

# Asha Michaux

## Pilot River Scheldt



# EMPA

Can love for the ocean be genetic?

The thought certainly crossed my mind as I was born into a family of seafarers. My grandfather, from my father's side, was a captain and Pilot on the River Scheldt, just like my father. My mother was a radio officer and sailed the world with my father before he entered the pilotage service. My mother's brother was a Captain as well. My sister chose the Antwerp Maritime Academy for her studies, and I followed her two years later. The running joke on me in our family was, 'Can't you study something else for a change?'

Growing up with stories of far horizons, continents you had never seen and countries you couldn't even locate, the concept of a career at sea bore a sense of adventure and mystery that was quite appealing to a young woman choosing her path in life. And so I followed the call and graduated from the Antwerp Maritime Academy in 2010. I fondly recall the feeling of literally spreading my wings as I travelled to join my first vessel.



My eight years at sea on LNG carriers with Exmar were rewarding. They made me grow both professionally and as a person. It was not always easy, that's for sure. As a woman, I felt I had to be stronger than my male colleagues to succeed. You can't simply be yourself, but you always need to stay mindful not to be too friendly or social or to reveal too much of yourself and let your guard down. There will be colleagues with a double agenda, which are better deterred right from the beginning. Over the years, that inner behavioural shift became easier. As I grew in rank, the respect from colleagues for my attained position created more natural boundaries, which made the promotions even more rewarding.



The more I saw of the world, the more valuable my home became, and I decided to end my sailing days. Before joining the Belgian pilotage service, I continued working for Exmar in an onshore position based in the Antwerp office. Being a Pilot for almost one year now, I feel this job gives me the best compromise between my former life as a seafarer and still being close to my family.

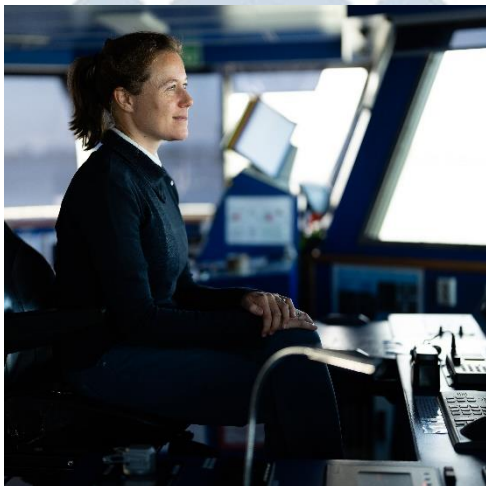
The satisfaction of wishing the Captain a smooth onward journey after you have safely guided his vessel on the river is simple and genuine. There is no backlog of administration, no hundreds of emails awaiting you after the weekend or a day off, nobody calling you off-hours to fix

something quickly—just you, the vessel and her crew and, with some luck, a lovely sunrise or sunset as your 'view from the office'.

I feel joyful whenever I encounter a female colleague on any of the vessels assigned to me. Working alongside women who share the same passion and dedication to their work is a pleasure. I see it as a mutual acknowledgement of female dare and strength. Once in a while, I can wave at my sister while she is piloting another vessel on the river. How unique is that!



The attitude towards a female colleague in the predominantly male maritime environment goes both ways. Seafarers are often more welcoming, polite and friendly towards women since they respect your accomplishments. I have laughed about this with my colleagues, who sometimes feel less well-treated than I am. Conversely, I have also encountered men who preferred not to shake my hand because I was female. As a Pilot, especially from an elder, more experienced Captain, you sometimes get the underlying, unspoken thought behind the smile: 'Will she be capable enough to do this'? And then it is up to us to prove we are as



worthy as our male colleagues, which adds another layer to the challenge. Also, within the pilotage service, not all view their female colleagues as equals. It is sad to hear that some male colleagues consider it inappropriate for us to combine motherhood with the job of being a Pilot. As if it is one or the other we should choose.

A positive evolution I saw over the years is that today's technology makes it less challenging to separate yourself from your family and friends for months. Nowadays, the internet on board is standard, which was not the case when I started sailing. It allows you to stay more closely in touch with your loved ones and lessens the loneliness of being so far away. Attention has also grown to seafarers'

fitness, emotional well-being and anonymous reporting lines towards the office. This is a very positive change, which will protect (young) seafarers who encounter issues on board that they cannot solve independently. If we can ensure these values are embedded not only in Western companies but also worldwide and seafarers receive the protection they deserve regardless of where they sign up for a life at sea, the maritime industry can remain a promising and rewarding career path, as it has been for me.

If you're a young woman considering a career at sea, remember that you can achieve anything you set your mind to. Believe in yourself, have confidence in your abilities and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Nothing is rocket science, no matter how weighty others act about it. Don't bow to people who consider knowledge power and want to put you down. Grab every opportunity you get to learn and become better at what you do. All it takes is practice. Be firm but respectful, as you will bring out the best in people if you treat them as equals. Keep your loved ones closest to you, even if they are physically far away, because they know who you are. And most of all, be true to yourself and what you feel is right. Don't ever feel that 'I have to get through this because that is how this world works'. We can change this world just one step at a time, and you will be able to make a difference.