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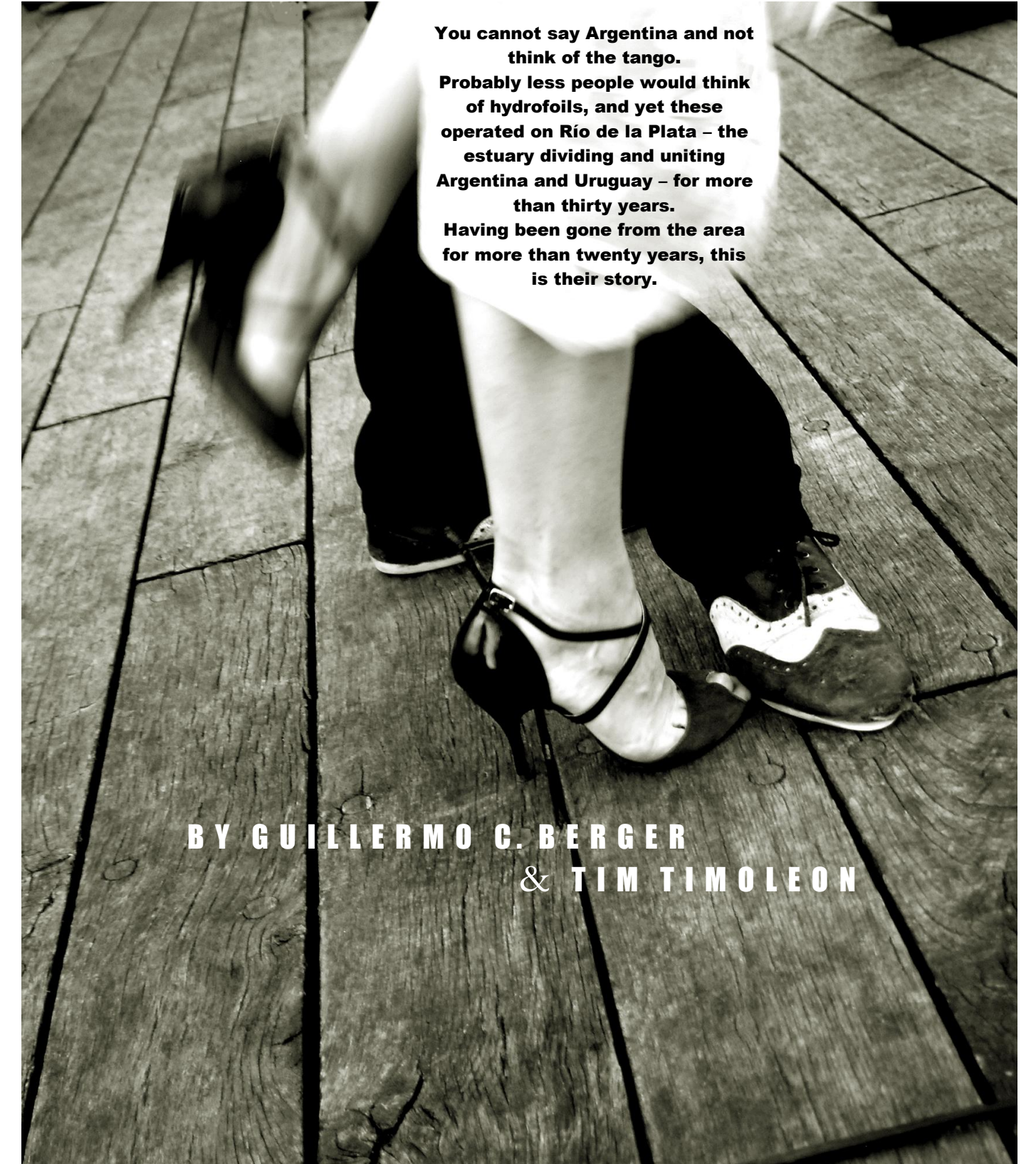
classic fast ferrries

HYDROFOILS HOVERCRAFT SESS & CATAMARANS

MESSINA
SURVIVORS

RÍO DE LA PLATA
ALISCAFOS





You cannot say Argentina and not think of the tango. Probably less people would think of hydrofoils, and yet these operated on Río de la Plata – the estuary dividing and uniting Argentina and Uruguay – for more than thirty years. Having been gone from the area for more than twenty years, this is their story.

**BY GUILLERMO C. BERGER
& TIM TIMOLEON**

/TIM TIMOLEON photo

**classic
fast
ferries**

FEBRUARY 2018 / ISSUE 56

THE ORIGINAL PERIODICAL ABOUT THE HISTORY OF HYDROFOILS, HOVERCRAFT, CATAMARANS AND SURFACE EFFECT SHIPS, THEIR BUILDERS AND OPERATORS WORLDWIDE.

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COVER : A handful of since long retired Rodriquez hydrofoils in Messina last year.

PHOTO: VINCENZO ANNUARIO



Above : PT.50 Flecha de Buenos Aires
being prepared for shipment to Argentina at
the Rodriquez shipyard in 1962
/ RODRIQUEZ photo

ALISCAFOS ACROSS RÍO DE LA PLATA

The history of fast ferries on Río de la Plata goes back fifty-six years this year, to 1962. A group of mostly retired naval officers had formed a company, Alimar SA, the previous year as they prospected a bright future for the hydrofoil linking the two neighbouring countries of Argentina and Uruguay. So much so that they placed an order with Cantiere Navale Leopoldo Rodriquez in Italy for not one but three hydrofoils of the Supramar PT.50 type. By then the Messina shipyard had delivered eight PT.50s since 1959 and nearly twenty of the smaller PT.20 design since 1956 to domestic as well as foreign customers.

The first Alimar vessel, *Flecha de Buenos Aires*, arrived in its namesake city as deck cargo in

September 1962 and entered service on the 31-nautical mile Buenos Aires–Colonia del Sacramento route shortly thereafter.

The other two PT.50s, *Flecha de Colonia* and *Flecha del Litoral*, followed in 1963. As for the latter, one source of the time indicates that the hydrofoil was originally to have been named *Flecha del Plata*, which would appear logical.

Before the hydrofoils, plying these waters was a fleet of conventional vessels, the youngest of which was of 1930s vintage, operated by state-owned Empresa Flota Fluvial del Estado Argentino. Crossing time for these was some 2 hours 30 minutes whereas the hydrofoils would offer a travel time of only about 50 minutes.

Left : The 40 minute crossing time stated in this early Alimar advertisement may have been a bit optimistic

Below : PT.50 Flecha de Buenos Aires entered service with Alimar between Buenos Aires, Argentina and Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay in late 1962
/ RODRIQUEZ photo

¡DESDE HOY
A COLONIA
EN 40 MINUTOS!

ALISCAFOS

EL TRANSPORTE
POR AGUA
MAS
NOVEDOSO
DE LA
TIERRA!



A partir del día lunes 22 de Octubre, a las horas más convenientes, podrá ir a Colonia en sólo 40 minutos. El Aliscafo de Alimar le servirá además, absoluta seguridad y rapidez en su viaje, ya que el mismo está equipado con el más moderno sistema de navegación, lo que le permite atender a los pasajeros con la máxima eficiencia. A su llegada a Colonia los pasajeros serán recibidos por el personal de Alimar, quien les ayudará a embarcar en el autobús que los llevará a Colonia del Sacramento. HAGA SU RESERVACIÓN HOY MISMO EN SU AGENCIA DE VIAJES O EN LAS OFICINAS DE ALIMAR. MARCELO T. DE ALVARO (EX-CHARGADO) y LUIS T. DE ALVARO. TELÉFONO: 42-2400 - 42-2014 - 42-3639. DIVERSA: ALPUERTO (EX-HIDROPUERTO) DARSENA O

ALIMAR S.A.



Equipados con motores Mercedes Benz

In addition to speed, emphasis was also put on the aircraft-style atmosphere onboard, including the reportedly attractive cabin attendants. While perhaps not exactly a politically correct remark these days, it probably reflected the fact that the service was primarily targeted at tourists and the business traveller, who, more often than not in the case of the latter would be a male. The hydrofoil offered a modern and swift crossing of the River Plate, allowing for a full day of sightseeing or conducting your business in either country and still return home on the same day.

There were 95 seats in tourist class and 20 in Belvedere class. Included in the price of the latter were free refreshments and newspapers. Four return trips were operated. At Colonia a bus service connected for Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay.

USED COMPETITION

It would be seventeen years before competition entered the scene.

In 1979 a Uruguay company, Aliscafos Belt SA, introduced an RHS 140 hydrofoil acquired on the second hand market.

The fourth of the type built by Rodriquez, this, *Tyrning*, was originally delivered to Norwegian operators Det Stavangerske D/S and Sandnæs D/S, Norway in 1972. Although seven years old, the vessel was still nine years younger than the most recent of Alimar's PT.50s.

During most of its time with its Norwegian owners *Tyrning* operated on Norway's major marine highway linking Stavanger and Bergen, initially alongside a pair of PT.50s of similar vintage to the Alimar craft. The hydrofoils would cover the 109-nautical mile route in a little over three-and-a-half hours, including three stops enroute, which was a remarkable improvement over the ten hours used by the conventional ferries, at least where time was a factor.





Alimar's third PT.50 *Flecha del Litoral*
entered service in 1963
/ Archive of CLASSIC FAST FERRIES

In early 1974 the only other remaining hydrofoil operator in Norway, Hardanger Sunnhordlandske D/S, joined the operation of the Flagggruten Stavanger–Bergen service and thus became part owner of the RHS 140.

With domestically built catamarans replacing the hydrofoils on the Flagggruten service, *Tyrving* was transferred to operate short-distance routes in the Stavanger area. But here too catamarans soon took over and the hydrofoil became surplus to requirements and put on the market.

It was shipped to Río de la Plata in late autumn 1979 and entered service on the Colonia–Buenos Aires route on December 1.

When the vessel kept its name from the Nordic mythology instead of receiving a new name with a more local flavour it was because Belt believed it meant bad luck to rename its first hydrofoil.

And more hydrofoils were indeed to follow.

A second RHS 140 was acquired in late 1980 from long-time hydrofoil operator Condor in the Channel Islands. Built in 1971 as *Condor 3*, it joined a PT.50 and replaced another leased PT.50



RHS 140 *Tyrving* was delivered to the Flagggruten service
in Norway in 1972 and acquired by Belt in Uruguay
seven years later
/ LARS HELGE ISDAHL photo

on the company's seasonal service linking the Channel Islands and Saint Malo in France, introduced in 1964. *Condor 3* was the first RHS 140 to be delivered by Rodriquez.

Renamed *Colonia del Sacramento* the vessel entered service in early 1981.

JETFOIL

However, coinciding with the arrival in December of Belt's RHS 140 was Alimar's new flagship – a brand new Boeing Marine Systems Jetfoil 929-115.

The 292-seat vessel, *Montevideo Jet*, was officially launched at the Boeing Seattle works on August 15, 1980 and shipped from the United States in early October.

Total value of the order, the first placed by a South American operator, was \$13 million, including training, customer options and shipping.

With more than twice the passenger capacity of the company's PT.50s and travelling at a higher service speed, the Jetfoil entered service on the considerably longer 130 nautical mile route between Buenos Aires and Montevideo in December. The scheduled crossing time of 3 hours was less than half that used by the conventional ferries.

While the new direct capital-to-capital service was well received by the the market, it would last for only ten months.

Following the short spell with Alimar the craft was returned to Boeing and, renamed *Aries*, would act as BMS's demonstrator vessel for the next few years, including on various trial services in Alaska performed jointly with the Alaska Marine Highway System. It was sold to a Canadian company in 1984 and again in Japan in 1987.



Above : Alimar briefly operated a Jetfoil 929-115, *Montevideo Jet*, on the River Plate in 1980-81 / BOEING MARINE SYSTEMS photo

This photo : RHS 140 *Farallon* was acquired by Belt in 1984 from a Danish operator. Seen here at Buenos Aires in March 1996 its days are numbered / GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo





Keeping its Norwegian name but having been rebuilt, RHS 140 *Tyrving* is seen at the Aliscafos / Buquebus Buenos Aires terminal in February 1996 / GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo

ONE LAST RHS 140

Needless to say, with the introduction of the Jetfoil competition between the two rivals became fierce. Alimar now had the advantage of having four craft as opposed to Belt's two. On the other hand, Belt's RHS 140s were younger than the PT.50s owned by Alimar and each took more passengers, including in the upper (belvedere) saloon, which was the preferred to most passengers.

Still, it would be four years before Belt added to its fleet.

In 1984 a ten year old RHS 140 belonging to Hongkong Macao Hydrofoil, *Flying Ibis*, was

inspected in Hong Kong but a purchase was never signed. Instead Belt, once again, found solace in Scandinavia where a Danish RHS 140 was available.

Delivered to D/S Øresund in 1972, the same year as *Tyrving*, this, *Løberen*, had become surplus to requirements for the same reason as the extinction of the hydrofoil in Norway and elsewhere – the introduction of catamarans in the mid-1970s.



RHS 140s *Farallon* and *Tyrving* rotting away in the backwaters of Buenos Aires in November 1998 / GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo



Yes, they are both PT-50s!

The wheelhouse and upper saloon on *Flecha de Colonia*, delivered to Alimar in 1963, were heavily rebuilt in the early 1990s. Sister vessel *Flecha de Buenos Aires*, built in 1962, remained unchanged.

Here the hydrofoils are laid up at Buenos Aires in May 1995.

/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo

Only shortly before the acquisition by Belt, *Løberen* had been extensively refurbished as DSØ was considering introducing it on a secondary cross-Oresund service. These plans were never carried out, however. By the time the hydrofoil left the Oresund for the River Plate in January 1985 it had completed some 30,000 crossings between Denmark and Sweden, carrying 2.1 million passengers since its inception in May 1972.

Renamed *Farallon*, after a small island off Colonia, the hydrofoil joined its RHS 140 siblings on the Colonia–Buenos Aires route in February 1985.

MERGER AND DISASTER

If you cannot beat them, join them.

In 1986 Alimar and Belt decided to join forces and became Aliscafos Puente Fluvial, marketed as Aliscafos and managed by Belt.

A few months after the services had pooled tragedy struck. In the evening of November 2,

water and finally sinking. It was later raised and towed back to Buenos Aires where it was found too damaged to be repaired and was written off. The machinery, interior, foils and even the superstructure were removed, whereas the hull was left alongside in the backwaters of southern Buenos Aires where it eventually sank.

EXTENSION AND PHASE-OUT

But a new age of fast transportation on the River Plate was in the coming.

In 1992 Aliscafos faced competition from an Argentine player, Buquebus, which introduced an Australian built International Catamarans Tasmania Incat 74m car carrying wavepiercing catamaran, *Patricia Olivia*, between Buenos Aires and Montevideo.



Above : Passengers boarding PT.50 Flecha del Litoral at Colonia in the early days.

In November 1986 the hydrofoil caught fire approximately halfway between Colonia and Buenos Aires and eventually went down

/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo

about halfway between Colonia and Buenos Aires carrying almost a full load fire broke out in the engine room on *Flecha del Litoral*. Getting the fire under control proved unsuccessful and the burning vessel eventually went down, taking twelve passengers and one crew with it. A surge of bad publicity followed and the service never fully recovered from the disaster.

Almost exactly one year later, in the evening of November 8, 1987, the former Condor craft *Colonia del Sacramento* was severely damaged as it hit the quay at Colonia in bad weather. The hull was punctured resulting in the hydrofoil taking in



To replace the aging hydrofoils on the Buenos Aires–Colonia route a pair of Marinteknik 33m catamarans were purchased from a Scandinavian operator in 1996. *Flecha de Buenos Aires* is seen here just off its namesake city in December 1997 / GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo



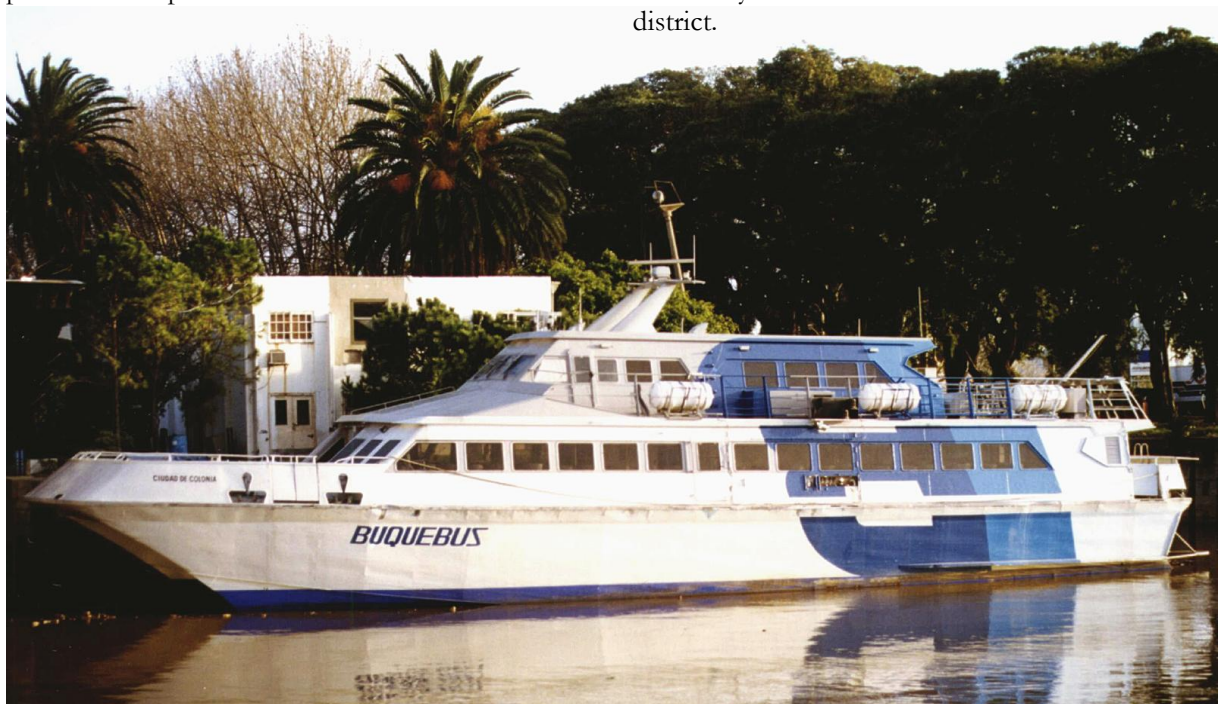
This had the Aliscafos fleet of two PT.50s and two RHS 140s, the oldest of which was now thirty years old, appear outdated with the hydrofoils' rather cramped interior and limited capacity as compared to the large, 600-seat wavepiercer.

In an attempt to upgrade and boost interest, Aliscafos decided to increase the number of seats on two of its hydrofoils. This was done by extending the superstructure on PT.50 *Flecha de Colonia* and RHS 140 *Tyrning*. While this work may have prolonged the presence of hydrofoils on the River Plate, it probably would not have won a price in a competition for aesthetics.

In 1994 the Aliscafos service was taken over by an associate company to Buquebus. The following year the pair of PT.50s was laid up to be scrapped, but the vessels were given a reprieve later in the year when they were employed between Buenos Aires and Campana on the River Paraná.

The reason for this was the reconstruction of the highway system in the northern parts of Buenos Aires, causing constant traffic jams. It was believed the new service would induce commuters to leave the car behind and take the hydrofoil, which ran into central Buenos Aires only a short walk away from the downtown and financial district.

Right : The other Marinteknik catamaran Ciudad de Colonia at Buenos Aires in June 2000, sporting the new Buquebus livery / GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo



ALL GOOD THINGS . . .

RHS 140 *Tyrving* laid up at Buenos Aires in December 1999. Next to it is PT.50 *Flecha de Colonia* and the other remaining PT.50, *Flecha de Buenos Aires*.

See also photo on page 12.

Like *Tyrving* and *Flecha de Colonia*, the car ferry on the left also originated from Scandinavia

/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo



However, the service was suspended already in December 1995, mainly due to mechanical unreliability of the craft and consequently bad ridership.

The two RHS 140s remained in service for another year or so until retired in 1996. All four hydrofoils were then moored in the backwaters of Buenos Aires, with at least one of them, *Tyrving*, ending up half-sunk. It was not until 1999, as a project to clean up the area was initiated, when scrapping of the PT.50s commenced. The humiliating situation for the two RHS 140s would extend into the new millennium and it is believed they, or at least parts of them, were observed as late as 2003.

The wrecked hull of the other RHS 140, *Colonia del Sacramento*, which was written off in 1987 and

A pair of 33m catamarans built by Marinteknik Verkstads in Sweden 1985-86, *Lommen* and *Ørnen*, were acquired from Danish-Swedish operator Flyvebådene/Flygbåtarna which no longer needed them. The first, *Ciudad de Colonia*, entered service on the River Plate in July 1996 with the second, *Flecha de Buenos Aires*, joining it in November.

While the catamarans were an improvement over the aging hydrofoils as far as accommodation was concerned, they were not well suited for the route due to the choppy conditions and heavy swells often experienced in these waters. It is said that passengers would claim for the return of the hydrofoils – presumably new such – after a particularly rough crossing. With the arrival of more large vehicle carrying fast ferries, the



RHS 140 *Tyrving* half sunk in the backwaters of Buenos Aires in late 1999. The extensively rebuilt PT.50 *Flecha de Colonia* remains afloat
/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo

subsequently sank, was raised from the riverbed and placed on a pontoon where it was cut up in July 2001.

A proposal to preserve one of the hydrofoils and put it on display at the Buenos Aires Maritime Museum was unsuccessful.

CATAMARANS

In addition to the new car carrying fast ferries on the Buenos Aires–Montevideo route, Buquebus was looking to replace the hydrofoils on the original Colonia run with passenger-only catamarans. Once again the solution was found in Scandinavia.

Marinteknik catamarans were reduced to back-up and during peak traffic periods.

Flecha de Buenos Aires remains in the area, however, whereas *Ciudad de Colonia* was sold in, first, Uruguay in 1999 and then in The Comores in 2003.

COLONIA EXPRESS

Currently competing directly with Buquebus on the River Plate is another Argentine fast ferry operator, Colonia Express.

Established in 2007, it introduced two Norwegian built catamarans previously operated in the Balearic Islands and Norway. The Spanish



A thirty-three year old Westermoen Hydrofoil W95 catamaran was acquired in Spain by newly established Argentine company Colonia Express in 2007 and put into service between Buenos Aires and Colonia as *Buenos Aires Express* / MAXI ALONSO photo

craft, a Westamaran W95 built by Westermoen Hydrofoil, was originally delivered to the Stavanger–Bergen Flaggruten service in Norway as *Sleipner* in 1974. Later renamed *Tranen* it was acquired by Flebasa Lines in 1989 and renamed *Rápido de Formentera* entered service between Ibiza and Formentera. It left Spain for Argentina as deck cargo in October 2007 and entered service on the Buenos Aires–Colonia route as *Buenos Aires Express*.

The other vessel is a Fjellstrand 38.8m catamaran, delivered to Norwegian operator

Fylkesbaatane in 1987 as *Sognekongen*. Also acquired in 2007, this was renamed *Colonia Express*.

The latest addition to the Colonia Express fleet is *Atlantic Express*. An International Catamarans Tasmania Incat 74m wavepiercing catamaran, this was originally delivered to Hoverspeed in the United Kingdom for its cross-Channel service in 1992 as *Hoverspeed Boulogne* (launched as *Hoverspeed Belgium*). In addition to its 650 passenger capacity, *Atlantic Express* carries 85 cars. **CFF**



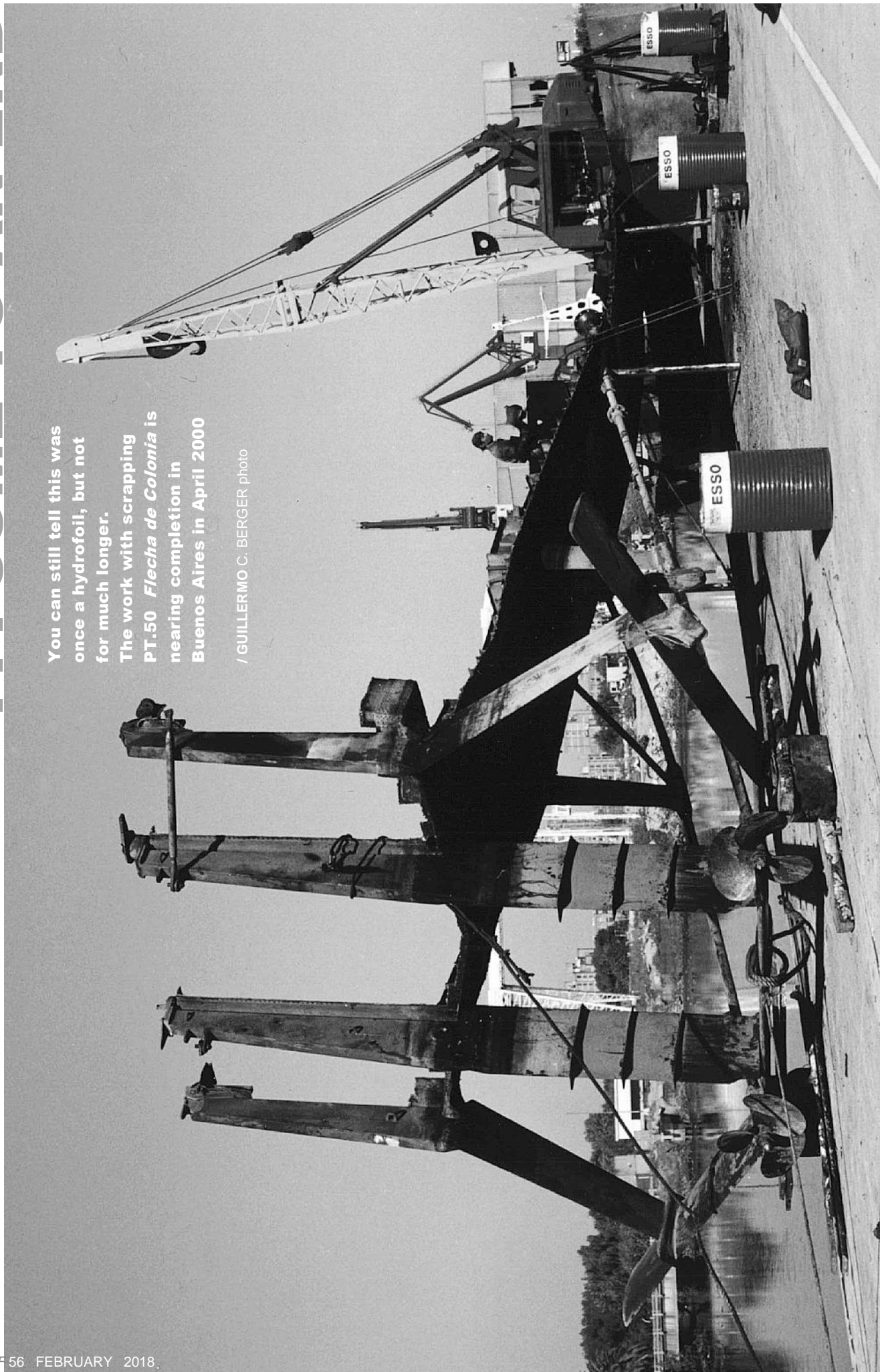
Likewise built in Norway and also purchased in 2007 was a Fjellstrand 38.8m catamaran delivered in 1987. Since this photo was taken at Colonia in 2001 the upper deck saloon on *Colonia Express* has been extended / LUIS ZUNINO photo

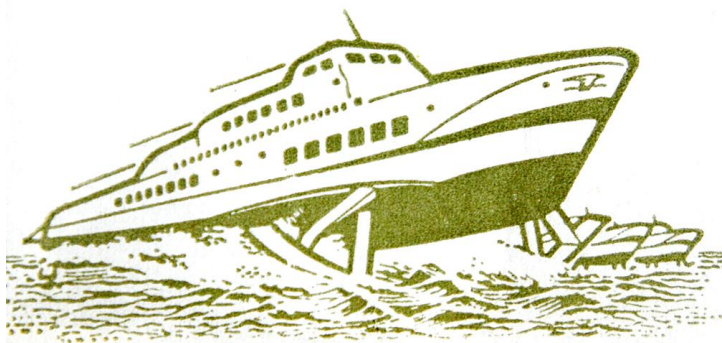
... COME TO AN END

You can still tell this was once a hydrofoil, but not for much longer.

The work with scrapping PT-50 *Flecha de Colonia* is nearing completion in Buenos Aires in April 2000

/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo





THE END

Below + bottom : PT.50s Flecha de Buenos Aires and Flecha de Colonia in well-advanced stages of being broken up at Buenos Aires in March 2000
/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo, both



ONE THE

Right : *RHS 140 Farallon resting on the riverbed at Buenos Aires in June 1999*

Centre + bottom : *The wrecked hull of the sunken RHS 140 Colonia del Sacramento was raised from the riverbed in Buenos Aires in July 2001 and immediately cut up*

/ GUILLERMO C. BERGER photo, all





Many builders of model ships around the world are fascinated by the hydrofoil, also long after the real thing has made its last trip. And rightly so.

One of them is Gabriel Zorron who lives in Montevideo and has built a 1:50 scale model of PT.50 *Flecha del Litoral*, the full-scale version of which entered service on Río de la

SECOND BEST TO THE REAL THING



ALL PHOTOS : GABRIEL ZORRON

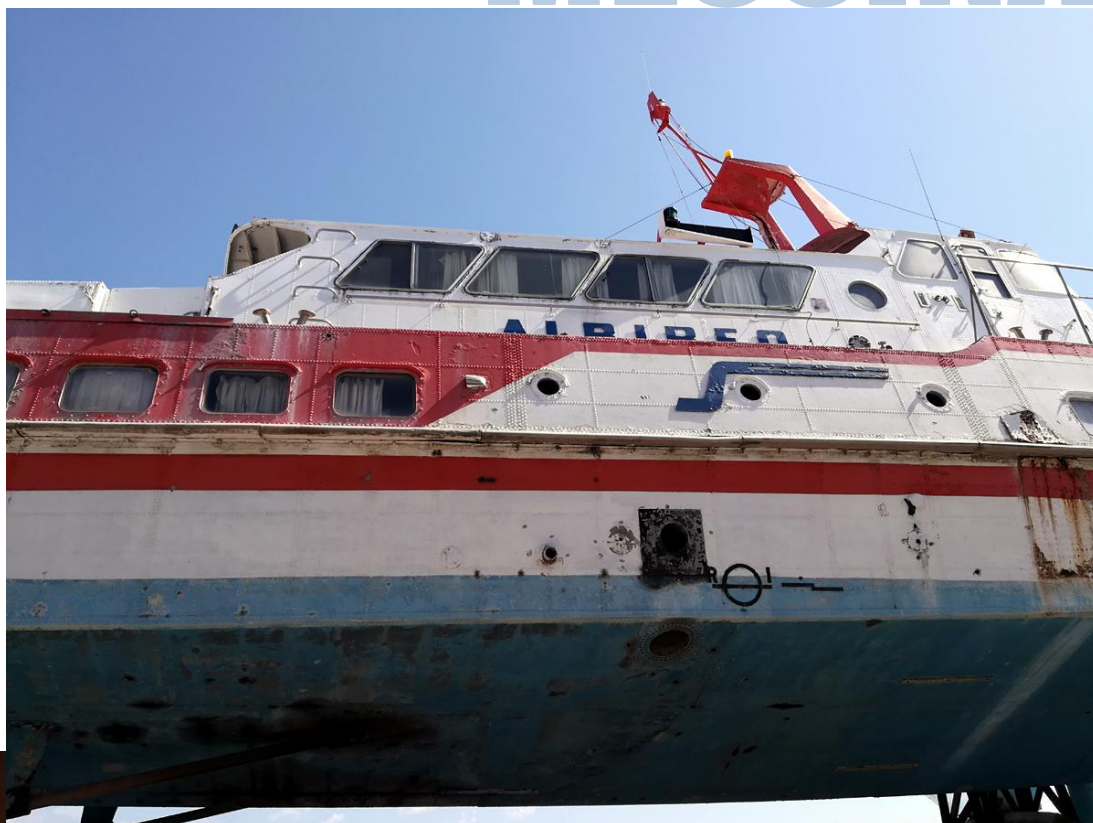
Plata in 1963.
Tragedly it sank
after having caught
fire during a
crossing in 1986.
A static model, it
measures 56
centimetres in
length and is made
from putty covered
corrugated card-
board for the hull
and superstructure
as well as metal
and wood for the
foils and other
parts.

CFF



PHOTOS : VINCENZO ANNUARIO

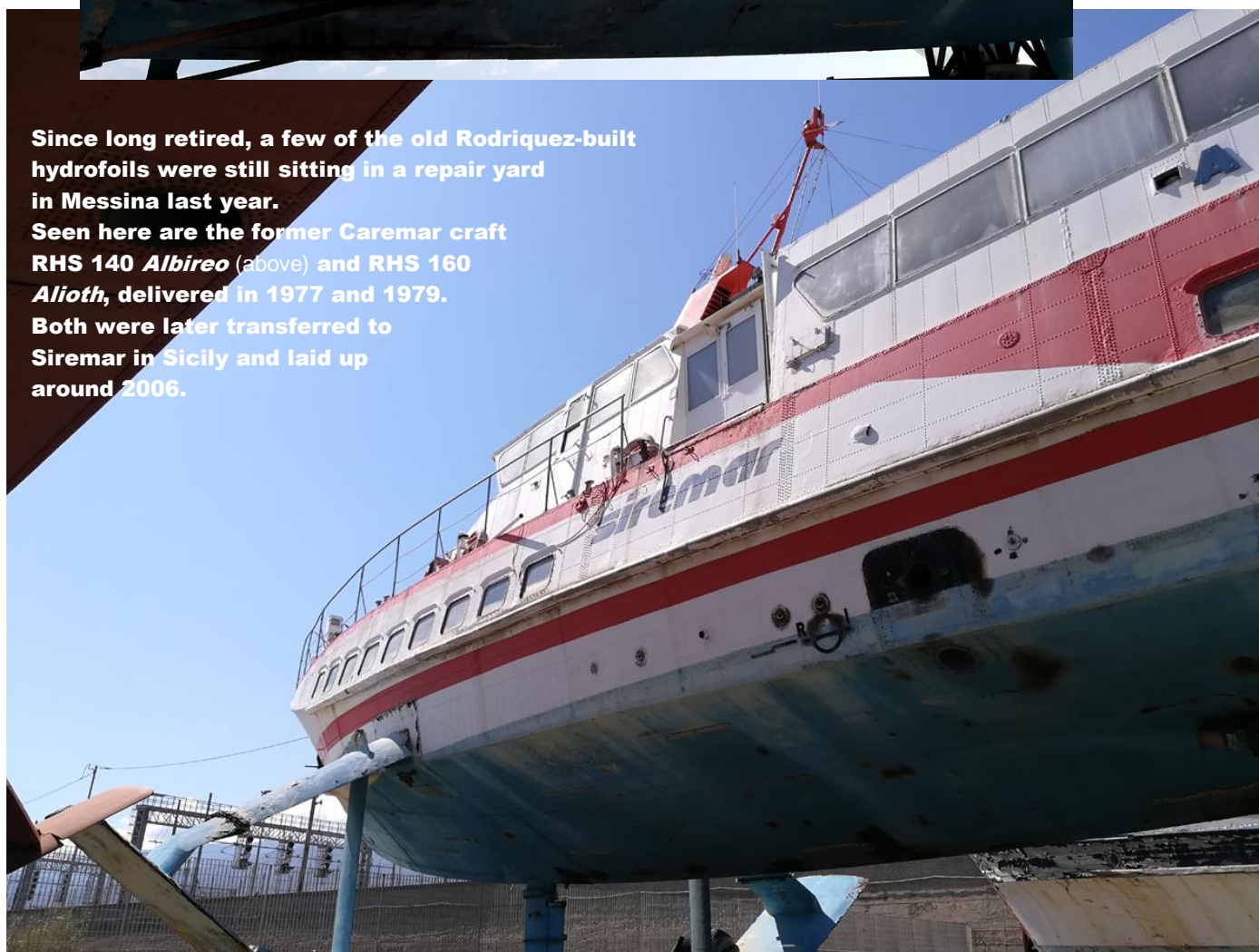
MESSINA SURVIVORS



Since long retired, a few of the old Rodriguez-built hydrofoils were still sitting in a repair yard in Messina last year.

Seen here are the former Caremar craft RHS 140 *Albireo* (above) and RHS 160 *Alioth*, delivered in 1977 and 1979.

Both were later transferred to Siremar in Sicily and laid up around 2006.





RHS 140 *Duccio* was delivered in 1977 as *Fabricia* and entered service in north west Italy with Toremar. It was transferred to Siremar ten years later and remained with this operator until retired in 2005. Having been laid up at Trapani for some time the hydrofoil was later moved to Messina.
/ VINCENZO ANNUARIO photo



The 1972-built former Australian RHS 140 *Curl Curl* was imported back to Italy in 1992. Acquired by Ustica Lines three years later and renamed *Spargi* it operated with them until sold to Alimare in 2004.

Having been laid up for more than ten years *Spargi* was acquired by a private individual in 2016 and is currently being extensively refurbished.

Taken in 2005, this photo shows also PT.50 *Freccia di Sicilia*, built in 1964, and another SNAV hydrofoil awaiting extinction.
/ VINCENZO ANNUARIO photo

Classic Fast Ferries

A rare capture of the rebuilt PT.50 *Flecha de Colonia* while underway.

The extensive work was carried out in the early 1990s as more capacity on the Aliscafos Buenos Aires-Colonia service was needed. No details have been confirmed as to the number of seats added and whether the increased load had any effect on the service speed or if indeed more powerful engines were installed. The latter, however, is not likely as the hydrofoil was about thirty years old at the time of the rebuilding.

Also puzzling is the colour scheme carried here as other photos show the rebuilt vessel in the usual white Aliscafos livery.

/ GEORGE SCHNEIDER photo

