Thank you for your interest in volunteering on board Research Vessel Toftevaag in 2022. This document serves as a general guideline for anyone who wishes to embark on Alnitak’s volunteering programme: study sites, projects, dates, ports, life on board, and FAQs.
Quick reference sign-up checklist:

1) Visit our alnitak.org website
2) Click on “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 24 hours and we will inform you of the next steps

Our email: todosporlamar@gmail.com
The open sea ecosystem is the largest and less-known on the planet. Since 1989 Alnitak has conducted surveys in the deep waters of the western Mediterranean, offering volunteers a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a hands-on contribution to the ongoing exploration, preservation and monitoring of this last great wild space.

Expeditions take place on board the 1910 ship Toftevaag, and involve volunteers in actively searching for wildlife such as cetaceans (whales and dolphins) and turtles, as well as documenting threats and human impacts such as illegal fisheries or ghost gear.

An expedition consists of:

- 11 days living and working on board. Typical ratio is 4 crew - 8 volunteers.
- An economic contribution of 1100 EUROs from the volunteer to cover his or her 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.
The Open Sea ecosystem

It’s important that we previously note that the open sea is a 3-dimensional ecosystem. Below us, there are deep canyons, sharp cliffs, and even mountain ranges. Oh, and lots and lots of water.

During the course of your expedition, researchers on board will introduce you to this dynamic ecosystem, how it functions in the Mediterranean, what species are associated with what features, what we study, and why it’s important.

The Mediterranean in some ways is like a miniature Ocean, a perfect “lab” for us to work in.
Introducing Alnitak

Alnitak is a grassroots organisation founded by two young Greenpeace activists. The idea was conceived in the port of Mahón (Menorca) while on board the ship Sirius. A ship bell with the name “Alnitak” was purchased in December of 1988, and in March of 1989 the ship Toftevaag was obtained for restoration.

Today, Alnitak has a combination of rich experience and fresh energy, with co-founder Ricardo Sagarminaga at the head of a fantastic team of like-minded individuals from a surprising variety of backgrounds.

The official goals of Alnitak are:

*To develop research and education programmes for the conservation of our maritime natural and cultural treasures.*
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 has picked a bunk bed, been provided with key training and instructions for living and working on board, and has made their unique and important contributions to Alnitak’s projects.
Our work

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 TODOS POR LA MAR - engaging stakeholders and the general public in practical and tangible conservation.

Alnitak partners with top 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 more.

To learn more about our ongoing projects please visit our website: https://www.alnitak.org/projects
Our impact

Over the years we can highlight some of Alnitak’s accomplishments in great part thanks to the work done each season on board Toftevaag during these 30+ years.

- Design, management and monitoring of 14 MPAs both in the Med 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.
Coming on board Toftevaag is embracing a wondrous adventure in an open, beautiful, but often harsh environment. This ship is no pleasure yacht and expeditions are not organised touristic packages. 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 - which is 100% true because you will have done so.

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

Volunteering

To sign up: visit our website alnitak.org and fill out the forms. Please note that your spot will only be 100% assured when you make the deposit.
2022 SURVEY SEASON

Main joining ports will be Almerimar Almería and Palma in Mallorca (red anchors).

ALBORÁN Sea
Approx January - End of June
These expeditions take the ship to Alnitak’s main research site since 1989, containing vital MPAs such as South of Almería-Secco de los Olivos. The Alborán Sea is home to pilot whales and the critically endangered Mediterranean common dolphins, among others.

BALEARIC Islands
Approx End of June - September
For the expeditions taking place in the Balearic Islands the ship island-hops and monitors different key areas such as Cabrera Archipelago National Park and the waters of Menorca, which is a Biosphere Reserve. These waters are home to loggerhead turtles, sperm whales, and the mysterious Risso’s dolphins.

CETACEAN Migration Corridor
Approx September - October
These expeditions will take place in a SPAMI (Special Protected Area of Mediterranean Importance) declared mainly as critical habitat for species such as fin whales. We will stop at different harbours for educational outreach activities and capacity building purposes.
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*CMC = cetacean migration corridor

IMPORTANT: It's crucial to understand that these are proposed plans but are extremely dependent on weather and sea conditions. Logistic-based decisions such as modifying the meeting port may be made to assure the expedition gets the most workable days at sea. However, our team is in constant contact with volunteers in the build-up to the expeditions, so any changes will incur communication and logistical support.
Pre-expedition: what happens once you sign up

At Alnitak we believe the adventure begins the moment you sign up. It’s hard to describe exactly what you should expect, as every expedition is unique. However we offer guidance through this exciting time and there is plenty for you to do:

- Read our website and follow our latest updates on Instagram: @alnitak_org
- We will contact you through todosporlamar@gmail.com and send you a check list of recommended items to pack, and our policy and safety documents which are important to read through. We will remain at your disposal to answer any inquiries you may have.
- At least 7 days before the expedition starts, you will be added to a WhatsApp group with the crew and fellow volunteers who will be on board. This private group will be used to coordinate your arrival, answer last-minute questions and for everyone to start familiarising themselves with the crew and other participants.
- You will also be asked to fill in online forms regarding diet, health information, etc. so everything is ready pre-departure.
DAY 1 “Hello Toftevaag!”: A meeting point will be agreed upon, generally around 17:00 at a restaurant or café in the harbour where we will wait for everyone else to arrive. Part of the crew will be present and will take you to the ship where you will be assigned your bed and store your luggage. During this afternoon you will familiarise yourself with Toftevaag, meet all the crew, listen to the introduction to the expedition, and get a safety briefing from the captain.

DAY 2-10 “Monitoring the Open Sea”: If conditions are adequate, 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 when the survey also begins. Those on watch will be expected to be awake and in their positions on time. Mainly during the first day, the crew will guide you through the tasks you need to accomplish while on board and help with anything needed.

DAY 11 “Disembarking day”: Today you leave Toftevaag, 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 forward you are a Friend of Toftevaag 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!
“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!
What happens when we can’t sail?

Sometimes the sea state and/or wind conditions don’t allow us to leave the harbour. This is due to the sea not being workable, but more importantly it is also a matter of safety. However, there is always plenty to do as Toftevaag is a floating “cabin”, classroom, exhibition centre, and more. There are different tasks which we might need help with: processing scientific data, sorting multimedia, boat maintenance, as well as other duties.

We may also do more coastal activities with our speedboat, such as filming. Alternatively, we may decide to visit the area and do a beach clean.

Sometimes we may also organise presentations below deck as there is a lot of theory behind these expeditions. The “MOS: Monitoring the Open Sea” course is divided into different parts focusing on Alnitak’s projects and methodologies. University students may be awarded 3 or 4 ECTS credits.

As it is likely that we don’t have time to complete the entire course while you are on board, we are working on publishing online video-presentations online that you may access at a later date.
Life at sea: advisory notes

When you are preparing for a voyage on Tofftevaag, get ready for excitement and adventure but plan it as if you were going camping in a harsh desert environment.

The open sea is far from being an ideal habitat for us humans, which is why a lot of our safety measures involve remaining hydrated and shaded from the sun, and one of the most important chores on board is to rest regularly.

In the winter months, the cold weather may be uncomfortable, while the heat during the summer will make sleeping outside on the deck tempting. Some volunteers bring sleeping bags or even hammocks with them, and it's advisable to pack clothing for every type of weather and temperature regardless of the season.

Even in summer, we may decide to navigate through the night and establish night shifts (usually 2 hours), so you will need warm clothes for these important tasks.

Once you sign up, you will receive more information on what to expect and what to pack.
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 are used to inform environmental policies and 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.
To be with an amazing team of marine biologists, supporters and volunteers was absolutely fantastic. I would do it again anytime and recommend it to anyone. Being able to do a small part to help with the establishment and management of marine protected areas has been mind-blowing. I really hope I get to join Ric Sagarminaga and his team again.

Siri Schubert
Alnitak volunteer in September 2021
Expeditions will be 11 days in duration.