

Escape Road

Lancia Aurelia GT 2400: a truly grand Grand Tourer

By Roger Barlow

It may well be that there have been only two authentic geniuses in the automotive world, Ettore Bugatti and Vincenzo Lancia.

Bugatti was the more eccentric, Lancia quite possibly the better engineer. Bugatti, with all his brilliance, actually went in a direction no one else traveled. Lancia, the ex-Fiat Grand Prix driver, was equally individualistic and although no other car makers ever made cars quite like his, they ultimately followed in the direction he first traveled...his Lambda of 1923 being the first fairly large-scale production car with independent front suspension and an integral or unitary body-chassis. It also had a unique narrow angle, 20deg, V4 engine.

Narrow angle Vee engines of four or eight cylinders, all within a single vertical block, remained a Lancia specialty until well after WWII, as did his sliding pillar front suspension, which had possibly the best geometry of any independent front suspension system. Indeed, right after WWII Lancia's first new design was a narrow angle V12, shown at the Paris Show of 1919 but never put into production due to Italy's new car tax based upon the number of cylinders.

Vincenzo Lancia died a few months before his remarkable Aprilia was introduced in the summer of 1937, winning instant acclaim with its lively narrow angle, hemi-head V4 engine, unitary body and *four-wheel independent suspension*. The front suspension was still a sliding pillar design. The unusual rear was also a Lancia design that maintained the desirable parallel relationship of the rear wheels and so was a vast improvement over the simple but vile handling swing axle so beloved by the German manufacturers.

While I have driven the Lambda, Dillambda, Astura, Aprilia, Appia, Fulvia and Flavia models, the only Lancia I have owned is the 1956 Aurelia GT 2400 Spyder; still in the family as it was the replacement for my beautiful Figoni-bodied Talbot-Darracq.

Although produced some years after his death, it is nevertheless a "real" Lancia with the traditional sliding pillar front suspension, here with adjustable shock absorbers. Rear suspension is of the viceless De Dion design (which maintains the vital parallel relationship of the rear wheels) and incorporates clutch, four-speed gearbox and differential in one unit, along



Pinin Farina-designed '56 Aurelia Spyder is beautiful and fast but failed to sell in US

with inboard rear brakes. The light alloy engine, no longer a narrow angle type, is the first production 60deg V6 with pushrod operated valves in hemispherical combustion chambers. The more aerodynamic Aurelia GT Coupe had a remarkable number of successes in major sports car events (when they were still contested by real sports cars rather than thinly disguised Grand Prix machines.)

But the B24 (and almost identical B25) Lancias are most memorable for how well they met the criteria of their GT designation. They are truly grand Grand Touring machines, fast for their day (110-115mph), comfortable, possessed of outstanding handling and roadholding, superb steering, non-fade brakes (huge Alfin drums) and even excellent economy (24-26mpg). And the Spyder is surely one of the very best-looking and most truly elegant sports cars Pinin Farina created. Thirty years later it still looks just right, seemingly ageless.

So why didn't Lancias sell in useful numbers here in the US? Pioneer importer Kjell Qvale tried to market them on the

West Coast, where mine was acquired. Three years later I went to Turin to negotiate (successfully) the US distributorship for Max Hoffman, another pioneer in the mass selling of imported cars in this country who shared my enthusiasm for the marque. Yet even with his resources and expertise, plus the availability of the beautiful new Flaminia sedan, the effort came to naught. US buyers weren't swayed by the style, engineering, build quality and ease of maintenance of the Lancias sent here, nor did they seem usefully impressed by the firm's success in Formula One, its Mexican Road Race win or enviable worldwide reputation reaching back to 1910. Loyal owners say the real Lancias, before they became re-badged Fiats, were simply too good in ways that Americans couldn't appreciate. This may well be so. But it may also have been that in the late 1950s and the decade that followed, most American car buyers able to afford the not inexpensive Italian cars were so bedazzled by the three-cornered Star of Stuttgart that nothing else could get their attention.

A pity. **AW**

Roger Barlow photo