

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## Argentinean Mille Miglia

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Pit-stop for Large and Small

**Today's story actually comes to you from 37,000 feet, where your correspondent is peeking out of the window of a British Airways 747 at wisps of cloud gently blowing over the South American rainforests far below. I'm reminiscing about the past few days spent enjoying some of the best roads and hospitality that the continent has to offer, while getting to know some of its most important car collectors. As jobs go, it probably beats managing a hedge fund, at least this week...**

The justification for travelling 8000 miles across the Atlantic for such a motoring feast is Argentina's 'Mil Millas' (thousand miles, or mille miglia) rally, a rather more relaxed interpretation of its Italian namesake. This being South America, life is taken at a somewhat different pace, so those thousand miles shouldn't be measured too literally: the quality of the scenery, menus and company were more pressing concerns than enduring a punishing schedule in pursuit of a soon-forgotten trophy. That being said, there was a timed regularity element to the event which some local crews have mastered almost to an art form: the first three teams were separated, after two days of driving and dozens of timed controls, by just a few hundredths of one second *in total* from a perfect score.

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No problems, we'll win - the ever-optimistic Valentino Balboni

Needless to say, your author's team was not one of those in question. I was paired with veteran Lamborghini factory test driver and old friend **Valentino Balboni**, who celebrated 40 years with the Sant'Agata firm last April, and we had been generously loaned an immaculate **Lamborghini 400GT** of 1967 vintage by Buenos Aires-based collector and Argentine Mitsubishi importer **Claudio Scalise**. I must confess that, despite many miles in classic Lamborghinis, none of them dull, I had never undertaken a long trip in a 400GT – so this was to be a journey of discovery in more ways than one.

The **Mil Millas** is set in some of South America's most spectacular scenery, in the **Patagonia** region at the lower tip of **Argentina**. Getting there takes a bit of effort, with a 12-plus hour flight from Europe to **Buenos Aires** followed by another couple of hours from there to the grandly titled '**Aeropuerto Internacional**' outside the small lakeside town of **Bariloche**, from where it's a 45-minute drive. Still, it doesn't take you long after arrival to conclude that it's worthwhile. Base camp for this upmarket adventure, and setting the tone as participants are billeted there for the four-day duration, is a rambling hilltop hotel, the **Llao Llao Resort**. Combining 'Leading Hotels of the World' luxury with a touch of *The Shining* isolation, it's a welcome change if you're used to the daily merry-go-round of school-style accommodation on most historic events.

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How cool is a petrol named after a racing driver?

On arrival, the first day is set aside for scrutineering and the distribution of rally essentials such as maps, road books, event passes, race numbers... and enough sponsors' gifts to fill two large rucksacks (also included, of course). From the sheer volume of these gifts, I assumed our benefactors either didn't expect participants to have far to travel, or to have private means of doing so (which would explain the row of freshly arrived executive jets parked up at Bariloche's *Aeropuerto*). Gratitude turned to concern when, among our gifts, I discovered countless boxes of over-the-counter medicine and remedies for ailments I didn't even know existed. Was this a forewarning of local bio-hazards or a sign of national hypochondria? Fortunately, neither: the main sponsor just happens to be a drug company.

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Claudio Scalise in '31 Alfa 1750GS Zagato on the road to victory

I couldn't help smiling at the paradox of an event which prudently serves nothing stronger than Coca-Cola to drivers at lunch but gifts them all bottles of champagne and hard liquor before the start.

Primed and ready for action, it was time for Valentino and I to make the acquaintance of other participants and our Italian steed for the next few days. The extensive grounds around the hotel had been set aside as a closed paddock area and dozens of teams, mechanics, staff and assorted friends and family were milling

around in preparation for the drop of the starter's flag. Since the first edition of the Mil Millas back in 1989, this has grown into a full-scale event, with no fewer than 191 teams entered this year. The choice of cars is somewhat eclectic, with organisers trying to give everyone a chance at least once: we encountered everything from a genuine **Blower Bentley** and a pair of lovely **6C 1750 Alfas** (including the car sold by Gooding for a record price at Scottsdale last January), through a well-known **Maserati A6GCS**, to myriad **Pagoda Mercedes** and **1970s Porsche 911s**. Oh, and of the **19 Ferrari 365GTSS** ever built, two were on this rally, including the car sold for a record price by Bonhams at Monaco last May. There are plenty of up-and-coming collectors here.

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#### A South American Special thunders through the Patagonian scenery

Waiting patiently in a corner of the assembly area sits our handsome **Lamborghini 400GT**, its rakish Franco Scaglione-inspired lines perfectly complemented by a subtle, deep blue livery. Valentino fires it up with the calm demeanour of 'business as usual' and the four-litre V12 settles down to a *basso profundo* idle as we check all the systems. No sooner are the levels and temperatures up to normal than we're ushered by stewards up to a noisy starting ramp, where cheerful announcer **Hugo Semperena** (editor of the country's *Ruedas Clásicas* car magazine) proclaims our names to great fanfare. Cameras flash and patrician event president **Emilio Dumais** drops the Argentine flag... *l'avventura* has begun.



Valentino is driving and I settle down to navigating duties: mastering the directions in the road book isn't difficult (they give you an English version, too) but I've resolved that we'll leave glory in the regularity stakes to others, especially having glimpsed some of the timing hardware which Argentine teams have attached to their dashboards: they probably have more computing power than the original Space Shuttle. We, on the other hand, have a speedometer which reads in miles (the roadbook is in km) and old wind-up wristwatches.

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#### Pass the tape... high-tech Stratos maintenance

Our first day sees the convoy winding its way north under foreboding clouds, past vast lakes and up into the mountains towards neighbouring Chile. The pace is brisk and I'm soon reminded that a) old cars weren't meant for very tall people and b) the driver has a steering wheel to hold; the passenger just needs to make do. We're soon in the groove and, when it starts to rain, Valentino simply comments, "And now we need feet like feathers," guiding the 400GT swiftly over the wet, twisty passes without breaking a sweat or, more importantly, grip.

We're soon at the Chilean border where the military uniforms worn by the guards are clearly inspired by the fashion seasons of 1939-1945 and don't encourage you to test their sense of humour. Nonetheless, everything has been arranged in advance of our passage and the convoy is swiftly ushered through, making its way along noticeably bumpier roads now skirting snow-capped peaks. Reflecting that we've probably just doubled the number of Lamborghinis in the country, Valentino observes that in his 40 years at the factory he never expected to one day find himself driving one in Chile.



Lunch awaits at a grand, secluded hotel, before we begin the trip back to base, a total of some 400km for our first day's driving. The cars are getting more spread out but remarkably few appear to be having problems. The pace of some is surprising: the Blower Bentley seems to leave smaller cars shuddering in its wake, a diminutive **Amilcar CGSS** looks barely large enough to fit one person, let alone two, yet pushes on fearlessly with its occupants huddled together, and a **Group 4-spec Lancia Stratos**, complete with more lights than a Christmas tree, looks and sounds superb as it tackles the twisty stages.

Refreshed after what is billed as 'happy hour' (although it lasts for three), a five-star dinner and a good night's sleep, the next day's route takes teams northeast across vast plains, overlooked in the distance by rocky hills: the set of a Spaghetti Western comes to mind. The road follows the contours of a wide river and, as clouds give way to sun, our steely-eyed Italian is able to let our charge have its head. Latin speedometers appear to have been calibrated with impressing female passengers in mind, rather than scientific accuracy, but it's remarkable just what rapid progress this 41-year-old makes across open ground (the *co-pilota's* code of silence precludes specifics...).





Dawn breaks on our last day and, suitably fed and rested, crews prepare to travel the final 250km to the chequered flag with the leading teams still separated by the tiniest of margins. Valentino, somewhat to my surprise as I wouldn't normally associate a Lamborghini driver with the restraint necessary to do well in regularity trials, informs me that coming last "would not be good for the honour of Lamborghini", followed by the casual observation that "actually, some co-drivers are quite skilled at this"...

We're rewarded with brilliant sunshine and soaring temperatures as we head south through a dramatic landscape, with swooping lakeside roads giving way to flat, wide expanses before climbing up into the hills. I've had a quiet word with a fellow team, whose members seem quite expert, to learn more about this mysterious regularity business. They're rather surprised when they learn that we've used this intelligence to leapfrog them on the leader board - I use the term loosely, as this means climbing from 137th to 134th.



Another fine lunch under our belts, which we rush, given our newly discovered appetite for the joys of finely timed regularity competition, and we're headed towards the finish in the centre of **Bariloche** for a welcome by what seems like the entire town. Children are waving flags, older ladies and gentlemen are pointing out the cars to each other with smiles of admiration, and everyone seems genuinely happy to see us: the warmth of the crowd reminds me of the reception on the Italian Mille Miglia. After what feels like 1000 miles and as many meals, we drive up on to the podium and give our best Spanish greetings, fearful that the crowd will be disappointed to learn that this lovely Argentine-registered Lamborghini is actually driven by *gringos*. And the overall winner is... well, unsurprisingly not us, but in fact our friend Claudio Scalise, driving his lovely black **1931 Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 Spyder**. Neither he nor the car missed a beat, which provided cause for another night of celebration.

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#### A hero's welcome

It's been a great experience and one I'd recommend to anyone who loves old cars and has a sense of adventure. You can take the regularity part as seriously (or not) as you like but you can't fail to enjoy the landscapes, great roads with barely any traffic and superb hospitality. And if you do happen to be good at regularity, **Valentino Balboni** would like to hear from you.



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