



# sail boats



## what are they?

They're vessels for travelling (and/or living) on water using the wind for propulsion. There's no precise distinction between a boat and a ship, but a ship is generally considered to be bigger. There are many different types of sail boats, depending on design, sails and use - examples include schooner, ketch, yacht or sloop. The range of boats, the terminology used, rigs, equipment, legislation etc. are complicated, and can only be touched on briefly in an introduction like this.

**History:** the earliest representation of a boat with a sail is from Mesopotamia and is over 7000 years old. An important development in sailing was the invention of the lateen rig, probably by the Arabs, around 2000 years ago, which allowed boats to sail against the wind. Since then, sailing vessels have arguably been the most important means for humans to explore and chart the earth. Although European vessels were clunky and square-rigged, requiring crew to go aloft in all weathers, unlike the Chinese and Arab vessels from which they evolved, it was mainly Europeans who did this exploring and charting. There are several reasons for this, but perhaps the most important was the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, cutting off Europeans' land access to Asian trade, and requiring ships to be built and sea routes to be found.

Sail was virtually the only way to transport bulky items long distances before the advent of railways and steam ships in the 19th century. Steam didn't replace sail entirely, as there was a rapid acceleration in sail boat technology, culminating in tea clippers like the Cutty Sark – still the fastest commercial sailing vessels ever built (this improvement in a technology due to competition is still called the 'sailing ship effect'). Sailing cargo ships weren't supplanted until the twentieth century and the marine diesel engine.



*Rum being unloaded from the hold of sail cargo ship operated by Fairtransport.*



*A currently operating (and newly-built) sail cargo ship. See [grayhoundluggersailing.co.uk](http://grayhoundluggersailing.co.uk)*

## what are the benefits?

**Environmental:** the main environmental benefit is that they don't require fossil fuels, with their associated emissions of carbon and pollutants when burnt and after spills. Cruise and cargo ships use heavy marine oil that is much more polluting than road fuels. Sailing vessels can also replace diesel lorries, buses and trains for cargo and passenger transport.

There have been improvements in fossil-fuel cargo transport, like kites or slow-steaming, but these gains have been wiped out by increases in the volume of shipping year-on-year. Ultimately, the only way to consume sustainably is to downshift and stop buying unnecessary goods made in sweatshops on the other side of the world.

**Personal:** you'll see nature at its best from a boat – from sunsets and unspoilt coastlines to dolphins, whales, flying fish etc. If you get a boat, you can live on it, saving housing costs, but unlike a conventional home, you could use it to make a living by transporting passengers or cargo. Plus holidays are sorted forever.

**Social:** sailing can and has been a life-changing experience for people in difficulty. The Sail Boat Project, for example, is a co-operative that has crewed boats with people who are homeless, unemployed or recovering from addiction. They also help struggling olive farmers in Portugal, by paying them for their olive oil up front. WWOOFers could also be transported to various countries to help olive farmers, and brought them back with the olive oil at the end of the season – and the same applies to other products.



### what can I do?

**Buy goods transported by sail boat:** for traders, networks are forming to deliver goods by sail, like the Sail Cargo Alliance. Contact them to become a stockist. Consumers - let your local community-supported agriculture scheme or fair trade shop know about them, or buy directly from the companies on the Sail Cargo Alliance website and others. The Sail Boat Project aim to develop networks with food co-ops, local shops and community-supported agriculture rather than build empires – which we think is a good approach.

**Travel by sail boat:** you can often find skippers (via word-of-mouth, online or negotiation with cargo vessels) willing to take you for a fee. FairTransport intend to set up routes with large passenger ships. You can reduce the price on cargo boats by negotiation / offering help. Get skills first, but you could also load and unload, keep watch, scrub decks, cook or look after kids. You can volunteer as crew. From the Canaries, you can hitch across the Atlantic. Crew are not passengers, and shouldn't be charged as such – but a contribution to costs is reasonable, or, if you're lucky, it could be free. It could work out to be a cheap way to gain valuable sailing skills, and have a great time in the process. There are sites specifically for matching boats with crew.

**Learn to sail:** first, get the feel of the wind – get a kite, and maybe some wind surfing. extrapolate to understand the huge pull that an 8m sail has in a strong wind. There's a lot to learn – sailing is unpredictable, and you'll have to deal with wind, weather, currents and tides all at the same time.



*Triangular lateen rig on an Arab dhow.*

**Get a boat:** to get a boat, you have to be a proficient sailor, and know about registration, health & safety, insurance, navigation, legislation, mooring, wind speeds, rigging, tides, maintenance etc. There's mandatory training, kit and insurance required, such as life jackets, flares, air horn and VHF radio plus training – you'll learn all about this from your sailing courses.

Are you going to be carrying passengers, cargo, or both? Your vessel needs to be commercially-coded for carrying cargo or passengers for money. A 70ft steel ketch will go for around £100k, plus 15% of this for maintenance every year – so you need a good business plan first. For cargo you'll need a hold that opens, and a derrick/crane for loading. Mooring costs can be £10-15k per year in a marina. When loading or unloading, small boat owners get in and out of a port quickly. They have to minimise costs as they don't have the economies of scale of large cargo ships; and they don't go anywhere with an empty boat.

Attend Sail Cargo Alliance meetings, visit projects, and/or volunteer as crew. Offer to pay someone to teach you. If you weren't born into the life, it's not something you can do without lots of experience. It's all-encompassing, especially if you're carrying cargo or passengers; and a small cargo boat will need a network of outlets – local food co-ops, community-supported agriculture etc.

**Build a boat / become a boat-builder:** building a boat needs an awful lot of training. You can build from scratch or renovate a classic old boat; you can employ a naval architect, and/or put in your own labour. There are boat-building schools in the UK – see lowimpact.org for links.

The sea is very corrosive, so unfortunately most of the sails, rigging etc. will be synthetic nowadays. Hulls can be of wood, which has a good strength:weight ratio – important as the heavier the boat, the more power it needs to propel it.

### resources

- see [lowimpact.org/sail-boats](http://lowimpact.org/sail-boats) for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Twain Braden, *How to Sail*
- John Jamieson, *Seamanship Secrets*
- Scott Wilson, *Living Aboard*
- [findacrew.net](http://findacrew.net) – find a crew or find a boat
- [sailcargoalliance.org](http://sailcargoalliance.org) – Sail Cargo Alliance
- [wind-ship.org](http://wind-ship.org) – International Windship Assoc.

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