

Brescia

by Jim Webb

During the month of March 2003, Christine and I decided to revisit one of our favourite places in Italy for a weekend away and caught the BA flight to Verona out of Gatwick. For the first time we were boarded on a Bae 146 ‘Whisper Jet’ (that’s the one with the wings over the top of the fuselage rather than underneath) and found it rather cramped even though we were travelling in Club Class. Anyway, with the flight time just about two hours it was not a real problem.

After landing at Villafranca airport we caught the link bus into town and checked into our usual hotel, the Sanmicheli on Via Valverdi. It’s just a short distance from the centre that is established around the Amphitheatre with lots of bars and restaurants, so we soaked up the ambience of these establishments with gusto (that’s a nice bottle of red wine to you and me) with nuts and crisps on the side. Sorry, I feel I’m delving into nostalgia, which is what this article is all about eventually, but I must tell you about the wonderful restaurant that we were directed to on our first trip to this romantic city (the home of Romeo and Juliet and their balcony and all that goes with it). It was pouring down with rain when we decided to go out for our evening meal and asked the hotelier if he could recommend a restaurant nearby. He provided us with an umbrella and directed us to a place unknown to tourists but frequented by local Italians because of its reputation. It felt like a seedy situation walking down the rain-soaked streets dimly lit with the reflection of a – not too often – neon light in the pools of water. Eventually, we found the restaurant and were welcomed inside by the owner who promptly ushered us to a vacant table. This restaurant has no menu, the waiter tells you what is available on that particular evening and you choose. Then he asks if you require wine and if your answer is yes, he tells you which wine you will get. That’s it, but what a fantastic evening meal you can expect. We have been there a couple of times and I can assure you that the whole thing is ‘the business’ – three course meal for two and all for around £30 – and that’s with a bottle of wine.

One of the reasons for going back to Verona was that it’s within easy reach of Brescia, just over an hour by train, and I wanted to go there because it’s the starting point of the ‘Mille-Miglia’ (a one-thousand mile race around the streets of Italy famously won by Stirling Moss and Jenks in a Mercedes Benz in the 50’s). But the other reason was that this city played host to the International Rallies on more than one occasion by providing a ‘Parc-Ferme’ and, of course, Triumph were major players during the 50’s and 60’s, so this place had to be on the must visit list. One of my favourite videos is a ‘Heritage’ Classic Rallying 1958/59 called “Against the Clock” whereupon the likes of Paddy Hopkirk, Keith Ballisat, Annie Soisbault, and Desmond Titterington, accompanied by their respective co-drivers, campaigned the snow-covered Alps in the works’ TR3s. All of these were painted green, save the lone private entry car that was red and driven by the American Bob Howell who finished but whose car was very much the worse for wear by the end of the ordeal. I once had the pleasure of being allowed to sit in VR 221, the Desmond Titterington car, a few years back at Stoneleigh when it was offered for sale at 14K and I could just imagine myself having a go at those formidable Alpine routes of yesteryear in a rough ‘n’ ready two-seater car with no heater not knowing what to expect around the next bend on shale or shingle roads zigzagging up some mountain pass that’s only open for a couple of months a year at best. I’m talking about the

Vivione and the Gavia – I have done the rest and they are not too bad but these two have still to be the most challenging.

There I go again, off on a trip of imagination, but you must admit that these folks had an exciting life for the most part given the challenges that they were lucky enough to be able to participate in all those years ago. For my part, I felt lucky enough to be able to visit that ‘Parc-Ferme’ in Brescia and stand on the very spot where the TRs were parked for the night with all the other contingents in the Piazza Della Loggia 45 years ago. It very nearly didn’t happen, though, because after Christine and I had walked up from the station we found the whole place covered with market stalls and people everywhere. I’d come all this way to see this place only to see a market! I was disappointed, I must admit, so we decided to go for a beer and something to eat and that had to be somewhere else for obvious reasons. We went into one of the neighbouring streets for our meal and after about an hour and a half I said “Let’s just have one last look at that place and then clear off, shall we?” Well, we did, and to our surprise the market had disappeared and the whole place was in the process of being swept and washed clean by men with machines and brooms and dust carts – I could not believe how slick this operation was and wished they would do this to some of our town centres. Anyway, after what seemed only a few minutes they were gone and I got my wish.



During the clean-up



After the clean-up