

Mille Miglia of "The Little Green Car"

Mille Miglia 15-18 May 2014.

After years of preparation a dream, which most thought to be un-realistic, came true when the email arrived: "Triumph TR3, driver Arthur Wassenaar – accepted".

Over 1000 applications are sent in every year, some many times, without success. We were elated that ours was accepted first time. With only a few weeks to make all the arrangements, Arthur frantically began to organize the necessary documentation.

With the help of Alan Grant, who'd previously owned the car lovingly nicknamed "the green car", many hours were spent getting her race ready. Due to the fact that time was so short she was flown to Europe just ten days before the race start. The plan was to collect her in Zurich and drive over the Alps via Lake Como to Brescia, home of the Mille Miglia.

All went according to plan until fifteen kilometres into our journey when disaster struck and we had a major breakdown. Smoke poured out from the front and back of the car so we had to pull over. Arthur put his head under the bonnet and immediately called Alan Grant who told me that he sat on the steps outside his garage and panicked for us. He thought at one point that he may have to get on the first plane and come to our rescue, but instead made a call to a friend at the Triumph club in England and a call was then made to the Triumph club in Switzerland. Twenty minutes later Robert Ernst arrived in his Triumph TR6 known as The White Lady, to rescue us and he is now referred to as Saint Robert. He and his wife Margrit took us under their wing for two days, repaired the broken piston, fed us and most importantly reassured us we would make the start of the race in time.

Back on the road we made it over the Alps and after missing out on a night at Lake Como we drove directly to Brescia with two days to spare. We had the car professionally washed as only the Italians know how and drove to the Brixia Expo to register. With emotional tears in our eyes we entered the enormous hall and with the engine switched off were pushed inside. There were rows and rows of the most beautiful cars we have ever seen in our lives. We stood speechless trying to take it all in. The reality of what we're about to do finally hit home; our little green car was side by side with the best in the world - how proud we felt! We purchased our Italian racing licenses, thousands of rands-worth of Mille Miglia souvenirs for ourselves and family back home and headed off for the nerve racking scrutineering. All went well and she passed the test. Good to go.

Day 1 of the race began with the cars meeting in Piazza Vittoria. Thousands of car-mad Italians as well as many visitors from all over the world come into the centre of Brescia to drool over the cars. Our car got the all-important sealing performed and we drove off to find a spot to park amongst the other 450 competitors. We gobbled down a pizza (unknown to us this was to be the last decent meal for four days) and after weaving our way through the thronging crowds collected our car. Next stop was the Mille Miglia museum to await our start time. Race car number 421 was ready to start at 6pm but we only departed at around 9pm. We felt like rock stars on driving nervously up to the start ramp with cameras flashing and signing autographs.

Finally on the ramp it was announced that we were the only South Africans taking part and were thanked for coming such a long way. After wishing us a good Mille Miglia our race began.

The first ten minutes of the race are a blur. The road book, which probably should have been studied before getting on the road proved to be gibberish. We decided that until we got the hang of it we should not lose the cars in front. We kept pace extremely well and stayed with the pack all the way to Thermae Abano Montegrotto just outside Padova. The speed of which these classic cars were moving was completely unexpected. Driving on the white line (imaginary lane for Mille Miglia cars) at 120kms an hour in traffic was nerve racking but a rush nevertheless. There was no opportunity to take scenic photos and apparently we passed through Desenzano, Sirmione, Pescheriera, Vincenza, Marostica, Bassano Del Grappa and Padova before arriving at our destination at 2:30am.

Day 2 of the race proved to be the most trying for us. The first leg was spectacular - Monselice, Ferrara, Ravenna and Gambettola with a half day stop in San Marino. We were now finally getting the hang of the road book and the climb up to hill to San Marino was one of the most unforgettable experiences of the race. However, we would prefer to forget the descent. We decided to stop for a Pannino in San Marino and by the time we had finished, all the cars had left. The road book had been changed and we got hopelessly lost. Finally on the right road after losing an hour we had a breakdown and lost another hour or so. A few more wrong turns followed and we finally arrived in Rome at 4am, five hours after our estimated time - stone last! The towns and villages we passed through on the way were in darkness and in pouring rain and are not very memorable. We managed to get an hour and 15 minutes sleep before day three.

Day 3 started off disastrously. A wrong turn five minutes into the race cost us 45 minutes but miraculously we found the right road and made up some time. This proved to be the best day of the race. Driving through Tuscany was amazing for both of us and our little green car and we decided this was her happy place; she was right at home in Volterra, Siena, Pisa and Lucca. We arrived on schedule in Bologna at 10:30pm. Finally we had a decent night's sleep of five hours after our dinner of Pringles from the mini bar.

Day 4 and the starter motor died. Our nerves were shot at this point with only 250kms to the finish line and fearing we wouldn't make it, our fellow competitors bump-started us into life. Then followed another amazing day of very, very fast driving through Modena, Reggio Emilia and Mantova. The sun was shining on our arrival back to Brescia after 43 hours of driving when we climbed back onto the ramp from where we had started the race, beaming with pride at our achievement. - Result - 338 out of 450 cars succeeded and 70 retired.

We did it. We'd finished La corsa piu bella del mondo, the most beautiful race in the world. The dream came true. The next dream: to do it all over again!!!

Below is a selection of photographs.











