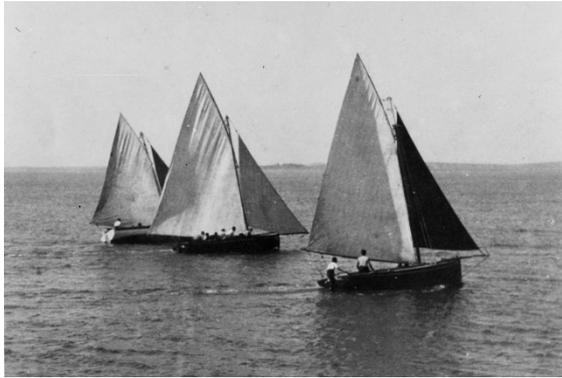


The Legendary Couta Boat



Commercial fishing out of Port Phillip Bay, Victoria in the 1870s, one of the most dangerous stretches of water in the world, required a special sort of vessel...the “Couta” boat. Now over 100 years on, it is described as the quintessential recreational sailing vessel.

“Couta” boats were named after the barracouta fish* , one of the key species sought after by fishermen at the time. Its origin designer, HR Murray was commissioned to design a seaworthy and commercially efficient boat for offshore fishing in all weather conditions. Typically, the boats would leave Port Phillip well before dawn, navigate the Rip and Bass Strait weather fill their quota and return as quickly as possible to the fish markets in Flinders Street Melbourne.

The Couta Boat was originally 26’6”, clinker built, 10 foot beam with functional cockpits and weighing approximately 5 ton. It had a draft of 3’3 inches draft which increased to 8 ft when the centerboard was lowered. The sail area of 600sq feet was originally gaff rigged but later evolved into a gunter rig with the high peaked gaff enabling the sail to be carried higher. The trademark of the Couta boat is the long curved bowsprit that the jib sets on. These high set sails enabled the boats to sail close to the wind.

Under this sailing rig and without the aid of electronic navigational equipment the fishermen had to navigate the notorious Port Phillip Bay, “Rip”, before heading into Bass Strait. The Rip, a 3.2 kilometre wide body of water connecting Bass Strait to Port Phillip Bay is still described as “the most treacherous stretch of water in Australia and amongst the most dangerous in the world”. Tidal flows in the Rip can reach up to 9 knots, due to the high volume of water passing through its narrow entrance and its numerous underwater hazards. The Rip has been responsible for the loss of hundreds of lives and shipwrecks, over time.

After crossing the Rip the boats would sail into Bass Strait which sits in the path of the Roaring Forties. The Strait a “ ferocious stretch of water with powerful storm driven waves is “twice as wide and twice as rough as the English Channel”.

In these conditions, after the fish shoals were located the boats would ‘run off’, come about and sail in over the shoal again trolling lines baited with rawhide. The 3ft -4ft barracouta were dehooked and loaded into the vessel by hand. The boats were then sailed back through the Rip to unload their catch.

Speed was also a matter of survival. The less time spent at sea reduced the chances of the boats being caught in adverse weather. The first boats to find the fish schools got the best catch, the best prices and the best berthage .

Whilst the fishermen were sailing out of economic necessity, half decked centre board vessels including Couta boats were being raced by working sailors such as fishermen, naval and merchant seamen and watermen in regattas on Sydney Harbour and Port Phillip bay. The Sydney Harbour boats added keels and small coach houses for comfort and local conditions. The Mayflower, the first Couta boat recorded as racing on Port Phillip bay was shipped to Sydney from Victoria in 1888 and later renamed Kananook. So popular was this design Walter Dendy attributed as the designer of the Manly ferries Dee Why, South Steyn and North Steyn, is reputed to have owned 33 Couta boats for recreational use over 27 years of sailing.

The 1970s and 1980s saw a resurgence of interest in building and restoring Couta boats which has continued into the 21st century. Boat builder, Tim Phillips of the Wooden Boat Shop is attributed to being responsible for their revival in Victoria which currently has the biggest fleet.



The Couta Boat Association (CBA) and the Sorrento Sailing and Couta Boat Club (SSCBC) are 2 organisations dedicated to the promotion and celebration of these boats. The CBA, founded in 1983 has chapters in NSW, Tasmania Victoria and Western Australia. It maintains a register of all vessels, provides strict guidelines for the building of new vessels and has developed class racing handicap rules. Couta boats are the SSCSCs signature fleet and integral to their club. The club organises weekend racing, special events, yearly regattas and activities that encourage family participation. National Couta Boat championships are held annually and testament

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to the dedication of some Victorian owners a number participated in Sydney in 2013, 2015, 2016 and 2017 in the precursor races to the Nationals.

Due to its seaworthiness, spacious cockpit and ease of sailing the Couta Boat can be raced, sailed leisurely with the family and friends or used to go fishing all whilst being part of Australia's maritime history.

* Barracouta: Thyrsites atun: Couta, Pick-handle, Snoek: not to be confused with Barracuda

References: Wikipedia; <https://www.researchgate.net>; <https://sailcraftblog.>; <https://poi-australia.com.au>; <http://oceans1.customer.netspace.net.au/portphillip-wrecks.html>; Bruce Stannard Afloat Magazine; Couta Boat Association; Sorrento Sailing Couta Boat Club, burnham.net.au. Top pic courtesy : <https://www.woodenboatshop.com.au/boat-range/couta-boats>. Bottom Pic: [C14 Surprise and C92 Whisper work uphill together - Barloworld Couta Boat Nationals](https://www.woodenboatshop.com.au/boat-range/couta-boats) © Alex McKinnon Photography <http://www.alexmckinnonphotography.com>