



Words: Jonathon Savill | Photography: Courtesy of Riva/Farretti Group

Revival

The remarkable tale behind one of *the* great design icons of the 20th Century.

The Aquarama is easily the most magnificent speedboat ever built. Outrageous, extravagant and beautiful, these boats actually grow in value and prestige as they get older.

The hard facts are that the Aquarama is a twin engine boat built between 1962 and 1996. The Super Aquarama is 8.45 metres long and has twin engines, each between 185 and 320 horse power, giving a cruise speed of around 40 knots.

But what makes the Riva craft so special is the sheer beauty of their mahogany construction as Aquaramas are never painted. You can't help lovingly touching this boat and when you do, every one of the 22 coats of varnish gently warms your hand and melts your heart.



In the 1950's Carlo Riva, the architect of the Aquarama, joined his father's tiny but traditional boatyard at the age of 15. Almost from the start young Carlo and his father disagreed on the way the business should be directed and develop.

Carlo looked to the magnificent Chris-Craft in America. Italy was still devastated by war and the idea of a tiny boatyard competing with the then mightiest boat brand in the world was laughable. Except that Riva did it. But this led to direct conflict with his father. Serafina Riva allowed Carlo to build a construction facility in his boatyard for the new boats. But after three years the younger Riva would have to buy the whole yard from his father. If he failed Serafina kept all of Carlo's assets. This was a legal agreement. Carlo succeeded and, although he never acknowledged it, Serafina was remarkably proud of him.

Armed with an order for one boat Carlo set off to America in 1951 to buy engines from Chris-Craft. They insisted their minimum order was fifty engines. Riva lied and said that while he was happy to buy fifty – the Italian government would only allow the import of six engines at a time. He returned home in business and built the Tritone, Super Florida and the Ariston. The Aquarama's genes trace back to the Tritone, a model she is a direct development of.

The name Aquarama is a combination of Aqua and Cinerama. It was chosen because it sounds so good in every language. When introduced, the Aquarama was an immediate success. The Riva name became known throughout Europe and royalty, film stars and tycoons rushed to buy the boats. Riva made it a policy to treat all his customers the same and no boat ever left his yard without being paid for in full. A strict policy that was tricky to explain to kings, movie stars and the ultra rich.



“Riva destroyed their instruments with his ‘quality control’ hammer.”

What was amazing about Riva was his fanatical attention to detail in every single piece of the boat – every screw and component was tested constantly. In the early sixties the head of VDO approached him to supply instruments for Riva. Carlo was in a difficult position because Fritz Linzenhof, the owner of the VDO company, was a good Riva customer. In an effort to turn him down politely Carlo explained that the salt water environment was too harsh for normal instruments. Linzenhof countered that his company manufactured for aircraft and were easily able to achieve the quality.

VDO engineers were dispatched with instruments and during testing they watched in horror as Riva destroyed them with his ‘quality control’ hammer. This happened for the next two years; in normal circumstances both parties would have given up – but rich men are determined. Finally in 1964 the hammer didn’t come down.

Carlo had his office built high so that he could see every part of the boatyard from his windows. Each part of the process was colour coded. The mechanics wore blue overalls, the woodworkers white ones. If he saw men in different colour overalls together he would rush down and demand to know what the problem was.

He set himself impossible standards and maintained them. He offered a refund of \$100 (388 drm) a day for any boat delivered late to a customer; he never had to pay. The boats at this time cost roughly \$10,000 (39000 drm), at least 30% more than his competitors, but his order books remained full. “The customers paid for quality”. Riva owners included Peter Sellers, Rex Harrison, Sophia Lauren, the Aga Khan’s brother, King Faroukh and Saddam Hussein as well as President Ceausescu of Romania.

Not all of his relationships with owners were smooth. Nick Thompson owns Riva Revival, a company dedicated to the sale of Riva boats. He explains “One of Riva’s customers in 1959 was an Irishman called Cyril Lord. He decided to save a bit on the delivery charge so he picked up the boat in Fishguard, Wales. He then drove it across the Irish Sea in a huge storm and the boat was so damaged it had to go back to the factory. Carlo Riva was furious.”

Another owner learned to his peril the dangers of drinking and driving a Riva. He was drunk and tried to bring his Aquarama alongside a jetty too fast. The inevitable meeting of boat and immovable object did so much damage that the craft was written off, to Carlo’s ire.

Owning a Riva is an expensive business. Many are kept lovingly in bags and only put in the water to be used by their owners. The roar of the engines is an expensive pleasure and refurbishing your boat takes around 1,200 hours. In Monaco there is a storage facility blasted out of solid rock and in it Rivas sit on shelves in a temperature controlled environment – like fine bottles of vintage wine. ▶



Above: Modern classics. An early Riva shares the water with one of the newer models produced by Ferretti Group.

Inset Right: Norbert Ferretti at the helm of his own classic.

Inset Bottom: The Riva brand is synonymous with glamour.

The Riva craft tend to be better suited to waters that are not too tidal. The rudders and propellers hang down underneath the hull and are designed for Mediterranean type seas. At their peak Riva Aquaramas cost around \$400,000 (Carlo preferred to sell the boats for dollars because the Italian Lire was so weak) and the earlier models are now much sought after objects by fanatical collectors. When found, each is meticulously restored to their former glory and the project avidly followed by Riva enthusiasts.

One owner who purchased his craft in 1963 (he paid roughly \$8,000 for it) was once contacted by an anonymous buyer who offered him a new Aquarama and £50,000 (350,000 AED) for his old boat. He turned it down. An Aquarama sold recently in England for \$480,000 (1.68m drm) defying the classic laws of boat values. Riva Revival company currently has a 1967 Aquarama for sale for \$520,000.

In 1969 Riva had a difficult problem. His showroom in the USA reported that Americans were increasingly fond of fibreglass boats. Riva faced the difficult choice of using a material that was technically advanced over wood but lacked its beauty. The other problem was the enormous quantity of mahogany needed to make an Aquarama, a

commodity that was becoming more and more expensive as the world increasingly faced a shortage of wood. As one Riva executive explained, "In the end we were competing at auction to buy wood against furniture manufacturers and architects. It just got too expensive".

In 1969, and one suspects reluctantly, Carlo Riva became committed to fibreglass. Other Italians were sceptical and treated him as a traitor to his tradition. "Fibreglass. The material of toilet seats!" one spat.

The company made 146 fibreglass boats, but Riva never really came to terms with the new materials and the philosophy of owners not wanting to maintain their boats. Demoralised he began to think about offers to buy his boatyard, something he would never have done before. He sold the business and in 1971 left the yard forever, having personally overseen the construction of 3,760 wooden boats, of which 203 were the stunning Aquaramas – a fitting legacy for one of the most talented and determined boat builders of all time.

After selling the boat-yard, Carlo maintained his interest in his beloved wooden boats though. He opened businesses called Revisione Assistenza Motoscafi (RAM) and the Monaco Boat service – both purely set up to look after roughly 40 Rivas a year. These repair yards remain solely in the ownership of the Riva family. The Riva name changed hands and for 16 years was in the ownership of the Vickers Group, who also owned Rolls Royce. And in a strange twist of fate it was briefly in the same ownership as the ChrisCraft company in early 1998. Riva is now owned by Ferretti in Italy. Interestingly it was also owned by a company based in UAE.

The Riva Aquarama is one of the great design icons of the twentieth century, alongside the Coca Cola bottle and others. What it represents is the totally uncompromising pursuit of perfection regardless of cost or effort. The idea of selling a 29ft speedboat for nearly 1.5 million AED is almost unthinkable. Except that Riva did it.

Carlo Riva recently celebrated his 80th birthday. His legacy is the most revered speedboat ever made and one that is still increasingly sought after. These boats hardly ever depreciate. Twelve years after they stopped making them they are still one of the most exhilarating boats to ride in. My own favourite Riva moment was being driven down the Solent at speed. Noticing the mirror I asked the driver if Riva's were used as ski boats. He looked at me strangely "Put it this way sir – the mirror is not used to look at overtaking vessels".

