



A Riva Aquarama built in 1967 for a Belgian owner in St Tropez

## Riva Yachts by Chris Madigan

Among the great lakes of northern Italy, Lago d'Iseo is not the most widely known. However, its water is the original home to one of the essential elements of life on the more glamorous Como or Garda, whether carrying Burton and Taylor in the Sixties or, more recently, George Clooney on the cover of *Vanity Fair*: the Riva speedboat.

The history of the *cantiere* ('boatyard') goes back over 170 years, but the story of Riva Yachts really begins in 1950 as a family saga, with an emotional showdown that could have graced a Visconti film. The fourth-generation boatbuilder Carlo Riva had been designing craft since the age of 15 before World War II. At 28, he was ready to take the family business, which at the time was focused on powerboat racing, into the future – he had an engineering degree from Cremona, ideas about new construction techniques (such as laminated wooden hulls) and a desire to cater for a post-war affluent class that wanted luxury leisure craft. He had secured financial backing from fellow Lago d'Iseo residents, the Berretta family (the firearms dynasty own a small island, San Paolo, in the lake). The only impediment was his father, Serafino, who rejected many of his ideas.

After a series of arguments, Serafino allowed Carlo the use of part of the boatyard with a legally binding understanding that the son's division had to make enough money in three years to buy out the father – if not, he would have to hand everything back and leave. Not only did Carlo easily raise enough for the buy-out; he had enough to build a new, state-of-the-art *cantiere* along the lake, with a remarkable office, designed like a ship's wheelhouse, which juts out from the factory over the lake.

From here, he oversaw the building of a series of boats – including the Ariston, Tritone and Florida – which immediately became a key ingredient in the recipe for *la dolce vita* (indeed, Anita Eckberg – Sylvia in the Fellini film – owned a Tritone with zebra-print upholstery). In Venice, hotels such as the Cipriani ordered fleets of them, so Sophia Loren or Paul Newman would arrive for premieres at the International Film Festival



The unmistakable lines of the classic Riva Aquarama are still in evidence on the modern Aquariva model

aboard a Riva launch. By the Sixties, Rivas were de rigueur in St Tropez – Brigitte Bardot and Gigi Rizzi spent much of their affair aboard one. And the popularity spread across the Atlantic, especially after the marketing masterstroke of opening a showroom in Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan, close to the celebrity haunt, the 21 Club.

Carlo Riva was as demanding as his father, in different ways. They both had a drive for perfection, but rather than adhere strictly to traditional boatbuilding techniques, Carlo would insist on innovation. When he opted for a certain type of locking nut made only by American companies, he imported Imperial-measurement wrenches and threading tools to match. Staff were dressed in colour-coded overalls, so he could instantly see from the 'bridge' if two different departments were in deep discussion, indicating there might be a problem. And his quality-control device for testing the durability of instruments was a hammer.

High standards and attention to detail were important factors in the quality of Riva boats but, above all, people were attracted to the aesthetic of these creations, their graceful curves and the deep burnish of their cedar and mahogany hull and decking. The lines of classic Riva yachts do not necessarily adhere to the golden ratio, but they do find their own perfect proportions. And the apotheosis of these lines of beauty is found in the best known Riva: 1962's Aquarama.

At rest or gentle pace, the Aquarama's bow shape is an apparently organic sea creature, sleek and curving outwards like a ray, its forelights like eyes. The arc of the hull is exaggerated to allow a wider foredeck. In practical terms, that both offers more space for sunbathing beauties and directs the spray from oncoming waves away from their impractical swimming costumes. The shape of the stern – so often an afterthought in boatmaking – is a masterpiece of challenging craftsmanship in itself. It combines two designs – both barrelback (curved from port to starboard) and reverse transom (tilted towards the bow) – so that, as it glides past observers on shore, it has the elegance of an orca.

However, as soon as the pilot pushes forward the throttle to power up the twin engines, all natural analogies are left in the Aquarama's wake. The stern hunkers down and the white-painted lower section of the planing hull, separated from the upper hull by yet another beautifully proportioned seam, rises out of the water. The boat reveals itself to be a marvel of engineering, not only in performance, but in details such as the motor racing-style chrome bow vents at the nose and its innovative curved one-piece windshield. No wonder various commentators have compared it to their favourite cars, particularly the Ferrari 250 GTO (which went into limited production the same year the Aquarama was launched) and the Lamborghini Miura. (Indeed, in 1968, Ferruccio

Lamborghini commissioned an Aquarama souped up with a pair of his own V12 engines, and in a subtle turquoise trim to complement the mahogany – it was restored in 2013.)

Always the innovator, Carlo Riva had already begun building fibreglass yachts by the time he sold the company in the Seventies. After a period in the hands of a succession of owners, in which time the Aquarama was discontinued, Riva Yachts became part of the Ferretti Group in 2000. Although the company began to apply the brand to larger



Chrome detailing reminiscent of the automotive golden age is an important part of the Riva design philosophy

and larger yachts (a 122ft superyacht, the Mythos, was built in 2013), the new owner's first launches were paeans to that classic period of the Fifties and Sixties.

Designed in conjunction with Officina Italiana Design's Mauro Michele and Sergio Beretta (yes, the neighbouring family is involved once more), the Iseo and the Aquariva – a direct tribute to the Aquarama – have many of the recognisable characteristics: caressable wooden decking (now mahogany with maple inlay), automotive chrome detailing and the wide foredeck and low-profile stern. Ferretti Group is also delving into Riva's design archive for other purposes – at 2014's Salone del Mobile, the firm launched a desk lamp based on the search light installed on every Riva boat in the Sixties.

In the final scene of *Some Like It Hot*, Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis are cosying up in the back of a Riva launch, driven by Osgood Fielding III, played by Joe E Brown. Up front, Jack Lemmon is still in drag as 'Daphne', trying to persuade the millionaire that 'she' is unsuitable for him. Eventually, Lemon reveals, 'I'm a man.' 'Well,' replies Fielding, 'nobody's perfect.' Perhaps not, but some design approaches perfection.

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*Images courtesy of Riva Yachts.*