



# A STORY OF HISTORIC RALLY CARS AND FLOWERS Sanremo

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**T**he Italian TV news reported a car crash (not a coach crash) that killed 13 people, injured scores more, and involved hundreds of vehicles. It happened on Italy's huge northern plain – an area notorious for fog. Ironically, false stereotyping being what it is, Italians often ask me how bad the London fogs are. They look surprised when I tell them that the last London pea-souper was in 1952. Italian road accident figures are just over double the UK's (with similar car and vehicle populations). Italians are really good drivers – who crash a lot. The fog had cleared as our Lancia Thesis motored across the Piemonte part of that northern plain from Turin to Sanremo in Liguria to meet new contacts, sample some rally cars, and enjoy the Mediterranean.

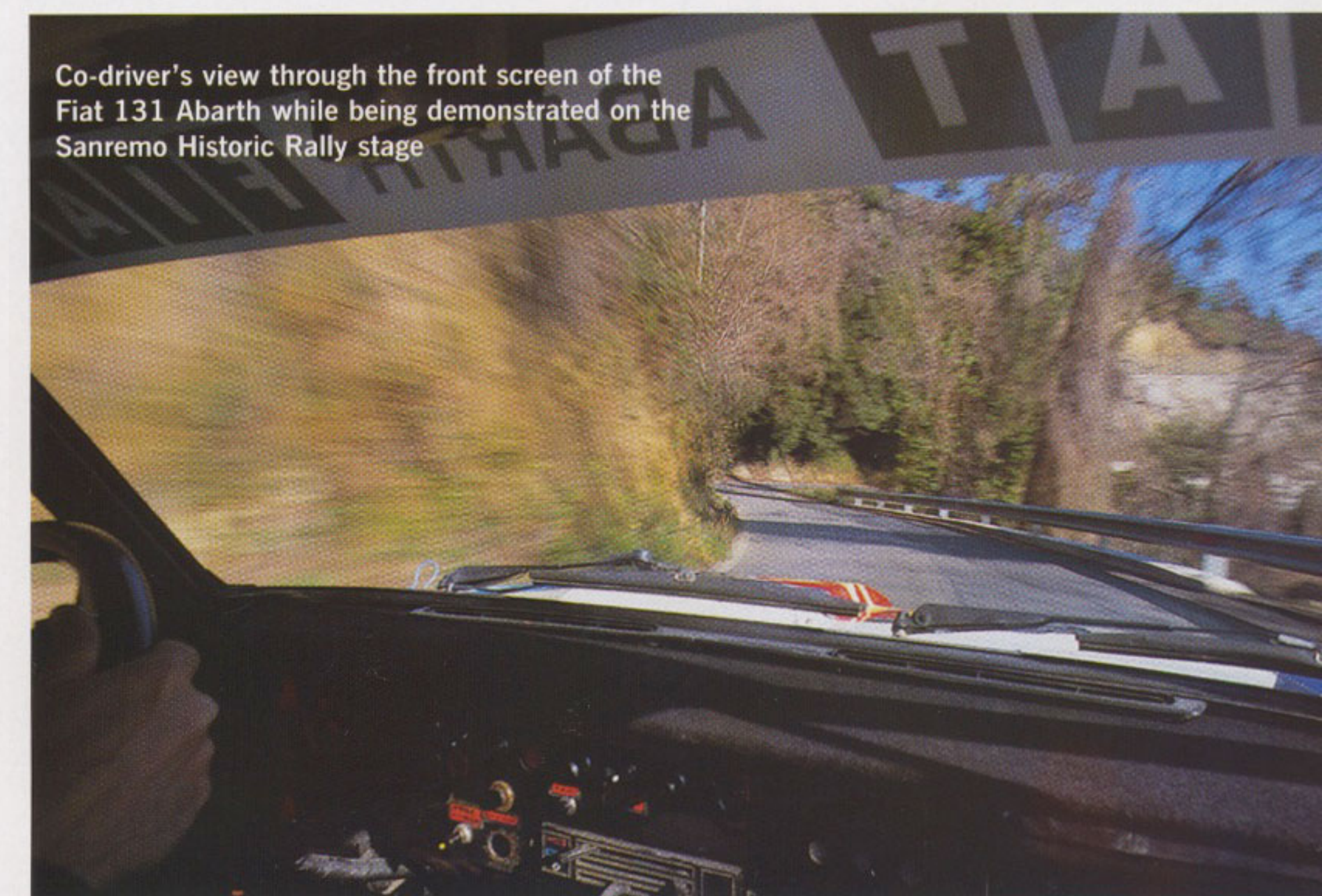
Liguria is that boomerang-shaped strip of land between the Maritime Alps and the sea. It extends from the French border, round past Genoa and a little way down the 'boot' of Italy. The western part is known as the Italian Riviera and the Riviera Dei Fiori (Riviera of Flowers). The Ligurian coastline enjoys a very pleasant micro-climate, which is good for exporting flowers and for life in general. Genoa sits in the middle of Liguria with the Riviera di Levante extending south. This includes the delightfully picturesque towns of Rapallo, Santa Margherita, Portofino, and many more.

The Med must be one of the world's greatest playgrounds and Liguria is about as close as the ➔





The 131 Abarth is the ultimate design from Fiat's 'boxy' period. High ground clearance suggests this example is a forest specification car



Co-driver's view through the front screen of the Fiat 131 Abarth while being demonstrated on the Sanremo Historic Rally stage

"No mirrors, no seat belts, 230bhp and 950 kilos. "Is that OK?" says the owner. Only in Italy."

Med gets to northern Europe. This narrow strip of land has little space for agriculture so its gastronomic specialties are typically Genovese. Genoa is the principal city and one of the Mediterranean's largest ports. Ligurian food specialises in fish dishes (even ravioli stuffed with fish), high quality olive oil, and pesto. The area is good for pine nuts and basil for making pesto, which also gets stuffed into everything. Liguria also produces some wine, although only two ever get a mention – Dolceacqua (from near Sanremo) and Sciacchetrà from the Cinque Terre. The Cinque Terre (just north of La Spezia) are a line of beautiful time-warp coastal towns with very difficult access – unless you visit by boat or train. Until about the middle of the last century, the British had a love affair with Liguria and the Mediterranean. The lyricist and poet Percy Shelley lived there until his premature death in 1882 in a sailing accident. "Bad, mad and dangerous to know" Lord Byron was a regular, too.

We cruised into Sanremo – at the western end of Liguria, near the French border. The Italian border has moved about quite a bit in the past as deals were done. "Dear France, We will give you Cannes,

Nice, Monte Carlo, etc, if you help up us fight the Austrians and move their border up a bit."

Thanks to UK based Terry Di Francesco (restaurateur, car nut, and club racer) we had some new contacts to visit in Sanremo. Sanremo once rivalled Monaco with its own round-the-houses Grand Prix as well as a posh casino, which still exists. Sanremo is big on rallying with top-level events for historic and modern cars. Today, some regard Sanremo as a poor neighbour to Monte Carlo but Sanremo is a 'real' place and a happening place. We arrived during Italian Song Festival week. OK, so Italian songs don't 'travel', but the Festival is big news in Italy. Even politicians go there to be seen.

Our first meeting was with charismatic yacht broker and ship chandler – Nuccio Magliocchetti, [www.sanremomare.com](http://www.sanremomare.com). He has an Alladdin's cave of cars, parts, and motorbikes. Unfortunately, a little while ago, thieves broke in and stole his Lancia Statos rally car and 15 motorbikes (for reward details see: [www.hobbymotorsport.com](http://www.hobbymotorsport.com).)

I spotted a flat-12 Alfa Romeo race engine, an Alfa GTAm engine, a magnesium GTA block, GTAm Siamese cylinder liners by the box-load,

Alfa 33 wheels, uprights, 33 chassis, countless rare wheels, Abarth parts, Stratos parts, two works 131 Abarth rally cars, a 16-valve works rally Alfetta with one of the few narrow angle 2.0-litre engines, and a Lancia Fulvia rally car.

We fire up the ex-Walter Rohrl works Fiat 131 Abarth to go for a blast up into the mountains – on slicks, of course (well, it was a sunny day). No mirrors, no seat belts, 230bhp and 950 kilos. "Is that OK?" says the owner. Only in Italy. The 131 snorts through the Sanremo streets and starts to climb. Induction noise competes with exhaust. driven like it has been stolen. Higher and higher – no houses now and Nuccio really puts the hammer down. Gear changes on the dog-box at something over 7,000 unsilenced rpm, the 131 is straight-lining the bendy climb. This bloke needs no instruction, I thought. Braking is strong despite the hard old slicks, which refuse get up to temperature. The exit of every corner is 'oversteer city'. The 131 has independent rear suspension and very good traction considering its configuration. But is there anything better in motoring than power-sliding away from corners? The 131 is a perfect car for such antics. In their ➔





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day, the works drivers loved them more than the faster Stratos. My notes read as follows, “1,000 metres above sunny Sanremo. A fast, rorty and very chuckable rally car. Empty Riviera roads. Panoramic Mediterranean views to die for. The stuff of dreams.”

For the return journey down the mountain, I take the wheel of the Thesis and chase (ha, ha) the 131 Abarth (and a Delta integrale that has joined in) down the mountain. The integrale owner – Fausto Amalberti – later took us to see his ex-works Turbodelta Alfetta (one of three or four – story to follow). The Thesis copes with the fast downhill twisty thrash superbly. Fiat 131 Abarth, Delta integrale and Lancia Thesis – decades apart but united by our need to be bad.

Sanremo's Song Festival is in full song with wall-to-wall media, palm trees, noise, and high spirits. We learn that tonight is the night that

Autodelta is celebrating its 40 year anniversary in Geneva. With the beautiful people, the politicians, the famous, the luvvies, and the hangers-on parading into the song Festival, we find a bar and meet Sergio Maiga who was in the Autodelta rally team from 1974-77 and became a team principal. He is now President of the Auto Club Sanremo. We start talking 'Autodelta'. I make a point that, amazingly, no book has written on the subject. Come on somebody, write one.

The next day – still in Sanremo – we find a 1966 Alfa Romeo GTA. Owned since 1998 by Valta Verdecchia, it is regularly used for historic events, like the Sanremo Rally and the Rally Storico. This 1600 GTA (chassis 613857) was originally prepared by Autodelta and competed in the Targa Florio driven by Vito Cocco, who was considered second only to Nino Vacarella. It has competed in the Enna Hilleclimb and raced until 1974. After a 'rest' the GTA has been restored. I noted a bag tank, Sparco seat and harnesses, fire extinguisher, alloy radiator, drilled front suspension pans, works rear anti-roll bar and Avon ZZ 185 70 14 tyres.

Job done, we decide to investigate a bar in the Sanremo Marina – a marina with over 800 berths. We point our trusty Lancia Thesis Press Car in the right direction for Turin, wave goodbye to the blue sea and head north to Turin.

We sometimes remember to use the headlights on daytime motorways, a 68 euro fine if you don't. As from June, driving on any road at any time will require the use of headlights. Also coming, a law requiring you to have on board a special reflective

**RIGHT: Engine for a champion. The 2.0-litre 16-valve fuel injected twin cam that powered Walter Rohrl to victory in the 1980 World Rally Championship season**



## Sanremo

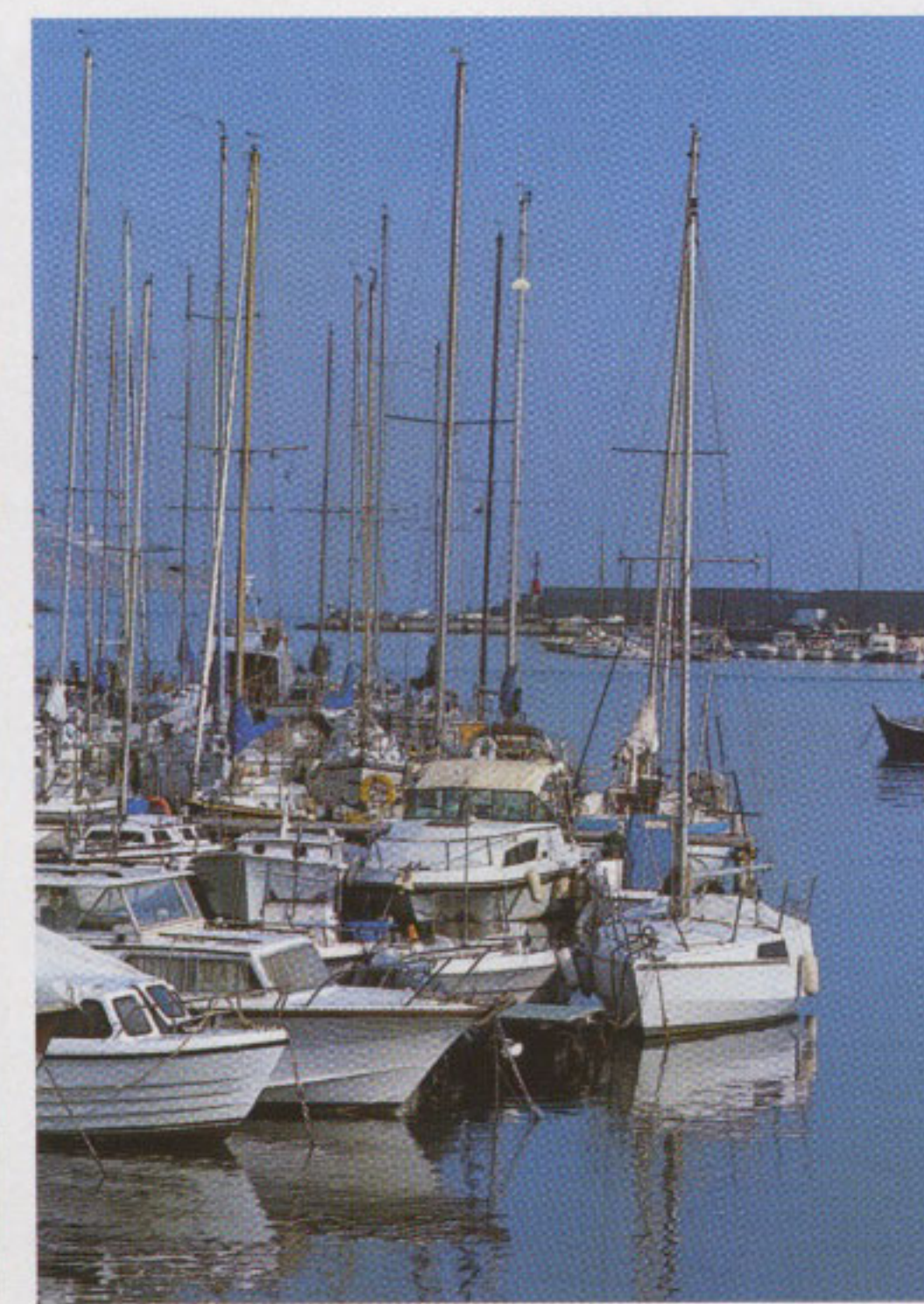
Sanremo is the heart of the Riviera dei Fiori (Coast of Flowers) and is recognised as the most important flower trading centre in Southern Europe and in the Mediterranean area. The fashionable town has colourful gardens blossoming with exotic species, this, combined with medieval gateways, passageways, alleys, remarkable churches, and fabulous sea views, ensures that Sanremo is a popular tourist attraction

Protected by a mountain range, Sanremo is sheltered from cold north winds and has very little rainfall (750mm per year). The temperature is particularly mild at 10 degrees in winter and 23 in summer, which makes Sanremo an all year round holiday resort. There are over 100 hotels catering for an annual count of more than one million visitors. Among Sanremo's attractions is the Casino where 360,000 people come each year to gamble away their euros.

Sanremo's convenient location makes it a favourite venue for festivals, not surprisingly featuring flower events but also film and writers' festivals, music concerts and theatre seasons, fashion-parades, gala evenings, sailing and rowing regattas, powerboat racing and, of course, rallying.

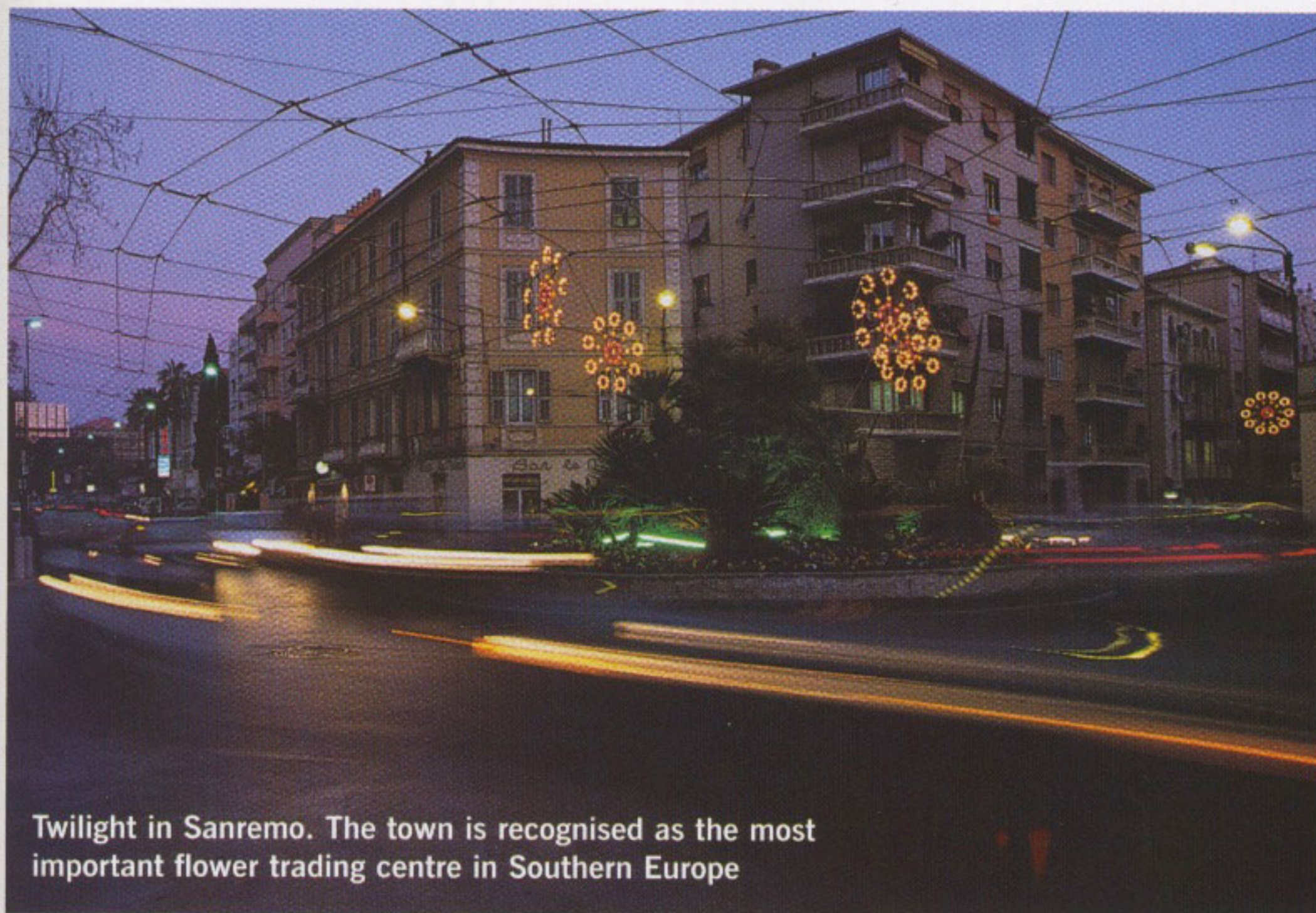
For more Sanremo information visit [www.rally.sanremo.it](http://www.rally.sanremo.it) or [www.sanremopromotion.com](http://www.sanremopromotion.com)

**BELOW: Sanremo scenes. The famous Casino, the harbour, and a gang of Supermen spotted during the Sanremo Song Festival**



Owned by collector Nuccio Magliocchetti, this Fiat 131 Abarth is prepared by Turin-based Fissolo Auto





Twilight in Sanremo. The town is recognised as the most important flower trading centre in Southern Europe

jacket, in case of breakdown. The 3-lane motorway speed limit is to be increased from 130km/h (82mph) to 150km/h (94mph). Italians are trying to reduce their accident statistics. We had managed to borrow a Telepass, enabling us to nip through the automatic tollbooth gates instead of fumbling with poorly designed euro coins for the toll robbery. Italy is a mad place but let's leave the final word to the bloke who invented the English Dictionary in 1755. Dr Johnson, "A man who has not been to Italy, is always conscious of an inferiority, from not having seen what a man should see. The grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean." **ai**

## German + Italian = World

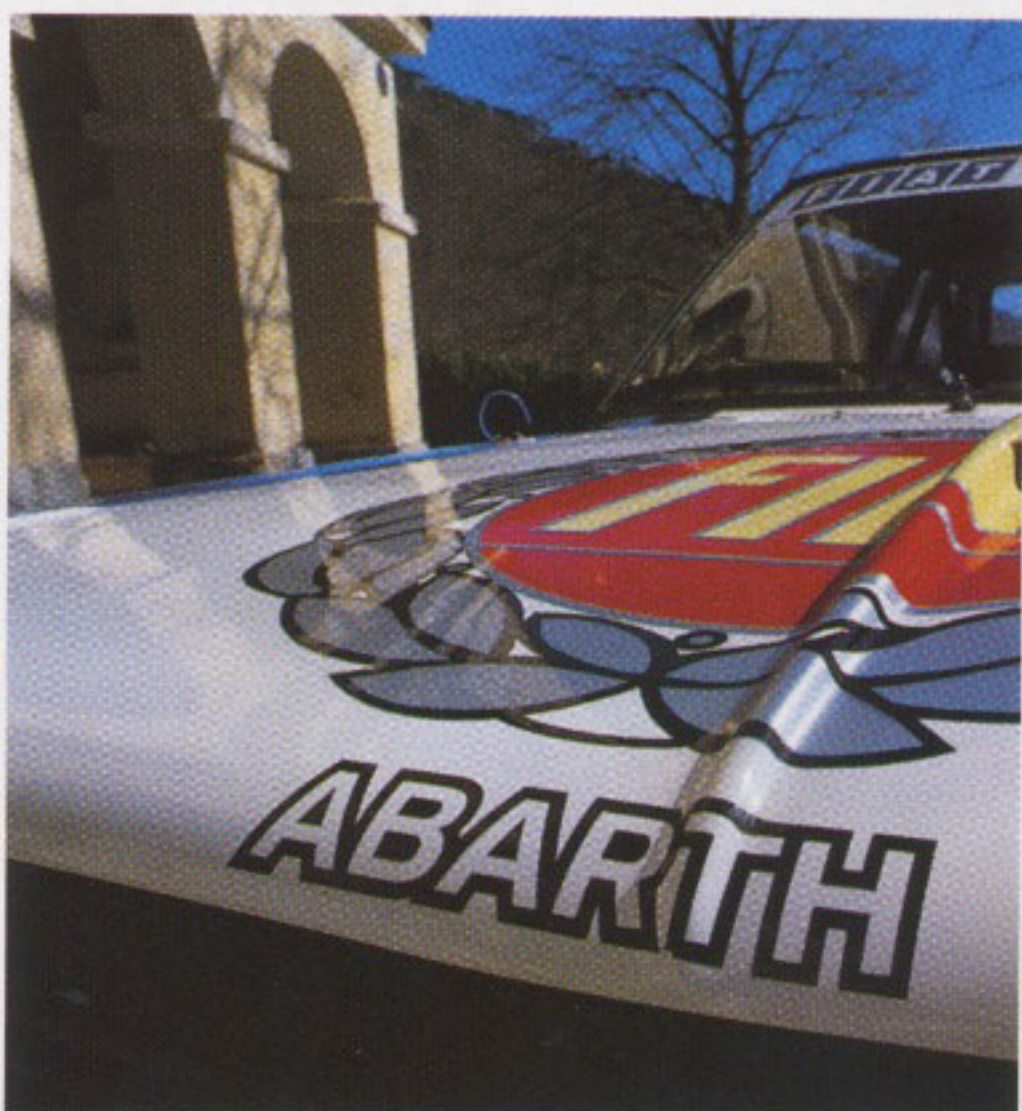
With well over 20,000 Fiat workers on strike in Turin blocking any chances the works rally team might have had of making a run for it from Corso Marche to Sanremo in 1980, the only answer for Cesare Fiorio was to borrow cars from elsewhere for his team to try to win the Italian World Championship round.

Walter Rohrl tells the story that Giorgio Pianta found a lightweight tarmac specification 131 and that was what he had to use for the part-gravel rally. All the time I was expecting it to fall apart, but no, it survived and I won, Walter told me recently. At the same time he clinched the World Championship. The 131 was more a race than a rally car anyway. Walter had also won the first rally of the year in Monte Carlo with what many said was an outdated car, but his driving, plus what he refers to as brilliant engineering by Sergio Limone and perfect testing and development by Giorgio Pianta, led to a season that was the swan-song for conventional rally cars.

A second win in Portugal, a third in Argentina and then the win in Sanremo, plus podium positions elsewhere, meant that not only did Rohrl come out on top – so did the 131 for Fiat.

It was almost the perfect season and team-mate Markku Alen proved the worth of the car by taking the 1000 Lakes round of the Drivers Championship. As an example of how things have changed Walter also had none other than F1 Williams driver Carlos Reutemann alongside him in another 131 in Argentina – and the home favourite finished third.

The rally world changed forever in 1981 with Audi introducing their Quattro, but Walter still looks back with much affection on both his achievement and the 131.



RIGHT: The Fiat 131 Abarth seems to have made a comeback recently as several of them have been restored for use in European historic rally events

