

# BRIDES OF THE WIND



In a world first, an all-woman crew crossed the Atlantic in a traditional sailing vessel. Photographer Verena Brüning captured the journey in 121 photographs. **By Wanda Sachs**

In late 2022, a ship set sail from the Canary Islands, bound for a small Caribbean port 3,000 miles away. The 47 crew members on board spent just over three weeks at sea, with nothing but the trade winds pushing the hull through the rippling waves. Intrepid voyagers have been crossing the Atlantic for centuries now – but for the first time on such a vessel, the crew were entirely women.

The Roald Amundsen – a 50-metre-long brig that had previously served as a supply lugger in the East German navy before being converted into the two-masted square-rigged ship in 1992 – was put to sea on December 28. On board: 17 seasoned seamstresses and 30 trainees, German women from the ages of 19 to 67, who had each paid around €2,950 to the association operating the ship, *LebenLernen auf Segelschiffen e.V.* (“learning to live on sailing ships”), to cover provisions and training in the art of seafaring.

Among the crew was Berlin-based photographer Verena Brüning with an additional mission. Camera in

hand, Brüning captured the 24-day voyage from Tenerife to Martinique, taking thousands of images. A selection of 121 of those photos was published in February in her photo book, *Windsbraut*, which documents the journey as the unprecedented accomplishment that it was for the women aboard. Beyond that, the photos tell the story of an adventure at high seas, full of challenges and camaraderie – and of lasting empowerment.

## IT'S A BOAT TIME

From the very beginning, Brüning's camera chronicled the daily labour involved in navigating a ship. Over the course of the month, the women had to learn how to tie knots and read oceanographic charts, how to take in the sails and fix them when the wind would eventually tear a hole, how to steer the ship and scan the horizon ahead during the popular lookout shift. Brüning snapped shots of jittery first attempts at climbing the 34-metre mast, of

**With combined forces, the crew take in one of the headsails. Heave-ho!**

the women swabbing the deck in unison or baking bread in the galley – and of the more tender moments: collective showers on deck, afternoon naps in the hammocks, crew members struggling with seasickness. “I wanted to capture all that happens on the ship, the camaraderie and how the group operates. On the one hand, there's this coming together and working as a team, and on the other, there are many intimate moments where you see everyone hugging or crying upon arrival. I really wanted to convey these emotions,” the photographer says.

Brüning joined the crew as a trainee, albeit one of the more experienced ones. The 42-year-old had been on oceanic journeys for other projects before, including a trip on a cargo sailing ship in 2019 and even one on the Roald Amundsen in 2021, but the latter had only been a three-day cruise in the Baltic Sea. Her previous experience with mixed groups makes Brüning see the benefits of an all-female crew. “When it comes to areas that involve physical work or something dangerous, and you ask who's up for it, it's clear that it's going to be some strong man who will do it, or the men saying they'll do it,” Brüning says. “And I think many women who could totally do it wouldn't even find themselves in that situation, because they would never charge ahead, maybe because they've never done it or are unsure if they can. And when there's always a man there saying, ‘let me handle this, it's too hard for you’, you start doubting yourself.”

“In our group, it was clear we had to do it ourselves. There was so much understanding for that,” she continues. “Even those who were a bit hesitant at the beginning were continually encouraged, for example, to climb up the rigging. No one had to, but it was always said, ‘If you want, I can show you how.’ And many then went for it, somehow pushing past their limits.” Brüning recalls that even those who had taken journeys on the Roald Amundsen multiple times before and had initially shrugged off the idea of an all-female trip noticed a change for the better. “They later said, ‘I've done things for the first time on my own, things that were always taken from me before.’”

She points to patriarchal structures. “I think a lot of that is to do with the way men are brought up. They're often taught they have to be the one to take charge and get things done,” she says. “So, it's not really about being a man *per se*, but more about how we define roles in any society.” The way the captain, Cornelia Rothkegel, handled the crew left an indelible mark on Brüning. Rothkegel navigated the brig safely across the Atlantic without a hint of the Popeye-style bulging-muscle gruffness that is often excused in male leaders. “I've seen many [male] captains just lose it or shout when things get kinda dicey. And what I found unique about our captain – I remember this one time, it was a bit touch-and-go, she got a bit louder, but even that was discussed right after.”

## WANDER WOMEN

While the voyage proved a masterclass in technical sailing skills, Brüning's photos show that the trip was much more than just laborious. In their offtime and with no phone signal or access to the internet, the women would come together in groups to write diary entries together, play board games or run impromptu workshops, like practising sea shanties. In the mornings, the women would stand



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**Windsbraut (März) is out now, €48. Join the book launch on Mar 19 at Buchhändlerkeller, Charlottenburg, doors 19:30**

at the railing, watching the sun rise with a cup of coffee; at night, they'd take turns steering the ship underneath the stars. Brüning took a picture of the ocean each day, collecting all the shades of blue as the water changed colour with every nautical mile.

A particularly memorable moment, she says, was New Year's Eve, four days into the voyage. All 47 women gathered on deck in the afternoon, drinking to the new year with cans of fizzy drink (alcohol, except for a celebratory swig of rum upon reaching the furthest point from land, the "point of no return", was not allowed), followed by skinny dipping in the middle of the ocean – all immortalised by Brüning's camera lens.

Crossing the Atlantic as if it were 1824 taught the crew new skills and a "new language", as Brüning describes the sailing jargon they had to learn. The shared experience didn't just bond the group but offered a new lease of life: some found love, others found a career. "Two of them are a couple now. They really got to know each other on the ship," Brüning smiles. A fellow crew member, Klara Marquardt, contributed a text for *Windsbraut* recapping the adventure. She writes that the work in the engine room inspired some women to become ship's mechanics, while another discovered a passion for boatbuilding. "It's a really tough job," Brüning adds, "and this girl said that

helping out the boatswain made her feel confident that she can do it... I think the boatswain inspired many of the young women."

#### A TIGHT SHIP

Of course, spending three weeks at sea with 46 other women, living and working together in close quarters, can create tension. "I'm a very open person, but I also need to be on my own, to have a retreat. I didn't have that for a month, and I realised at some point how exhausting that is," says Brüning and chuckles. "The loo was basically the only place where you could be alone for a while."

Spats occur almost naturally under intense conditions like that, and in a group this big, not everyone will be on the same wavelength. "There were some people who swapped [work] groups, and there were also some who wanted to swap cabins, but only because of things like someone snoring a lot," Brüning recalls. Still, she says, it was surprisingly harmonious. "Everyone kind of expected that the conflicts would be much more extreme than they were. Maybe, and we don't know this for sure, it was because it was an all-female group; there was an incredible amount of talking, which created a space for people to check in on each other, to ask if everything is

okay or if something is bothering someone. It was always like, 'let's talk about it.'"

Friction between crew members is not the only potential risk on a transatlantic trip. Despite constant supervision from experienced sailors and a whole catalogue of safety measures, like having to wear a harness to secure yourself to the ship when the waves are high, there's still the potential for accidents – and avoiding them requires the whole crew's attention. The ship is well-equipped; there's an emergency kit, medicine and a satellite telephone, but when situations arise, they have to rely on their own medical training.

"You can't just leave the ship. If the situation had been life-threatening, we would've had to call international rescue radio," Brüning says, referring to an incident in which one of the women sustained a minor injury while cleaning. "It makes you very aware of the things that can happen." Similarly, when someone gets ill or seasick, they just have to stick it out – leaving the ship when you're miles away from land is simply not an option.

#### SEA CHANGE

Brüning's photographs bear witness to a story of personal and collective growth, of 47 women who took a leap of faith and surpassed themselves. The images, she

**1. Skinny-dipping in the Atlantic on New Year's Eve**

**2. Group cuddles on deck**

**3. Photographer Verena Brüning climbs the rig, camera in tow. Photo by Irma Entenmann**

**4. The Roald Amundsen counts two masts and 18 sails**

**5. Nailed it: Boatswain Anna pierces the women's earlobes the traditional way**

hopes, will convey the empowerment she experienced on the Roald Amundsen, and inspire others to have confidence in their own abilities – men and women alike. "The best thing for me is when I get to introduce the book and then someone actually goes out and takes that journey. I mean, that's just fantastic. Whether it's taking that exact trip or just sparking the courage in people to try something new and to step out of their comfort zone," Brüning says, beaming as she recalls a first presentation of the book in Berlin last November, when a male member of the audience told her that her photographs inspired him to take the same trip despite having no sailing experience.

"What's really awesome about the whole story is that these were just regular women, you know? No athletes, and many of them have never tried anything like this before. The most beautiful thing would be if someone looks at the photos, and it gives them that nod to go for something they've always wanted to try but only ever wondered, 'Can I do this?'"

The book's final images, and two of the last moments Brüning captured, show the crew applauding the captain, and the bittersweet tears when the Roald Amundsen finally reached the coast of Martinique: happy, sad, and, after almost a month at sea, maybe a little bit salty. ■