



there magazine

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FLOWER POWER

WHY
BELGIAN
FLORIST
MARK COLLE
IS FASHION'S
GO-TO
GUY

A STAR ALLIANCE MEMBER 



ON THE ROAD: NAPLES TO PRAIANO

ADRIAN MOURBY TAKES A CLASSIC ITALIAN SPORTS CAR FOR A SPIN ALONG THE AMALFI COAST



At last we reach the Mediterranean, dropping down rapidly from Pompeii and leaving the autostrada behind. Pompeii is a great cultural pit-stop if you've spent a few days amidst the human chaos that is Naples. A leisurely leg-stretch round the ruins, a few photos of Vesuvius, and a *calzone* leaves us ready to hit the road again.

Our route runs south through Castellammare di Stabia and flirts briefly with the Med with great views back to Naples before we're into short tunnels and sharp bends. Any road called Via

Panoramica needs to be approached with care. Via Panoramica is Italian for third gear. From now on, the route to Sorrento will climb, swerve, drop down and get sucked into long tunnels as it attempts to follow a beautiful but deeply crenellated coast. Pine trees flash by, clinging to the cliffs, and whenever the road widens even briefly there will be a Victorian villa facing the sea, painted in Pompeian red and bright ochre.

Our 1963 Alfa Romeo AF Giulia Spider purrs along throatily, but comes from a time before power-assisted steering or disc brakes. By the time

we are approaching Vico Equense, my shoulders feel every twist and turn. Suddenly we are swallowed up by a long tunnel through the rock and realise that Vico Equense is never going to happen. The builders of SS145 (aka Via Panoramica) cut off that section of coast. When we emerge again we're approaching Montechiaro and the suburbs of Sorrento.

My wife and I had always wanted to drive to the Amalfi coast in a classic Italian car. Its open top and blood-red leather upholstery are the stuff of classic on-the-road romance. Sergio, the proud owner, took me through the controls at Naples Airport – I'd never used a hand-cranked accelerator before – but with some trepidation I was soon ready to hit the Italian road. The break at Pompeii came at just the right time and now with aching shoulders, I'm looking forward to handing this low, sleek beast

over to the concierge at our hotel in Sorrento.

The city itself comes into view round one of an infinite number of bends. Fortunately there's a pull-in point where a man is talking on his mobile rather than hawking his stall of his lemons. I pull up so we can

“THE OPEN TOP AND BLOOD-RED LEATHER UPHOLSTERY ARE THE STUFF OF ROMANCE”

ALAMY ILLUSTRATION KATE BUTT/PHANESOME FRANK



take in the vista and the old man nods approvingly at the machine I am driving. "E bello," he says. Sorrento looks pretty *bello* from up here too, a Roman cliff-top city that was given a resort-style makeover in the 19th century, with vertiginous hotels on top of sheer cliffs that drop down to simple bathing platforms in the sea.

We pull up at the Bellevue Syrene, built over the site of a Roman villa that was the temporary home of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. She wrote a poorly received and excessively moral story here called *Agnes of Sorrento*. Ibsen stayed at the hotel opposite and employed his time to better effect, working on *Peer Gynt*.

The hotel has grand, colourful drawing rooms and a dining room that is a mock-up of a Pompeian villa, but the best thing about it (aside from the views of course), is the valet service that takes our extremely valuable car and hides it safely till the next morning.

After a revitalising breakfast on the hotel's sunny terrace, we linger over the *Herald Tribune* and the jaw-dropping views until it is time to head down the Amalfi Coast. Our first

stop is Don Alfonso 1890, a restaurant above Sorrento that celebrates its 40th birthday this summer. I'd booked for lunch as I was driving. I knew if we had evening meal at Don Alfonso, I'd not be able to resist its wine cellar, which is cut into the rock and predates the Romans themselves.

The drive up to Don Alfonso doesn't wind too much, but by God, it's steep. Now I'm getting to know second gear very well as we pass through a landscape of lemon trees, olive groves and more modern hotels. At the restaurant, Alfonso and his wife Livia are very welcoming. The success of this place is due almost as much to the friendliness and charm of the hosts as the food – and that really is superb.

Even without wine I could happily snooze my way to Praiano were it not for the SS163, which makes Via Panoramica seem like an autobahn. After the village of San Pietro the road loops back on itself so often it looks like Elizabeth I's squiggly signature drawn on a map. This is definitely a road for the passengers. My wife has a great time with her camera

SPEC

Alfa Romeo Giulia Spider 1963

Engine
1,600 (112 horse power)

Top speed/acceleration
172km/h; 0-100km/h:
10 seconds

Price
€35,000-40,000

Rent
€250 per day,
spiderlifestyle.com





while I become a dab hand at grabbing the handbrake whenever we stop and are about to roll backwards. We skirt Positano, which is an almost vertical town built into a 300m cliff face, and call in at a interesting ceramics factory wedged into the cliff just so the car and I can have a breather.

There's an additional challenge on the SS163. As if the road weren't narrow enough, locals park on bends or pull up to have a chat, reducing the room to squeeze past to virtually nothing. But the sea vistas are stunning. I wouldn't have missed it for the world – just as long as I am able to avoid the oncoming traffic.

Finally we arrive in Praiano and Casa Angelina, a much-sought-after new art hotel that clings to the cliff edge like a white fairy-tale castle. The only problem with Casa Angelina is its driveway, which for steepness and tight curves exceeds anything I've encountered since Naples – and that's saying something. One car has got stuck on a bend just below us and hotel staff are busy helping the driver wiggle it out.

"I know, let's walk," I suggest to my wife. So we park up and step cautiously on to the steep drive leaving Sergio's Spider to the concierge. I feel the muscles in my shoulders twitch, then start to relax.

ILLUSTRATION: NATE SUTTON/PANESONE FRANK

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