Fog, blinding thunderstorms, darkness — these are the kinds of conditions harbor pilots sometimes deal with while they guide ships. And they're not guiding little boats in and out of harbors. Their duties involve enormous cruise and cargo ships that they have to maneuver within feet of other big vessels.

**Tricky Business**

Great responsibility rests on the judgment and skill of these specialists who know the deep-water channels of their harbors so well that they can map them from memory. They serve as navigators in port waters, taking over control of ships’ movements all the way in to dock and back out to sea.

And then there are the acrobatics that go with the job. Harbor pilots meet the ships and climb aboard them while they are still at sea and still moving, often at around 14 miles per hour.

*Continued...*
The pilot boat moves alongside the ship, and the harbor pilot has to leap onto a rope ladder hanging down the side of the ship, and then climb up two or three stories to get aboard. The pilot gets off the ship the same way when it leaves port, and in rough seas the smaller boat below might be bobbing up and down 5 feet.

Capt. Jorge Viso, a harbor pilot working in Tampa Bay in Florida, explains what it's like: "The boat's going up and down like an elevator, so you are timing your departure to coincide with the top of the run, when the pilot boat rises up to its highest point."

Viso says pilots are so used to it, they hardly think about it, but it is the most dangerous part of the job. They are at risk of falling and getting crushed between the vessels or run over by the pilot boat. From time to time, a pilot is killed doing it.

**Pursuit of Perfection**

Viso, a former Coast Guardsman and graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, is vice president of the American Pilots' Association for the South Atlantic States. He has worked 24 years as a harbor pilot in Tampa Bay, which is the nation's 22nd busiest port (ranked by tonnage), bustling with everything from cruise ships to tankers. It's one of the nation's longer runs for pilots — 43 miles from where they board ship to the docks near downtown Tampa. It's also a place known for sudden, violent thunderstorms.

Having handled boats all his life, Viso says he enjoys the challenge of maneuvering monstrous ships perfectly into port.

"I pride myself. It's my thing. I want to get this job absolutely perfect. I'm always asking, can I improve? Can I make this turn prettier?" he says. "I want to land on the dock and be right on the spot — boom! Just nail it."

Ship captains at sea keep a distance of 1 or 2 miles between them when they pass. Viso is used to guiding a 965-foot cruise ship past a fully loaded 650-foot petroleum ship in a narrow channel and coming within 23 yards of it.

He is on call for two weeks and off work for two weeks. While on call, he must be ready to meet a ship within two hours of getting notice. The 20 pilots working Tampa Bay go on about 200 to 225 jobs each per year, says Capt. Allen Thompson, executive director of the Tampa Bay Pilots Association.

New pilots who are assigned to Tampa Bay must — after passing a series of rigorous tests, one of which is to map the channels from memory — go through an apprentice program that lasts about three years. Under strict supervision of experienced pilots, these rookies take over larger and larger ships until they are able to handle the largest alone.

**What it Takes**

A stark story all Tampa Bay pilot trainees hear is the tragedy that occurred there 36 years ago. A phosphate tanker caught in blinding rain and high winds struck a key support to the Sunshine Skyway Bridge, collapsing...
a section of roadway. Six cars, a truck and a bus plunged 150 feet into Tampa Bay, and 35 people died.

Though a Coast Guard inquiry said the pilot contributed to the accident by continuing under the bridge in blinding conditions, authorities ultimately ruled the accident an unpreventable “act of God.”

“It’s inescapable. It gets rehashed,” Viso says. “Of course you talk about it when you’re training because we still have to deal with the Skyway.”

Training and talent are key to avoiding such disasters.

Thompson, a retired Coast Guard officer and former Boy Scout, oversees the pilot operation, making sure pilots are available when ships need them. He was never a harbor pilot, but he has a deep understanding of the qualities a person needs to do the job.

“You’ve got to be good at your craft. You must have great situational awareness; generally have a good rapport with people; must have great leadership skills because you’re giving directions. You must be able to interface with the whole maritime community, international as well as domestic — the full gamut.”

**SALARY:** Though the national average is more than $400,000, that represents people handling large ships in busy seaports. Depending on size of ships and frequency of jobs, pilots in Florida make a range of $60,000 to about $400,000.

**TO LEARN MORE:** Check out tampabaypilots.com to get more detailed information. Viso says one of the best books he has read about being a ship’s pilot is Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi,* published in 1883. The book details Twain’s training as a riverboat pilot before the Civil War.