

CultureLab

Where books, arts and science collide



Ocean exploration, from empire to empirical

16:30 20 February 2012

Exhibitions Museums

Lucas Laursen, contributor



(Image: Lucas Laursen)

Creatures in chloroform, musty maps, and navigation by brass instruments. That was ocean exploration 18th-century style. Nowadays it's satellite links, mandatory life vests on deck, and flow cytometers measuring minute lifeforms from the murk below - a very different kettle of fish.

The [España Explora. Malaspina 2010](#) exhibition juxtaposes two Spanish expeditions launched over 200 years apart: between 1789 and 1794, commander Alessandro Malaspina led Spain's imperial survey of its global holdings. In 2010, the Spanish government launched the high-tech [Malaspina expedition](#), an oceanographic venture far removed from anything the commander would be able to recognise.

Tucked into a pavilion at the [Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid](#), the exhibit offers visitors a choice between immersing themselves in Spain's imperial past, or its oceanographic present.

Malaspina would be familiar with the paintings and sketches of the indigenous people encountered by his two-ship expedition, which are exhibited in the historic exhibition. He might nod in recognition at the exquisite charts his surveyors drew of the coastlines and harbours, which served as Spain's nautical highways and rest stops. And he would have reason to be pleased that some of the plants and animals collected by his hard-working naturalists, unpublished during his lifetime thanks to political intrigue, are now before the public.

The artefacts are a kind of unintentional art, the by-product of busy empire-building. That empire was more concerned with politics than scientific legacy, however, as was Malaspina. His missives on the political structure of the empire and his ambitions for ministerial office offended prime minister Manuel de Godoy. The exhibit narrates Malaspina's fall from grace with fairness and illustrates his island imprisonment with a near-contemporary painting of the fortress where the scheming minister shackled him for years.

The exhibition's modern displays focus on Spain's 20th and 21st-century oceanographic

Our other blogs

[Short Sharp Science](#)

[One Per Cent](#)

[New Scientist TV](#)

[CultureLab](#)

[Big Wide World](#)

Bookmark&share



Categories

[A Spot of Culture](#)

[Architecture](#)

[Art](#)

[Awards](#)

[Best of 2010](#)

[Books](#)

[Comedy](#)

[Comics](#)

[Competitions](#)

[CultureLab loves...](#)

[Dance](#)

[Essay](#)

[Events](#)

[Exhibitions](#)

[Festival](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Film](#)

[Flash fiction competition 2010](#)

[Games](#)

[Housekeeping](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Museums](#)

[Music](#)

[Philosophy](#)

[Photography](#)

[Podcast](#)

[Poetry](#)



research efforts. Videos at the exhibition reveal Spain's modern research vessels at work on their ambitious tasks: studying climate change, Antarctic biodiversity, and the global reach of atmospheric pollutants.

One display case contains leftover sampling bottles and the label "The Treasure of the Malaspina Expedition: A Collection for the Future." The genetic material the team collected sampled from as deep as 4 kilometres below the ocean's surface are indeed a treasure. Few research vessels are equipped to send sampling bottles so deep, and scientists know little of what lives there. While Spain's researchers and their partners are already analysing the data collected last year, they are also storing some of the samples in the hope that future technologies will unlock even more secrets. It's a shame that such fascinating details are not mentioned in the exhibition.

The videos and photos are, however, an intimate glimpse at how dozens of scientists and technicians cruised the world for seven months last year gathering evidence of biological change. One stop-motion video from above the helicopter deck of the B.I.O. Hespérides is particularly gripping, showing sailors and scientists as they wander the ship on its travels. It makes the mundane mesmerising. Malaspina, with all his leadership experience, would likely respect biological oceanographer Carlos Duarte, of the CSIC's Mediterranean Institute for Advanced Studies in Mallorca, for coordinating such a spectacular effort.

España Explora. Malaspina 2010 runs until 31 March at the Royal Botanical Garden in Madrid, Spain.

This article originally stated that the exhibition opened on 29 February. It is already open. The article has been corrected.

Follow @CultureLabNS on Twitter

Like us on Facebook



tags boat expedition exploration Madrid nautical navy ocean
oceanography ship Spain

Like what you're reading? You'll love the CultureLab section of New Scientist magazine, where science meets the arts.

**READ
NEW SCIENTIST
MAGAZINE
SUBSCRIBE
TODAY**



Post a comment

[Sign in](#) to comment, or comment anonymously.

Name

Email Address

URL

Remember me? ☐

Comments

Preview

Submit



Twitter updates

Video game
New Zealand's iconic pūkekos care for their rivals' chicks. What on earth for? <http://t.co/hFf31iUu> #Zoologger about 4 hours ago

Oklahoma bill tackles 'controversial' science education
<http://t.co/TLJ5qt8e> about 4 hours ago

Digital Grand Canyon and Yosemite look like alien-scapes
<http://t.co/M4ysop5m> about 4 hours ago

Recent entries

[Are you mad to love city living?](#)

[Ocean exploration, from empire to empirical](#)

[Life as a bird](#)

[Splash dance: Water crisis choreography](#)

[Bending waves of sound and light](#)

Monthly archive

[February 2012](#) (29)

[January 2012](#) (36)

[December 2011](#) (39)

[November 2011](#) (38)

[October 2011](#) (38)

[September 2011](#) (45)

[August 2011](#) (44)

[July 2011](#) (49)

[June 2011](#) (51)

[May 2011](#) (43)

[April 2011](#) (43)

[March 2011](#) (43)

[February 2011](#) (37)

[January 2011](#) (20)

[December 2010](#) (46)

[November 2010](#) (41)

[October 2010](#) (36)

[September 2010](#) (28)

[August 2010](#) (30)

[July 2010](#) (35)

[June 2010](#) (39)

[May 2010](#) (29)

[April 2010](#) (31)

[March 2010](#) (40)

[February 2010](#) (31)

[January 2010](#) (31)

[December 2009](#) (41)

[November 2009](#) (50)

Tags

animal art astronomy
biology book books brain
climate change comedy
cosmology environment
evolution exhibition film



Previous post

Next post

flash fiction health history
history of science holiday
wish list internet life
mathematics medicine
museum recommendations
music neuroscience Origin
of Species Revisited
philosophy photography
physics podcast
psychology religion review
science fiction sculpture
sex space Steve Jones
technology

[Back to top](#)

search New Scientist

Go »

[Login](#)

About us

[New Scientist](#)
[Syndication](#)
[Recruitment Advertising](#)
[Who's who](#)
[Advertise](#)
[RBI Jobs](#)

User Help

[Contact Us](#)
[FAQ / Help](#)
[Disclaimer](#)
[Ts & Cs](#)
[Cookies](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

Subscriptions

[Subscribe](#)
[Renew](#)
[Gift subscription](#)
[My account](#)
[Back issues](#)
[Customer Service](#)

Links

[Site Map](#)
[Browse all articles](#)
[Magazine archive](#)
[NewScientistJobs](#)
[The LastWord](#)
[E-Newsletter](#)
[RSS Feeds](#)
[Online Store](#)
[Android App](#)

Science Jobs

[Biology Jobs](#)
[Chemistry Jobs](#)
[Clinical Jobs](#)
[Sales Jobs](#)
[Earth & Environment](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Engineering Jobs](#)
[Maths & IT Jobs](#)
[Graduate Jobs](#)

© Copyright Reed Business Information Ltd.

