



Un Altro Po (Another Po)

Determined to demonstrate a simpler, cleaner way of travelling, environmentalist and documentary film-maker Giacomo de Stefano and friends navigated Italy's longest river from Venice to Torino. Julianne Davidow has their story.

Giacomo's voyage had two objectives. The first was to draw attention to the state of this great river, which has been polluted by agricultural and industrial wastes, denuded of natural vegetation and dammed for electrical power. Second, simply to experience the feeling of freedom which comes from being carried by the current. He would also use the wind and the power of his arms to traverse the same route, in the same way, as people did for centuries. He invited anyone who wanted to help out to accompany him. Some who sailed on different stages of the journey were his friends – Roland Poltock, Bruno Porto, a skipper from Brazil, and Damiano Carraro – but he also wanted to meet the people whose lives connected with the Po, to hear what they thought of the river and what has happened to it. He did just that and more than a few wound up sailing and rowing along with him as well.

The Po is 405 miles (652km) long and 1,650' (503m) across at its widest point. It runs eastward across northern Italy, from Monviso in the Cottian Alps on the border between France and Italy, to the Adriatic Sea near Venice, passing through such historic cities as Piacenza, Cremona, Mantova, Ferrara, Torino and, indirectly, Milan. Due to its connection with the river, the surrounding Padan Valley has grown to become Italy's main industrial area. It is home to nearly a third of all Italians and the land is some of the most highly cultivated in Europe.

Flowing through a variety of habitats, the river contains many indigenous varieties of fish: carps, rudds, bleaks, eels, as well as fish introduced in ancient times, such as the catfish, the sunfish and the crucian. It also hosts migrating fish, which swim down to salty habitats to feed and then return to the river to reproduce. But due to dams that have been built to harness electricity, these migrating fish can no longer reach the stretches where they normally reproduce.



Master boatbuilder Roland Poltock. Photo: Giacomo de

The progressive degradation of the Po has caused profound changes in the relationship it has had for centuries with the surrounding population. Professional fishermen can no longer make a living from it and recreational fishers are turning away as well. "It's important to focus our attention on all of the earth's water but most especially on the rivers," says Giacomo, "because rivers make up 90% of our sources of drinking water; desalinisation is costly

and time consuming. Though our lives are dependent on them, few people are focusing on the rivers. I admire what Bobby Kennedy Jr has done in the USA with his organisation Riverkeeper. It's an independent member-supported advocacy group which monitors the Hudson River's ecosystem and I'd like to create a similar kind of foundation here in Europe."



Born in the city of Asti, in the land-locked, mountainous region of Piedmont, as a boy Giacomo was surrounded by the alps. With snow on the ground from November to April, he spent all his time outdoors: skiing, skating, climbing, and wandering in the countryside. He loved mountain climbing and trained to tackle extreme traverses on the big walls until one day a freak accident left him briefly paralysed from the chest down. "After that, the *anima mundi*, the soul of the world, started to speak to me and told me to stop trying to challenge nature and instead, look for a way to enjoy it slowly, respectfully. I wanted learn how to be useful on this earth, but I didn't yet know how."

When he was 19, Giacomo went to study architecture at the University of Venice and discovered a whole new world. Here he fell in love with the sea and with old wooden boats. He started rowing in a *topa*, a traditional Venetian flat-bottomed boat, then bought a completely rotten boat and



Above: Seen on the Canale delle navi in Venice, Iain Oughtred's 19'2" (5.84m) Ness Yawl is a double-ended beachboat with a classic sail-and-oar hull shape. Photo: Giacomo de Stefano. **Facing:** One of many muddy moorings near Bastida Cantarana Pavia. Photo: Linda Kaiser.

restored her himself, subsequently learning how to row in the Venetian style, standing and looking straight ahead. After that, he taught himself to sail with another *topa* which had a lugsail and then moved on to a *topo veneziano*, a bigger version of the *topa* with two masts.

He continued sailing in the shallow waters of the Venetian lagoon until in 1994, he finally took to the open sea. He and a friend sailed from Venice to Rovigno, Croatia, on a John Hanna Tahiti ketch, built in Maine in 1939. From then on he read everything he could find about Blue Water sailors such as Joshua Slocum, Vito Dumas, Alain Gerbault, Sir Alec Rose, Sir Francis Chichester and the great Bernard Moitessier, author of the classic sailing narrative, *The Long Route*, which speaks of voyage as spiritual journey. Moitessier became a kind of guru for Giacomo. "He was my master, with his minimalist philosophy. He seemed to be a kind of maritime Thoreau. It was when I read Moitessier that I began to dream of actually living on a sailing boat."

It took eight more years of moving from place to place, job to job, working as an architect, managing shops, hotels, and

bars and even travelling around the world as an art dealer, for Giacomo to decide to abandon everything else in order to live his dream. "After September 11, 2001, the art market collapsed and like many people, I started to re-think my life. It was a similar experience to when I'd fallen and become paralyzed so many years earlier." Having always been fascinated with Michelangelo, Giacomo was drawn to the area in Tuscany near the Tacca Bianca quarry where the great renaissance artist chose his first marble to sculpt. With a companion, Giacomo bought an old house made of grey marble blocks, overlooking the sea and the island of Corsica. He restored the house and tried to settle down but after six months, he sold his share of the property to his companion and returned to his travelling ways.

He gave up trying to 'fit into civilization' and became a kind of vagabond, doing odd jobs and trekking across the alps with his dogs. For the past three years, Giacomo has lived mostly on his boat, a 43' (13.1m) Marconi ketch designed by Alan Buchanan and built in Trieste in 1965, the same year Giacomo was born, using mahogany and teak over oak taken from a



100 year old cruise vessel. It's moored on the small, woody island of Certosa, close to Venice and just 15 minutes from the open sea. After being abandoned for many years, Certosa has recently been revitalised with a sailing school, moorings and laying up facilities, and a shipyard where boats are both repaired and constructed. "Instead of buying a house, I wanted to invest my time and money in a project which could benefit the planet. I believe we're all connected and we need to act for our common good. I like living in a place where we work

with sailing boats and natural resources, where we move with intelligence and show respect for people and animals. It's beautiful here; my dogs can swim and I can see the Dolomites."

In 2004, he spent four months in China as an assistant to a film-maker friend and discovered the kind of work, making documentary films, which has become another of his passions. He's managed to combine his two loves, sailing and film-making, and has done several documentaries, one on Albania



Above & below: As a consequence of intensive excavation, the bed of the river Po is now over 19' (6m) lower than it used to be, so when the water was low Giacomo's crew had to haul the boat up weirs instead of using the chiusa - locks. Photo: Annibale Volpi
Facing page: Running out of river... Giacomo hauls the boat near Balossa Bigli where his trip came to an end. Photo: Linda Kaiser.



where he travelled last summer with three friends. "Albania is the last paradise of the Mediterranean. It was isolated for 50 years under a communist dictatorship but since 1991, it's been a Republic. We sailed there following the old Venetian trade routes. Our aim is to encourage tourists to be light and respectful of this ancient culture and we hope that mass tourism will not destroy this wonderful place." And, of course, he's in the process of making a documentary on his Po River journey, as well as writing a guidebook for others who'd like to travel the same route he did.



The boat Giacomo chose for his Po voyage was constructed by his friend, master boatbuilder Roland Poltock. Designed by Scottish designer Iain Oughtred, the boat is a 19' (5.6m) Ness Yawl, similar to those the Vikings once sailed and the kind fisherman from the Shetland Islands still use. Clinker-planked with mahogany plywood, she's light but very seaworthy, good for both rowing and sailing.

Giacomo set off from Certosa on 30 April, 2008 and stopped in Chioggia, Porto Viro, Crespino, Santa Maria Maddalena, Felonica, Revere, Motta Baluffi, Plesine Parmensa, Cremona, Monticelli D'Ongina, San Zenone Po, Piacenza, Soprarivo di Calendasco, Pavia, Bastida and finally Balossa Bigli, just outside the Piedmont region and almost 81 miles (130km) from Torino. There, the current was running at close to 14 miles per hour (22 kmph), too strong for them to continue on to Torino, where Giacomo had originally planned to finish his journey. Wanting to respect nature, he chose not to fight the current. He turned the bow of the Ness Yawl downstream and ran back to Venice in only eight days. In total, he had travelled more than 620 miles (1000km).

"It was beautiful and rewarding sailing, very challenging,



often moving under trees, always looking for the right place to find the right passage," he says. Arriving in Venice, he sailed past San Marco on choppy seas with 25 knot winds before ending his voyage at Certosa Island.

"Without the Ness Yawl Roland Poltock built, the trip could never have been made," says Giacomo. "Roland is known as a poet among boatbuilders, with a tremendous knowledge of the history of boats." Born in Cornwall almost 60 years ago, Roland learned to love boats from his father, an officer in the British army. After living in various places around the world including Iran, where he built boats for the Shah, Reza Palevi, Roland settled down in Venice where he fell in love both with the city and with his wife Betty. The boat he lent Giacomo was strong enough for the open sea, yet light enough to be pulled from shore when necessary. But Giacomo and his companions had to learn to row 'English Style,' looking over their shoulders to see where they were going.

The trip was arduous and sometimes they found themselves trying to make headway against 7 knot (12 kmph) currents. When the current was stronger than their top rowing speed and yawl drifted backwards, they had to get out and pull with ropes. But the boat stood up to the most rigorous tests. Giacomo chose May and June to make his trip, usually good months on the river when there is the right amount of water. They had a fairly smooth journey during the first month. In June, however, melting snow from the Alps and heavy rain caused the Po to rise 25' (8.5m), running over its banks. "The river was so high, we were sailing on the flood plain and we had to pass over sandbars and rocks, which normally are visible. So we needed to be constantly on guard. In some places the river is 1 mile (1.6km) wide, so when it was foggy we couldn't even see the other side." He'd expected to stop for perhaps two weeks at most but he lost more than a month, having to stop many times to wait for the waters to recede.



Tall, lanky, and affable, Giacomo looks like a cross between a relaxed university professor and the ardent outdoorsman that he is. He loves interacting with people and talking about his work and vision. All along the route he met generous souls who became interested in his journey; they opened their homes and extended their friendship to him and his companions. The trip was dictated more by instinct than by calculation and came out of the classic model of a journey which both needed and prompted sponsorship. Giacomo didn't ask for anything but he gratefully accepted whatever people wanted to give. "I wanted to show that it's possible to travel and have a good time, while respecting nature and helping the local economies. In 1999, I began to study the way mass tourism is destroying many parts of the planet. There must be a way, I told myself, to travel like Bruce Chatwin, Henry David Thoreau and other interesting people did in the past; a way to move without polluting too much. It's possible to have wonderful holidays, travelling slowly by bicycle, on foot and by boat, meeting people, tasting the local food and following the local customs."

*In addition to the 'crew' mentioned above, Giacomo would also like to thank other friends who gave up their days and nights to help the project: designer Patricia de Ross who designed the website; photographer Linda Kaiser who took wonderful pictures; marketing manager Marco Scurati who set out the philosophy of *Un Altro Po*; Sandro Soramae who made the website work; Eleonora Scarpa ready to help with any problem; and film-maker Ricardo Bosia and his brother. The website for the journey, www.unaltropo.com, is only in Italian for the moment but plans are underway for a completely bilingual site with information on all Giacomo's work.*