



DATI ALLA MANO

I PODCAST

A SEAFARING NATION

Italians have always been a seafaring nation. But they don't just know how to use them, the vessels, they also know how to build them. And shipbuilding gives us great satisfaction in foreign markets. Because it is easy to sell and is the less known component of the 'Made in Italy', in particular for a non-expert public. For this reason, we want to know more about it.

I am Cristiana Conti and this is Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast by Istat, the National Institute of Statistics, where I work in the Directorate for Communication, Information, and Services to Citizens and Users. This initiative is part of a broader project to promote statistical culture.

In this episode, we will try to understand if and to what extent, in our country, survive gender stereotypes.

Amerigo Vespucci, Giovanni Caboto, Flavio Gioia, Giovanni da Verrazzano... do we want to continue? Not to mention Christopher Columbus. Italians have always sailed, and well. We have a long list of explorers. But those who navigate must be able to benefit from strong expertise from builders of ships. And we have it. We have it, and it is appreciated on the market. Do you want to know how much? Let's take the last year for which we have data: in 2023, we sold to foreign countries large vessels of different types - from lightships to fishing boats to cruise ships - for a total of over EUR 9 billion. I'd say not bad. But how and where do we sell them?

We ask an expert in foreign trade, Mirella Morrone, who – I remind you – has already been with us for another episode of our podcast, the one about exports of the more 'classic' Made in Italy, well-known to the public, namely wine, food, and fashion.

Cristiana. Hello Mirella and welcome back.

Mirella. Thank you for inviting me, and hello everyone.

C. The export data for large vessels in 2023 are quite impressive...

M. Oh yes, but we have similar data for the previous year too. In 2022 we also exceeded EUR 9 billion.

C. Has it always been like this? I mean, have we always recorded such high values for this type of export?

M. Look, shipbuilding has historically been significant, but we saw a huge increase in 2021, when we went from a value of about 4.62 billion to 6 billion and 400 million of Euro.

C. Well, about 1.8 billion more... that's not a small amount. But to be clear, what type of boats are we talking about?

M. I wouldn't exactly call them boats...

C. That's true, we talked about large vessels.

M. To give you an idea, more than half of the 2023 export value is due to cruise ships, cargo ships, ferries... types of vessels I certainly wouldn't define as "boats".

C. You're right, so these are ships we build in Italy and sell abroad, correct?

M. Correct, but let me remind you that ships are not like an object you build and send to the buyer. You build a cruise ship or a ferry in Italy and then you transfer the economic ownership to a foreign country, after which that country can use the ship wherever it wants, even in Italy, for example. For example, a company from a Country X buys a ferry which then shuttles between our islands.

C. But this Country has acquired the economic ownership of that ferry.

M. Exactly, and economic ownership means that the country assumes the risks and benefits that arise from the use of the ship.

C. I understand. Another question, which country is the main buyer of these ships?

M. The 2023 data tells us that the USA purchased for more than EUR 4 billion...almost half of the amount we were talking about.

C. And besides the USA?

M. In second place, we have Switzerland...

C. Switzerland? And they buy our ships to sail where, on Lake Geneva?

M. Probably even on Lake Geneva, but in any case a Swiss shipping company can operate on the seas worldwide. Do you remember the economic ownership thing?

C. Right, it makes sense. Now, let's complete the podium, who's the third country buying our ships in 2023?

M. The Cayman Islands.

C. ...uhmmm.

M. Then, United Kingdom and France. And then countries from all over the world, there are so many, we basically export everywhere.

C. And we're not just talking about cruise ships and ferries, right?

M. No, of course, another type that performs very well in foreign markets are yachts and leisure and sports boats. The huge increase in export of 2021 is also related to these types, and it grew further in 2022 and 2023.

C. Let's talk about who builds these vessels. How many companies do we have in Italy that are involved in shipbuilding and operate on international markets?

M. The most recent data we have is from 2022, and if we only consider large ships and those who perform maintenance, we are talking about 148 companies that build and trade, for a total of almost 17 thousand employees.

C. Meaning employees?

M. No, I remind you that by 'staff' we mean all those who work for a company, so employees but also self-employed workers who provide their services.

C. In any case, 17,000 is a good number... have the staff also increased in recent years like the export value?

M. Bear in mind that in 2019 there were around 14,000.

C. Listen, can we trace the history of our ships' exports over the last 20 years?

M. it's not simple, but I'll try: so, if we sum up the total export value from 2000 to 2023, the main buyers – meaning those who spent the most – are the United States, the United Kingdom, and

France. Then each has its own history.

C. For example?

M. For example, exports to the USA increased a lot in 2010 and then, apart from the drops in 2013 and 2014, we had a constant growth. In the years from 2000 to 2009, strong buyers were Panama, Bermuda, and the Bahamas, while Switzerland and the Cayman Islands are more recent phenomena. The United Kingdom and France have been fairly consistent buyers over time.

C. Another question: what market share do we hold in this type of export? How does Italy perform if compared to other countries?

M. Our share in 2023 is almost 7.5%, and in 2022 it was even higher: 8.4%. I can tell you straight away that we are third in the world, and we have the Japan behind us. And in any case, we are first in Europe.

C. Returning to the history of our shipbuilding, do you remember the Andrea Doria incident?

M. When it sank in '56, it caused a sensation because it was a true jewel. It was considered the most beautiful passenger ship of its period, a prototype of modern cruise ships...

C. I read that it took two days longer than other transatlantic liners to go from Genoa to New York, but it was still preferred because it was much more comfortable and elegant. Less speed, more beauty.

M. Today we would say it was a 'must' for travelling to the USA.

C. But it only lasted three years. If I remember correctly, it made its maiden voyage in '53.

M. Yes, and in July '56 it was rammed off the American coast by a Swedish ship that entered its side with its bow.

C. However, Captain Calamai managed to keep the Andrea Doria afloat for 11 hours and allowed the evacuation of all passengers, incredible.

M. The entire crew maintained commendable behaviour. The only victims were those sleeping in the cabins on the rammed side, about forty if I'm not mistaken, out of about 1,700 people on board. Consider that in 2021, a staircase was dedicated to Calamai in Boccadasse, which is the seaside village of Genoa... But how did Andrea Doria come to your mind?

C. Because we are talking about shipbuilding, first of all, but also because I read a beautiful article by Dino Buzzati about the sinking of our transatlantic liner.

M. I didn't know.

C. I have it here with me, and if you like, I'll read you how he described the Andrea Doria.

M. Go on!

C. "It went back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean but it was Italy no less than Rome, or Naples or Milan, and in a way even more, because that tiny piece of homeland had come entirely from our heads and arms."

M. Touching.

C. Yes, and further on he says that a ship like that isn't built unless there's a highly organised multitude of intellectual and technical expertise behind it. And I believe it still exists, given the data we have discussed.

M. Absolutely yes.

C. So let's end with this note of awareness and Buzzati's words. Thank you, Mirella, for being with us.

M. Thank you and goodbye everyone.

Our shipbuilding industry remains an important asset. Even after the era of ocean liners, when one had to sail to move from one continent to another. Today, in the international markets, we are third in export value and first in Europe.

I am Cristiana Conti, and this was Dati alla mano (Data at Hand), a podcast from the National Institute of Statistics. This episode was produced with the support of Storielibere.fm. Continue to follow us on the Dati alla mano (Data at Hand) section of Istat.it and on your favourite listening app. Are there any topics you would like to explore further? Write to me at datiallamano@istat.it. Mirella Morrone collaborated on this episode.