

The Anatomy of a Sail

The Yacht dissected
and explained

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Sedans, coupés, hatchbacks, estates, sports, pick-ups, 4 x 4, SUVs, campers... Just as cars come in many shapes and sizes, so do sailing boats, and it takes a bit of practice to recognise them. Like car engines, different sail plans serve different purposes. One is powerful but tricky to handle (eg lugger), while another is more versatile (eg gaff cutter), and another more suited to short-handed sailing (eg ketch).

New materials and equipment also play a major role in the development of sails. It's long been known that a single large sail is more efficient than several small sails, for instance, which is why cutters and sloops are the rigs of choice for racing. Until the invention of winches, however, all that sail area had to be controlled by hand using blocks and many, many yards of rope. It's no coincidence that the largest cutter ever built (the 1903 America's Cup defender Reliance) also sported the first ever set of underdeck winches. Even with the benefit of winches, large sails need large crews to handle them, which is why sail plans with two masts, such as ketch or yawl, are preferred by cruising folk, who are more interested in comfort than speed.

Logic aside, sailors often favour certain types of rig for purely aesthetic or cultural reasons – which is why Americans love schooners and Brits love cutters.

