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Tuscany in a classic Alfa Romeo

The only snag with a classic car in Italy is that the police keep stopping you — to check out the engine. Nick Rufford puts his foot down



(Nick Cornish)

Nick Rufford

The policeman pulled me over on the outskirts of Poggibonsi. It was at the end of a beautiful stretch of twisting Tuscan road, snaking beneath tall cypress trees and poplars, and I assumed I was guilty of some unknown offence: something that broadly translated into “having too much fun while at the wheel of a car”.

I had a glove box full of tourist excuses ready for him, but all he wanted to do was talk about the car I was driving. He tapped the bodywork of my 1300cc Alfa Romeo Giulietta, made in 1958 and painted duck-egg blue, and smiled.

“This is the same as the police car in Italy when I was a boy,” he told me. “Too slow to catch criminals nowadays, but back then bad men drove Vespas.”

He made me open the bonnet so he could inspect the engine, muttered something appreciative about it being “belissimo” and motioned me on with a wave that came close to a salute. I glanced back at him in my rear-view mirror as I accelerated away. He was standing by the side of the road, watching the Alfa disappear.

I know exactly how he was feeling. Ever since Mrs Robinson sat next to Dustin Hoffman in his Alfa Romeo Duetto and told him she didn’t drive a stick shift, I’ve been in love with the Italian convertibles of the 1950s and 1960s. Back then, they were everywhere. Not, of course, in cash-strapped, Harold Wilson-era Britain, but in every good film I saw at the time.

Remember the red 2600 Spider from Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Mépris*, starring Brigitte Bardot? No? Then surely you must be familiar with the white Veloce Spider used by Edward Fox in *The Day of the Jackal*?

He hid his rifle in the exhaust and gave it a quick alfresco respray in the woods as part of his assassination attempt on de Gaulle. I defy any boy under the age of 14 to watch that sequence and not find these lithe, pocket-sized machines irresistible.

This summer, after 40-odd years, I finally got the chance to drive some of them. Two Germans, Walter Laimer and Gert Pichler, have started a company called Nostalgic, offering classic Italian sports cars for hire in six locations, including Tuscany, the Italian Lakes, Sicily and the Côte d'Azur.

The pair have scoured Europe for Alfa Giulias, Giuliettas and Duettos, lovingly restored them and made them available for clients to drive on specially chosen routes, where the countryside has changed little since the days when they were built.

As soon as I heard about them, I picked up the phone. At last I was going to turn childhood daydreams into reality. Thing is, once I got to Tuscany, it turned out everyone else also wanted to be in my fantasy.

It wasn't only the local carabinieri. When I parked the Giulietta outside the only bar in Ville di Corsano — a pretty village on the road to Siena, surrounded by vineyards — a gaggle of locals came out to stroke and admire it.

At the Trattoria Moscadella, in Castelmuzio, a little later in the evening, I looked up from a plate of figs and pecorino cheese to see a black-and-white photo of a Giulietta hanging on the wall opposite me. When the owner realised I was the driver of the real one outside, he waived the bill. At times it felt as if I were carrying a letter of introduction from Silvio Berlusconi.

Nostalgic bases its Tuscan clients in Il Borgo di Vescine, once a 13th-century hamlet, now redeveloped into a small, exclusive resort by the local Paladin wine family. Its suggested routes fan out from here, taking in both Siena and Florence and following some of the route of the Mille Miglia, an open-road endurance race that ran most years between 1927 and 1957.

You can drive them in convoy, with a repair truck hauling spares; or strike out on your own, equipped with an emergency phone number and a sense of adventure. No prizes for guessing which option I took.

Some of the time I barely noticed the landscapes I was driving through. When the car's the star, even the most hallowed stretch of Italian hillside can boil down to nine or 10 smooth gear changes and the plucky roar of a 1300cc engine — or (as happened more than once on my trip) anxiety about strange knocking noises from under the bonnet. (In case of breakdown, Nostalgic will dispatch a repair team — but it doesn't appreciate it if you've wandered off one of its approved routes.)

Mostly, though, driving the Alfa just deepened my enjoyment of being in such a handsome part of the world. It was September when I was there — warm enough to sit outside in the evening, but not so hot that you needed to take shelter in the middle of the day.

Crucially, the roads were no longer jammed with irritable families in people carriers, shuttling between their villas and the nearest supermarket. The roof came off each morning, and I was able to sail along at a steady 50mph (the recommended speed for an Alfa of this vintage), soaking up the sun and structuring the day around leisurely stops at Nostalgic's suggested attractions, such as the Etruscan stronghold of Volterra or the papal enclave of Pienza.

The last day was typical. The plan was to drive into Florence in the morning and wander round the Uffizi gallery. I set off early enough, but by the time I arrived, the car parks around the edge of the city's historic core were all full.

I had three options. One was to leave the car parked in an anonymous suburban street, at the mercy of Firenze's finest car thieves. Another was to drive straight back to the hotel at Il Borgo di Vescine with my tail between my legs and the Uffizi unvisited. The third, by contrast, was a little bolder.

I parked right outside the cathedral, beneath Brunelleschi's soaring dome. It didn't say "no parking" on any signs nearby — at least, not in a language I understand. But I doubt that tourists are routinely encouraged to even drive their cars into such a place, let alone leave them there.

After four days of open-topped driving and the cooing approval of almost every local, I was beginning to feel invincible. So I put the roof up, locked the doors and went to feast my eyes on Raphael and Botticelli for a couple of hours.

When I got back, the Alfa was still there, glittering in the afternoon sunlight, without a ticket or a clamp.