



Il Duce's **ALFA**

Sports cars and tyrants don't usually go together, but Fascist *presidente* Mussolini had different ideas.

Mick Walsh drives his Mille Miglia Alfa Spider

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



Transport for imperious heads of state and tyrannical rulers tends to be bulky limousines laden with heavy, bullet-proof bodywork. From Italy, a nation synonymous with style, you expect something with more flair and, during the 1930s, Cavaliere Benito Mussolini broke all the rules with a succession of sporting Alfa Romeos. Whatever your view on *Il Duce's* Fascist regime, the Emilia-Romagna-born despot had imposing taste.

The memoirs of Mussolini's long-serving chauffeur Ercole Boratto offer the best insight into the Italian leader's passion for motoring. These accounts only came to light in 2004, 34 years after the death of Boratto, when researcher Mario José Cereghino discovered an OSS interview while trying to dig up evidence of the CIA's dirty tricks in Italy. Boratto was probably the premier's closest confidant and joined him in October 1922 from Alfa Romeo, where he was a test driver, sticking loyally with Mussolini until he was deposed in July 1943.

According to Boratto, the great Italian dictator loved to get behind the wheel whenever possible. 'He drove fast but badly,' reported Boratto. 'He adored machines, especially motor cars and parading about in them. He loved to be recognised by the people and principally the female sex.' Before each working day began, Mussolini would order Boratto to drive him through the streets of Rome in one of his open-top Alfa sports cars: 'If by chance some young thing caught his eye, he was quite capable of taking the same street several times in succession so as to pass by the target woman.'

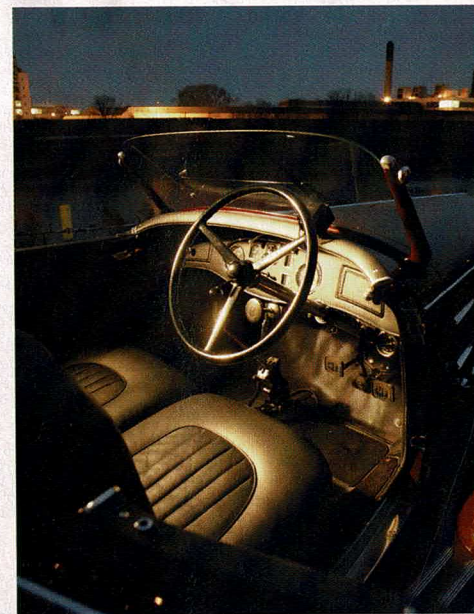
For a time during the '20s the car often had a second passenger, because *Il Duce* insisted on

taking his pet lioness cub Italia along for the ride until the animal grew too big and dangerous.

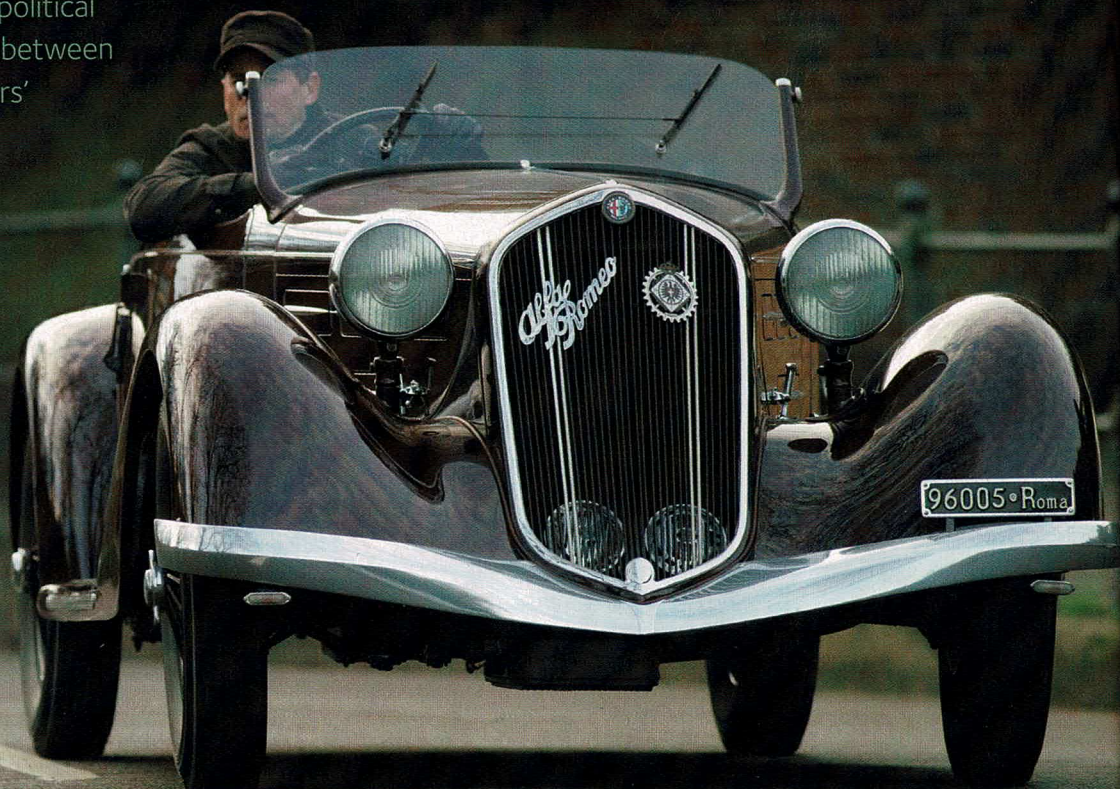
Boratto also pointed out that his boss would think nothing of long journeys across Italy whatever the weather and, until Mussolini became infatuated with aircraft and flying, he regularly went by car. From 1924, *Il Duce* had a trio of Alfa Romeo sports models, starting with a 67bhp ES Spider with Castagna bodywork that was good for 80mph. 'He was a daredevil driver, particularly downhill. It was very hard to keep up,' recalled Francesco Carli, a loyal Fascist supporter. 'He timed his gearchanges perfectly with the engine revs, and liked to drift around corners. Passengers were always scared.'

After the ES came a pair of RLSS models, bodied by Zagato and fitted with a third seat in the pointed tail. Mussolini once drove one of these 3-litre straight-sixes from Rome to Milan in 10 hours and, after just an hour's rest, roared back to the capital – and that would have been on dusty routes long before the *autostrada* was built. He would later become a great supporter of the Mille Miglia road race, which started in 1927.

Mussolini remained loyal to Alfa Romeo for much of his life. Italian historian Luigi Fittipaldi records that he owned 12, from the vintage ES to a streamlined 1936 6C-2300B with Berlinetta body by Touring. Several were no doubt presents from the factory. Regardless of the vulnerability to assassins, in the early '30s the vain Mussolini had a weakness for glamorous Spiders including Zagato and Touring efforts on the 6C-1750 chassis. His obsession with dicky-style seats (*due posti dietro*) continued and the Touring bodywork was modified at his request. Fittipaldi reported that *Il Duce* loved these two sports cars.



'Just imagine the conversations conducted here – be they political gossip or lascivious chat – between Mussolini and his passengers'





Clockwise, from top left: bold script and ACI badge; long tail includes dicky seat; Mussolini riding in the Alfa Spider in the summer of 1935; 6C-2300 handles well; high steering wheel and deep padded seats of fully restored cockpit. Note centre throttle

ALFA 6C-2300 PESCARA

Sold/number built 1934/two Spiders

Construction steel box-section chassis, with alloy body by Touring of Milan

Engine iron monobloc and aluminium cylinder head, dual-overhead cam 2309cc straight-six, with twin updraught Solex 35-40 FH carbs

Max power 95bhp @ 4500rpm

Transmission four-speed manual, with synchro on third and top, driving rear wheels

Suspension: front & rear live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, friction dampers (adjustable at rear)

Wheels 18x5.50in wires

Steering worm and wheel **Brakes** drums

Wheelbase 115¼in (2927mm) **Track** 56¼in (1429mm) **Weight** 2816lb (1277kg)

Top speed 90mph **Price new** L50,500

Now £6-800,000 (est): H&H Classic Auctions (01925 730630; www.classic-auctions.com)

As Mussolini attempted to expand his empire with the invasion of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), so his vast arsenal bolstered Italian industry, including Alfa Romeo under its new director Ugo Gobbato. The illustrious Milanese company was in a parlous state by the early '30s, and the Portello factory was run-down with a huge deficit. Several times the government's Ministry of Finance and IRI were under pressure from the powerful senator Giovanni Agnelli to close Alfa or allow it to be absorbed into Fiat's truck-manufacturing subsidiary, OM in Brescia.

Mussolini came to Alfa's support, publicly decreeing that it was "the maker of the best Italian product" and should remain in business. Once his ally Gobbato took over management, automotive output and racing became an image-making sideline as its major activity became large-scale production of aero engines, trucks and vans. After a long period of uncertainty, the workforce soon put its faith in Gobbato in the name of Fascist Italy. But Alfa Romeo's brilliant engineering head, Vittorio Jano, was not happy, possibly feeling that he should have been made director. In the shadow of Gobbato, a highly qualified engineer with several diplomas and brilliant credentials, no doubt Jano felt uncomfortable with his new boss.

Not surprisingly, the Fascist party leader's support for Alfa was rewarded with occasional gifts and, with the launch of the new 6C-2300 line, Mussolini requested a Spider. First shown at the 1934 Milan motor show, the 6C was

born after Alfa's management had instructed Jano to tame his road machines for a more civilised model. With the establishment in 1933 of Alfa's in-house body-building facility, the range also became more standardised. The 6C-2300 chassis had a box-section frame while its ride was enhanced by the outboard mounting of its half-elliptic springs, anchored in rubber. The four-speed gearbox also featured synchromesh on third and top as well as a freewheel. This mixed blessing was controlled from the instrument panel, as were the rear dampers.

The crankcase and block of the then seven-main-bearing engine were a single casting, while the cylinder head was in light alloy. Jano had previously stuck to gear drive for his sophisticated overhead-camshaft engines, claiming that chain drive was unreliable over 4000rpm. The new engine, however, featured a silent chain up front. With a vigorous 2309cc capacity and twin-throat updraught Solex carburettor, the new 'six' was good for 68bhp in standard form.

Alfa purists claim the loss of supercharging and passing of the machined-from-solid feel of the earlier thoroughbreds marked the end of an era, but the new model soon made an impression in competition. A trio of handsome Berlinettas, with Touring bodywork and engines in tuned, twin-carb 95bhp form, was entered by Scuderia Ferrari for the 1934 Targa Abruzzo, a 24-hour road race run in extreme August heat. Against supercharged 8Cs in the hands of stars Nuvolari, Sommer and Earl Howe, the new closed Alfas finished an emphatic 1-2-3, headed by Franco Cortese teamed with Felice Bianchi.

After this impressive win, a new line of sporting 6Cs was produced, christened Pescara. Just two were fitted with open Spider coachwork,



one of which was built to the order of Mussolini.

Once completed, the Spider was delivered to Rome for the prime minister's approval by Alfa Romeo's long-serving test driver Giovanbattista Guidotti. Unfortunately, several features were not to Mussolini's liking and it was returned to Touring for major body modifications after a week. Firstly, the premier demanded black rather than tan trim, but more serious for the Milanese coachbuilder was the order for a dicky seat. The pressure was on to get the body corrected in 10 days, for which, as well as a new lid design, the spare wheel and petrol tank had to be moved. The wings, too, had to be reshaped and a fold-away step fitted into the body. When completed, the tail revisions upset the harmony of the styling, so the perfectionist Touring director Felice Anderloni instructed that the bonnet details be modified with new horizontal wing vents in place of the vertical louvres. After he was satisfied with the restyled result, the Alfa was returned to Rome but, much to Anderloni's frustration, Mussolini never noticed the altered bonnet. Throughout the summer of 1935, the Spider, often festooned with flowers, was used as the parade car for propaganda tours, including on the Ligurian Riviera. Mussolini would stand boldly on the passenger side with little apparent concern about attempts on his life.

The following year, Mussolini entered the 6C-2300 Spider in the Mille Miglia for his chauffeur Boratto but, in the light of Italy's severe economic crisis, he ordered the car to be converted to run on alcohol. Yet, during its later restoration, a two-way tap was discovered under the cockpit floor. Guidotti subsequently recalled that the car kept its petrol tank, which was used

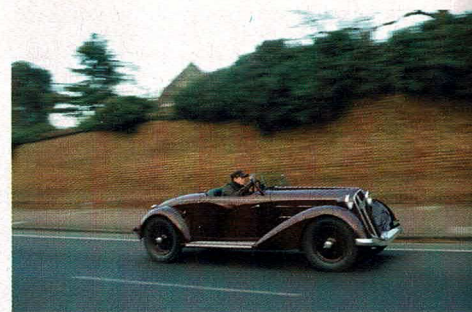
for most of the race while the alternative-fuel modification was merely a propaganda stunt.

Pull down the slim and elegant curved handle and the long rear-hinged door gives easy access to the deeply sprung and upright bench seat. Being the same height as *Il Duce*, I fit the driving position perfectly, yet the highly restored cabin has little ambience considering this car's remarkable history. With new, unmarked black leather and recovered dash, there is little left that the Fascist leader would have touched. But just imagine the conversations conducted here – be they political gossip or lascivious chat – between Mussolini and his passengers.

The instruments are all Jaeger, with white numbers on black backgrounds, adding to the austere character of the interior. Round speedo and rev counter sandwich a cluster of square gauges – water temperature, petrol, clock and oil pressure. Turn the large, clockwork-toy-style key in two stages and the fuel pump starts to thrum under the tail. Pull the choke, thumb the black button and the 2.3-litre straight-six wakes easily with a rorty bark.

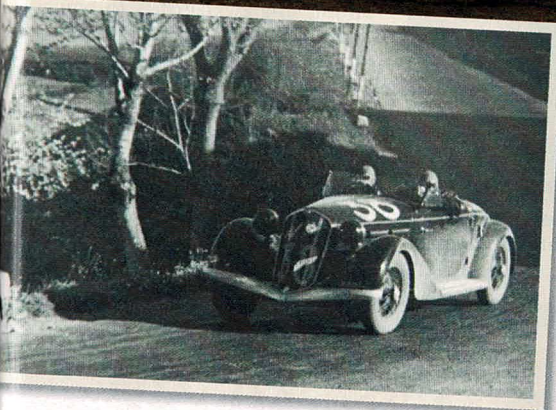
In classic pre-war sporting Alfa tradition, the throttle is in the centre, a button pedal set between higher brake and heavy clutch. Initially it takes real focus but heeling-and-toeing soon feels natural with this unfamiliar set-up. The gearlever sits high on a plinth with gears etched out in roman numerals on the polished gate cover. First is right and forward in the four-speed 'box, while reverse is nearest in a dog-leg.

The ratios are well-spaced in this quality gearbox. Slotting up and down the gate is a rewarding action, aided by Alfa Romeo's then newly developed synchromesh. Thanks to the torquey,



Clockwise, from below: straight-sided cockpit feels like a speedboat; twin Solex carbs raised twin-cam's power to 95bhp; engine's forward position dictated styling of 6C-2300; Mussolini's chauffeur Boratto *en route* to 13th place on the 1936 Mille Miglia





out deflectors, but the low screen and high seat leave your forehead exposed. Boratto must have wished that he'd had a Berlina during the '36 Mille Miglia as class rival Cattaneo finished over an hour ahead after 16 hours. The age of the sports saloon had dawned, and Mussolini's last Alfa would be one of Touring's streamlined Berlinettas.

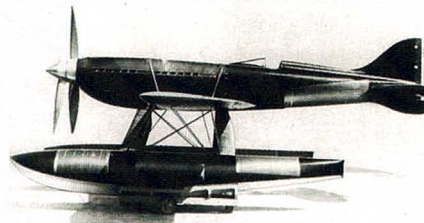
Story has it that *Il Duce* kept the Spider until '39, when he sent it back to the factory and passed it to a less prominent member of the Fascist party. The red paint was replaced with a less conspicuous green but eventually, with fears the famous car might be recognised, the Spider was hidden away.

Only upon the owner's death in the late 1960s did the Alfa come to light, but his relatives weren't interested in the inheritance. Thus it remained in a sorry but highly original state until 1972 when historian Fittipaldi negotiated its purchase. After a mechanical restoration, the Spider completed the Mille Miglia re-run before coming to the UK for auction in the 1990s when it sold for £195,000. The 6C-2300 then returned home where its present owner Ugo Isgro commissioned premier Italian restorer Dino Cognolato for a total restoration. Missing features such as the stylish one-piece bumpers were remade and the colour was returned to a deeper plum red. The car has since been shown at various leading events including Pebble Beach and the New York Concours.

Now it's back in England, to be sold by H&H Classic Auctions on February 27. "It's a very tough car to value," says MD Simon Hope, who has set a mighty estimate of £6-800,000. Maybe two wealthy Mussolini enthusiasts will invigorate bidding fever. ■

DID YOU KNOW?

■ Mussolini was passionate about spectacular machines and directed huge investment into high-profile projects such as the SS Rex Blue Riband ocean liner. Aeronautical achievements included the world's fastest seaplane, the beautiful 3000hp, 440mph Macchi MC72 (below) and Air Marshal Balbo's squadron of Isotta-powered S55 Transatlantic seaplanes.



■ During Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1936, Mussolini had been keen to develop self-sufficient fuel supplies at home. That year the Mille Miglia had a special class for alternative fuels and six entries ran charcoal burners on the event. The quickest of these, the Fiat 508 Balilla of Guzman/Paletti, averaged 32mph and finished 37th after 31 hours 28 mins driving. The victorious Alfa 8C-2900A of Antonio Brivio finished 18 hours ahead of the sooty Fiat.

■ The most stressful part of the relationship between Mussolini and Alfa's director Ugo Gobbato was his inability to deliver a Grand Prix car that could compete consistently against the Nazi-backed German opposition. This not only hurt the Milanese manufacturer's image but was also deemed a national failing. Although Alfa Romeo's aero engines provided power for many prestigious aviation records, the government became increasingly frustrated with international motor racing results. To make it worse, Mussolini regularly attended motor sport events, and all the flak fell on Gobbato. Eventually Jano was dismissed and the Spanish-born Wilfredo Ricart was promoted to chief engineer.

■ Mussolini also had a fleet of coachbuilt Lancia Asturas, but his final car was a two-door, Touring-bodied 1940 Fiat 2800 berlinetta (below). It was a gift to his buxom mistress Claretta Petacci, but she couldn't drive. Some reports claim the stylish coupé was used for the couple's escape attempt in 1945. While racing to Chiavenna airstrip, their escorts were shot. *Il Duce* and Petacci were executed and the Fiat pushed into Lake Garda. It was later retrieved and hidden under hay in a railway carriage before it was smuggled to Switzerland. The Fiat remained in the same ownership from 1950-'98 when, with just 1000km recorded, it was bought by an American collector for £65k.

