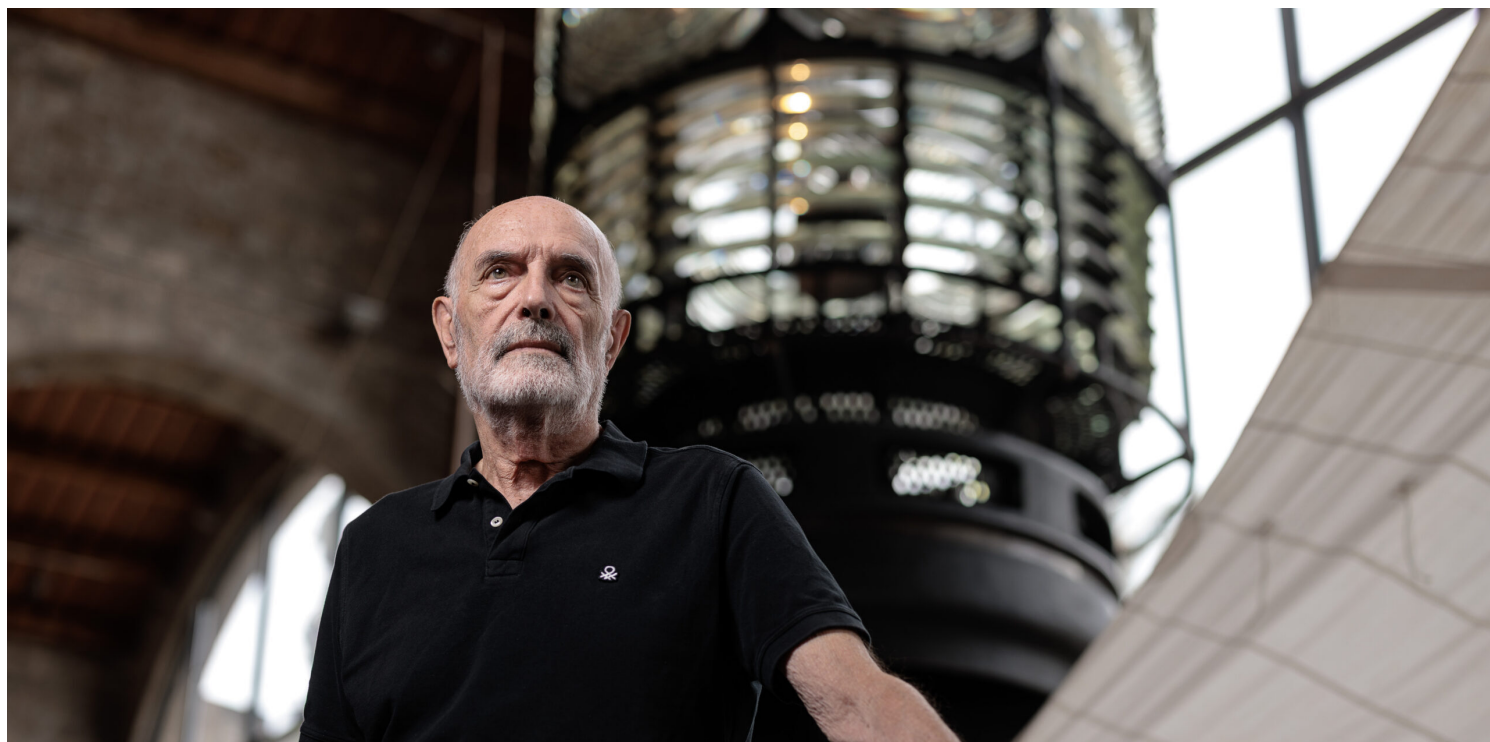


AÑATERVE SÁNCHEZ, MERCHANT MARINE CAPTAIN



When ships were a school of life and trade routes, portals to other worlds

Category: [Interview](#)

Tag: [#15](#)

AUTUMN 2025

TEXT: Jordi Garriga. Journalist and writer.

FOTO: Quim Roser.

Sailing is no longer what it used to be. In an era when crossing oceans meant truly getting away from it all, the young Añaterve Sánchez set sail for the first time looking—like so many other sailors—for something more than a job: a way of life, a way of understanding the world from the deck of a ship. Today, with decades of voyages behind him, he is a living voice of that merchant navy that no longer exists, when port calls were lessons in human geography and ports, gateways to unknown cultures. A captain in times of adventure and uncertainty, Sánchez invites us to remember a time when sailing was synonymous with discovery. His story tells us of a way of life in which the world still seemed immense and distances real.

"I am from an era, from a navigation, that no longer exists"

Where does your vocation for the sea come from?

I'm from the Canary Islands, so I grew up surrounded by the sea. My relationship with the sea has been there since I was born. We used to go to Punta Hidalgo, in Tenerife, a lot. There, we all traveled by boat. The first time I got on a big boat was when I was six years old, to come to Barcelona. I remember that everything I saw really caught my attention: the passage, the uniforms... It fascinated me! The thing is that when I had to decide what to study, I enrolled in the Barcelona Nautical School, against what my father thought. So, when you make a choice like that at such a young age, you don't really know if the vocation is real or not, and if you made a mistake, because the sea is a way of life that you don't know until you're there. I wasn't wrong.

What was the training like to become a captain in the sixties?

The path to becoming a captain is long, longer than people think. I left in 1968 as an assistant. Then, to really become a captain, you still have to take other courses and accumulate sailing days to move up the ranks. The thing is that in 1968 I boarded the *Villa de Madrid* of the Trasmediterránea, a ship with 140 crew members, with the intention of going out and seeing the world, although that wasn't exactly the case. In any case, I spent a year and a half there doing my internship. I was lucky enough to have a good captain and, despite only doing coastal routes and very little offshore sailing, I learned a lot.

The thing is that when I finished those internships it turned out that there was a big shortage of pilots, because abroad they paid better and many pilots from here left. This led to me being qualified as a pilot and I went sailing with the company Marasia. The atmosphere was fantastic, great. We were doing the Galicia-Italy route and there I began to see some of the lies of our world, because it turns out that we were going to load marble in Portugal and take it to Carrara, where, supposedly, there is one of the best marbles in the world...

And after that, how does your maritime career continue?

As a pilot, I returned to Trasmediterránea, on the emblematic *Ernesto Anastasio*, but after a month I left because they paid very poorly. And that's how I returned to Marasia.

In fact, if I'm not mistaken, Marasia is where he ends up carrying out all his activities as captain, right?

Yes, exactly. I went back to Marasia and didn't leave until, let's say, I returned to the mainland.

What type of ships did they work with and what routes did they take?

At first, we had very old ships, but we owned them. Later we chartered them. There was also the owned ship *Pedro de Alvarado*, which was renamed *Pacífico*, and which was a training ship for engineers and pilots.

As for the routes, I've done a lot of them, I've been everywhere. At first, we did the East Pakistan line. There we loaded jute and took it to Spain. That seemed like another world. It was like traveling in time, it seemed like they were living in another century...

And how were the lines and routes they took defined?

The conferences or regular lines had been marked by Francoism, in payment for "services rendered". This meant that if you didn't have assigned lines, as was the case with Marasia, you had to make a living in the world of freight; if not, you were nobody. But in this, at Marasia, we knew a lot and despite having much inferior ships compared to, for example, the Germans, we had conferences in South America, in East and West Africa and even in Australia.

Many worlds to discover... Surely his life is made up of a good pile of anecdotes...

Oh, and so much! I could write a book, or more than one! Navigation, when I was involved in it, was very different from what it is now. I come from an era, a navigation, that no longer exists. I remember once that we were taking a large shipment of oranges to land in Rostock, in East Germany. We were in the midst of Franco's regime. It was the first time I had left Spain and suddenly I found myself in a port where we were constantly being watched by men with machine guns. From there, we went to Antwerp. What a change! I was twenty- *something* and suddenly I discovered that there was a civilized and advanced Europe. No Civil Guard, no questions... I discovered freedom!

And what do you remember about your first trips to Central and South America?

America was a discovery, for me! It's so many things... I've crossed the Panama Canal 21 times, so you can say I've experienced everything. Just crossing the canal is worth it, it's spectacular. The first time takes your breath away.

I told you that I was very young, and I remember the first time we crossed the canal, we stopped to refuel and went to eat in a kind of "Zona Franca" full of bars and places to eat, and once we were seated, a mulatto woman approached me and said "What are you going to drink, my love?". Wow! Imagine, I thought I had already hooked up... until I saw that I was saying the same thing to everyone. It was all a permanent discovery, you were realizing the different forms of relationship that exist in each part of the world. I also witnessed the great unfortunate change that Chile suffered. I got to know Allende's Chile. I was young and that was a happy and fun country, with many students. But then I got to know Pinochet's Chile, and nothing was the same. Machine guns, raids in bars, a lot of sadness. What do I have to explain, we all know it...

I suppose he must have also gone through more or less dangerous experiences...

Yes, of course. In Colombia, in the port of Buenaventura, which is considered one of the most dangerous ports in the world. Access is difficult, but once you moor and go ashore, the spectacle is impressive. It's full of taverns and what they call record houses. One next to the other and the cumbia playing at full blast. And inside the premises, an unimaginable fauna. Like in pirate movies, but in a modern way. It was scary, to be honest.

Speaking of dangerous situations, have you experienced any at sea?

I would say that, obviously, I have lived through complicated situations, but I don't really feel like I have ever suffered for my life or that of my crew. Now, seeing plates, chairs and all kinds of objects flying, many times. Crossing the Atlantic takes many days, especially on the way back, and I have been through risky situations, but in none of them have I thought "what am I doing here?"; quite the opposite. A tree-lined sea, returning from America, between two cyclones, governing the wave... It is wonderful. It has its charm. It is nature and you realize how insignificant you become. Of course, the cargo, always well tied, very well tied.

You also sailed around Africa. You must have a good collection of experiences there too.

Yes, of course. Africa was many Africas. In my time it was a post-colonial continent and almost still colonial. Anglo-Saxon Africa was very different from French Africa, not to mention apartheid South Africa... So when you passed Cap Blanc you had to change your chip. That was another world.

Once, during the violent civil war in pro-Soviet Angola, we found ourselves anchored in the port of Luanda in the midst of a very tense atmosphere, but it turned out that in the end our ship ended up becoming a kind of free zone, no man's land or peace zone. They came at the same time from Cuban doctors to mercenaries from the different factions fighting to eat trout and ham. It was a rather extraordinary week.

He used to tell me that Marasia were very good, despite having competition from companies with better

boats. What was their secret?

The beginning of any route was the same for all companies, that is, loading in a port in Europe. Then we would go through the Panama Canal and head south. And that's where the difference began. Our competition would empty until they reached the last port in the south and then they would load again to return to Europe. We, at the first port of unloading, would already start loading again, and we would do that until we reached the last port to return to Europe. The point was to have everything very, very well organized so as not to have to move cargo. We were the best at this, and that's because we enjoyed making stowage plans. And luckily we were very independent. Since we were good, the company let us do it.

A good part of Marasia's crew came from Barceloneta. What role did the company play in that port Barcelona?

It's true that Marasia provided a lot of employment for people in the neighborhood. There was a bar, Los Dos Hermanos, where shipping companies used to go to recruit crew members. Once, during Franco's regime, when the civil governor had closed all the brothels in Barcelona, many unemployed people ended up in that bar. Right at that moment we had to go there to look for crew members, and they all came. Phew, what a bunch! It was a very complicated trip, I could write another book...

What made him leave the merchant navy and start working on land?

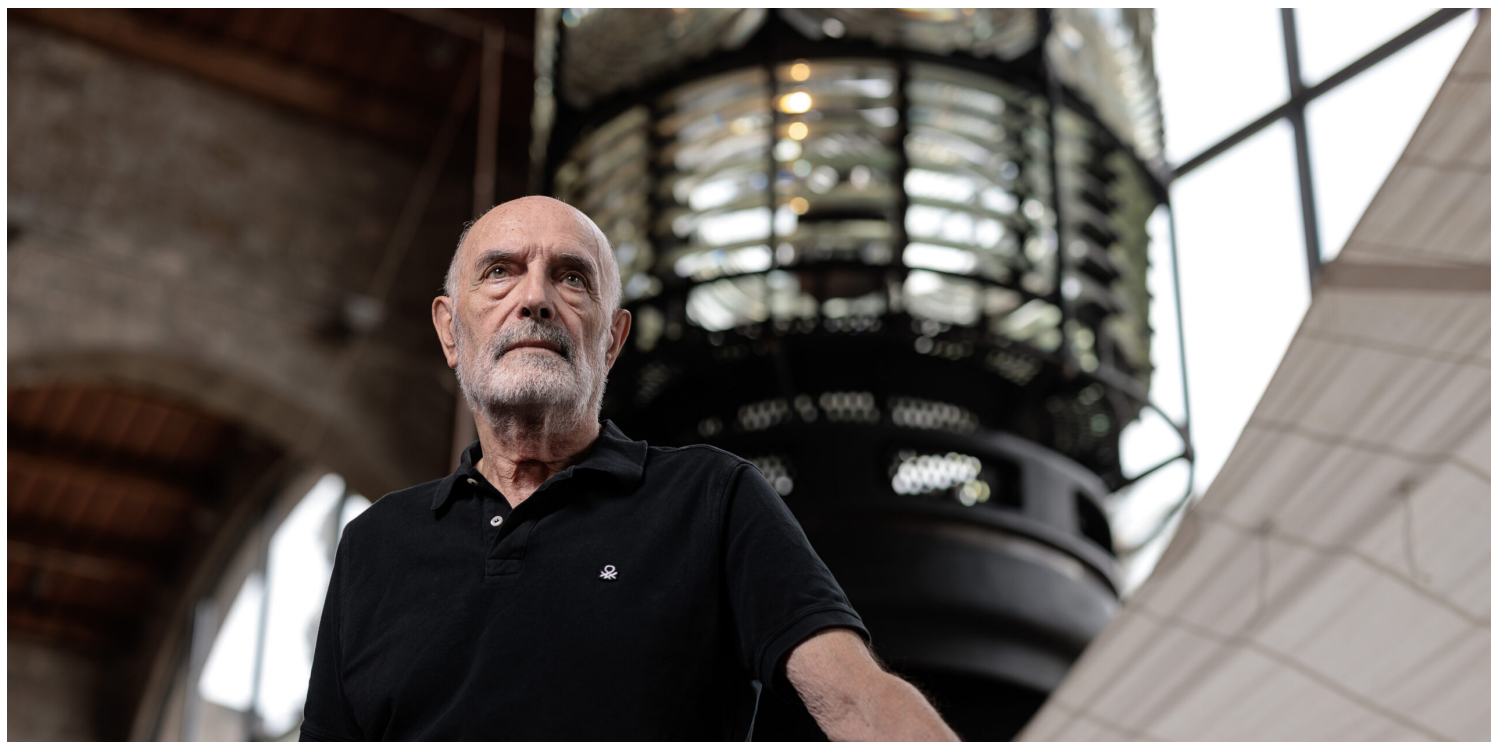
I gradually realized that when I traveled with older people, they were sad people. Most of them thought too much about their families. I didn't want that to happen to me. I wanted to see my children grow up. That was the reason. In my time, without mobile phones and without internet, sailing was incompatible with family. To sail you have to be free. That's why, when I fell in love, I started working at Sea Spain, a shipping company, until they offered me the management of Gandara in Barcelona. The company was dedicated to the industrial production of elements for navigation, so there was still a certain relationship with the sea. I can't say that it was a job that I was really passionate about like sailing, but I was lucky that at least once a year I could find my own projects that satisfied me, for example, supplying everything we were doing in the expansion of Port Ginesta.

Another of these projects, if I'm not mistaken, was the restoration of the pailebot *Santa Eulàlia*, one of the flagship ships of the Barcelona Maritime Museum.

Yes, exactly, and it was very interesting and stimulating, precisely because of the Museum's demands. We had to find a way to comply with current demands and regulations and, at the same time, carry out a restoration that was as faithful as possible to what the boat was like in 1918. This is where my relationship with the Museum began, and I am very happy and satisfied with it.

To finish, earlier you told me that the navigation that you experienced no longer exists. Explain it to me.

Well, look, when I started and until I left, in 1982, to reach the Caribbean we had to travel astronomically, from dawn to dusk. You were subject to the wind and the weather without having practically any forecast and, as we know, depending on all these factors, in navigation the shortest distance between two points is not necessarily the best. But, apart from that, the atmosphere on a ship is not the same either. Now, in our free time, everyone is glued to their mobile phones or doing video conferences. The concept of camaraderie is no longer the same, nor is that of socializing at mealtimes. Today, in the merchant navy, it is almost impossible to have the experiences that I have been lucky enough to have. Now, the cargo terminals are far from everything and everyone. Almost no one on board goes down to dry land anymore.



THE DECALE

A sea?

The Atlantic.

A beach?

The one in Lobito, in Angola.

A marine animal?

The fur seal and the albatross. Once, a pair of albatrosses accompanied us for 20 days of sailing, from Australia to South Africa.

A maritime sport or hobby?

Swimming.

A book to take to a lonely cove?

The heart of darkness.

And a record?

I've moved on from classical music to other things. Maybe some of John Coltrane or Miles Davis.

What is your first memory of the sea?

A bath with my grandfather in Tacoronte, Tenerife.

Think of the sea and tell me some nuance to describe its blue.

It's like the river; no two are alike. The sea is my great companion, and I'm not afraid of it, but I do have a lot

of respect for it.

If he had to run away, he would go to...

The west.

Finish the sentence: if the sea didn't exist...

I would inventory it.



Añaterve Sánchez, at the Maritime Museum of Barcelona.