

MID-ENGINED MARVELS PORSCHE 914 vs MATRA M530



Britain's best-selling
classic car magazine

February 2025 £6.50

JAGUAR'S GREATEST GT

PLUS
HOW THE XJ-S
TRIUMPHED
ON TRACK

XJ-S at 50: from early V12
via wild Lister to rare estate,
now is the time to buy



LIGHTWEIGHT MERCEDES
+ 300SL

- BENTLEY'S TURBO TITANS
- C&SC GOES HISTORIC RALLYING
- BUGATTI T57 SHOWSTOPPER





LATIN LESSONS

Italy's brief flirtation with makeovers of mainstream

WORDS MARTIN BUCKLEY PHOTOGRAPHY LUC LACEY

Brits resulted in these two rare beauties, the Sunbeam Venezia and Triumph Italia



Triumph resists body roll but works best on smooth roads, while the brakes are strong. Right: softer Venezia is more laid-back, with a safety net of understeer



'The Venezia was launched in Venice: it arrived on a gondola and was the first motor vehicle to turn a wheel on the Piazza San Marco'

As enigmatic oddities go, the Sunbeam Venezia and Triumph Italia 2000 are about as niche as it gets. Based respectively on the Humber Sceptre and the Triumph TR3, they are part of a short-lived genre of British cars that were not only styled in Italy, but also built there. More than just one-off showstoppers, but something less than true production models (combined Venezia/Italia output was fewer than 600 units), they were beautiful and – to an extent – luxurious yet mechanically ordinary rarities that tapped into both the contemporary British obsession with Italian styling, and that market's now difficult to credit (and somewhat transient) fondness for certain relatively prosaic English machinery of 60-plus years ago.

In the land of zestful Fiats, sophisticated Lancias and sporty Alfa Romeos, there was a living to be made, it appears, from selling Hillman Minxes and Austin A40s (supplied in knock-down kit form) to those Italians who simply wanted something different. Both the Italia and Venezia bridged the gap between coachbuilding and semi-quantity production, but neither hit the critical mass that would have

allowed them to compete on an equal footing with the mainstream Standard-Triumph and Rootes Group models that inspired them.

Giovanni Michelotti was to Standard-Triumph what Pininfarina represented to the British Motor Corporation: a one-stop shop for the latest in Continental styling at a time when all aspects of the Italian lifestyle, be it coffee bars, furniture or hairstyles, was a blessed relief from the post-war gloom of an England only recently off the ration books.

Triumph had been out of the blocks briskly in the early '50s with its TR sports cars, which sold well in spite of their bug-eyed styling rather than because of it. Projects such as the 1957 Vignale-bodied, Michelotti-penned Dream Car based on the TR3 (plus the Zest and twin-cam-engined Zoom prototypes) showed that there was an awareness of the problem, although strong American TR sales perpetuated a hesitancy to upset the status quo.

Enter Salvatore Ruffino, the Naples-based Standard-Triumph importer. Convinced that the TR3 looked "too British" for local tastes, he consulted several styling houses (including Zagato) before commissioning Vignale to build Michelotti's vision of a reimagined and more luxurious fixed-head Triumph sports car, with plans to produce up to 1000 units per year.



From top: Italia wears eye-catching knock-off wires; iron 2-litre 'four' is torquy and quite vocal



From top: Rootes connection was severed by '66 Chrysler takeover; 1600 unit needs to be worked

The Italia 2000 was first revealed at the Turin Salon in 1958 and production began in 1959, with a more conventional nose and headlight treatment for prototype number two, which is thought to have been *signor* Ruffino's personal car. The first Italia was later sent to Standard-Triumph for evaluation, and the importer managed to extract a verbal agreement from the seemingly impressed British firm that every one of its dealerships would stock an Italia. Doubtless they would have been good for showroom traffic, but when Leyland took over Standard-Triumph, the new management refused to honour the agreement.

Vignale built the first 13 examples, the remainder being constructed on a production line rented from Vignale by Ruffino. With altered badges and other detailing, full production kicked off at the end of 1959, but only six Italia 2000s (out of 350) would ever be built in right-hand drive. After production ended in 1963, it took a further two years to sell the remaining 29 examples on the North American market, where buyers proved understandably resistant to the \$5000 price-tag. Further options such as leather seats, an adjustable steering column and overdrive could boost that figure way beyond the \$3000 that would have bought a TR3A.

Where the Italia 2000 was a steel-bodied two-seater with a separate chassis, the 1963-'65 Venezia, styled and built by Touring of Milan, wore aluminium panels over the firm's patented Superleggera framework, with Humber Sceptre unitary underpinnings sent from Coventry. Touring was already assembling 10 Super Minxes and four Alpines a day for the local market, and its changes to the open sports car – twin wing-mounted fuel tanks to improve boot space, trimmed-down tailfins – would inspire later factory versions of the model.

Enthused by the idea of an Italian-styled Sunbeam sports saloon, Lord Rootes gave the go-ahead for the Venezia in 1961 after seeing Touring's 1:10-scale model. The finished product was 11in longer than the Humber on which it was based, and launched to great fanfare in Venice. The prototype arrived on a gondola and was the first motor vehicle of any description to turn a wheel on the Piazza San Marco. A £1400 asking price put it in the same territory as the Jaguar 2.4 and Sunbeam Tiger, and import duties ruled out any British market for the car right from the start.

The Venezia was good for just over 100mph on 88bhp – an unexplained 8bhp up on the Sceptre. Still, it was a useful 50kg lighter than the Rootes saloon (from which it borrowed its

CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

PRESENTS

THE LEGENDS SERIES



The Legends series gathers together some of the finest stories from the past 30 years of *Classic & Sports Car*, and if you've missed the first 22 editions, time is running out to bag yourself a copy.

Ten have already sold out, but still available are *Ferrari Legends*, *Modern Classic Legends*, *Aston Martin Legends*, *Off-road Legends*, *French Legends*, *1980s Legends*, *MG Legends*, *Italian Legends*, *Lotus Legends*, *German Legends Triumph Legends*, and the latest addition to the series, *1990s Legends*, which focuses on newcomers to the classic fold. Plus, for a limited time only, there are special offers available on selected editions; simply follow the link below or scan the QR code to find out more.



ON SALE NOW!

Visit magsdirect.co.uk/classic-sports-car-presents/

COMING SOON IN THE LEGENDS SERIES:

- *Bugatti Legends* (on sale 23 January)
- *British Leyland Legends* (on sale 27 February)
- *Bentley Legends* (on sale 10 April)



front 'screen) and came with overdrive, an oil cooler and reclining front seats as standard. It was said to be 60% local in content, with tyres from Pirelli and Ferrari 250GT doorhandles, while the ashtray and quarterlight catches were shared with the Aston Martin DB4. It also featured extensive internal sound-deadening for a more luxurious feel. Other details, such as the tail-lights, instruments and Sunbeam grille, were pure Rootes Group parts bin.

Both the British and the Italians were realistic about sales from the start, but even talk of 350 examples annually turned out to be wildly optimistic. Only 154 Sceptre kits were sent from Coventry to Milan, although a few more may have been assembled from leftover Alpine/Minx parts. Against a background of strikes at Touring's newly opened factory and problems at Rootes (the Imp was sending the firm broke), the Venezia was hardly a priority. When Touring ceased trading in 1965, the fate of the Venezia was sealed, although the last examples may have been assembled as late as 1967, and some were not registered until 1968. Following a 25% price reduction, the final 10 Venezias ended up in Spain.

'The Italia could easily be a baby Maserati, while the quietly elegant Venezia is a pleasing combination of Lancia and Aston'

Without knowing the history behind either car, both could be mistaken for Italian exotica. Mike Wheeler's slim, beautifully proportioned Italia could easily be a baby Maserati (it shares quite a lot with the one-off Michelotti BMW 507 as well), while the quietly elegant Venezia, with its quad headlights and glassy, slim-pillared roofline, is a pleasing combination of Lancia Flaminia GT and Aston Martin DB4.

The Italia was nut-and-bolt restored during lockdown by an ex-P&A Wood employee and has now been on the road for three years. It is one of the six original right-hand-drive Italias, but Mike knows of a further surviving example under restoration in the north-east.

John Neal bought his Venezia in 1982 and used it as a daily driver at first. Ownership has been a question of "preserving rather than restoring" says John, who produced a book on the Venezia in 1988 to celebrate its 25th anniversary. It is thought to be a 1965 example built for one of the bosses of Rootes Italia, with whom John reunited the car a few years ago, and one of only two right-hand-drive Venezias, if you include the prototype. Just in excess of 40 survivors are known worldwide.

Neither car gives any clues to its origins, although the Italia shows an indecent amount of its TR3A anti-roll bar and steering gear, seemingly more exposed here than on the British original. The Sunbeam has long doors that allow easy access to the rear seats, and an impressive, nicely detailed dashboard features the usual revs, amperes and water-temperature information, plus an oil-temperature gauge. The glovebox is huge and a grabhandle forms

SUNBEAM VENEZIA

Sold/number built 1963-'65/170

Construction steel platform chassis, aluminium body over tubular steel frame

Engine iron-block, alloy-head, ohv 1592cc 'four', twin Zenith carburettors

Max power 88bhp @ 5200rpm

Max torque 91lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive, RWD

Suspension: front independent, by wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar rear live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs; telescopic dampers f/r

Steering recirculating ball

Brakes discs front, drums rear

Length 14ft 8in (4470mm)

Width 5ft 4½in (1628mm)

Height 4ft 5½in (1369mm)

Wheelbase 8ft 5in (2565mm)

Weight 2480lb (1125kg) **Mpg** 25

0-60mph 18 secs **Top speed** 101mph

Price new £1440 **Price now** £20-40,000

TRIUMPH ITALIA 2000

Sold/number built 1959-'63/350

Construction steel box-section chassis, separate steel body

Engine all-iron, ohv 1991cc 'four', twin SU carburettors

Max power 90bhp @ 4800rpm

Max torque 117lb ft @ 3000rpm

Transmission four-speed manual with overdrive, RWD

Suspension: front independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar rear live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers

Steering cam and lever

Brakes drums

Length 12ft 11in (3937mm)

Width 4ft 9¼in (1453mm)

Height 4ft 1in (1245mm)

Wheelbase 7ft 4¼in (2242mm)

Weight 2100lb (953kg) **Mpg** 30

0-60mph 11 secs **Top speed** 103mph

Price new 2.5m lire **Price now** £100,000



Clockwise from top: comfortable seats in Triumph; short-throw gearchange; turned-aluminium cluster

part of the dash top. The (optional) Nardi wheel sits high on an adjustable steering column, and the deeply padded front seats don't help with rear legroom, although two modestly sized adults would fit for short trips.

The Italia, with its big, wood-rimmed steering wheel, is much the cosier of the two inside, but also has luxurious front seats with a padded area behind for a child or a dog. The prominent transmission tunnel is plushly carpeted and there is a touch of Lotus Elite about the shape of the instrument cluster, which uses original TR3 dials and switchgear with the familiar Laycock overdrive switch to the left of the wheel.

Although built to the same formula, the Italia and Venezia have different characteristics once under way. The low-slung and close-fitting Triumph feels dinky next to almost anything modern. It is smaller than it looks, but pretty from every angle while offering clear views fore and aft around its wafer-thin pillars.

The Italia's pedals are deeply buried and thoughtfully positioned for heel-and-toe work. A raucous, torquey engine permits second-gear starts, and you can play tunes on the seven possible ratios offered by the overdrive, which works in second, third and top in the notchy, short-throw 'box. Pick-up is lusty in all ratios without the need to use high revs - 3500rpm is sufficient for most open-road situations - as the big 'four' throbs and growls away to itself. Cruise in overdrive top and it smooths out, but even on a well-surfaced road you are conscious of trying to hold a steady course against a natural inch or two of straight-ahead play in the steering, while at the same time avoiding the worst of the craters in the asphalt so as not to run out of its limited suspension movement. It stops effortlessly - in a straight line - and corners flat and neatly on smooth surfaces.

The Sunbeam is a much gentler-natured car, with relatively soft suspension. Its light but lower-geared steering requires quite a lot of twirling, although feeding back sufficient understeer to make brisk cornering safe if unexciting. It is much quieter than the Italia (you could convince yourself that Touring's efforts with the sound-deadening actually worked), and has much more in the way of head- and shoulder-room in its airy cockpit.

Despite twin Zenith carburettors, the engine is relatively remote and prosaic-sounding, and must be worked harder than the Triumph's to extract performance. Changing gear to keep things on the boil is no chore, though, thanks to the well-defined lever movements and a smooth-acting overdrive on third and top; it automatically disengages in the lower gears.

Triumph's reluctance to continue supplying Ruffino with TR3A chassis and running gear was likely down to the fact that it had the TR4 waiting in the wings - a development certainly inspired by the shape of the Italia, and also designed by Michelotti. It didn't help the cause of the unlucky Venezia that it never got the latest 1725cc engine and full synchromesh 'box found in cheaper Rootesmobiles, although it would not have made a dramatic difference.

What it needed was a six-cylinder engine or, even better, a V8. What a shame the contract between the Rootes Group and Carroll Shelby to fit Ford 4.2-litre V8s into the Venezia was in effect quashed by the Chrysler takeover of the British firm in 1966.



From top: Triumph's steering needs plenty of correction even in a straight line; crisp tails; Venezia's helm is light and lower-geared



Clockwise from top: Sunbeam's long doors aid access; satisfying gearchange; Nardi wheel, neat dials