



# ALAMAR (TO THE SEA)

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## Review by David Jenkins, Time Out:

A fresh-faced toddler and his bashful, semi-estranged father trade hushed life lessons in this gorgeous docu-fiction from Mexican director Pedro González-Rubio. Filmed with a skeleton crew (Rubio as cinematographer alongside a single sound man) in the rickety, stilted shacks surrounding the atoll reef of Quintana Roo off the south-east coast of Mexico, this rugged, tranquil film chronicles a rite-of-passage fishing trip the pair takes before the boy is whisked off to Italy with his mother.

At first their bond is tacit and undemonstrative, but through various father-son activities – house-painting, cooking, descaling fish – you gradually get a sense of the profound mutual affection they share. Rubio frames the central drama against a sublime natural backdrop, capturing a mesmerising elemental harmony between man and beast. Moving but never sentimental, ambient but rigorously focused, this is an assured, refreshingly simple film where the dramas and responsibilities of parenthood exist inside a bubble of blissed-out tropicalia.

## Review by STEPHEN HOLDEN, New York Times:

In *Alamar*, a luminous semi-documentary film that plays on the border of reality and fiction, Natan Machado Palombini, a young boy, goes on an enchanted expedition with his father to the Banco Chinchorro, the largest coral reef in Mexico. The bonding of the son and his father, Jorge Machado, a lean, moustachioed Mexican fisherman who will return Natan to his Italian mother at the end of the trip, portrays a tender, ritualistic passing of knowledge, experience and love from one generation to the next.

Male viewers deprived of paternal affection as children may feel a sharp pang of longing while watching Jorge, a hippie, oceanic Tarzan with a noble bearing, teach his son the ways of the sea in a place whose turquoise waters appear uncontaminated.

The characters in *Alamar* may be playing versions of themselves, but the writer, editor and director Pedro González-Rubio has constructed a film in which the journey has an overarching mythic resonance that evokes fables from *Robinson Crusoe* to *The Old Man and the Sea*. Jorge teaches Natan to reel in fish, to snorkel, to identify sea creatures and plants, to avoid tempting a crocodile and to befriend a white cattle egret that appears and that they name Blanquita. Blanquita is no sweet little Disney chirper. She snaps hungrily at scraps of food that are offered and appears to be a pet, until she flies away. All the while, ominous scavenging birds circle their cabin.

*Alamar* risks lapsing into ethnographic sentimentality and at moments comes perilously close to turning into an escapist fantasy of abandoning civilization for never-never land. But in a gentle, firm voice, it teaches hard lessons about impermanence and letting go. Like his parents' passion, Natan's days in paradise are numbered.

When the beloved Blanquita disappears, he must accept the loss.

*Alamar* begins with a short prelude in which the boy's mother, Roberta Palombini, recalls the idyll with Jorge that produced their beautiful child. When this cosmopolitan woman realized she could not live the elemental existence of a fisherman's wife "in the middle of nowhere," she and Jorge parted amicably.

Natan's journey with his father is really a farewell during which Jorge purposefully imprints himself on his son through his demonstrations of agility, physical affection and attentive care. Their bonding culminates with a euphoric wrestling match. After the journey, the boy will go back to Italy



to live with his mother.

During their trip out to the reef, Jorge cradles the seasick Natan in his arms. Their destination is a tiny community of fishermen who dwell in palafittes, one-story cabins perched on stilts above the water. Jorge shares his space with Matraca (Néstor Marín), an older fisherman whom Jorge refers to as his father, although they are not biologically related. They sleep in hammocks, brew strong coffee and live off the catch of the day. They are shown cooking spicy fish broth and dining on tortillas and freshly caught barracuda. They keep in touch with the mainland (and the weather forecast) by short-wave radio.

From the cabin, they journey by motorboat to the reef where Jorge and Matraca spend the day spear fishing. Although there are a few beautiful underwater shots, *Alamar* is not really interested in exploring the details of spear fishing or the wonders of marine life.

Elegantly photographed by Mr. González-Rubio, *Alamar* makes every shot a composition. Whether painting the wall of a cabin into which he carves a window, or meticulously cleaning the boat with Natan's help, Jorge comes across as a hard-working man in perfect harmony with his environment. Each gesture, like each shot, has a purpose.

But if Jorge's life appears fulfilling from the outside, the movie doesn't pretend that living it day after day, year after year, would be easy. It is a destiny most of us would choose not to pursue.