

Targa tourist

Photographer Martyn Goddard makes a pilgrimage to Sicily to trace the route of the legendary Targa Florio road race

Photography: Martyn Goddard





Above

The Fiat 500 Gucci Edition makes its way through some typically Sicilian 'traffic'; the roads here are frequently deserted and offer enthusiastic drivers some of the very best tarmac in Europe.

THE LIGHT turned green and we sped away, the rasp of the straight-eight's exhaust echoing off the faded facades of the hilltop town of Collesano as we headed north on the sinuous route of the world's oldest motor race, the Targa Florio. The year was 1983 and I was sitting in the mechanic's seat of what is thought to be the 1926-winning Bugatti Type 35T that was driven by Bartolomeo Costantini, enjoying the ride after photographing the car for the now-extinct *Supercar Classics* magazine. One of the images from that shoot ranks among my favourite photographs from a career of nearly 40 years, so when the opportunity arose to drive the roads of Sicily again, this time in Fiat's 500 Gucci Edition, I was first in the queue at the boarding gate.

The first part of the trip is spent climbing the SS120 mountain road to Cerda, the starting point of the Targa Florio. The route developed into a 45-mile loop in the Madonie Mountains with 700 corners, and it wasn't until 1961 that the 60mph average speed was smashed by Wolfgang von Trips in his Ferrari Dino 246SP.

Since my last visit in the 1980s I've hankered after a return pilgrimage to the home of one of the most exciting motor races ever staged. The cinder block pit complex still exists either side of the road, and from there we head south into the mountains. The road is laid across the landscape with wonderful changes in elevation via a series of hairpin bends.

At one location on the SP24 beneath Caltavuturo we stop to look back across the valley where spectators would have seen and heard the cars approaching. Historic roads the Targa route might have, but long sections of the tarmac surface, by a quirk of geology, are now literally sliding down into the valley.

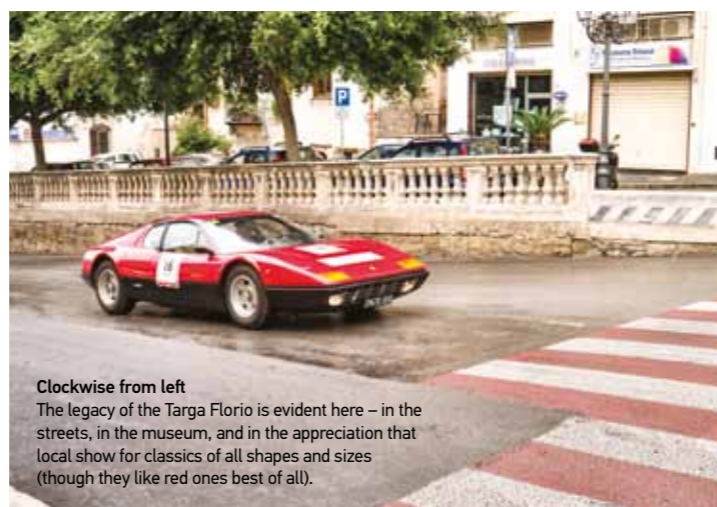
At our lunch stop, Bar Caricaturi in Collesano, the cafe is decorated by signed vintage prints. My favourite, Vic Elford's 1968 winning Porsche 907 is apt, seeing that the team from Stuttgart claimed the most wins on the event. Collesano is deserted at lunchtime but the small Targa Florio museum is open, and a look at the exhibits rounds off my return

to the town after 30 years. It's just a few miles back to the coast and a right turn on the SS113 east to join the arrow-true straight of the Targa Florio, which beckons us onwards.

Soon the road bears the little Fiat to the medieval town of Cefalù, home to our overnight stop, Hotel La Calette, which clings to the rocky coastline east of town. The 500 has company in the car park; a Lancia Fulvia is cooling down after a day's action in the hills above the coast.

Cefalù's narrow streets were not built for automobiles so we leave the hotel on foot for an early morning breakfast in the shadow of the Norman cathedral, which was built in 1091 and then decorated with gilded mosaics by the Byzantines in the 12th century. In fact, the old town has architectural evidence of all Sicily's occupations.

Night time rain showers have coated the Fiat's black metallic paintwork with Saharan dust, but the sea and sky are bright blue for the drive east along the corniche – and what a drive it is. The road is completely deserted save for a few groups of Lycra-clad racing cyclists and the odd blur of sports motorbikes passing us on the short straights between the many blind, rocky bends.



Clockwise from left
The legacy of the Targa Florio is evident here – in the streets, in the museum, and in the appreciation that local show for classics of all shapes and sizes (though they like red ones best of all).

At Sant'Agata di Militello we turn 180 degrees onto the SS289 and up into the Nebrodi Mountains and national park. The topography changes from Mediterranean shoreline to forested mountainsides not dissimilar to those in mid-Wales, only with sunshine. Small groups of locals are out foraging, and as we pull over briefly to survey the mountains, I peer into a wicker basket full of various mushrooms that to the untrained eye look like they might well be life-threatening.

The mountain road continues to climb with endless *toranti* (hairpins) until, at around 1500 metres above sea level, we gain our first view of Mount Etna, standing all alone, its conical shape conforming to every child's idea of a volcano. The road from Cesarò cuts through black lava flows before entering a region of walled vineyards and olive groves along the SP711. Traffic, again, is almost non-existent – something a Brit living in London can only dream of ordinarily. Every now and then we come up behind a dawdling Fiat Panda and pass as the driver – elbow out the window, always, deep in conversation with a passenger, always – hugs the centre line.

Taormina, a favourite destination of 19th-century Grand Tourists, is very busy; this,

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apparently, is where the locals want to be on a Sunday afternoon. The town is built on a series of terraces, with the narrow roads cut into the hillside and adorned by villas, many of which are now hotels. Road signs and hotel directions appear in such profusion and in type so small that I consider pulling over to don my reading glasses, but our sat-nav delivers us successfully to the wrought iron gates of the Grand Hotel Timeo. As we relax on the terrace with a panoramic view of Mount Etna, Taormina and the Mediterranean it's not hard to imagine previous guests taking afternoon tea: the Kaiser, Edward VII, DH Lawrence, Tom Cruise and Bob Dylan.

We continue to track the classic Sicilian byways the following morning, our day's

drive taking us up the SP92 dell'Etna road to Europe's highest active volcano. The hotel staff have reassured us that occasional eruptions are good – simply the mountain's way of letting off steam – and, indeed, as the 500 snakes along there is a plume of smoke rising from the crater.

Here we have the odd tour bus to contend with, but the road is a terrific drive and I imagine what my old 1964 Alfa Giulia would have been like to drive on such an ascent. Our 1.2-litre Fiat requires fourth gear and a lot of revs to maintain a good pace up the mountain.

Once at the summit car park we find ourselves faced with a choice between a €57 cable car and minibus to the crater, and a 20-minute walk up a slippery incline to view the 2001 fissure. We opt instead for a coffee and a rapid descent.

Back at base camp, we swap from new 500 to 1970 Cinquecento – this one hired out by the Grand Hotel Timeo. Our next destination is the mountain village of Savoca, the location Francis Ford Coppola chose for scenes in the first *Godfather* movie, and which I am assured will make provide a most suitable backdrop for some photographs of our button-cute rented steed. ➤

**Clockwise from top**

The sun-scorched landscape has barely changed over the decades – this is part of the Targa Florio route in the mountains; classic Cinquecento, rented from the Grand Hotel Timeo, pauses for breath in Taormina.

Anna from the hotel volunteers to drive the first stint while I survey the landscape. Climbing into the car I'm reminded how simple the 500 really is: this is no-frills motoring, with only a speedo, odometer and three switches to distract you from the road.

Ascending the mountain with the sunroof open, the lack of soundproofing makes conversation testing, but the noise from the tiny engine undoubtedly has a certain charm – as, it turns out, does Savoca, which proves to be a superb location. But for the ubiquitous satellite dishes attached to the medieval houses, these scenes could easily have been shot in 1970, I think to myself as I snap away.

Before piloting the Fiat back to the hotel we stop for an espresso in Bar Vitelli, the location of Michael Corleone's meeting with Apollonia's father in the film.

Back in the car, I lift the starter lever between the front seats and the engine grinds into life. The steering is surprisingly heavy for a rear-engined microcar, but once on the twisty road back to the coast it feels precise via the large plastic steering wheel. There seems to be only one way to drive the car up and down hills, and that's in second gear. There is no syncro on first, which is just to get going, so on the descent I decide to save the drum brakes and employ engine braking.

On climbs it's bags of revs until the little

twin tells you to just sit tight in second and be patient. Once back on the main coastal road it's possible to use the gearbox, zooming towards the curves, slipping down to third and then powering out at 40mph with no chance of hearing your passenger above the engine note.

My drive coincides with the traditional two-hour Italian lunch break, and despite a spirited attempt by a lady in a Lancia Ypsilon we are not overtaken once. The locals still drive the first generation cars and we have seen many on the roads over the past few days.

In Taormina I park the classic car by our 2013 Fiat 500 and appreciate the size difference. The new car does continue the spirit of the original, however, and all the advantages of a small car in Sicily are still apparent.

Our last drive is across the Piana di Catania, which is not unlike the central rift valley of California, the S288 passing citrus plantations before crossing the mountains to Piazza Armerina. We buzz by a shepherd with his flock of sheep and goats in an olive grove, a pastoral scene from the 19th century save for the Azzurri football shirt and baseball cap.

Sicily is blessed with exquisite ancient sites and the Roman mosaics at Villa Romana del Casale are mind-blowingly complete. They are vast and tell of life in the Roman Empire in the third century AD, with floors depicting chariot racing, hunting and even some risqué bikini-clad maidens.

Next it's along the SS115 to the Valley of Temples in Agrigento. This tree-lined avenue runs adjacent to the World Heritage site sporting three of the most complete Greek temples dating from 430 BC. The short section of highway looks like a JMW Turner painting, and by the time we arrive the sun is casting long shadows of the trees onto the road surface, the temples above a rich honey colour.

We bump up a gravel road to find the Baglio della Luna Hotel, dating from the 13th century. Here at this restored hostelry with terrific restaurant our 600-mile road trip in the 500 ends, and as we settle in I consider just how well the car has acquitted itself. It's no Bugatti, but the Fiat – in both iterations – has tackled the roads of the Targa Florio with real style; this little car's huge following is fully deserved.

THANKS TO

Hotel Le Calette, Cefalù. www.lecalette.it
Grand Hotel Timeo, Taormina. www.grandhoteltimeo.com
Baglio Della Luna, Agrigento. www.bagliodellaluna.com
Just Sicily custom vacation planning. www.justsicily.net.