

# 2018, Grand tour to Sicily and the Targa Florio

A brief summary of our European touring history begins in earnest in 2014, when we joined a trip to Monte Carlo, which had been proposed by a good friend and car club coordinator in the Home Counties. It was an unescorted tour which was very successful, being enjoyed by all. We were impressed with the standard of the organisation, and in the following year undertook another drive, this time an escorted tour with the Lincolnshire based company that had provided the itinerary and package to Monte Carlo.

We particularly like the level of support provided by Mark and Alison for experienced travellers and novices alike. The attention to detail is excellent as is the information provided during the drive and the individual walkie talkie radios, which allow easy communication should stops be required, or if drivers wish to deviate from the route.

Navigation is made simple by the inclusion of fully programmed satellite navigation units in addition to hard copy map books. Our first escorted drive was themed around the 1969 film, "The Italian Job" which took us to Turin, at the end of which we committed to a tour to Northern Spain the following year. We were hooked and we have continued to take a drive with them each subsequent year.

In 2018 we embarked on a tour which was a little unusual as it was not in reality a commercial trip, but instead an invitation to friends and participants from earlier drives who shared the passion for visiting Sicily and the circuit of the Targa Florio.



Needless to say, having previously discussed the viability of such a journey, twelve enthusiastic couples filled the available spaces in short order. Although the group has many makes of car, the Boxster is proving to be the most popular and practical car, providing good luggage capacity and excellent touring ability.

The Targa Florio tour was longer than any of our previous events, because of the distances involved. Rather than being just a road trip, there would be a mix of driving and sightseeing, stopping for several nights at hotels to allow exploration of the surrounding areas and to appreciate the true flavour of the destinations.

Heading through the channel tunnel, we joined our fellow travellers at the luxurious Najeti Hotel Chateau in Tilques for a tour briefing and a 'meet and greet', for although each of us had been on tours before, there were still a few introductions to be made.

The journey through France towards Italy took two days, the highlight being on the second day at the Col du Galibier. We had crossed this several years previously on our way to Monte Carlo and just as then, we were very fortunate that the high mountain road only opened the evening before we were due to cross, after an unseasonably late snowfall.

This is a great driving road and one of my favourites with many twists and turns, but progress can be hampered by the large number of cyclists on the pass. The descent took us to the Col du Lautaret for a lunch stop at the Hôtel Des Glaciers. While everyone enjoyed their lunch break I noticed a lull in the traffic and decided to drive the pass again. The road had miraculously cleared allowing me to get a fast, high octane sprint back over the pass, that certainly got the adrenaline pumping, and which gave the Boxster a good work out and me a grin that would make a cheshire cat proud.



There are of course several ways to make the journey to Sicily, but we embarked on the madness that is the overnight ferry from Genoa to Palermo. If you have not travelled on Italian ferries, it is an experience you might not be able to

comprehend! In summary, it is total chaos - complete confusion mixed with a large helping of latin bravado. Strangely enough however, we all boarded without incident and retired to our cabins for some liquid fortitude. We were treated to a fireworks display as entertainment, courtesy of a cruise liner moored nearby that was about to depart on her maiden voyage.

After the twenty four hour ferry journey, our accomodation in Palermo was a beautiful villa overlooking the harbour. Purchased by Ignazio Florio, the head of the entrepreneurial family who named the villa after his daughter, Igiea. The Grand Hotel Villa Igiea is just a short drive from the ferry terminal, and once our cars were squeezed into the parking they became the centre of attention.



*Our tour organiser Mark, with Nino Vaccarella*

We enjoyed a free day to explore Palermo and that evening Sicily-born Nino Vaccarella kindly agreed to join us for dinner in the villa restaurant. Nino, now in his eighties is a Targa Florio specialist, being a three time winner of the great race, who in 1971 with Toine Hezemans, took the chequered flag in an Alfa Romeo. This race ended the dominance of Porsche who had finished first in the previous five Targa Florio races.

Nino was also a winner in the 1964 24 hour of Le Mans with Jean Guichet at the wheel of a Ferrari 275P and also raced in Formula one. He kindly signed the bonnet of our tour leader's car, which was resplendant in markings representing Nino's Targa Florio successes.

Next day leaving Palermo initially to Corleone, (of "Don" fame) we drove south to the historic hilltop city of Agrigento, famous for the nearby Valle dei Templi Greek ruins of Akragas, the Temple of Concordia being the best preserved of the three ruins, this is a popular attraction spread over a considerable area so we parked the cars in the shade of an olive grove and went to explore the ruins on foot.

Our next hotel for two nights was located on the outskirts of the beautiful coastal city of Cefalù, which was just a short taxi ride away. The narrow cobbled streets and waterfront are home to many superb eateries and it was a fitting destination for our evening group meals.

The Targa Florio was created in 1906 by the wealthy pioneer race driver and automobile enthusiast, Vincenzo Florio. One of the toughest competitions in Europe, the first Targa Florio covered three laps of the circuit equalling 277 miles through multiple hairpin curves on treacherous mountain roads.



*Targa Florio museum in Collesano*

Several versions of the track were used. It started with a lap of a 91 miles from 1906-1911 and 1931. From 1912 to 1914 a tour around the perimeter of Sicily was used, with a single lap of 606 miles, lengthened to 670 miles from 1948 to 1950.



*Targa Florio pits in Cerda*

The 91 mile "Grande" circuit was then shortened twice, the first time to 67 miles, the version used from 1919-1930, and then to the 45 mile circuit used from 1932 to 1936 and 1951 to 1977. From 1951-1958, the long coastal island tour variant was used for a separate event called the Giro di Sicilia.

The start and finish took place at Cerda. The counter-clockwise lap lead from Caltavuturo and Collesano from an altitude over 1,970ft down to sea level, where the cars raced from Campofelice di Roccella on the Buonfornello straight along the coast, a straight over 3.7 miles, longer than the Mulsanne Straight at the Circuit de la Sarthe in Le Mans.

We explored the Targa Florio circuit over the next two days, visiting the original pit complex that still exists at the roadside in Cerda and taking in Targa Florio museums around the



circuit. Having driven the circuit, our respect for the racers increased immensely. The average speeds they maintained over local mountain roads was incredible.

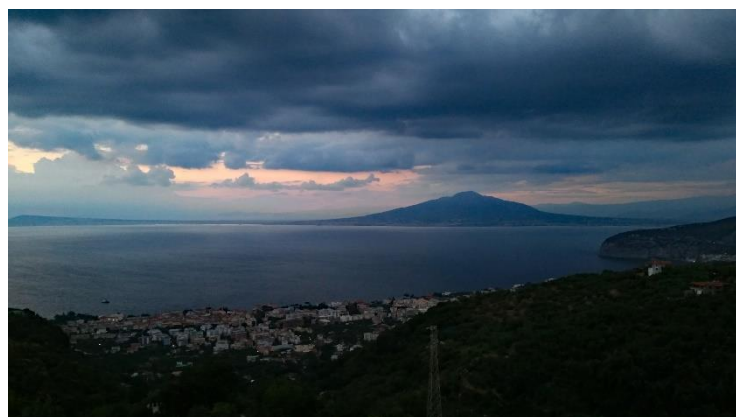
Leaving Cefalu we headed for Mount Etna which although steaming, was inactive. This was also our first overcast day on the tour so a little disappointing. Fortunately though, the clouds had cleared by the evening allowing us views of the volcano from our hotel.

The port of Messina where we would board the ferry to the mainland was just a short drive the following morning, utilising the excellent autostrada we made good progress, via Salerno to the glorious Amalfi coast road and our next hotel.

Although beautiful, the cliffside Amalfi coast road seems populated by scooter racers, hogging the middle of the road, knees scraping the asphalt interspersed with buses and horn tooting Italian road racers. All this on what is in reality a narrow road with very few places to take in the view. Sitting on the wrong side of the car and hitting this particular road at rush hour was a mistake that I would not wish to repeat!



*Porsches on tour*



*The bay of Naples, Sorrento, and Mt Vesuvius*

Our lodging for the next few nights, the Grand Hotel Due Golfi had breathtaking views overlooking Sorrento, the bay of Naples and Pompeii. It also gave us easy access to these tourist destinations and to the island of Capri. The cars took a welcome rest whilst we boarded boats and excursion coaches to places generally inaccessible to cars. We chose to visit Pompeii, this was made simple by the hotel shuttle bus and inexpensive train service from Sorrento. Others in our group chose to visit Herculaneum and Naples. The second day we took a trip to the Isle of Capri which must boast the greatest variety of cabriolet vehicles on the planet, however many seem to have been modified in back street garages.

Back on the road, leaving Sorrento behind we set off to Montecassino to learn some of the history about the rebuilt Benedictine monastery, bombarded into ruins during WW2 after the Germans were believed to be holed up inside. In retaking the high ground the allies suffered 55,000 casualties before the Polish flag and Union Jack were raised, the Polish II Corps being those that led the final assault.

Next we headed to Castel Gandolfo which served as a summer residence and vacation retreat for the pope, before entering nearby Rome for our next layover. There had been some concern about driving into Rome but we were fortunate that our journeys, both in and out of the city were painless. Our accommodation was in the Hotel Villa San Pio which had arranged secure parking nearby which in itself is quite a feat in the centre of Rome. It allowed us to utilise the public transport and tourist services to make the most of Rome over the next two days, seeing many of the marvellous sights in the city.

We departed Rome early in the day to beat the traffic which fortunately we were travelling against. Our drive began on the ancient "Via Cassia" on a two day drive on roads that featured in another classic race, the route of the "1955 Mille Miglia". Our agenda allowed time to stop at many historic monuments and famous passes, firstly the "Passo della Futa" and then the "Passo della Raticosa".



*Passo della Futa Club Mille Miglia wall plaque*

We broke our journey at a beautiful Villa il Poggiale, located near San Casciano in Val di Pesa in the heart of Chianti. The hotel is surrounded by tall cypresses and overlooks vineyards and olive groves so typical of Tuscany, classified among the Italian "Historic Houses" our hosts gave us an introduction to the property, before serving us a delicious dinner on the balcony, from mostly home grown produce.

This two day exploration was a journey that Stirling Moss and his navigator Denis Jenkinson did in one afternoon. Whilst we were not racing, the distances involved put their achievement into perspective for us. We didn't quite manage the 99mph average as we continued to make our way towards the finishing line in Brescia but we did arrive with time in hand to visit the "Mille Miglia museum".



*Leaving the Mille Miglia museum*

By fortunate coincidence, it also allowed us to return to the museum in Brescia where an historic rally featuring over sixty beautiful cars were departing that morning. The event was the fourth running of the Trofeo Valli Bresciane, Memorial Cirillo Gnutti, which was well supported by local business including Porsche in Brescia. Following departure of the competing cars, we also set off under the start gate for a scenic drive through the lakes and mountains of the south Tyrol. Starting with the Lago d'Idro and Lago di Molveno we then crossed the Passo Giovo to our overnight halt at Steindl's Boutique Hotel in Vipiteno. This location put us in close proximity to some of the best roads in the Dolomites.

Our journey towards Austria allowed us to explore the Gardena and Sella passes, before crossing the Passo Pordoi onto the Falzarego pass, then leading us to the Winter Olympic resort of Cortina, where we paused for a lakeside lunch stop.



*Why not join in? at the Mille Miglia museum*



*Crossing the Passo Sella*

The road is a delight. From both sides the drive starts with several challenging hairpins that resemble roads like Stelvio Pass and Grossglockner. The higher you climb the more the scenery opens up, what starts with a drive through what feels like a dense forest suddenly becomes a mountain landscape where you have panoramic views to every direction. We seemed to have this all to ourselves so it was only natural to give our car a little testing too.

Continuing on to the Austrian border we made the obligatory purchase of a vignette (necessary for access to the motorways) which did allow for swift progress to our next stop at the Hotel Kaiser Franz Josef in Millstatt.

This location provided convenient easy access to the Nockalmstraße, the first of two Austrian toll roads we would negotiate that day. It has been used as a test route for many Porsches over the years, the 34 km long Nockalm road is undoubtedly one of the most varied and beautiful Alpine roads that you can experience by car, the panoramic road winds up and down in 52 hairpin. No matter which direction you drive it up from, from Unterwinkl or Inner-Krems, the



On completion of the toll route we were close to the excellent Porsche Automuseum Gmünd, a private museum opened by Helmut Pfeifhofer in 1982 and is still run as a family business. It is housed in a building of the Marhof, the former court stables of the Counts of Lodron, near the center of Gmünd, and shows exhibits from the construction history of the automobile manufacturer on two floors. Exhibits included in an extensive collection are the Porsche 356 Type 356 020 ALU, reconstructed wooden patterns for construction of the 356 and Spyder, the Porsche hunting car from 1956 and Porsche rally and racing cars. Another highlight is Austria's first and only police Porsche 911. Leaving the museum we headed for the scenic Mölltal Straße following the river valley as we travelled west to the Großglockner Hochalpenstraße.

Every one of the 48 kilometres and each of the 36 turns of the Grossglockner High Alpine Road is a treat. The road was opened in 1935 but has been improved and widened with exhibits, museums, trails and excursions to become a major tourist attraction.

Turning onto the Edelweisspitze excursion we hoped for some great panoramas, Kaiser-Franz-Josefs-Höhe is popular stop for visitors. It offers a grand view of Austria's largest mountain, Großglockner, and the nine kilometre long Pasterze glacier which even tops the largest in the Eastern Alps, and feeds the Möll river we had recently followed. The snow-covered Johannesberg caps off the mountain panorama but sadly at the overview, visibility was hampered by showers with a strong wind blowing the snowflakes vertically up the mountain face.

Despite waiting for the weather to clear, we eventually had to move on as we were still a considerable distance from our next stop in Salzburg. Our original itinerary had included a visit to the site of Hitler's retreat at the Berchtesgarden, but we quickly realised the weather delay would make that impossible, so we headed down from the mountains. Naturally the weather improved as we descended and by the time we arrived in Salzburg, blue skies were again the order as we checked in at the Hotel Pension Frauenschuh.



*Solitude at Edelweiss*



*The impressive Red Bull exhibition*

Our first visit to Salzburg left us very impressed with the rural qualities of the city. It is a most agreeable place to spend some time. Our primary reason for adding it to our itinerary was a visit to the Red Bull museum which refreshingly is free to enter.

The collection is housed in an elegant modern exhibition hall, itself as interesting as many of the items displayed inside. Being an aviation and motoring enthusiast I could happily spend a considerable time at the collection. Sadly on our visit they were not flying any of the planes but we did manage to take plenty of photographs and do some shopping.

From Salzburg travelling West, the realisation dawned upon us that we had commenced our homeward leg. Motorway speed restrictions in Austria saw an unprecedented economy boost, maintaining an average of 45mpg for several hours. Whilst not exciting, we were impressed by our fully laden car's frugality. We took this opportunity to relax and enjoy the cruise through glorious Austrian Tirol, passing mountains that are home to the ski resorts of Kitzbuhel and Innsbruck. Fortunately our route combined a variety of roads and before long we left the motorway behind, crossing the picturesque Fern pass before entering Germany at the Joch pass. From there the scenery changed to rolling hills and pastures, and then to lakeside views as we approached our hotel, the Seehotel Adler on Lake Constance at Bodman-Ludwischafen.

The following day saw us continuing our Westward travel, passing through Rottweil, the town that the dog breed was subsequently named after, this was a day of vineyards and hops as we headed through the Black Forest to Baden-Baden, taking time out for a break and some retail therapy both in the town and at the Porsche centre in Baden-Baden.

We crossed the Rhine briefly into France, stopping in Bitche, a town known for its large citadel originating from a castle built at the beginning of the 13th century. The fortress is noted for its resistance during the Franco-Prussian War following which the town became part of Germany until the end of the First World War, when it was given back to France. Our route continued, crossing back into Germany and another pretty wine valley and our hotel in Saarbrücken.



*Tirolean mountains*

On our push towards home, our route continued through Luxembourg where we took the opportunity to refill with reasonably price fuel, before visiting historic sites from the first world war including the refuge of Wilfred Owen who was one of the leading poets of the First World War. His war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare was much influenced by his mentor Siegfried Sassoon, Owen led units of the Second Manchesters to storm a number of enemy strong points near the village of Joncourt. For his courage and leadership in the Joncourt action, he was awarded the Military Cross. On 4 November 1918 he was killed while attempting to lead his men across the Sambre canal at Ors. The news of his death reached his parents on 11 November, Armistice Day.



*Not your usual rush hour traffic*

Our route took us to Cambrai, scene of the first tank battle, then on to Arras which most of the First World War was only ten kilometers away from the front line, it was witness to a series of battles and by the end of World War I, the city was so heavily damaged that three-quarters had to be rebuilt. We joined the motorway to reach our accomodation at the hotel Restaurant La Sapinière in Wisques, just thirty miles from the coast.

The final leg of our trip allowed time for a visit to the Mimoyecques Fortress, an underground complex intended to house Hitler's third vengeance weapon, the V3 cannons aimed at London. The site was targeted for

intensive bombardment by the allied air forces from late 1943 onwards although the exact nature of the threat was not fully understood until the end of the war. Construction work was seriously disrupted by the bombing including on 6th July 1944, when a raid by No. 617 Squadron, famously known as "the Dambusters" used the ground-penetrating 12,000 lb "Tallboy" earthquake bombs, to collapse tunnels and shafts, sadly entombing hundreds of slave workers underground. This action finally forced the Germans to abandon work on the complex and London was spared the onslaught from guns able to fire ten high velocity dart-like explosive projectiles a minute.

This extended tour was slightly over four thousand miles, an amazing experience with too many highlights to mention. As always, the tours are compiled to be both breathtakingly beautiful and educational. We enjoy travelling as part of a group, but also we liked the bonus towards the latter part of solo driving, with the flexibility of being on our own.

This holiday was in reality the best of both worlds and we were grateful to be invited to take part.