

The European tour

Gregory Collavini

Gregory Collavini is a documentary photographer based in Switzerland, whose work explores human environments in particular through architectural structures and landscape design. In January 2018, he went on a journey through the North Sea on the Amerigo Vespucci, one of the largest cargo ships in the world. With an interest in micro-societies and people who deliberately live outside of normal societies, Collavini immersed himself for six days onboard the Vespucci, photographing the minute details of life at sea within the body of a massive container ship. In between corridors made of steel and the temperament of the outdoors' sea, the photographer reflects on the fleeting landscape of remodelled port cities, attuned to the colossal demand of continental desires. The following text belongs to a documentary series that transports the reader into the floating machinery of global commerce, capturing the inside of one of the busiest trading routes in the world. This series is the beginning of a long exploration of people who deliberately or non-deliberately paint themselves out of the normal canvas of society.

Through the window of the taxi, the docks of the Port of Hamburg are saturated with colourful containers, as far as the eye can see. I'm wondering why I decided, four months ago, to take this trip. Suddenly, the taxi driver stops and says: 'Burchardkai Terminal'. I have to get out. An icy wind slaps my face as I enter and pass through an airlock that scans every truck going in and out. I walk to a small shed, a rough, neon-lit metal structure where I have to register. Inside, I announce myself to the man behind the counter, who takes out a folder on which the word 'photographer' is highlighted. The man in an orange jacket addresses me sternly: 'No picture in the enclosure of the terminal, we do not joke with security.'

The formalities settled, I climb into a minibus that drops me off in front of the Amerigo Vespucci, one of the largest container ships in the world.

Named after the Florentine trader and navigator who served the Kingdom of Portugal and the Spanish crown in the fifteenth century, this giant of the sea, weighing more than 155.000 tons and measuring 365 meters in length, built in South Korea and sailing under the French flag, was launched in 2010. I feel a slight shiver just raising my head towards her guardrail. To reach the ship, I must climb an iron staircase with narrow steps barely wider than my waist. I wobble under the weight of my big bag. Twenty meters farther up, I am aboard! A Filipino officer greets me, confiscates my passport and says in very approximate English: 'You can have it back when you disembark.' Without any further words, the anonymous sailor leads me to one of the six VIP cabins, a sort of tower beyond the hull that shelters the crew's sleeping quarters, the kitchen, the refectory of the officers, and that of the sailors. Carpet, double bed, sitting area, and a private bathroom with a panoramic sea view, a luxury compared to my Hamburg Airbnb where I had stayed the previous nights! Of course, this sea tourism has a price, 800 euros. I could have been fed and housed for a one-way trip to Le Havre. But at this moment, I do not regret it.

Hamburg, Rotterdam, Antwerp, Le Havre, I am travelling one of the busiest shipping routes on the planet: the 'European tour', as they call it in the merchant navy. One port per day, six days in total. From the navigation bridge of the Amerigo Vespucci, I am fascinated by the ballet of the gantries, trucks, forklifts and men who act like ants amidst a perfectly coordinated infernal hubbub. Everything seems too big and, at the same time, very small. I can hardly imagine that, once it leaves Le Havre, the blue cargo ship will be empty, and then ready to be filled in Malta before embarking on its journey to China. Owned by the French shipowner CMA-CGM, the third-largest shipping company in the world after the Swiss MSC and the Danish Maersk, the Amerigo Vespucci can accommodate 14.000 freight containers with all kind of goods.

Standing at the wheel on the day of departure is a German captain, binoculars in hand, eyes focused on the busy traffic of the Elbe. Once the moorings are released, I completely lose sight of any landmarks. I would later learn that each port has its own maritime characteristics, the captains of merchant ships must leave the bridge to experienced local pilots. Whether it is three in the morning or three in the afternoon, the activity level on board is the same, intense. I would like to be everywhere at once, see everything, understand everything, so I run back and forth from the bridge to the holds.

Only meals mark a hint of rhythm during the day, and also an opportunity for the 27 crew members – 6 officers, 4 French sailors and 17 Filipino seamen – to meet and exchange ideas. I look forward to these moments, especially as I am alone most of the time, walking the endless pastel-coloured corridors of this cold and squeaky monster, in search of the smallest detail: the noise of clashing containers, radar graphics, a sketch in the corner of a magazine, an empty can of soda rolling on the ground.

As we sail along the shores of a North Sea as smooth as a pond, I take the opportunity to gaze once more from the bridge; the view is almost 360 degrees from there. Despite the density of cargo ships, fishing boats and ferries around us, the atmosphere is laid-back. The Filipino officer at the helm, wearing a burgundy cap, explains that on these busy waterways speed is limited to 12 knots. In case of infringement, fines are high. Comfortably seated in his chair, the captain of the Amerigo Vespucci, a forty-year-old bearded senior with an Algerian father and a German mother, who is usually not very talkative, begins to chat with me about European politics, his investments in Germany, his family, and his retirement, which he is already planning. With the idling engine purring, the trip reaches cruising pace.

Rotterdam appears on the radar; the rest of the trip will be short. As soon as I enter the Rhine Delta, I feel like I am entering the Los Angeles of Blade Runner: grey and drab atmosphere, rainy climate, angular architecture, pale lights where nature has disappeared. Although I have seen from my limited perch only a tiny part of the biggest automated port of the Old Continent, which covers more than 12,000 hectares – the equivalent of 24,000 football fields – its vastness overwhelms me once more. I try not to miss anything that is happening outside and inside the boat, my camera always close at hand. Lack of sleep and the stress of this unknown environment do not help me keep my thoughts straight. Forbidden to disembark during berth, I spend my evening on the bridge deck, watching each fragment of this monumental and strange metal city. The constant hissing of the gantries fascinates me. They seem like machines communicating with each other. I fight the cold by eating the succulent meal prepared by the Breton cook. Tonight, it's cold cuts, gratin dauphinois, tarte Tatin and cheese, washed down with a good bottle of Bordeaux. I then join the twenty or so Filipino sailors from the Amerigo Vespucci in watching a local sitcom. Although the language difference deprives us of deep exchanges, we laugh and enjoy this moment of relaxation by sharing baklava bought somewhere between China and Europe. But

already they are standing up and returning to their positions to prepare the ship for its departure in the early morning, checking the tie rods that hold the cargo in place, controlling the temperatures of refrigerated containers, refuelling, contacting the tugs and preparing the moorings — as for myself, I go to sleep.

A few hours later, a complete change of environment in Antwerp. To reach the Belgian port, the freighter must enter the Scheldt estuary and sail upstream. For hours, the local captain guides the boat with breathtaking dexterity. Except for the return of real workers in the gantry cranes and some silhouettes roaming along the quayside, the environment is just as inhospitable as the previous stopovers. The fresh air of the night invigorates me. I meet the cook in his blue apron leaning on the parapet. This Breton, about fifty years old, first worked on fishing boats before discovering the merchant marine by becoming captain of a coal bulk carrier, then of container ships: 'Every boat I sail seems bigger and bigger. Moreover, once we are in China, this one will be cut in half to be lengthened. It will then exceed 400 meters.' In the distance, the smoke of an incineration plant draws abstract shapes illuminated by multiple street lights. The smoke tickles our nostrils with its unpleasant fragrance. The Amerigo Vespucci will remain docked for the time needed to unload and replenish the stock of spare parts that the mechanics will have to index; once on board, the crew is on its own to repair anything that breaks, including the main engine.

Rocked by the discordant sounds of the ports to which I have finally acclimated, I sleep soundly. The next day, during the crossing of the English Channel, two successive storms shake the boat. The wind blows so hard that I must cling to the rail when standing on the deck. The chief mechanic, a tall blue-eyed fellow from the north of France, chooses this moment to show me around the engine room and the main deck. 'With each wave, we go up and down by ten meters', he says with a smile when we are at the bow. This is the place where, according to him, we can best feel, and hear, the power of the ship while the bow bulb slowly sinks into the dark waters and rises to the surface like a whale taking a breath. Fortunately, I am not seasick.

My fifth and last night aboard the Amerigo Vespucci. While I quietly sip an instant coffee alone at a table of the sailors' refectory, a whirring pulls me from my reverie. Through the porthole, I can see a red light flashing in the dark: a helicopter! I rush to the stairs, climb them two by two to reach the command post...it is locked. I fall back onto deck F, just below. The blast

of the blades makes me squint and protect my face with my arm. Hovering over the port bridge, the aircraft tries to maintain its position in the wind while a man climbs mechanically down a flexible ladder like a puppet. It's the French pilot who will take us to Le Havre, my final destination. The helicopter is already moving away as I see the first lights of the coast off in the distance. My phone is on the French network: proof that we are approaching the mainland. For two hours, we will sail along the mouth of the Seine under a clear sky.

The second-largest French commercial port after Marseille, Le Havre is ranked lowest in Northern Europe in terms of traffic. Standing on the starboard bridge, the captain steers the ship from the outside control station. At his side, the captain listens attentively to the comments from the tug boats coming through his walkie-talkie. Without the slightest jolt, the container ship is docked. The huge mooring ropes are thrown, the engine stops. It's time to eat. During the meal, I discuss my disembarkment scheduled early the next morning with the captain, who will call a taxi to take me to the station. I take the opportunity to share this last evening with the French officers who spend half of the year at sea without seeing their family. Their loneliness is heavy, their impatience palpable. 'In 21 days, we will finally be in Singapore', sighs the young chief mechanic. 'I will finally go back home and kiss my daughters.'

In the wee hours of the morning, I leave the white castle. In the elevator, I review the photos of the 27 crew members displayed next to the weekly menu. 27 portraits plus one: mine. As short as this journey was, I was part of this ship. I am a bit sad as I enter the bridge; a Filipino officer returns my passport. Over a last cup of coffee, the officer of the Amerigo Vespucci says he regrets that I cannot come to China with them and apologises for not having had more time for me these past days. We say goodbye to each other, the taxi is waiting for me along the dock. I descend the iron stairs confidently this time. Tired, a little melancholy and nauseated, I sit on a cold bench at the Le Havre station and wait for my train to Paris. I experience the first effects of earth sickness. So it is on solid ground that I take my first pill against motion sickness.

Fig. 1: Gregory Collavini, a Filipino crew member stands by while the ship is filled up with fuel, 13 January 2018



Fig. 2: Gregory Collavini, near the rudder machinery, the crew members have a place for exercise and leisure, 15 January 2020

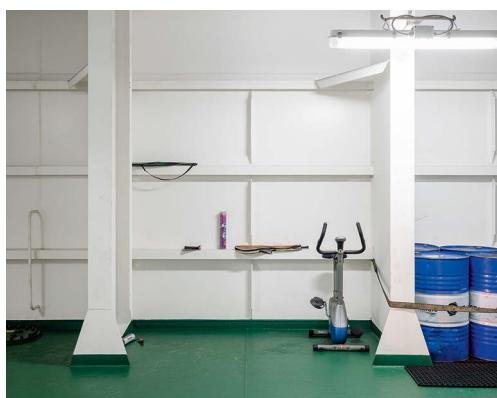


Fig. 3: Gregory Collavini, view of Rotterdam port, 13 January 2018



Fig. 4: Gregory Collavini, foggy view towards the stern of the Amerigo Vespucci, 12 January 2018



Fig. 5: Gregory Collavini, the chef enjoys his break and contemplates the Antwerp docks, 14 January 2018

