

# With Flights Banned, Son Sails Solo Across Atlantic to Reach Father, 90

An Argentine man stuck in Portugal because of the virus travels for 85 days the only way he could: in a small boat.

By Daniel Politi

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BUENOS AIRES — Days after Argentina canceled all international passenger flights to shield the country from the new coronavirus, Manuel Ballestero began his journey home the only way possible: He stepped aboard his small sailboat for what turned out to be an odyssey across the Atlantic.

The 47-year-old sailor could have stayed put on the tiny Portuguese island of Porto Santo, to ride out the era of lockdowns and social distancing in a scenic place largely spared by the virus. But the idea of spending what he thought could be “the end of the world” from his family, especially his father who was soon to turn 90, was unbearable.

So he said he loaded his 29-foot sailboat with canned tuna, fruit and rice and set sail in mid-March.

“I didn’t want to stay like a coward on an island where there were no cases,” Mr. Ballestero said. “I wanted to do everything possible to return home. The most important thing for me was to be with my family.”

The coronavirus pandemic has upended life in virtually every country on the planet, gutting the global economy, exacerbating global tension and halting most international travel.

A particularly painful aspect of this awful era has been the inability of an untold number of people to rush home to help ailing loved ones and to attend funerals.

Friends tried to dissuade Mr. Ballestero from embarking on the perilous journey, and the authorities in Portugal warned him he might not be allowed to re-enter if he ran into trouble and had to turn back. But he was resolute.

“I bought myself a one-way ticket and there was no going back,” he said.

His relatives, used to Mr. Ballestero’s itinerant lifestyle, knew better than to try to talk him out of it.

“The uncertainty of not knowing where he was for 50-some days was very rough,” said his father, Carlos Alberto Ballestero. “But no doubt this was going to turn out well.”

Sailing across the Atlantic in a small boat is challenging in the best of circumstances. The added difficulties of doing it during a pandemic became clear three weeks into the trip.



Mr. Ballestero, left, with his brother and his father, who turned 90 while his son was on his voyage. Photo: Ballestero

On April 12, the authorities in Cape Verde refused to allow him to dock at the island nation to restock his supply of food and fuel, Ballestero.

Hoping he still had enough food to carry him through, he turned his boat west. With less fuel than he hoped for, he'd be more at the mercy of the winds.

He was no stranger to spending long stretches of time at sea, but being alone on the open ocean is daunting to even the most experienced sailor.

Days into the journey, he became panicked by the sight of a ship that he thought was trailing him and seemed to be approaching closer.

"I started going as fast as possible," Mr. Ballestero said. "I thought, if it gets very close, I'll shoot."

Seafaring is a Ballestero family tradition.

From the time he was 3, his father took him aboard the fishing vessels he captained.

When he turned 18, he took a job on a fishing boat in southern Argentina. Off the coast of Patagonia, one of the most experienced fishermen aboard gave him a piece of advice that would become a way of life.

“Go see the world,” the fisherman said.

And so he did.

Mr. Ballestero has spent much of his life sailing, with stops in Venezuela, Sri Lanka, Bali, Hawaii, Costa Rica, Brazil, Alaska and Spain.



Mr. Ballestero named his boat after a seabird, the skua, one of which paid him a visit on the journey. Ballestero

He has tagged sea turtles and whales for conservation organizations and spent summers working as a skipper aboard boats owned by wealthy Europeans.

He bought his sailboat, an Ohlson 29 named the Skua, in 2017, hoping to take it on a loop around the world. It proved up to the task of traversing an ocean on a planet plunged into crisis mode.

“I wasn’t afraid, but I did have a lot of uncertainty,” he said. “It was very strange to sail in the middle of a pandemic with humanity teetering around me.”

Sailing can be a lonely passion, and it was particularly so on this voyage for Mr. Ballestero, who each night tuned into the news on TV for 30 minutes to take stock of how the virus was rippling across the globe.

“I kept thinking about whether this would be my last trip,” he said.

The expansiveness of the ocean notwithstanding, Mr. Ballestero felt he was in a quarantine of sorts, imprisoned by an unrelenting stream of foreboding thoughts about what the future held.

## Frequently Asked Questions and Advice

Updated June 24, 2020

- What's the best material for a mask?  
Scientists around the country have tried to identify everyday materials that do a good job of filtering microscopic particles. In recent tests, HEPA furnace filters scored high, as did vacuum cleaner bags, fabric similar to flannel pajamas and those of 600-count pillowcases. Other materials tested included layered coffee filters and scarves and bandannas. These scored lower, but still captured a small percentage of particles.
- Is it harder to exercise while wearing a mask?  
A commentary published this month on the website of the British Journal of Sports Medicine points out that covering your face during exercise "comes with

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"I was locked up in my own freedom," he recalled.

On a particularly trying day, he turned to a bottle of whiskey for solace. But drinking only increased his anxiety. With his nerves frayed, Ballestero said he found himself praying and resetting his relationship with God.

"Faith keeps you standing in these situations," he said. "I learned about myself; this voyage gave me lots of humility."

Several weeks into the trip, when his spirits were low, Mr. Ballestero said he was buoyed by wildlife sightings that felt like omens.

He found solace in a pod of dolphins that swam alongside his boat, on and off, for some 2,000 miles.



Mr. Ballestero speaking with his father, a former fishing captain who took his son to sea from the age of 11. Photo by Rodrigo/Telam, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

“They would go and come back,” he said. “And one day, they seemed to say goodbye.”

During a day when he had drunk heavily, he spotted a large bird cruising nearby. It turned out to be a skua, the bird his boat is named after.

“It was as if the bird was telling me not to give up, to keep going,” he said.

One day, when he tired of canned food, Mr. Ballestero got a fishing rod and scanned a school of mahi-mahi. But he had a sudden change of heart and decided not to cast out a line.

“I didn’t want to kill one. It felt like killing a person,” he said. “I used to be a fisherman but after that experience it’s hard for me to do that.”

He went back to eating canned tuna.

When he was approaching the Americas, a brutal wave rattled the boat some 150 miles from Vitória, Brazil, he said. That episode convinced him to make an unplanned pit stop in Vitória, adding about 10 days to a trip he had expected to take 75 days.

During that stop, Mr. Ballestero learned that his brother had told reporters in Argentina about the voyage, which enthralled people who were bored and cooped up at home. At the urging of friends, he created an Instagram account to document the final leg of the trip.

When he made it to his native Mar del Plata, on June 17, he was startled by the hero’s welcome he received.

“Entering my port where my father had his sailboat, where he taught me so many things and where I learned how to sail and where the trip originated, gave me the taste of a mission accomplished,” he said.

A medical professional administered a test for Covid-19 on the dock. Within 72 hours, after the test came back negative, he was able to set foot on Argentine soil.

While he didn’t get to celebrate his father’s 90th birthday in May, he did make it home in time for Father’s Day.

“What I lived is a dream,” Mr. Ballestero said. “But I have a strong desire to keep on sailing.”

Ernesto Londoño contributed.