

# BIKE

## FESTIVAL

RIVA DEL GARDA

**"The Bike Festival Riva del Garda creates real experiences – and has been doing so for 30 years."**

In spring 1994, the first Bike Festival took place in Riva on Lake Garda. In thirty years, the event has evolved into an absolute must-visit in the bike industry. Uli Stanciu is the initiator and founder of the event. The origins of his idea date back to the 1980s – his desire to create something lasting has been fulfilled. A conversation about manufacturers, end consumers, trends, and visions.

*Riva del Garda, 05.12.2023*

**How did the idea come about to organize a Bike Festival at Lake Garda?**  
The basic idea of the Bike Festival originated from the Bike Magazine. At that time, I was the editor-in-chief, and the magazine had been on the market for four years. The innovations during that time were massive, with so many new products entering the market that our testing and technology department struggled to examine them all. What many people don't know is that back then, people wanted even more information than is prepared in a magazine today – around 50 brands with 170 types of bicycles were available. The idea of inviting manufacturers and readers to a festival was born.

**What was your vision?**

We wanted an exhibition where manufacturers could display their bikes and customers could view the models. And this had to be outdoors, not in a hall, allowing people to rent, test, and make a purchase decision about the bikes. In the first step, I communicated my idea to the manufacturers, and they were immediately excited. They knew that this was an opportunity to connect with end customers, who would provide feedback on the product after returning the bikes to the booth. This direct connection did not exist before.

**The Bike Festival – an endeavour that didn't exist at that time and was a significant undertaking. How long was your lead time?**

I became real around mid/late 1993. But: Ten years earlier – in the early 1980s, when I was the editor-in-chief of the Surf Magazine – I organized a surf festival at Lake Garda, attended by 2,500 people in one day. While surfing depends on the wind, I realized: With biking, we don't have a weather problem. Even if it rains, our program works. The attendance at the first Bike Festival was 4,000, almost double the surf festival on the first attempt. Today, 60,000 to 70,000 people attend the Bike Festival.

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## **A significant logistical challenge...**

... which is why we soon sought the help of an agency. In the first year, I still called manufacturers myself and conducted acquisition. That would be unimaginable today.

## **What else helped you?**

Excellent contacts at Lake Garda. Through windsurfing, I met Paolo Zontini – a hotelier from Riva. I said to him: We need contacts, permissions, and a place where everything can take place – this place needs electricity, toilets, and more. All of this had to be organized. I am very grateful to Paolo Zontini for joining me on that path, and I like to say: I was the engine of the Bike Festival; Paolo Zontini was the transmission. Without him, I wouldn't have had the strength to turn all of this into reality.

## **When you look back on the past 30 years, what comes to mind?**

That we have continuously grown and evolved. We had to adapt to innovations – for example, the e-MTB opened up an entirely new target group for us. We also benefited from the mistakes of some other organizers. End consumers have always looked for and found a contact point with us. So, we also integrated the gravel trend into our program, offering exciting opportunities for everyone to try out.

## **Is the Bike Festival today as you envisioned it back then?**

Of course, in 1993, I couldn't look 30 years into the future, but my intention was indeed to create something lasting and offer genuine experiences. And we succeeded – visitors have loved the event from the beginning, the exhibitions, the races, the shows. And where else could you meet and talk to stars like Hans Rey or Karl Platt? Even today, it's the most beautiful thing for me when I look at people, see them smiling, and realize: The Bike Festival and the associated experiences make life richer.

## **Why was the decision made for the first weekend in May?**

Purchase decisions are made early in the year, so we had to find a date for the Bike Festival before the season. Winter, the southern German region, and the Alpine region were not an option because the event was supposed to take place outdoors, and there was too much snow here. In addition, two considerations came into play: First, I wanted a region we knew, and second, we looked for a long weekend so that people could plan a small trip. Lake Garda was and is the ideal combination of all factors.

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### What are the 3 biggest success factors of the Bike Festival?

1. The many events around the actual fair, such as the Bike Marathon and the Enduro race.
2. The fair is always exciting.
3. The stars you meet there.

### What has changed over the years?

Initially, the festival was attended by bike-readers from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland; now we have become more international. We have many Italian visitors from Trento, Verona, Bergamo, the large area around Lake Garda. We moved away from guided tours. Originally, bike guides led groups of 20, 25 participants, but that is no longer the case today. On the one hand, people know Lake Garda and the routes, and on the other hand, there are GPS data on the internet, navigation devices, and more.

### Has the audience changed?

Partially. The proportion of women has increased, there are many young families among the visitors – we have also promoted this by initiating the pump track for children and the Scott Junior Trophy. And, as mentioned, with the e-MTB, an entirely new clientele has been added – one that was not previously involved in the world of biking and now rides up the mountains. All in all, the audience is wonderfully mixed.

### Have you experienced difficulties?

There were some challenging phases in the 30 years of the Bike Festival, for example, in the early 2000s, when the Bike Festival was in danger of sliding into an extreme bubble. I said back then: 'Guys, we must not become too extreme and niche; we want to appeal to all bikers and not scare anyone away.' I strongly expressed my opinion at that time, and fortunately, there was a turnaround.

### What are the highlights of the anniversary edition in May?

No one knows the region and the people better than the current organizer – Garda Dolomiti, which naturally works in our favor. This way, we can make the most of the festival's location and offer a complete experience. As usual, there will be numerous exhibitors and diverse events next year. The focus will certainly not deviate from biking, but aspects such as sustainability, accessibility, and Italian culinary culture will have their place at the Bike Festival as well. In addition, some highlights that we have not revealed yet. In any case, I can already promise many beautiful experiences.