

FERRUCCIO LAMBORGHINI'S RIVA



RIVA REVIVAL

Is this the most desirable powerboat ever made? Ferruccio Lamborghini's personal Riva Aquarama was owned by him for 20 years – and it's just been restored after years of neglect

WORDS Mark Dixon // PHOTOGRAPHY Maurice Volmeyer and Riva-World



I T WOULD BE HARD to come up with a man-made object more glamorous and desirable than the Riva Aquarama motor yacht. Instantly recognisable by its wraparound windscreen and varnished mahogany hull, and powered by two muscular V8 engines, it was the ultimate 1960s status symbol of the Italian Lakes, the French Riviera or the Florida Keys. In terms of classic style, you can't beat an Aquarama.

Unless, that is, it's an Aquarama fitted with two Lamborghini V12s, which was commissioned by Ferruccio Lamborghini himself, raced by him and in his ownership for two decades. Now *that's* something special.

Imagine, then, the excitement when Ferruccio's personal Aquarama was rediscovered in 2010

rotting in an Italian boatyard. Sadly, the brace of V12s was no longer in the boat, having been removed when Ferruccio sold it in 1989 (one of the engines is now in Lamborghini's museum). But, following a painstaking restoration by Dutch specialist Riva-World, this Aquarama is once again powered by Lamborghini: supercar engines in what is surely the original superboat.

The Aquarama may have a 1950s *la dolce vita* vibe but in fact it wasn't introduced until 1962, an evolution of the company's Tritone model. Its name is supposedly a nod to the widescreen movie format Cinerama, because of its wraparound windshield, and it was distinguished from the Tritone by a non-slip gangway along the rear deck that made it

easier to get in and out of the water at the stern – Riva owners being the kind of beautiful people who waterskied or went swimming in the world's more temperate climes. It was always an extremely expensive toy: in the late 1960s it cost 13 million lire, when a Ferrari 365GT 2+2 was a mere eight million.

Although the company's history has been chequered – it was founded by Pietro Riva in 1842 and sold by descendant Carlo Riva in 1969 to the Whittaker Corporation in the USA, bought by UK group Vickers in 1988, and returned to its present Italian ownership in 2000 – the Aquarama proved remarkably long-lived, with the last wooden-bodied example being made in 1996, even though glassfibre construction had been introduced on other →

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Riva models by the new American owners back in 1969. Fewer than 800 were made, and survivors in top condition are often advertised at around half-a-million euros today.

No pressure, then, on the man who was entrusted with bringing Ferruccio's personal Aquarama back to concours condition: Riva-World's founder, Sandro Zani. He restored his first Riva some 12 years ago, after which the work just kept coming in. These all-wooden boats are extremely labour-intensive to rebuild and this example was particularly challenging, as Sandro explains:

'When Ferruccio placed his order in May 1968, the boat he was allocated, no 278, had already been constructed with the standard 220bhp small-block V8 engines,' explains Sandro. 'But Ferruccio was adamant that it should be powered by two of his V12s, which meant modifying the rear of the boat to accommodate the longer engines. He also wanted the regular exhaust mufflers ditched in favour of straight-through copper pipes, and he asked for deck grab handles to be fitted.'

'Because the V12s developed considerably more power than the small-block GM V8s supplied to Riva by Crusader Engines in the USA, their transmissions were also upgraded to the Borg-Warner Velvet Drive 72C units normally used with big-block V8s.'

'The boat was ready by August that year, but soon after Ferruccio took delivery it became apparent that all was not well. For one thing, the engines, being intended for automobile use, delivered their power and torque too high up the rev range. Riva sent its chief engineer, Lino Morosini, over to the boatyard near Ferruccio's summer house at Cervia, where the Lamborghini engines were taken out and the Riva engines refitted. After that, Riva had little more to do with the boat, which is why it developed something of a reputation in-house as being a failed experiment.'

This, however, was not the whole story. Far from it: Ferruccio tasked his own engineers with carrying out further modifications to the V12s, which incorporated parts from a number of Lamborghini models: the Islero, 350GT and 400GT. One of the engines had already been reworked to make it counter-rotating, which

involved changes to the lubrication system and the casting of a unique water pump. The engines were cooled by pumping river, sea or lake water around a heat exchanger for their oil and coolant, and then passing it over a transmission cooler before sending it through the double-skinned exhaust manifolds and ejecting it from the exhaust ports on the stern.

The changes made to the V12s' power and torque delivery seem to have been effective, because Ferruccio himself piloted the revitalised Riva (with Italian superstar boxer Nino Benvenuti as navigator) in the 1969 Pola-Cervia waterski races. He did the same again in 1970 but after that he used the boat less and less, and in 1989 the engines were removed and the hull was sold with its refitted Riva V8s. Amazingly, when the boat was rediscovered in 2010, a letter signed by Ferruccio was found inside it confirming transfer of ownership.

More than 40 years after its construction, the Riva was quite seriously decayed, says Sandro Zani. 'It was complete with all the original fittings, but decades of exposure to sea water had taken their toll. The problem with these boats is that you cannot hide any damage, because the wood is varnished, not painted.'

'An Aquarama hull is made up of three layers of mahogany, two of them overlapped diagonally in an X-shape and the third running horizontally from bow to stern. That's made from a single piece of 6mm mahogany veneer, nine metres long, which has to be perfect and free of knots, so you can imagine it's not easy to find! The strips are pressed to shape, glued and secured with bronze screws, but the joints of the two diagonal layers were never perfect when they were new, and sea water penetrates and causes black stains. You can use a stain remover, but the marks will always reappear.'

'Some of the wood in this boat was still in pretty decent condition, but the outer skin was poor – you could peel layers away with your fingers. The deck frames above the fuel tanks at the rear were also water-damaged, and we decided to replace the keel. We source the wood ourselves from Africa but it's sometimes impossible to find exactly the same type as was used in the 1960s – even Riva had to change the specification over the years.'



Sandro goes on to describe just how many types of wood might go into a Riva product. 'Mahogany is used extensively for the hull, keel and frame, seats and deck. Then there is mahogany plywood built up in nine layers for the bottom panels, below the waterline. Ash and cedar are used in the cockpit area, while fir is used for support blocks under the deck, and beech for anything that needs bending, such as rounded corners on seats and decking.'

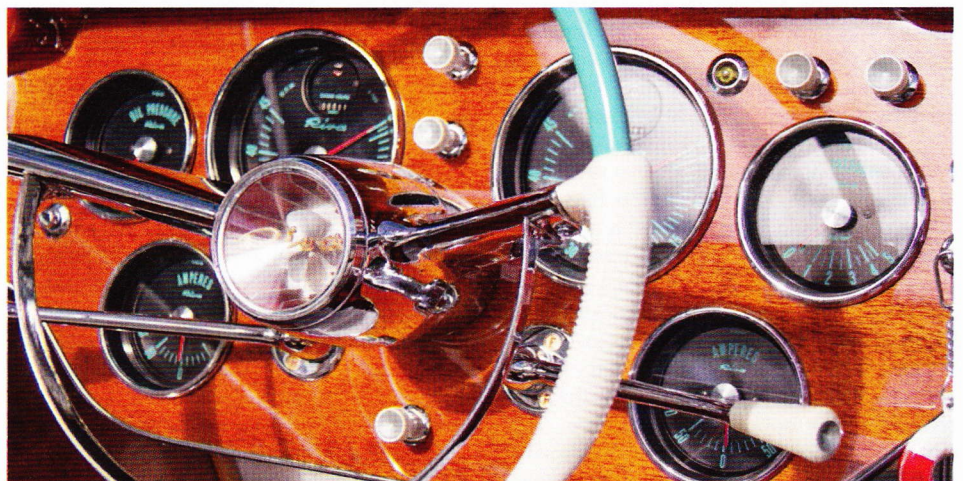
'To give you an idea of the time it takes to restore a Riva: well, after sanding the exterior of a bare hull by hand, using progressively finer grades of grit on the sanding boards, the mahogany is stained with Stoppani's *pasta mogano*. It's then left for five or six days so that the stain's thinner can evaporate.'



'Next, three coats of heavily thinned clear varnish are applied by brush, to soak into the wood. They are followed by another 20 coats of varnish, which are rubbed down after every third coat. This takes about three months.

'Once the varnish coating is judged thick enough, the hull is given a very fine sanding and a further three coats of UV-resistant varnish are sprayed on – followed by another fine sanding, and another three coats of sprayed varnish. Finally, the hull is polished to remove any tiny imperfections, before the last detailing such as the waterline and antifouling paint is applied.'

But, of course, dealing with the woodwork was a known quantity for Sandro and his team. Finding and rebuilding two Lamborghini

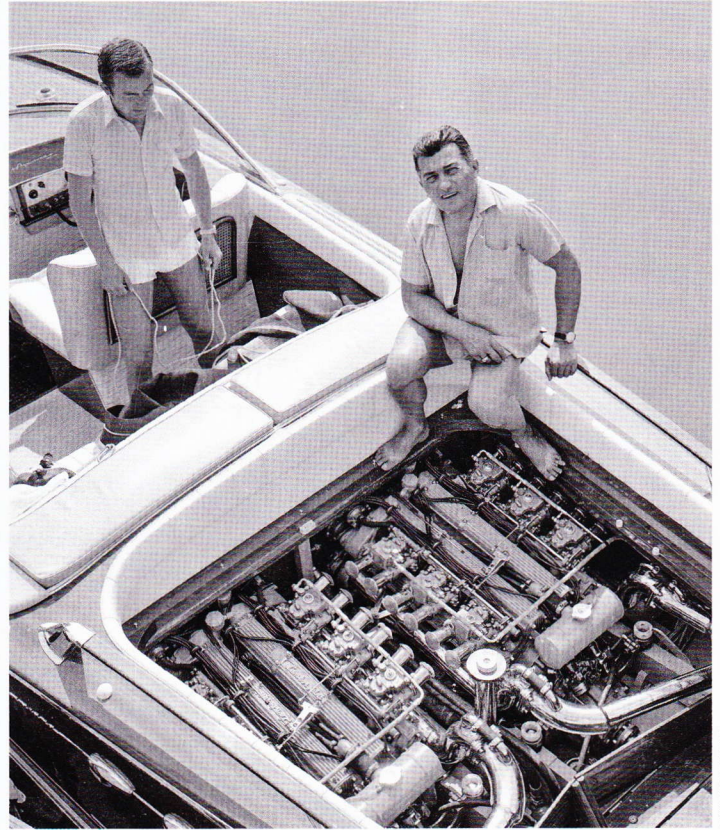




SILVANO MARINI



SANTE GREPALDI



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V12s was a very different matter. Suitable donor units were eventually sourced from a German Lamborghini specialist and from US collector Gary Bobileff, though many parts had to be specially made; and GT Car Parts in Phoenix, Arizona, was very helpful in providing some of the smaller bits and pieces. 'Bill and Dave even let me go through their stock with a flashlight, and pointed me in the right direction of specific parts I was looking for,' says Sandro.

'I was lucky in that the Lamborghini museum – which has one of the original engines – allowed us to borrow some of the unique parts to copy. I went to see Fabio Lamborghini and gradually we struck up a friendship, to the point where he just said "Take the parts and let us have them back when you're done." That was hugely helpful.'

Sandro was even able to seek advice from Lamborghini's legendary engineer and test driver Bob Wallace, shortly before his death in 2013: 'He told me he wasn't involved in 1968, because the engine builder then was Roberto Frignani, and as test driver Bob had other things on his mind. But he played around a lot with engines in his free time, and was able to give advice about modifications for the counter-rotating engine to me and to Carobu Engineering, who built the V12s for us.'

California-based Carobu carried out a computer-modelling programme for the V12s beforehand to optimise performance. That meant changing the bore and stroke, camshaft timing and intake flow, and commissioning

'SINCE RESTORATION THE AQUARAMA HAS LITERALLY BEEN GIVEN THE THUMBS-UP BY FABIO LAMBORGHINI AND CARLO RIVA'

new billet crankshafts and forged pistons. All this increased engine capacity from 4.0-litres to 5.5-litres, for which each block had 9mm-thick deck plates added on top of each bank of cylinders. And, for the counter-rotating engine, new oil holes had to be drilled in the opposite face of each cam, using a process called Electronic Discharge Machining.

Following trials of the re-engined hull on Lake Iseo, the V12s were finished in Riva's trademark bright blue paint, and the exhaust manifolds and many other parts chromed to match the brightwork found all over an Aquarama. Just laying out the parts for polishing – including the letters used to spell out LAMBORGHINI – occupied three large tables in the Riva-World workshop.

Since then it's literally been given the thumbs-up by both Fabio Lamborghini and

Carlo Riva, who were treated to demonstration runs on the lake, with Carlo himself taking the wheel for a spell.

'It's actually quite easy to pilot,' says Sandro. 'There are separate throttle and transmission levers for each engine, for manoeuvring in tight spaces, but on the open water you operate pairs of levers together and steer with the rudder. Even though there are revcounters for each V12, it pays to listen to the noise they are both making to ensure that one is not running slightly faster than the other.'

Without actually being in the cockpit while the boat is travelling at speed, it's hard to imagine the sheer noise that these two Lamborghini engines – running short, straight-through exhaust pipes – produce; video clips on the internet give only a poor impression. It's fair to say that you wouldn't feel able to indulge in idle chit-chat, however.

Although the fortunate new owner is keen to display his restored Aquarama at prestige boating and/or motoring events, nothing had been decided as this issue went to press. For us, there's one blindingly obvious contender: the Villa d'Este Concours, held every spring on Lake Como. Who knows, maybe the debut of this Riva-Lamborghini could open up a whole new competition class at the Continent's most glamorous concours.

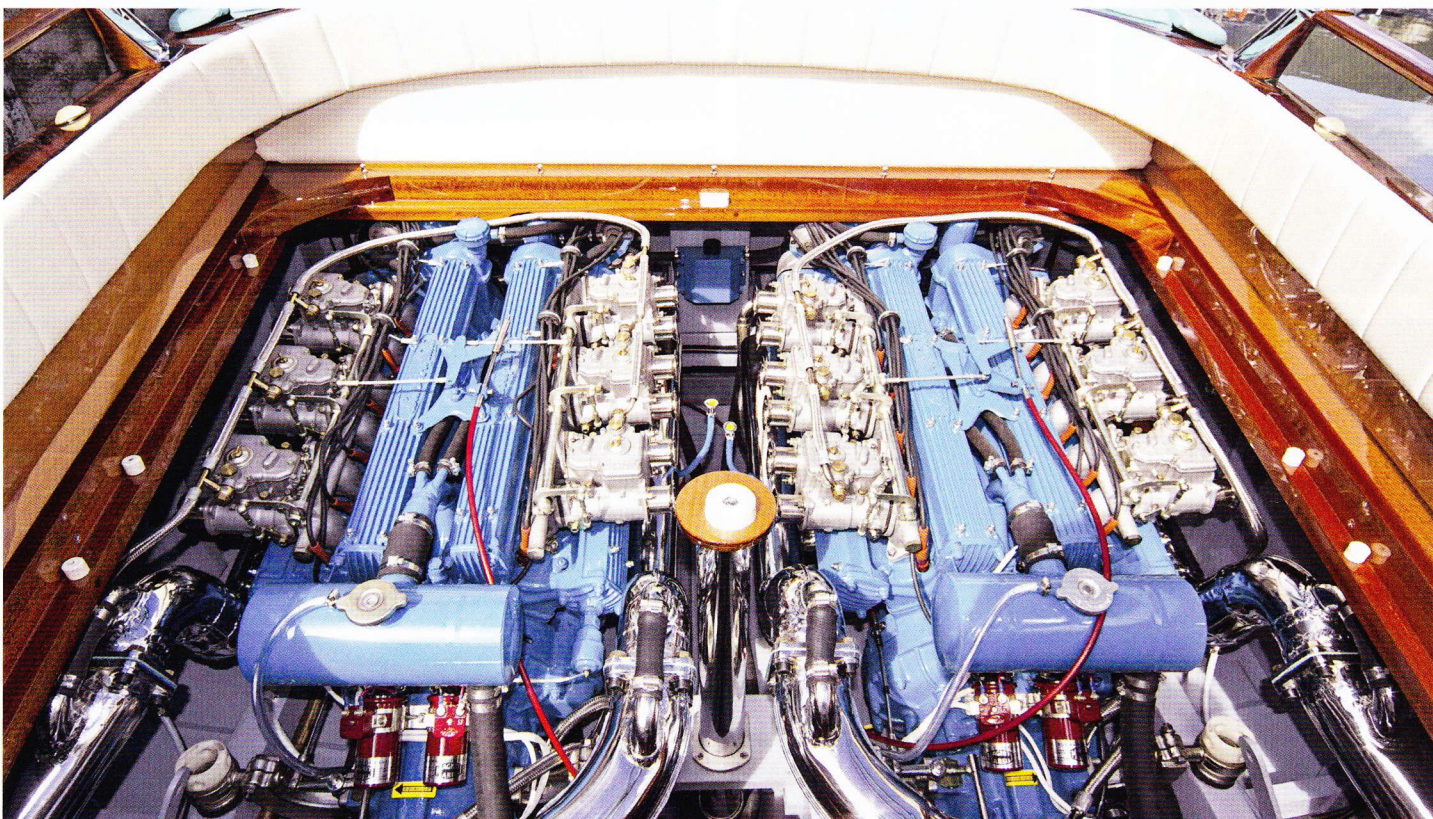
THERE'S A fascinating video of the Aquarama's restoration, including archive footage of boats being built at Riva in 1961, on YouTube. Enter the keywords 'Total restoration Riva Aquarama Lamborghini 278'. For more about Riva-World, see www.riva-world.com.

Facing page, clockwise from top left
Ferruccio Lamborghini (in dark suit, on right)
chats with Carlo Riva during his 1968 visit,
having arrived in a new Islero; Ferruccio in
relaxed mode before the 1969 Pola-Cervia race;
on the same hot July day, waterskier Antonio
Marussi and boxer Nino Benvenuti look happy.



1968 RIVA AQUARAMA

ENGINES Two Lamborghini 5.5-litre V12s, each with six 40DCOE Weber sidedraught carburettors
POWER 322bhp each @ 5100rpm **TORQUE** 379lb ft each @ 3600rpm **FUEL CAPACITY** Two 240-litre tanks
TRANSMISSION Two Borg-Warner Velvet Drive Type 72 direct-drive hydraulic gearboxes
PERFORMANCE Top speed 48 knots (55mph). A standard V8 Aquarama can reach 40 knots (46mph)



THE RESTORATION

You need more than O-level woodwork to rebuild a Riva...



Above, left and right
When rediscovered in 2010, Ferruccio's Riva was in a boatyard on the other side of Italy from Cervia, where it had been kept during his ownership – note how the chromed letters spelling out LAMBORGHINI have been replaced at some point with a painted logo. The boat was remarkably complete with all its dashboard instruments and bespoke fittings, and every single part was disassembled, cleaned and if necessary repaired before being reinstalled; the seat trim was also original but faded and brittle through exposure.



Clockwise from far left
All the outer panels were removed and renewed, because exposure to sea water had caused damage that would be impossible to disguise beneath clear varnish – however, the deck frames and underlying structure were still in remarkably sound condition; the first of the two rebuilt V12s was temporarily installed in the hull for testing before final painting and chroming; this close-up of the rear deck before varnishing shows the incredible precision needed by Riva-World's craftsmen when installing the new woodwork. *Enel*

