

RE-VISITING SANREMO

A break between Monaco GP races provides the ideal opportunity to rediscover a legendary post-war circuit.

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Believe me, the even-numbered years are the best nowadays if you plan to attend the Monaco Grand Prix Formula One race. This is because ever since the inaugural 1997 event, the Grand Prix de Monaco Historique for vintage racing cars has now been taking place during even-numbered years in the month of May just one weekend before that of the modern F.1 event (and quite frankly, it is possibly better value for your money too!) The remarkable GP "Historique" might even be considered on a par with Lord March's legendary Goodwood Festival of Speed when it comes to drawing the most fascinating vintage machinery from anywhere in the world to a single location for everyone's enjoyment. This certainly is the case where single-seater race cars are concerned .

And that is exactly what we were doing in the storied Principality back in May 2002 – taking advantage of the attractive "package offer" of being able to attend both the GP Historique and the modern F.1 race only one week apart. You see, we now had the enviable "problem" of knowing what to do with ourselves during the week between the races ...imagine that! Many tour operators take their guests down the coast to visit the French Riviera, to places like Nice, Cannes, or even St. Tropez but we had been there before. Closer in, there's Euphressi de Rothschild's famed "pink villa" and the lovely scenery of St. Jean Cap Ferrat not to mention the picturesque village of Eze "rocher" perched high up the mountain from its coast road namesake, Eze "village." No, this year, we were in search of doing something quite different.

Maybe it's the history major in me but one of my passions is to visit old motor racing circuits from bygone years, of seeing how much has changed with time and of trying to imagine and feel what it must have been like to actually be present at a race during the glory days. I had already visited Reims (certainly the most evocative former circuit with its remaining ruined grandstand, control tower and pits complex), also the daunting Rouen-les-Essarts, and the various post-war tracks within the Bois de Boulogne. So before departing our home in Paris by train for Monaco, I had taken the precaution of stuffing in my back-pocket a hand-drawn map which I'd copied out of an old book showing the outline of the road circuit that was used for the post-war Sanremo Grand Prix. Judging from a modern Michelin guide, the trip from Monte Carlo across the French border into Italy to see Sanremo looked like a very comfortable couple hours drive at most.

Leaving behind the sights and sounds of the GP Historique teams as they finished loading up classic Bugatti's, Maserati's, Aston-Martin's, and Lotus's into their transporters and began streaming out the narrow streets of the principality, we proceeded to make arrangements on the Monday after the race to visit Sanremo the following day. Along with friends, we rented a compact Peugeot from the rental agency at the foot of our hotel in Beausoleil and got off to an early start the next morning. We had beautiful weather forecast for the entire day. The coast road out of Monaco traveling east is lush and green with vegetation on the mountain side climbing away abruptly on the left, and it offers

spectacular panoramic views between intermittent pine and scrub trees over the azure blue Mediterranean when you look over to the right. There are dramatic rock-cliffs falling straight down to the sea below and small deserted beaches nestled between the folds of the earth as the winding road hugs the coastline high above. Spectacular villas, some in the old French chateau style and others on the contrary, very modern with broad plate-glass picture windows, peered out periodically from the tree growth as we drove past Roquebrunne and Cap Martin. The last town on the French side of the border, Menton, still has a relaxed, affluent, holiday atmosphere about it but this changes dramatically to the hustle and bustle of commerce upon entering Ventimiglia on the Italian side. The next town, Bordighera, another 15 minutes down the coast, has a similar commercial feel but this begins to dissipate as the road climbs back up gently and things again become more rural and scenic. The last miles before arriving to destination are always the longest, pregnant with expectation and sometimes concern of missing a signpost or something and of going too far.

I needn't have worried as we soon came upon the standard Italian roadsign announcing we were entering Ospedaletti. I now kept an eye out for visible signs of buildings I might recognize from the few old black and white photographs I had studied of the start of the post-war Grand Prix races to see if I could spot the approximate location of the Start/Finish line. Realizing this could prove long and fruitless, I parked the car in the shade and momentarily abandoned my fellow travelers while I ran across the street to inquire at a grocery store – the only current sign of life as I slowly realized what a sleepy little town this was in late morning. In my best broken Italian, I asked the lady shopkeeper a few questions about "il circuito storico" (the historic circuit) and "la linea di partenza" (the start line) but drew a complete blank in response. As I would learn again later, not everyone in Ospedaletti today is keenly aware of its past motor racing history. I then recalled that the Start/Finish had been near a monumental hotel, the Regina or Royal Hotel depending on who you ask, and this struck an immediate chord of familiarity with the lady. Both she and a customer ushered me by the sleeve out onto the sidewalk and, speaking over top of one another in their simultaneous efforts to be helpful, pointed straight ahead along the main thoroughfare. Good, I had not understood much but obviously, what we were looking for lay further beyond so I thanked them both for their kindness and bid farewell.

We only had to curb-crawl another five minutes before I instantly sensed we had found the right spot. Up ahead at the last stoplight before leaving the town, I recognized a great stone wall behind a side road which veered off from the main coast road, climbing away sharply to the left in front of the wall. This was the first turn of the circuit leading up Via Cavour after the Start and now visible on our left were the tall palm trees and magnificent gardens of the Royal Hotel (Photos 1-3). I was amazed at the narrowness of this first left-hander and had difficulty imagining how the field of cars, so soon after the tires and smoke of the bunched-up start, could have struggled to get around here and gone uphill without incident (Photos 4-5). Somehow, it had all appeared broader and less steep in the old black and white sepia prints of the day. Rounding this corner and after a slight jink to the right, Via Cavour continues to rise hard until a slight dip before the next corner, a circa sixty-degree right-hander at the bleached white stone wall of a villa (Photos 6-9). This stretch, as it turns out, is the highest point of the circuit and after the corner is negotiated, the road is now called Corso Marconi. The track now begins a progressive, winding descent between palm trees to the left and a mix of pine and cedar-like trees on the right before an even more impressive and massive stone retaining wall begins towering above the right side of the road (Photos 10-12). Any slight error or pushing and shoving to the right here would have had serious race consequences for both car and driver! The roadway now plunges down to a sharp left-hander which passes over a bridge with railings. An unsightly modern green hangar-like metal building with the sign "Ponticelli" over its doorway (Photo

13) has been erected on the outside of the curve. In old photographs of this spot, the viaduct below the road is clearly visible, the surrounding landscape is barren, and there is not yet any of the tree growth which has come to fill the inner drop-off on the left side. Here we have reached the northernmost point of the circuit.

Now, the road again climbs gently with a slight dogleg to the right (Photo 14) before going through a somewhat commercial zone with light truck traffic, small shops, and two or three storey apartment buildings on the right. An auto body shop has put up a metal sign advertising "Il Circuito 1999," undoubtedly a reference to some modern event, but with a few historic images alongside, the only visible reference I saw along the entire journey that acknowledged the existence of a local motor racing tradition (Photos 15-17). Beyond this point, where the clockwise 1947 circuit rejoined the roadway on the left, the track begins to present a challenging series of swerves and sweeps as it undulates downhill through a posh residential area of walled villas with overhanging trees, purple bougainvillier bushes, and occasional glimpses of the sea far beyond (Photos 18-23). In order to get a good depth photo of the last downhill bends before the sharp-left at the extreme end of the circuit (Photo 24), I parked and crossed the street with a telefoto lens mounted on my camera. In the stillness of the countryside and while absorbed working the focus of the long lens, I did not notice an Italian "Carabinieri" police car with three officers pull to a silent stop and back up. Undoubtedly intrigued by the telefoto and no obvious photo subject in sight, the local cops called out to me; "vostri documenti per favor" (your documents, please). I fumbled for my passport and put on my friendliest conversational face. Pulling the crumpled, annotated map of Ospedaletti from my pocket, I pointed to where we were on the circuit, all the while talking to them in my halting Italian about where Alberto Ascari and the "Sanremo Maserati" had made history. They all stared back, either ignorant or unimpressed. Across the street in our Peugeot, I could see my wife and friends yucking it up, having a merry laugh over my ongoing "interview." I was just waiting for them to call out some grossly unhelpful remark to ensure my immediate arrest. "Va bene, buona giornata" said the more senior Carabinieri as they politely returned my passport and wished me a good day before moving off. Suffice it to say that good-natured kidding about my obsession for old circuits and my near brush with Italian justice did not subside soon enough!

The roadway then sinks and rises just a bit before the final hard left-hander (Photos 25-26) where the drivers could get an awesome if momentary glimpse over the concrete parapet of the Mediterranean Sea beyond. Not to lose concentration, they would then hurtle down the ramp (Photo 27) to rejoin Corso Regina Margherita and the long, somewhat broader straightaway through town back to the Start/Finish line (Photos 28-32). My overall impression of the Ospedaletti circuit was that it must have been an exhilarating roller-coaster ride with its odd cambers and gradients and a fearsome challenge for the drivers as most of the control and braking required after Via Cavour was all downhill!

BOX:

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE SANREMO GRAND PRIX (1948-51)

Sanremo is the largest resort town west of Genoa along the Ligurian coast of Italy. Depending on your interests, it is best known today for the Sanremo Music Festival, maybe for the World Championship auto rally which takes place in the mountains behind the town, or because of the Casino which was patronized in the last century by the Russian Czarina and her court. On April 24, 1920, it played host to an historical event which still has

consequences for the world to this day – the Sanremo Conference which assigned the mandate for Palestine to Great Britain under the League of Nations.

The idea of staging a motor race in Sanremo undoubtedly came to its municipal authorities as a way of raising money and promoting tourism to their community after the economic devastation of World War Two. Motor racing was not an entirely new concept, however, since a 1500cc voiturette-category Circuito di Sanremo race had already been held through the city-streets back on July 25, 1937. Seventeen starters participated in three 25-lap heats around an improvised track on which the cars shot straight down Via Vittorio Emanuele past the Casino before veering sharply left around a hairpin and then coming back along Via Roma and a few more tight turns to rejoin the Start/Finish line. The first two finishers of each heat would race in the 30-lap final. On that occasion, the legendary Achille Varzi driving a Maserati 4CM passed his closest competitor, Piero Dusio in a 6M, just four laps after the start and then easily drove away with the win.

For the post-war racing, the organizers decided to move the event away from Sanremo proper and settled on a track which would be centered on the tiny community of Ospedaletti just a few miles west along the coast between Capo Nero and Capo Sant Ampelio. The town took its name from the 13th-14th century hospice which had been built there by the Knights of St. John. As with Sanremo but on a more modest scale, Ospedaletti bloomed during the nineteenth century as a balmy resort town with a reputation for having the best climate along the Mediterranean for those suffering illness. The writer Katherine Mansfield spent one of the last years of her tragically short life here trying to recover from disease. The town also boasted the first licensed casino in Italy, the Villa La Sultana, which was decorated in Second Empire style by the renowned architect Garnier who also did the Casino of Monte Carlo and the Paris Opera. As with Sanremo, affluent vacationers had included the Russian and Polish royal families and members of the French and English aristocracy. In the immediate aftermath of war, however, times were now hard and it was thought a motor race such as the one which had put the tiny nearby principality of Monaco permanently on the map might help bring back some of the former glamor and opulence here as well.

In 1947, a minor sports car race took place along a 1.62 mi. circuit which was raced this time only in a clockwise direction, starting from the Corso Regina Margherita, the main drag through Ospedaletti, and going up the Via dei Medici to rejoin Corso Marconi and Via Cavour before it doubled back to the pit straight. The event was only 45 miles long and was won by Frenchman Yves Giraud-Cabantous in a pre-war Delahaye ahead of Renato Balestrero and Piero Ghersi, both in Alfa-Romeo Monza's. The average winning speed was only 45.6 mph. The great Tazio Nuvolari was reportedly also present, racing in the 1100cc category, but did not fare well. For the following year, major modifications and improvements were made to the circuit layout. The race would from now on be run in a counter-clockwise direction with the first corner being a sharp left going up Via Cavour. All of the newly-constructed Corso Marconi would be incorporated, bringing the total circuit length up to 2.09 mi. and this would become the more familiar configuration used in all four of the famous Grand Prix races that followed.

On 27 June, 1948, sixteen race cars lined up on Corso Regina Margherita for the start of the first true post-war Grand Prix of Sanremo which was scheduled for 85 laps. Racing under the colors of the Scuderia Ambrosiana, Alberto Ascari and Luigi Villoresi were present with the brand new Maserati 4CLT/48 entering its very first race. This was a 1.6 liter, four cylinder, supercharged evolution of the 4CLT model. Other notable drivers who took part in this new event included the great pre-war aces Luigi Fagioli (Maserati 4CL) and Louis Chiron (Talbot T26SS), Giuseppe Farina (Maserati 4CLT), Raymond Sommer (Ferrari

166SC), Louis Rosier and Yves Giraud-Cabantous (both in Talbot's), Prince B. "Bira" of Siam and the Swiss baron Emanuel "Toulo" de Graffenreid (both in 4CL's). Regrettable was the absence of the Alfa-Romeo team of Achille Varzi, Jean-Pierre Wimille and Count Felice Trossi who were at the Bern-Bremgarten circuit ahead of the Swiss Grand Prix in which Varzi was to tragically lose his life. Although Villorosi secured pole position with a lap of 2'07.4" which was two seconds faster than Ascari, it was his teammate who led at the end of the first lap and who would never look back. Villorosi had to make a couple of pit stops during the race which further dropped him a lap behind. Still, on its inaugural outing, Ascari and Villorosi brought the Maserati 4CLT/48 home to a 1-2 victory. Henceforth, it became known as the "Sanremo Maserati" and, depending upon how you look at it, the car or the race brought the other everlasting fame. It was Ascari's first Grand Prix triumph, winning in just over three hours at an average speed of almost 59 mph while Villorosi managed to hang onto fastest lap honors with a lap of 2'02.8" (61.75mph). Farina, lying third during the early part of the race, dropped out with throttle problems and Sommer, oddly driving a Ferrari sports car in a Grand Prix, faded during the final stages with engine problems. This opened the door for Clemar Bucci driving a 4CL model for Scuderia Milan to lay claim to third place.

Although the 1948 race gained immortal fame with the "Sanremo Maserati" legend, if the truth be told, the second Grand Prix of Sanremo held on April 3, 1949 was probably a historically more significant event due to the appearance in Europe at that time of a little-known Argentine driver by the name of Juan-Manuel Fangio. There were close to thirty entrants signed up (although only 22 eventually started) and unfortunately once again, the great missing ingredient was the factory Alfa-Romeo team with its dominant "Alfetta" racer as well as the previous year's winner, Ascari, who had by now signed on as a works driver for Scuderia Ferrari. The organizers decided to run this year's race in two heats of 45 laps with aggregate times determining the final outcome. Fangio first shocked the Europeans by qualifying his Maserati 4CLT/48 in second place, putting it squarely in the middle of the front row of the grid between pole-sitter B. "Bira" (also in a 4CLT/48) and Sommer (Ferrari 125). When the flag dropped, he stormed into the lead ahead of Bira and would win the first heat by almost a minute and a half. The same thing repeated itself during the second heat with Fangio again beating Bira by a similar margin. Stunned by the dominating performance of Fangio, the European drivers and crowds probably did not pay much heed to the strong performance of his young compatriot, Benedicto Campos, also driving a blue-and-yellow liveried Automovil Club Argentina 4CLT/48, who placed third in the second heat and fourth overall on aggregate. It was an eye-opening day which presaged an extraordinary career for Fangio who would go on to be a five-time World Driving Champion after the championship was formally inaugurated the following year.

In 1950, Fangio repeated with another triumph at Sanremo although he was now at the wheel of the famed Alfa Romeo 158 "Alfetta" of the official factory team for whom he drove in those Grand Prix races counting for the World Championship. Villorosi, who came in second, and Ascari, who started from pole but had an accident on lap 33, were now both driving the Ferrari 125 alongside Raymond Sommer. Alfredo Pian, driving a Maserati 4CLT/48 entered by Scuderia Achille Varzi placed third. Scuderia Ferrari had also engaged two local entrants, Giovanni Bracco and Roberto Vallone driving older Ferrari 166 Formula Two cars in which the little-known Vallone posted a surprising fourth place. The two factory Maserati 4CLT/48's of Francesco Rol and Louis Chiron came in respectively fifth and sixth, the very last race finishers falling a full six laps behind the winner. Fourteen cars had failed to finish the grueling 90-lap event.

The 1951 Sanremo Grand Prix sadly got underway on April 22 following an accident with fatal consequences which took place earlier in practice – Belgian driver Johnny Claes lost

control of his Talbot-Lago when his brakes failed him, killing trackside spectators. The field consisted of seventeen drivers not counting two forfeits including that of Claes. The most notable and regrettable absence was once again that of the works Alfa-Romeo team, so Fangio, Farina (the reigning first World Driving Champion), and others who could have spiced up the competition did not participate. Aside from Bira and de Graffenreid in their usual Maserati 4CLT/48's (Bira was experimenting with an Osca-engined version), there was a healthy representation of drivers from England who had made the trip, men like Reg Parnell and David Hampshire in 4CLT/48's, Peter Whitehead (Ferrari 125), and Lance Macklin and a certain Stirling Moss driving HWM-Alta's. Scuderia Ferrari now had the powerful 375 model and drivers Alberto Ascari and Luigi Villorresi both took off from the first two spots on the starting grid. Ascari handily won the race in under two hours at an average speed of 65.57mph. Villorresi ended his race with an accident on lap 63 but the third Ferrari driver, Dorino Serafini, still came in second place ahead of the remarkable privateer Rudi Fischer in an Ecurie Espadon 2.6 litre Ferrari 212. The colorful American Harry Schell was fourth in a 4CLT/48 entered under the banner of Scuderia Plate. The honorable mention for this race, however, would have to go to the HW Motors team of Moss and Macklin who brought their under-powered HWM-Alta's home to a very creditable fifth and seventh place respectively.

These four races unfortunately marked the end of the Ospedaletti circuit's use as a venue for Grand Prix races. It was still used in the early-mid 1950's by the Lancia racing team for testing its race cars. The most memorable test session took place in December 1954 in order to get the revolutionary Lancia D50 Grand Prix car ready for the 1955 season but the mythical Sanremo Grand Prix had by then faded into the history books. Other categories of motor sport continued, most notably motorcycle racing, and the track remarkably survived in operation as late as 1972 before it was closed down definitively. In 1988-89, historic revival events were held which drew former participants such as Villorresi, de Graffenreid, and Fangio and another one held in 2001 even tried to attract the attention of Formula One supremo Bernie Ecclestone by dedicating the track to him but with no long term success. The Committee for the Revival of the Ospedaletti Circuit was formed in 2000 and it remains hopeful of trying to bring some form of racing, possibly a vintage event such as the GP de Monaco Historique, back to this challenging race course and legendary venue.