

CLASSIC DRIVER

Grand Tour Internazionale Di Sicilia-Targa Florio



“Cabin crew seats for landing please,” says the Captain and, as our Boeing 737 descends, sun-baked Sicily comes into view surrounded by a twinkling Mediterranean sea. Three minutes later, the aircraft is 100 feet above the runway with the jagged mountains that make up this island’s terrain towering over us; it becomes obvious why this is the perfect place to hold a classic car touring event.

Less than a year ago, the **‘Associazione La Sicilia dei Florio’** was formed with the intention of staging an event that would combine the enjoyment of driving classic cars through Sicily’s rugged and beautiful countryside with its historical heritage, customs and cuisine: indeed, a ‘Grand Tour’. The prologue was to be a visit to the **Palazzo dei Normanni**, followed by a hillclimb trial up **Monte Pellegrino**, offering beautiful views of **Palermo** spread out below. After lunch at the top, the cars descended to **Palermo’s Piazza Verdi** for the official start of the tour at 5pm, finishing the day with an evening run along the coast to Porto Rosa on the north-east corner of the island.



Then followed five days of Grand Touring, first moving down Sicily’s eastern coast, then turning west, before heading north and up through the island’s centre to finish back on the northern coast at **Termini Imerese**. It was a journey interspersed with trips to archaeological sites, castles, museums, plus a day blasting around the **Syracuse Grand Prix** circuit, all joined together by road sections winding through the beautiful Sicilian countryside and punctuated by five-course gastronomic delights.

Thursday saw the greatest contrasts, with participants gazing into one of **Mount Etna’s** steaming craters in the morning – while a sleet-filled wind whistled around them – and six hours later sitting in the evening sun at Syracuse’s 2500-year-old amphitheatre, watching a Greek tragedy.



Most of the classic marques were represented, with entrants coming from all parts of Europe. **Sasha and Marija Hrovat** brought their **1967 Aston Martin DB6** all the way from Slovenia, the car having just undergone an engine rebuild. **1980 Group 1 European Saloon Car Champion Hanno Schumacher** brought his **1957 Alfa Romeo Touring Spider** from Germany; this is just one of his collection of 'Old Timers' that he keeps in a converted dance hall!

Two of the most unusual cars present were also the oldest. Albert Wetz's immaculate **1927 Bugatti T38** had to be hand-cranked each time to get it started, and wrestling with that huge steering wheel around Sicily's hairpins all week is a feat beyond belief – all in the true spirit of the pre-War Targas. Then we come to **Marco Rollinger's 1951 ex-works Ferrari 212 Vignale Spider**. Marco says that apart from a body change at the end of the '51 season, when the factory sold the car, it's all original. Thanks to Marco, we can see and hear the car on the road, rather than gathering dust in a museum: wonderful.





There was a competitive element to the week, consisting mostly of the Italian speciality of timed slow runs, each requiring a different and precise average speed. One exception was a night trial, staged in the hotel car park, where participants had to lap the park three times while weaving through strategically placed traffic cones. It's not as easy as it sounds, as a number of flattened cones will testify. On the road into the town of **Falcone** for another of the 'slow run' tests, the event's Road Book dictated the usual left and right turns, but this time the happy sound of children enjoying themselves floated down the narrow streets: perhaps a school was nearby?

As the cars made their last turn into the test area, it all became clear. Lining the town square were most of Falcone's schoolchildren, ready to greet the cars and enjoy the spectacle. Once this test was completed, the competitors enjoyed a wonderful lunch provided by Falcone's Mayor. At this lunch, the event organisers presented a cheque to the Falcone branch of **S.F.I.D.A.**, an organisation dedicated to helping underprivileged people throughout Italy. Next year's event will also raise funds for **S.F.I.D.A.**



A circuit of the breathtaking **Targa Florio** course was reserved for the last day, with the **Associazione La Sicilia dei Florio** invited to join forces with the **Automobile Club Palermo** for the day, thus providing a whole host of classic cars to tackle this jewel in Sicily's motoring crown. One of the Automobile Club's members is **Principe Francesco Moncada**, a cousin of **Prince Michael of Kent**. To the delight of all the entrants, **Prince Michael** was on hand to drive the **Targa** in a Mercedes – as well as paying a visit to the **Targa Florio Museum** at **Collesano**. He declared that it had all been an unusual and enjoyable experience.

The final stop on the **Grand Tour** was the appropriately named **Grand Hotel Termini Imerese**, home to the **Ferrari** and **Alfa Romeo** teams during the halcyon days of the **Targa Florio**. The prizegiving ceremony was conducted by **Marchesa Costanza Afan de Rivera** (a direct descendant of Targa founder **Vincenzo Florio**) and **Nino Vaccarella** (twice winner of the Targa Florio), so the Grand Tour ended in great style.

Carlo Picco took the overall prize, driving his beautiful little blue **1956 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint** with **Giuseppe Giaconia's Porsche 356** and **Daniel Fischlin's Triumph TR4** finishing 2nd and 3rd, respectively. It had indeed been a **Grand Tour**, with the emphasis on enjoying Sicily, its wonderful driving experiences, and the company of other classic car owners from all over Europe.



Next year's tour covers the western side of Sicily. For details and full 2008 results, see www.grandtourdisicilia.it.

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