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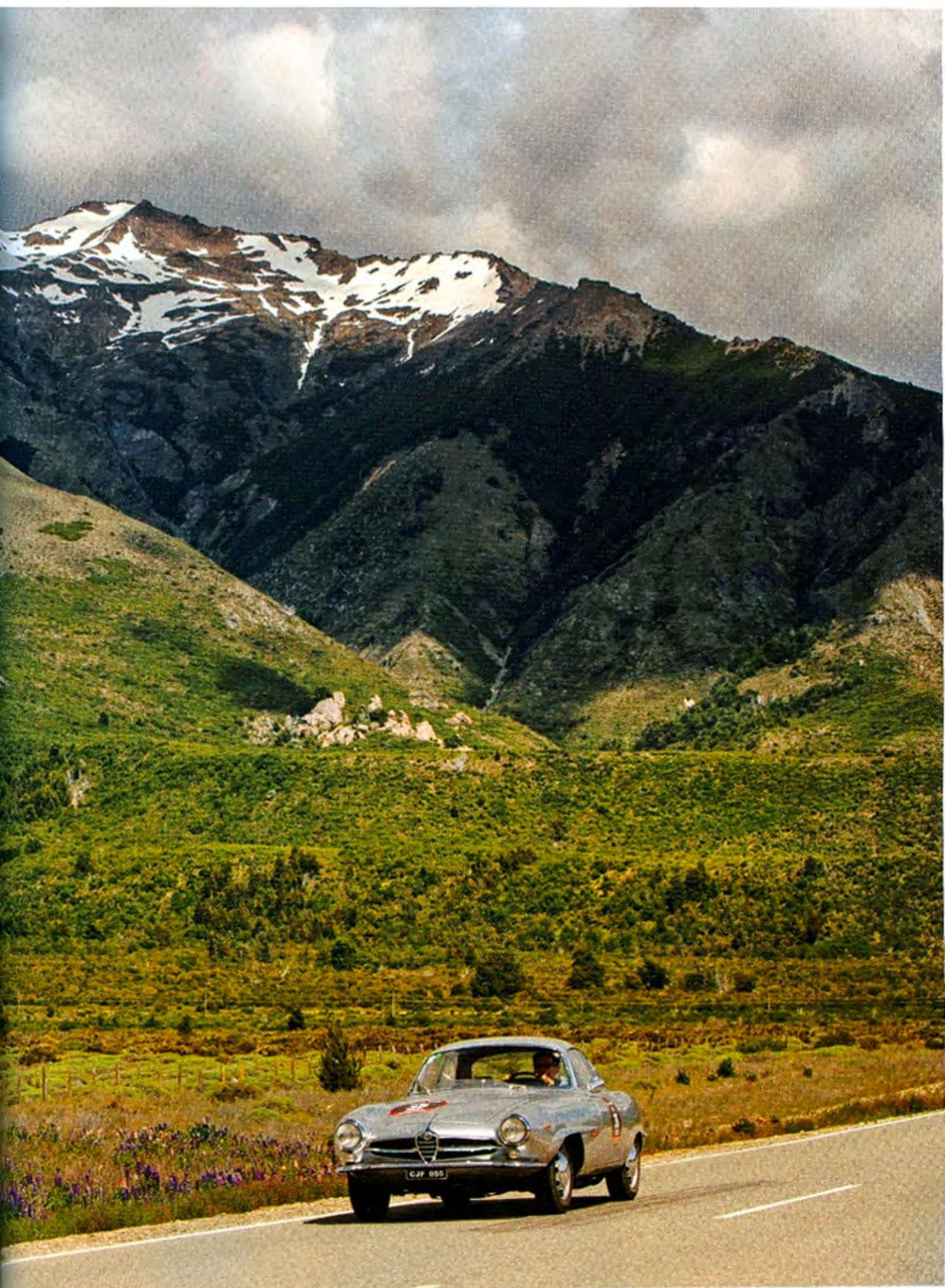
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 DUNLOP

In search of South America's hidden treasures

If you're after deserted tarmac and spellbinding scenery, Argentina is the place, says **Mick Walsh**, as he tackles the 1000 Millas Sport in an Alfa Romeo Giulia SS

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





Europe boasts plenty of magnificent roads, but there aren't many that can match the legendary long-distance arteries of the Americas. Route 66 in the USA has been immortalised in songs and fiction, but for sheer pleasure it's not a patch on the transcontinental highways of South America. Top of my must-drive list has long been Ruta 40, which cuts through western Argentina, running parallel with the Andes from the provinces of Jujuy to Santa Cruz. I've long dreamt of a road trip through this romantic region, and a recent visit to Buenos Aires rekindled that fantasy as I was enthralled by the adventures of the locals. Classic vehicle collectors – be they millionaires or single-car owners – adore driving in their homeland. Maybe it's the wild, beautiful country that inspires them – or possibly it's the motorsport culture that stirs them from an early age.

There's long been a strong Italian connection here, which, among other ways, manifests itself as a love for Latin machinery. Few are more

passionate about Alfa Romeos than Patricio Magrane, who, as well as racing a GTA for decades, has enjoyed the Milanese marque on many road events. He lives in the capital, preferring new Alfas as daily drivers, too. Magrane's automotive highlights include an informal event with friends driving from the Pacific to Atlantic coasts, transporting a jar of ocean water and taking in as many circuits as they can *en route*.

Like lots of his fellow enthusiasts, Magrane's favourite roads are around western Patagonia in the shadow of the Andes, and the 1000 Millas Sport, Argentina's leading classic road rally, is one of his top events. "You must do it – I'll lend you my SS," is his unbelievably generous offer. My incurable love of Alfas has led to some unforgettable escapades over the years, but this tops them all. Later, I review the route and discover that it includes a long section of RN40, not to mention some spectacular passes around the scenic lake district of Bariloche. To experience these heavenly roads in the Franco Scaglione-styled Super Speciale – the closest production



Above: star car of the Mille Millas Sport was Manuel Eliçade's sublime Maserati A6GCS. The awesome-sounding sports-racer is to run at the Goodwood Revival. Right: Alfa SS was a great hit at the local school in El Hoyo, where everyone wanted to try the cockpit

Idyllic route through the Argentinian hills was free of traffic. Right: amazing skylines. Below: guest Prinz Leopold von Bayern loved BMW Classic's 507



design to the wild BAT Alfa concept cars – makes Magrane's invitation even more extraordinary.

The first 1000 Millas, founded by the Club de Automóviles Sport, was based in Buenos Aires, with a three-day drive to Córdoba. "It was far less glamorous and everyone used stopwatches," recalls FIVA representative Alex Daly. "Ten years ago we moved it to Bariloche and it became the premier road rally in Argentina."

The event is based at the outstanding Lloa Lloa Hotel, a 1930s-style lodge in the heart of the Nahuel Huapi National Park. The imposing wooden complex provides the perfect backdrop for the 150-car entry, including a 1922 Grand Prix Peugeot, a pack of stylish Mercedes Pagoda SLs and a few early-'80s Porsches. The line-up at the start is refreshingly diverse, from recent



Mille Miglia winners in Bugattis and a Riley to a batch of modern recreations. "We run the replicas at the back and the idea is to attract younger enthusiasts but outside the event rules," says Daly. The crowd of lookalike Elevens, Cobras and Maseratis (there's a thriving homage culture in Argentina) has as much fun as anyone, and was easily the noisiest bunch at the prizegiving.

The eruption of a local volcano in 2011 had a catastrophic effect on the area and last year, due to ash fallout, the organisers were forced to relocate to Córdoba where the event originated.


The first day runs south, a 500km return leg to Esquel and back that mixes a wide range of scenery from wooded lakeside lanes to trunk roads across the Chubut Plains to Esquel, which is best known for its narrow-gauge railway christened *The Old Patagonian Express* by writer Paul Theroux. Once clear of Bariloche, the smooth rolling roads are deserted other than for occasional trucks, and the SS is in its element. It's a great feeling to see my first RN40 sign as the twin-cam rasps throatily in fifth gear, eating up TR3s and MGAs along Lago Gutiérrez in the hazy early sun. The SS rolls noticeably through the long, fast turns, yet its handling is beautifully balanced.

Not bothered about the event timing we soon catch the pre-war cars, and it's a joy to see the fabulous Kellner-bodied Hispano-Suiza H16B coupé of Daniel Sielecki being driven with such spirit. Every two years Daniel and brother Calilo organise a marathon vintage Bentley get-together for a small group of mates and take off to the far corners of Argentina and Chile.

A local school on the outskirts of El Hoyo has turned out to cheer on the rally and a few of us stop so that the children can have a closer look at the exotic European machinery. The streamlined SS is a big hit as the kids jostle to get a closer view, and I mistakenly invite a few to sit in the driving seat. Many more soon want to get behind the wheel, including one lad who bursts into tears at the possible missed opportunity.

Now behind schedule, we're running with younger, faster cars and, on the long straights south of Leleque, I'm distracted by the distant sight of a red car in the mirror that's gaining very quickly. This desolate landscape – with perfect skies and the empty tarmac stretching ahead arrow-straight to the horizon – is a surreal place, particularly when a Ferrari Daytona comes storming past at full chat. We finally catch it up in Esquel as Chilean owner JHernán Levy refuels



A high-angle photograph of a silver classic car, possibly a Jaguar E-Type, parked on a dirt road. The car is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the frame. The road curves through a dense forest of trees with vibrant autumn foliage in shades of yellow, orange, and red. In the background, a large, calm lake stretches across the middle ground, reflecting the sky. Beyond the lake, rolling hills and mountains are visible under a cloudy sky. The overall scene is a picturesque landscape with a classic car as the focal point.

'THE SCENERY IS STUNNING,
BUT BEST OF ALL ARE THE
ROADS – WITH SUPERB
SURFACES AND NO TRAFFIC'



the mighty V12-powered wedge. "It's a heavy brute, but just keeps getting better the faster you go," says the ceramics manufacturer with a big smile. "It was made for these roads and it sounds fantastic. Thankfully, the local police are really nice guys. I also have a 275, although it just doesn't have enough power. We don't believe in trailers and drove down from Santiago, which is a 3400km round-trip. We did 1200km in less than 10 hours to get to the start."

No car in Levy's collection is tolerated if it can't be driven and his taste is remarkably eclectic: "I've just done a 1000km event around Chile in my Model A Ford. We were all driving pre-war cars and the pace was a total contrast to the 1000 Millas but just as much fun. You can take the Ford to really remote places and it's so tough."

The bulk of the entry is from the host country, but several make the trip from Brazil including Claudio Romi Zanaga and Luis Pasetti from São Paulo with their trusty MGB roadster. Like Levy, they make an event of the long journey south to Bariloche. "There's about 20 MGBs in Brazil and I love British cars," enthuses Zanaga. "We've taken three days to get to the start and enjoy the sightseeing along the route. It's too far to drive all the way, so we convoy to Buenos Aires and transport the cars from there. The roads through Uruguay are really good and the MG has been really reliable, but an overdrive is a must."

He adds: "We have our own Mille Miglia run at home, which features everything from Midgets to a Rolls-Royce, but it's no match for this brilliant tour. It's my first time and it has exceeded all of our expectations. The scenery is breathtaking, though best of all are the roads. The paved surface is superb and there's no traffic."

After the epic stage on day one, the second day is more relaxing but no less memorable. The



route weaves around the lakeside, heading north on the RN231 to Villa La Angostura in the Neuquén province, and we're so close to the Chilean border that it's tempting to make a break to tick off another country. This friendly town was declared a disaster area in 2011 when the eruption from the Puyehue-Cordón Caulle fissure buried the area under tons of ash, sand and pumice stone. The tourist economy was devastated, and the rally organisers pledged a visit to help raise funds in support.

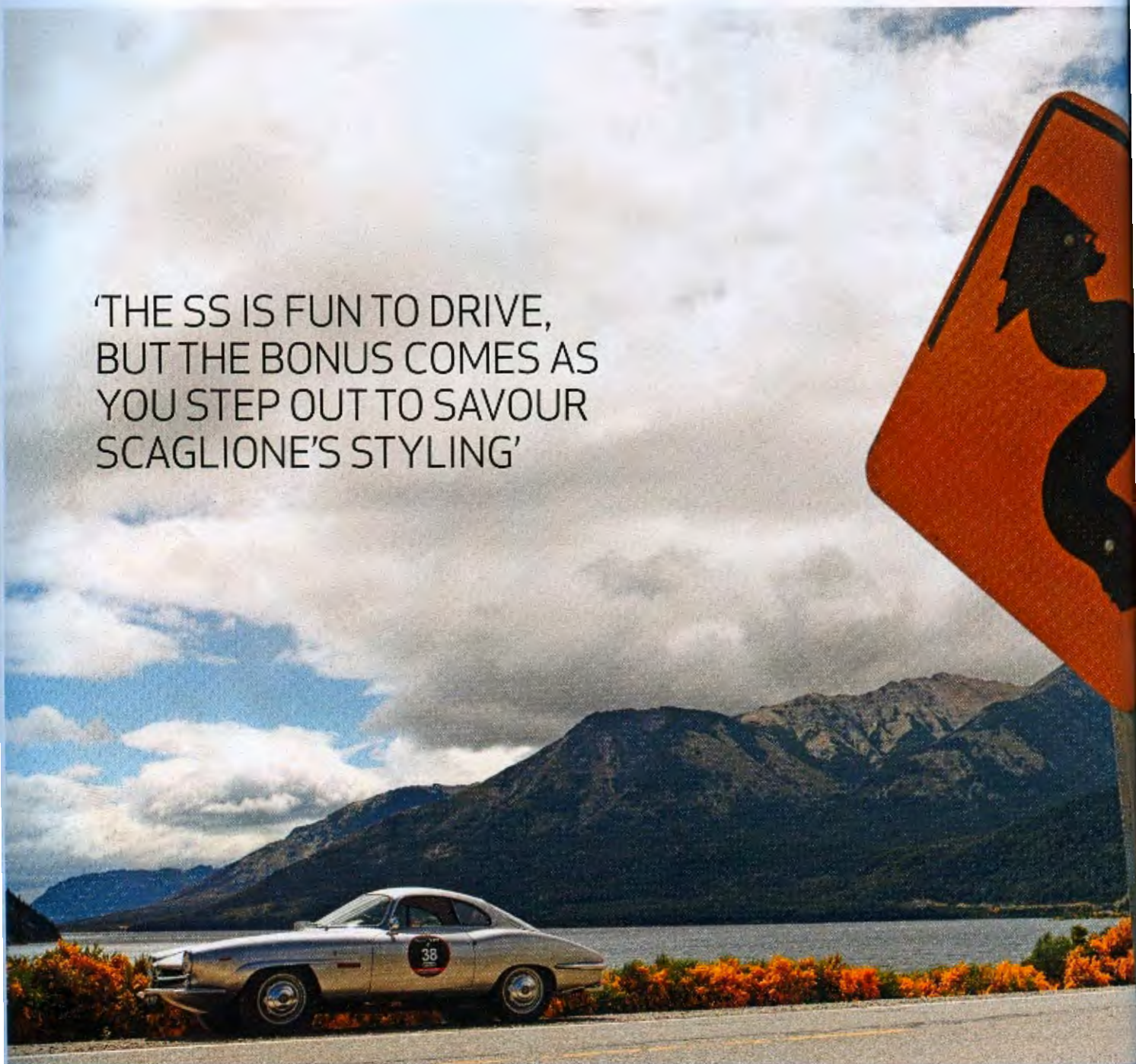
It's always good to see youngsters enjoying classic car events, and Damian Pozzoli's son Agustín is navigating for the first time in his dad's 1969 Jaguar E-type fixed-head coupé. "I love the styling and the sound of the engine," enthuses the 19-year-old. "The only problem is that Dad drives too slowly. My dream car would be an SS100. As soon as I've saved enough money, I'm going to buy a classic, enter the 1000 Millas and beat him. The roads here – particularly over the mountains – are unbelievable."

The return leg around Lago Nahuel Huapi looks even more mindblowing, with vast cloudscapes set above the foothills of the Patagonian Andes. Much to the amusement of the other competitors, we just stop the Alfa and enjoy the



Clockwise, from top: svelte SS shape is refined at speed; Chilean Daytona of Hernán Levy and Matias Enrique Vicuña Balze; awesome road across Salinas Plain; favourite look-out point at Llao Llao

'THE SS IS FUN TO DRIVE,
BUT THE BONUS COMES AS
YOU STEP OUT TO SAVOUR
SCAGLIONE'S STYLING'



Clockwise, from top: SS by the Lago Gutiérrez; Alfa's perfectly set up twin-cam didn't miss a beat; rear three-quarter shows off Scaglione's exquisite lines; simple detailing with neat boot lock and badge



ever-changing cumulus formations in the late afternoon sun. On the way back we're distracted by a café near a lookout point that says it serves the best hot chocolate in Argentina. It's run by an Italian who is friends with the Agnelli family. The SS is immediately christened "the jet car" and he demands to have it parked in front of his place so that he can send a photo home. And the smooth, dark drink lives up to his promise.

A glorious sunrise has me up and about early the next morning to chat to other entrants about their favourite roads and cars. The Argentinian ardour for driving their prized motors is confirmed by club president Manuel Elicabe who's in his newly acquired Maserati A6GCS, a fabulous 1955 sports-racer that he will be driving this September at the Goodwood Revival. "Some cars you tend to idolise and they are a disappointment when you finally get to drive them," explains Elicabe. "The A6GCS is exactly the opposite and running it on this event was automotive nirvana. The engine is a jewel – high-revving, flexible and really sweet. The



Above: fantastic run with SL and GTVs along Lago Gutiérrez. Below: César Litvin's Healey 3000 leads Ferrari 365GTC of Patricio and Tomas Magrane




suspension, poise and its eager-revving heart are always thrilling, but the bonus comes when you step out to savour Scaglione's sensational styling. Too many SSs have been devoured by rust, but thankfully values now make it worthwhile to restore them. When expertly rebuilt, the distinctive coupé is worthy of any art gallery. To drive such a prime example for three days on such phenomenal roads is very special.

"One of the best trips ever," states *co-piloto* and long-serving *C&SC* photographer Tony Baker as we pull into Llao Llao for the last time.

The Argentinians have become masters of classic road events, as their recent success on the Mille Miglia confirms, and no one could touch Juan Tonconogy and Guillermo Berisso in their Riley Sprite on the 1000 Millas. "It's a great car and I love driving it," says Tonconogy. "I'm lucky to have the best co-pilot, who is also a really good friend. We were cursed with charging problems, but everyone was really helpful. We won it two years ago and it's a great competition."

But the biggest cheer at the prizegiving goes to Daniel Van Lierde, who gunned his freshly restored 1926 Salmson SS for the full distance. Van Lierde drove solo from the start, in a car with no mudguards or windscreen that was untested before the event. The compact supercharged ex-works 1100cc *voiturette* set the pace and upstaged many younger machines with its determined performance. Van Lierde's daughter Nadine joined him on the maps from the second day and squeezed into the narrow staggered cockpit for the rest of the competition.

As the 1000 Millas Sport and the compelling stories of those who've taken part become more established, Argentina – and Patagonia in particular – looks set to draw more people for their ultimate road trips. "It has the perfect combination of monumental landscape and little traffic," concludes Eliçabe. "It's also so vast that there are loads of incredible places to discover."

One day, I hope that I'll be back to further explore this wonderful country. 

The 25th 1000 Millas Sport runs from 13-17 November. For info, go to www.1000millas.com.ar



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power perfectly matches the communicative handling, too. It makes a good driver look excellent." The 1000 Millas has always been lucky for Eliçabe, who met his gorgeous wife Valerie during the '97 contest: "We've done many events together, but this time she drove a TR2 with her best friend and won the Ladies' Cup."

Eliçabe counts the Grand Prix de Monaco Historique and Mille Miglia as five-star experiences, yet the trips that stand out for him are the ones organised every two years with four chums: "We take locally built cars – Maserati Monofaro and Cobra lookalikes, with no mechanics but just ourselves. Last year we did 2400 miles, taking in a lot of gravel roads. Nothing fancy, just great driving, adventure and friendship."

The final day is a total surprise, including a 15km dirt-road diversion to Escondido, the lake with a mirror-like surface in a hidden valley that is the impressive retreat of American billionaire Joe Wells. The now-dusty convoy follows a single track, better suited to off-road vehicles, along a narrow ravine, with ramshackle rope

bridges and river rapids to distract drivers. The early cars – particularly Jorge Ferioli's famous 1924 Studebaker Big Six, a former Formule Libre road-racer – look uncannily authentic covered in muck. The ranch-style lunch is fantastic, but no place for a vegetarian with enough butterflied lamb, beef and chicken to feed an army, all grilled Parrilla-style by superb local cooks. The founder of the Hard Rock Cafe chain certainly knows how to entertain visitors!

We enjoy one of the best drives of the event on the run back when a pair of Bertone Alfa GTVs and a hot Pagoda appear behind us. The subsequent spirited chase on flowing, open roads along Lago Gutiérrez for 15 miles in the late sun is great fun, with no one taking risks to keep pace. Even though we hadn't previously met, the camaraderie is brilliant when we stop.

When new, the SS may have been upstaged by lighter, faster Zagato-bodied Giuliettas, but this late-'63 Giulia version – with 1570cc all-alloy motor and front disc brakes – is a treat to drive as a road car. The slick five-speed gearbox, supple