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Ocean exploration, from empire to empirical

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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, unpublicised 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

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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

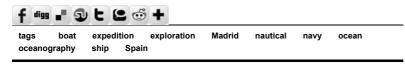
The videos and photos are, however, an intimate glimpse at how dozens of scientists and technicians cruised the world for seven months last year gathering evidence of biological change. One stop-motion video from above the helicopter deck of the B.I.O. Hespérides is particularly gripping, showing sailors 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,

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

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