

AN ECONOMIC MIRACLE SENT ITALY INTO THE ROCKET AGE

The war ended, and it was back to business as usual for the car-building concerns of Turin and the visionaries who had shaped motoring culture: the Maserati brothers, Enzo Ferrari, Battista Farina, and Nuccio Bertone. Their plans for racing success, grand touring dreams, and design advances had been rudely interrupted by the conflict. With the advent of peace, they could once again focus on styling, technological advances, and fulfilling their destinies by crafting the greatest cars in the world.

However, the road to greatness was marred with economic difficulty and social unrest. Much of northern Italy's industrial heart was flattened by Allied bombing. Mussolini was dead, and the specter of an unpredictable Soviet Union divided Germany, setting the stage for the emerging tension of the Cold War. Italy, occupied by foreign powers, teetered on a fragile democracy—a nation caught between two ideologies, a perilous fight to win hearts and minds.

Two things helped Italy rebuild. Migrants from rural southern Italy, where some of the fiercest fighting had taken place during the war, moved north to find work, settling in Milan, Turin, and Genoa. America and the Allied countries launched the Marshall Plan in 1948: seeing Italy as a strategic bulwark against the spread of communism, they injected over a billion dollars into the Italian economy.

This meant that Italy's reconstruction advanced at a rapid pace. These joint forces began an "economic miracle" that lasted across the decade, well into the 1960s: between 1950 and 1962, the Italian GDP doubled, which created a middle class and the postwar prosperity that ensued. The people needed televisions, brand new appliances, and transportation. Soon, Italy reemerged as

an industrial power, one that was able to reaffirm its adoration of the automobile and everything that it entailed.

One of the highest priorities of postwar Europe was the need to get its citizens on wheels again. It began when former aircraft builder Piaggio developed a future icon. It was to be something that was easy to climb aboard, simple, easy to start up and operate, affordable, easy to manufacture en masse, and effortless to maneuver around Rome's and Milan's burgeoning traffic as well as the rough roads in the countryside. The resulting Vespa was introduced in 1946, and the sight of Audrey Hepburn riding with Gregory Peck across Rome in the 1953 film *Roman Holiday* cemented the Vespa's status as

more than just cheap n' cheerful transportation, but as a worldwide ambassador to Italy itself.

Then, a decade later, in 1957, Fiat introduced the "nuevo cinquecento," its newest and most modern car for the masses. Using a prewar name, Fiat and lead engineer Dante Giacosa hoped for a positive association with the beloved 500 Topolino, or "little mouse." Their expectations were shattered, because the New 500 became nothing short of a revelation—now as indelibly associated with Italian culture as its Tuscan vineyards, its universally recognized cuisine, and the artifacts of its Roman Empire. Despite its diminutive size, by placing the engine in the rear, the 500 featured interior volume



Above: Two Sud Aviation Caravelle airplanes in Alitalia livery at Rome's Fiumicino airport.
Opposite: An Alfa Romeo B.A.T. 7 participates in the 1955 Palm Springs road race.

