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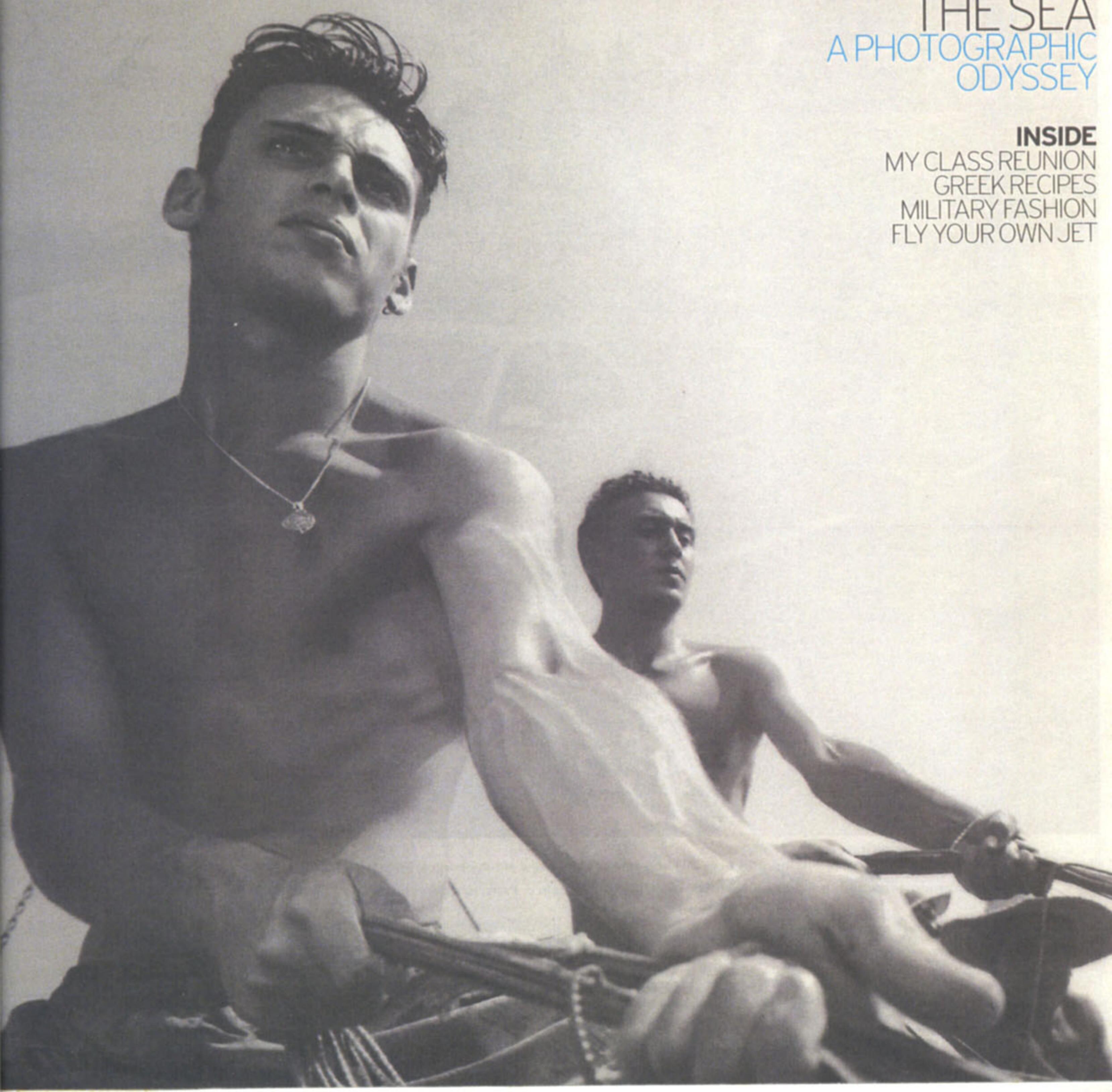
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magazine

CALL OF
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A PHOTOGRAPHIC
ODYSSEY

INSIDE

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IN AT THE DEEP END

From underwater training with the German Navy to storm-tossed voyages with Scottish fishermen, the latest project by photographer Giorgia Fiorio has been challenging in the extreme. Its purpose? To follow the work of men who live, and sometimes die, at the mercy of the sea

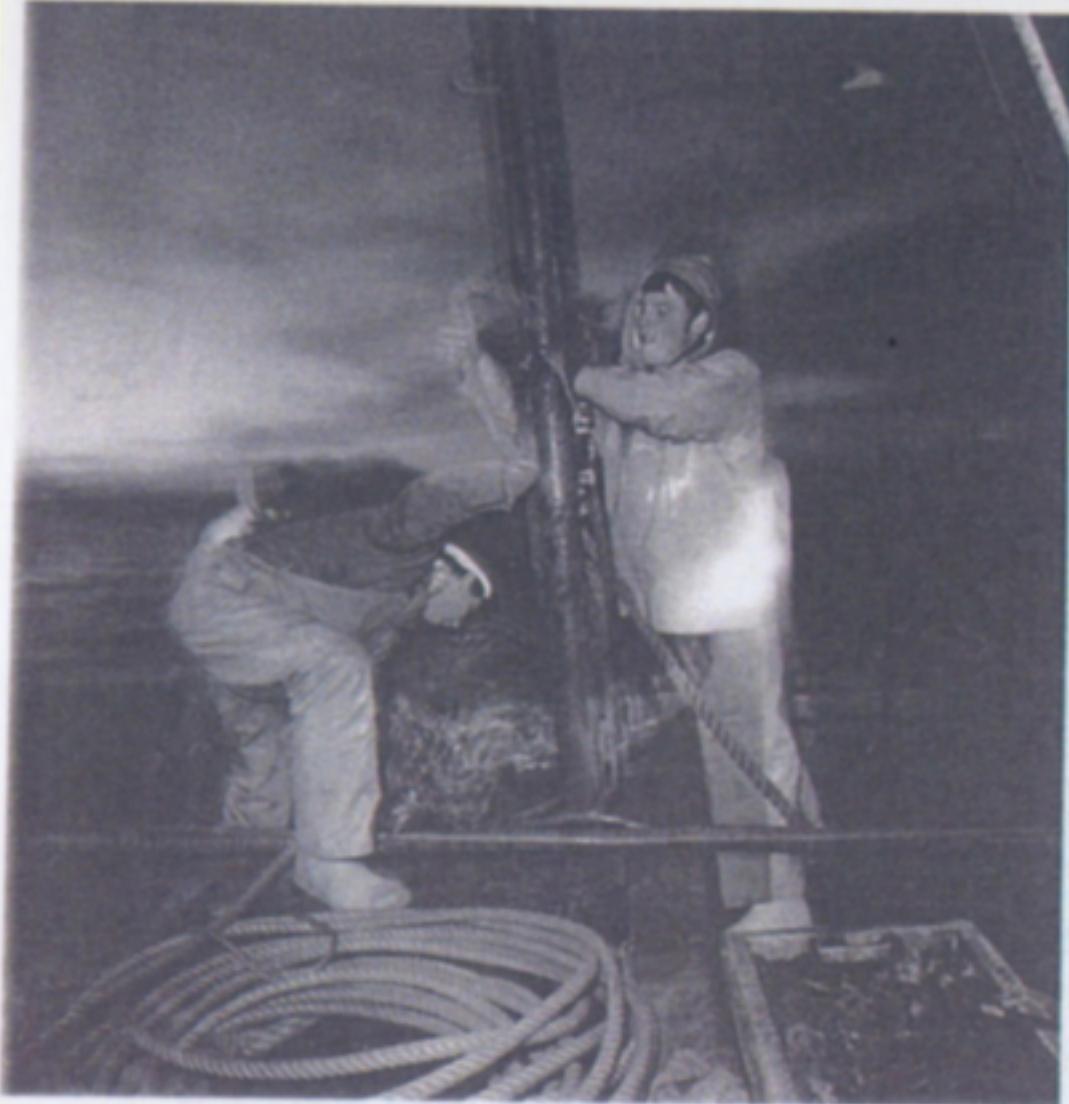
►► **Big blue** Giorgia Fiorio's latest photographic project spans Europe, chronicling a range of men whose working lives involve the sea. Facing page: at a German Navy training base in Eckernförde in Schleswig-Holstein recruits undergo basic underwater training. Below: fisherman Giovanni Favara, crammed into his boat's hold off Capo Passero in Sicily, proudly displays his day's catch.



Giorgia Fiorio's work has led her into some formidable situations. In 1990, the beautiful Italian photographer spent six months hanging out with boxers in the gyms of Harlem, the Bronx and Brooklyn. A few years later, she followed the Foreign Legion into the rainforests of Guyana and on to Iguazu Mountain during the conflict in Bosnia. Then, in 1997, she documented the lives of American firemen as they fought the flames in New York, New Orleans, Texas, Louisiana and California. The firemen had a rest between shifts. Fiorio went out on every call.

All that, however, was nothing compared to the time she spent photographing Scottish fishermen in the North Sea. "That was the hardest thing I've done in my life," she tells me in her tiny office on the top floor of a building near Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris. "They go out whatever the weather and just stay out! A storm comes and they just keep going. Sometimes the sea was so big, like I've never seen it before. I was so scared."

A selection of the pictures she brought back from that intrepid trip have made it into her latest opus, *Men of the Sea*. In it, she breathtakingly captures both the brutality and beauty of the ocean in images that have a timeless quality to them. There are Portuguese sailors clinging to masts and sunbathing on deck, Russian naval recruits exercising in a courtyard, and German combat swimmers carrying out underwater exercises (one seems to defy the laws of physics by sitting down on a chair on the bottom of a swimming pool). There are also some quite magnificent portraits of Sardinian and Sicilian tuna fishermen. During the three weeks she spent on one *tonnara*, the crew caught only a handful of fish. "It was a disaster, a real catastrophe," she declares, before going on to explain the essential difference between fishermen of the North and South. "In the North, there are few men and many, many small fish. Whereas, in the South, there are many, many men and very few, very big fish." →



'THEY BATTLE WITH THE ELEMENTS, THEY BATTLE WITH DEATH'

Men of the Sea draws to a close a 10-year study of male communities. As well as boxers, Legionnaires and American firemen, Fiorio has also focused her lens on Spanish bullfighters and Ukrainian miners. Initially, she simply chose subjects that instinctively attracted her. It was only later that she realised that each group was "symbolic of a certain 'ideal' of the male of the 20th century". Indeed, they are all quintessentially macho. "They battle with the elements," she says. "With earth, water and fire. They battle with death. And above all, they battle with themselves. Their everyday lives are utterly extreme." Yet, when you ask why she is so fascinated by such individuals, she remains evasive. "Whatever research we do, it's on things that are different from us," she proffers. "That's what we're very curious about."

In person, Fiorio is certainly quite different from her photographic subjects. Dressed in a lime-green shirt and mauve trousers, she is impeccably thin and refined. She speaks in gravelly tones, smokes with the aid of an elegant cigarette holder and is quite obviously widely read (her conversation is peppered with references to Flaubert, Dante and Dostoevsky). Yet, beneath the sophisticated exterior, there is something rather more steely and distant. Throughout the interview, she rarely establishes eye contact, preferring to gaze at what look like a couple of huge paperclips on her desk. She works out for one and a half hours a day, is an amateur fencer and seems particularly proud of the fact that she owns neither a mobile phone or television. She hardly ever accepts commissioned work. Instead, she simply immerses herself in her personal projects. Deep down, she is something of a loner. "[When] I travel, hardly anybody knows where I am," she recently told the German magazine *Stern*. "I like being cut off and far away from friends and family. For me, loneliness is a privilege."

Fiorio was born in Turin in 1967 and claims to have always had a rather conservative notion of men. "I come from a country where you say *uomo* [man] to mean 'humankind' and nobody would ever think of being offended." About her past, she remains guarded. When pressed, she says that her father was in the racing-car business (he was actually a big cheese at Fiat). Her biography also includes nothing about her teenage singing career, which began at the age of 14. In the Eighties, she performed several times at the prestigious San Remo Festival and released three albums. "As a teenager, I was pretty well-known," she told *Stern*. "I had a band, a manager and a lawyer, and was earning loads of money. But, I was still at school, and glad to be there. Once, during a Greek lesson, I wrote on a classroom wall: I'll stop singing when I'm 19." And she did.

The decision to switch careers and take up photography was, she says, made with the help of the Dalai Lama. On a trip to the north of India in 1988, she was among those granted an audience with the Tibetan leader. During it, the spiritual leader told a Chilean film-maker who was also present: "You have a tool in your hands. You can really transmit a message and do things with it." "I had a camera with me," recalls Fiorio, "and at that moment, I knew that was my path in life." Soon afterwards, she enrolled at New York's International Center of Photography and chose boxers as the theme of her final project (she is a big fan of *Raging Bull* – a film she has seen seven times). It was originally supposed to last for just 10 weeks. "Then," she says, "I realised I was at the start of something extraordinarily big and that I had only scratched the surface." So, she ended up spending a total of six months visiting gyms and going to fights. She even managed to attend the weigh-in of a Mike Tyson fight, thanks to a friend at *Sports Illustrated* who got her access to the press area. "All the →

Long haul Fiorio spent several months in early 1999 off the coast of Scotland capturing these images of life on board both Scottish trawlers and the so-called "klondykers" of the Russian fishing fleet. Facing page, from top: James and Jason Manson, pictured near the Hebrides, on board Margaret Ann. A trawlerman tends the nets of the Radiant Star in the seas around the Shetland Isles. Below: the Leonid Novospaskii, a Russian klondyker, also off the Shetlands, and a long way from its home base of Murmansk on the Barents Sea.



'IN OUR MODERN TIMES, WE TEND TO CONFRONT THINGS LESS AND LESS'

photographers of the world were there and I climbed between the legs of everybody to the front," she laughs. "I took three shots and then they chased me away. They said: 'What are you doing here? You don't have the right!'"

On her return to Italy, Fiorio spent a year working on a study of the Italian army, before heading off to Russia (where she went eight times in one year) to chronicle a miners' strike in Ukraine. Then there were the bullfighters. Fiorio had never previously been present at a *corrida*, but over seven months, she attended 72 fights, drove miles every night, and slept for just a few hours in a hostel each morning. "All the experts were shocked that I was making a book about it," she says, "but I need to look at things from a virgin viewpoint. If you know everything, you don't see anything."

Thematically, the idea of confrontation is very present in each of the monographs she has published to date. "For me, it was important that there was a real, concrete confrontation with daily life and daily struggles," she explains. "In our modern times, we tend to confront things less and less. We are removed from real life by thousands of tools and devices. People see war on the television and forget people are actually dying."

Fiorio will be less drawn, however, on the topic of being the sole woman in a male environment. The important thing, she insists, is creating a rapport with your subject: "That is completely beyond the fact of being a man or a woman, of being old or young." Then, she adds, bluntly: "I don't know why nobody wonders why most of the male fashion photographers spend their entire life photographing women." Point taken. Fiorio also firmly asserts that she did not encounter one uncomfortable situation during the 10 years she worked on the *Men* series – not even when faced with the lack of a toilet on the Scottish fishing trawlers (there is just a bucket tied to a rope, which has to be emptied overboard and rinsed in sea water). She simply made sure she had clothes designed for round-the-world yachtswomen, with strategically placed zips.

Still, there were a couple of traumatic moments. The worst was the death of a 25-year-old Portuguese sailor, who fell from the top of a mast. His body hit the deck, before tumbling into the sea. "For the first time," she admits, "I was shy to take pictures of these people in their sorrow and mourning." In the end, she took just two – one of which made it into *Men of the Sea* (an image of white-clad crew members looking out to sea). Fortunately, there were also some lighter times, like when a Scottish fisherman whipped out some bagpipes as they were coming into dock after a storm. Or when a Portuguese naval recruit decided to practise his tango on deck.

Men of the Sea may just be being released in the UK. Yet, for Fiorio, her project on male communities is already firmly behind her. "I never go back," she states (although she does admit she would like to take portraits both of Lennox Lewis and the bullfighting prodigy, El Juli). Instead, she is concentrating on a new project – a study of the different forms of spirituality across the world entitled *The Gift*. Last year, she worked around the notion of the Cross. This year, she's taken the Ganges as her theme and will move on to the Himalayas next year. It's certainly a far cry from the sweaty gyms of New York. "Now, I'm not confronting the subject any more," she declares. "I'm just looking at someone who is looking at a mystery." *

'Hommes de la Mer (Men of the Sea)' is published by Edition Marval, priced £25, and is available from the Photographers' Gallery bookshop, 50-52 Great Newport Street, London WC2 (020-7831 1772), and other specialist outlets.

▲ **In the net** In the seas around Sicily and Sardinia, the Italian-born photographer accompanied the hardy *tonnarotti* (tuna fishermen) during a *mattanza*, or cull. "Work at sea is by nature exhausting and inexhaustible," comments Fiorio of the gruelling trip. Below: off San Pietro Island, near Sardinia. Bottom: Renato Cau (front) and Michele Aramu in the "chamber of death", the last in a complex system of nets used to catch the fish, also off San Pietro.

▲ **Ship mates** Clockwise from below: cadets celebrate Navy's Day in St Petersburg at the Russian Naval Academy. A crew member takes a break on a U-18 submarine, part of a German Navy flotilla sailing off Kristiansund in Norway. Fond farewells in Lisbon docks for sailors about to set off on a three-month tour aboard the *NRP Sagres*, a Portuguese Navy training ship. Russian Navy trainees are put through their paces at the St Petersburg Naval Academy.

