

# Volunteer expeditions 2023

## Monitoring the Open Sea



ALNITAK

Balearic Islands: MEDTOP "Toftevaag"



## Alborán Sea: southern Spain, Morocco and Strait of Gibraltar



With the harbour of Almerimar as the main port for the beginning of the season, Alnitak crew and volunteers will monitor the open sea ecosystem and in particular sites such as the “Seco de los Olivos” seamount, Cabo de Gata Natural Park, the waters around Alborán Island and possibly even off the North African coast (conditions permitting).



Alborán is known to be the most biodiverse basin of the Mediterranean Sea, but wildlife here is exposed to multiple threats. Of these, Alnitak focuses on illegal fishing and ghost gear, and in particular pelagic drift nets which have been prohibited since 2002 but are still in use. In recent years, Alnitak has observed a perceived decline in cetaceans in the region, but we need to do more research to confirm this. Taking data and imagery of species such as common dolphins and pilot whales, while also monitoring the threats they face, is our main aim for these expeditions.



Volunteers will live and work on board Toftevaag as part of the team, will receive ongoing training and guidance, while immersing themselves in the day-to-day tasks including research and navigation, but also participate in cleaning, cooking and more. While in Almerimar, we are right next to the Equinac marine wildlife rescue centre, and will help with ongoing maintenance and caring for sick or injured marine turtles, when required.

These two expeditions will be the last Mediterranean Sea surveys on board RV Toftevaag after 33 consecutive years of working as a platform for conservation, and will mark the end of a chapter for Alnitak Research Institute.

\*Toftevaag voyages after these dates (Portugal and Northern Spain) will not be primarily research and conservation-oriented, and will be more focused on maritime culture and classic sailing. These can be consulted on our website, and are also open to anyone who wishes to partake in the adventure!

# Our programme

## Summary

Since 1990 ALNITAK has been conducting open sea expeditions focusing on top pelagics (whales, dolphins, turtles, elasmobranchs, tunas, mantas and birds) and human activities. These 11-day Expeditions are intensive, weather-dependant and no two Expeditions are the same.

Volunteers joining are integrated quickly as part of the crew, experiencing our daily lives as researchers and sailors on a historic wooden ship. This is **not a tour or pleasure cruise**, and we are honoured to have the “Mediterranean’s most uncomfortable ship” with a culture of working as much as possible in the vast and sometimes hostile open sea.

*If you have trouble adapting to living in small quarters, waking up early, and working long hours, this may not be an Expedition for you. However, if you are looking for a true adventure dictated by the weather, meeting like-minded people, working with a small dedicated team, conducting important research and tackling modern-day conservation issues, we have a bunk bed ready waiting for you.*



We subdivide our work into two large programmes: **MEDTOP** - scientific projects using top pelagics as umbrella species for the conservation of the open sea ecosystem, and **TODOSPOR LA MAR** - engaging stakeholders and the general public in practical and tangible conservation. Alnitak partners with institutes such as the US Fish and Wildlife Service, NOAA, the Balearic Islands Coastal Observing and Forecasting System (SOCIB), OceanCare, Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO), IFREMER, Exeter University and many more. Results from Expeditions contribute directly to ongoing research and conservation projects.



# Our impact

Over the years we can highlight some of Alnitak's accomplishments in great part thanks to the work done each season onboard *Toftevaag*:

- \*Design, management and monitoring of 14 MPAs both in the Mediterranean and beyond.
- \*Reconfiguration of IMO traffic separation schemes.
- \*Mitigating the risk of turtle bycatch (over 95% - estimated between 20 and 30,000 loggerhead turtles per year in long-lining).
- \*Mitigation of the risk of noise pollution.
- \*Contributing to species management plans, for example of the endangered Mediterranean common dolphin.
- \*"Train the trainers" programmes for fishers, scientists and stakeholders in the EU, Africa and Latin America.
- \*Contributing to policy frameworks, actively cooperating with UNDP GEF, FAO GEF, ACCOBAMS, NOAA, etc.



*If you ever wondered what it's like to do field research at sea, be on the frontline collecting data on wildlife and impactful activities as well as making documentary films, get in touch and become involved!*





# Toftevaag

## Research vessel

*Toftevaag* is an 18-metre 1910 Norwegian ship that was originally a fishing ketch, but has been effectively converted into a platform for a new purpose: scientific research in the Mediterranean open sea ecosystem.

The name *Toftevaag* aptly means “Meeting Place”, and has welcomed over 3000 volunteers from over 90 nations. Each and every participant will be provided with key training and instructions for living and working on board.



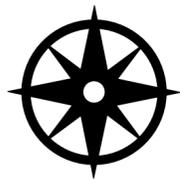


## **An expedition consists of:**

- \* 11 days (10 nights) living and working on board. Typical ratio is 2-4 crew - 8 volunteers. There are 12 bunk beds in total divided in three shared cabins.
- \* An economic contribution of 1100 EUROS from the volunteer to cover costs while on board plus supporting the scientific programs.
- \* Working at sea using every moment of daylight possible, maximising our search effort when conditions allow us to (sea states 0 and 1).
- \* Full safety briefings and training in research methods and sailing manoeuvres.
- \* Upon signing up you will receive a BRIEFING document with further details as well as a check-list of appropriate things to pack, and other information to enhance your experience.



Coming on board *Toftevaag* is embracing a wondrous adventure in a beautiful, but often harsh environment. Volunteers who come on board contribute to ongoing projects by becoming part of a working team, which sometimes entails waking up early, long survey days and some physical exertion. However, this makes it fully immersive. You effectively become an assistant researcher and deckhand, learn from hands-on experiences, and you leave feeling like you've made a direct contribution to marine conservation.



## Day 1 - Arrival day

We typically meet at 17:00 close to the port at a café /restaurant, we usually have a drink together prior to embarking. Sometimes *Toftevaag* is in a port (close to the meeting point) or on occasions it may be anchored in a bay and we will have to go with our rib.

This will be your first day meeting everyone and becoming accustomed to the ship: selecting your bunk bed, organising your belongings, learning how everything works (including our infamous “toilet talk”). Additional instructions will be provided by the researcher and skipper regarding the weather forecast, expedition objectives and planned activities.





## Day 2 to Day 10 - Monitoring the Open Sea/Boat Maintenance/Other Activities

If the weather conditions are suitable, the engines may start as early as 4:00 AM to ensure we are out in deep waters by sunrise (this doesn't necessarily mean that you need to be up for this, but you are welcome to experience this night voyage if you wish). The day officially begins at around 7:00 AM for breakfast, surveys also begin at this same time. Those on watch will be expected to be in their positions on time. During the first day, the crew will guide you through the tasks you will help us with while on board: navigation/surveying/data entry/cooking/cleaning/boat maintenance, etc...

**During your stay with us there will be ONE OFF day for both the Alnitak team and volunteers. Alnitak's team uses this "OFF day" to carry out office work. We are a very small team therefore please respect this assigned time the team will need to do their land based work.**

## Day 11 - Disembarkation day

Last day onboard, although we welcome mutineers! Departure times must be communicated to ensure we are back in harbour on time in order to meet everyone's travel arrangements. Even though this is a farewell, from this day onwards you will be part of the *Toftevaag* family and we hope you stay in touch... or even join us again! No two expeditions are the same, and some volunteers have made a *Toftevaag* expedition part of their yearly plans!

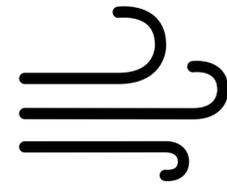
## Calm days at sea

When the sea is flat and there is little wind, we are able to spend entire days in the open sea, surveying for wildlife and human activities such as ghost fishing. During calm weather, we may leave the harbour sometimes as early as 4 or 5 am allowing us to already be in waters of over 500 metres depth for sunrise.

There are different ways of collecting information depending on what we see, and we will need help in navigation chores. Even those who have never been at Sea before can learn fast and help us out!

Days onboard are long therefore we recommend everyone to pace themselves, drink plenty of water, and don't forget that off-duty breaks should be used to rest your eyes, mind, body and recharge batteries.





## Unfavourable weather conditions

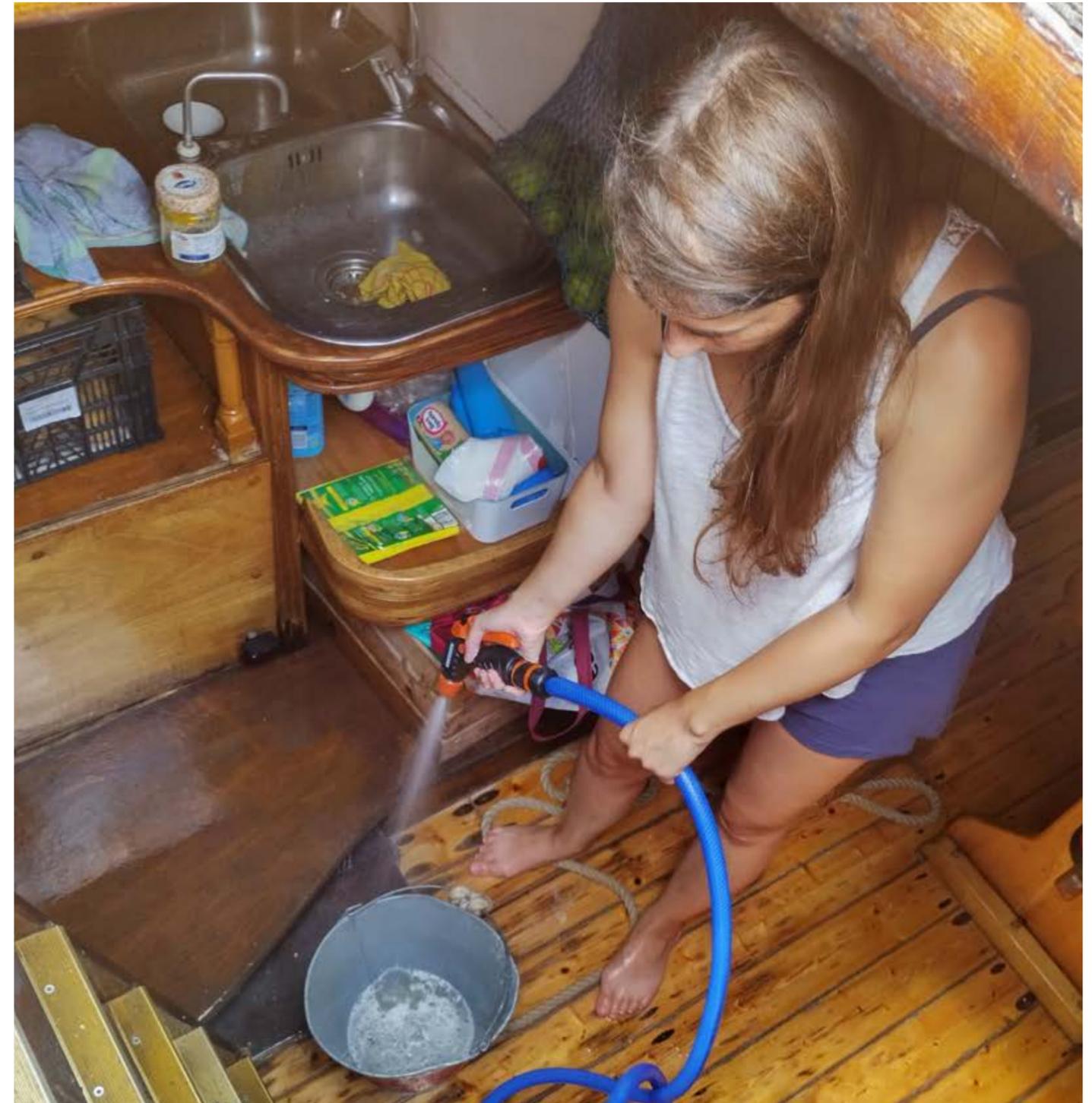


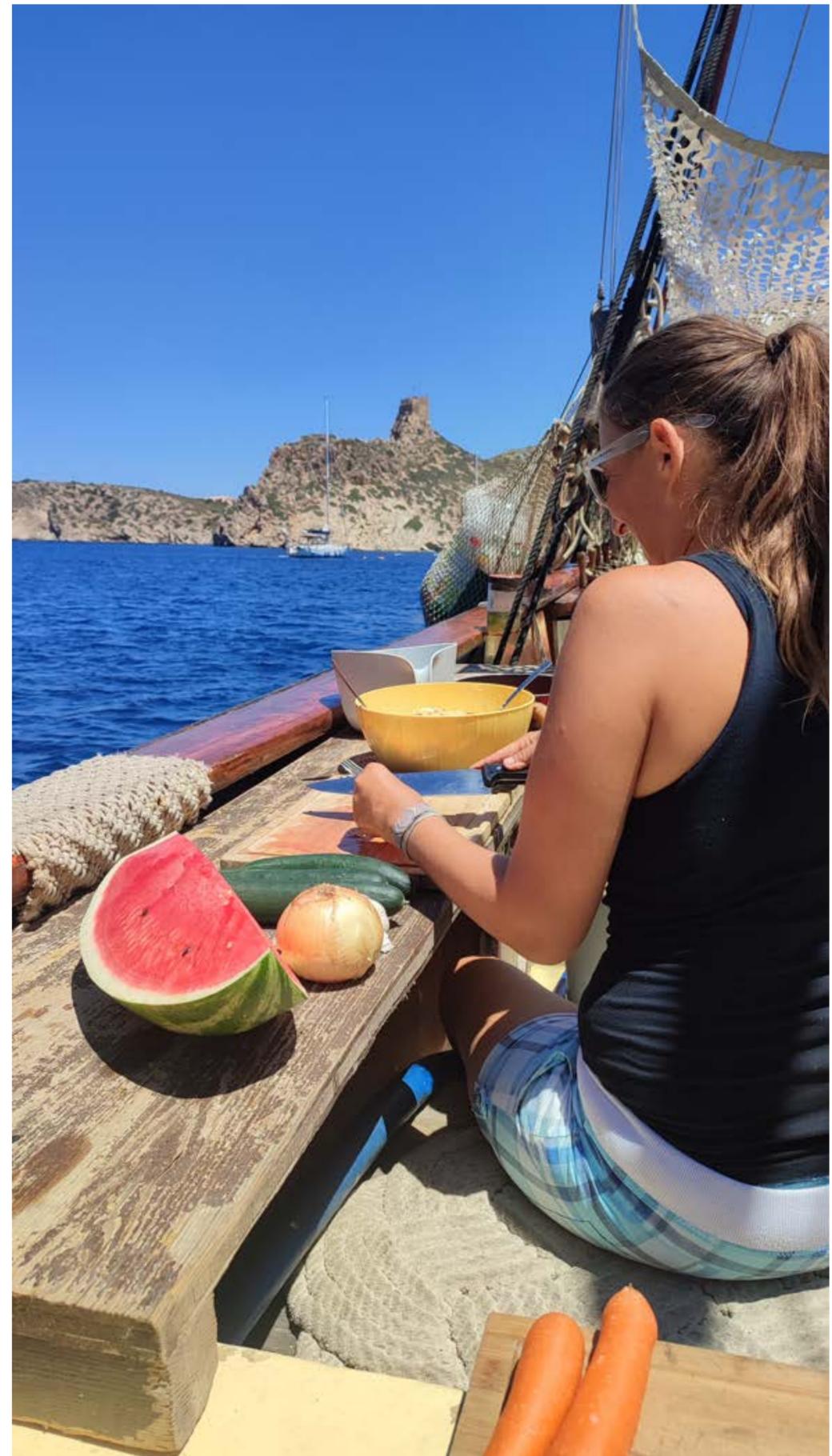
On occasions weather conditions may not be ideal for surveying (windy and/or wavy) therefore we will have to stay back. Most importantly it is also a matter of safety.

Please be flexible with last minute changes in plans as our work is weather dependant. There are different tasks which we might need help with: processing scientific data, sorting multimedia, boat maintenance, as well as other duties

Alternatively, we may decide to visit coastal areas and do a beach clean up. Sometimes we may also organise presentations below deck as there is a lot of theory behind these expeditions.

“A clean ship is a happy ship!” is one of our mottos on board *Toftevaag*, which is why it’s important that everyone contributes to the ongoing “house” chores. These include preparing meals, cleaning the galley and bathroom, scrubbing the deck, washing the dishes after each meal etc. and are vital for the overall hygiene of the ship as well as well-being of it’s inhabitants. While on expedition, *Toftevaag* is our home-away-from-home and together we strive to keep it as organised and clean as possible!







**It was a challenging time for me and I went far and beyond my limits. I was sea sick, sleep deprived, covered in bruises and scratches. Yet, it was worth it. Seeing my favourite animals so close and in their natural habitat meant the world to me. And by collecting data, I even contributed to their conservation. Thanks ALNITAK for this very intensive experience. Keep up the amazing and important work!**

**Volunteer Anna Manz after her expedition in August 2022**

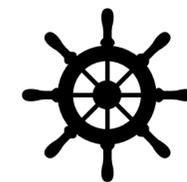


## Quick reference sign-up checklist:

- 1) Visit our [alnitak.org](http://alnitak.org) website
- 2) Click on “Get Involved - Join the crew as volunteer”
- 3) Fill out and submit the online application
- 4) Make the deposit

...and you're done! You will receive an email from us within 48 hours.

Upon signing up you will receive a BRIEFING document with further details as well as a check-list of appropriate things to pack, and other information to enhance your experience as well as our policy which are important documents to read through. You will also be asked to fill in online forms regarding diet, health information, etc. so everything is ready pre-departure.



Our email: [info@alnitak.org](mailto:info@alnitak.org)

# Frequently Asked Questions

How is Alnitak committed to my safety?

Risk is an inherent part of our work. Which is why volunteers are given a safety briefing upon embarking and project staff are trained in appropriate emergency response procedures. If needed and despite sailing in open waters, we can typically get a helicopter in under 30 minutes for a quick transfer to hospital.

Do I need to have any prior scientific or sailing knowledge?

No, you will be taught everything you need to know on board. Part of the immersive experience is to partake directly in sailing manoeuvres and scientific research.

What kind of physical shape do I need to be in?

Most volunteers are able to embark, and we have had volunteers aged 80+. However, prepare for long days at sea. These expeditions are no pleasure cruise, and there is a “rough and tough” aspect when living on Toftevaag.

What is included in the cost of my contribution?

When you join, you do more than contribute your valuable time and effort. Your contribution is also vital to help cover project costs, crew, locally sourced food, and other key expenses which get us out of the port and into the open sea.

How does my contribution make an impact?

All Alnitak’s research is applied science, so data collected on these expeditions is used to inform environmental policy-makers and for management plans.

Can I travel alone?

Yes! One of the great thing about Alnitak expeditions is that you get thrown in with a community of like-minded adventurers who have signed up to make a tangible contribution to marine conservation.

How old do you have to be to volunteer?

Some volunteer opportunities will require a minimum age of 18 although on occasions we taken on volunteers of at least 16 years of age. Volunteers under the under the age of 18 must send along a signed Permission Form by a parent/guardian in order to participate.