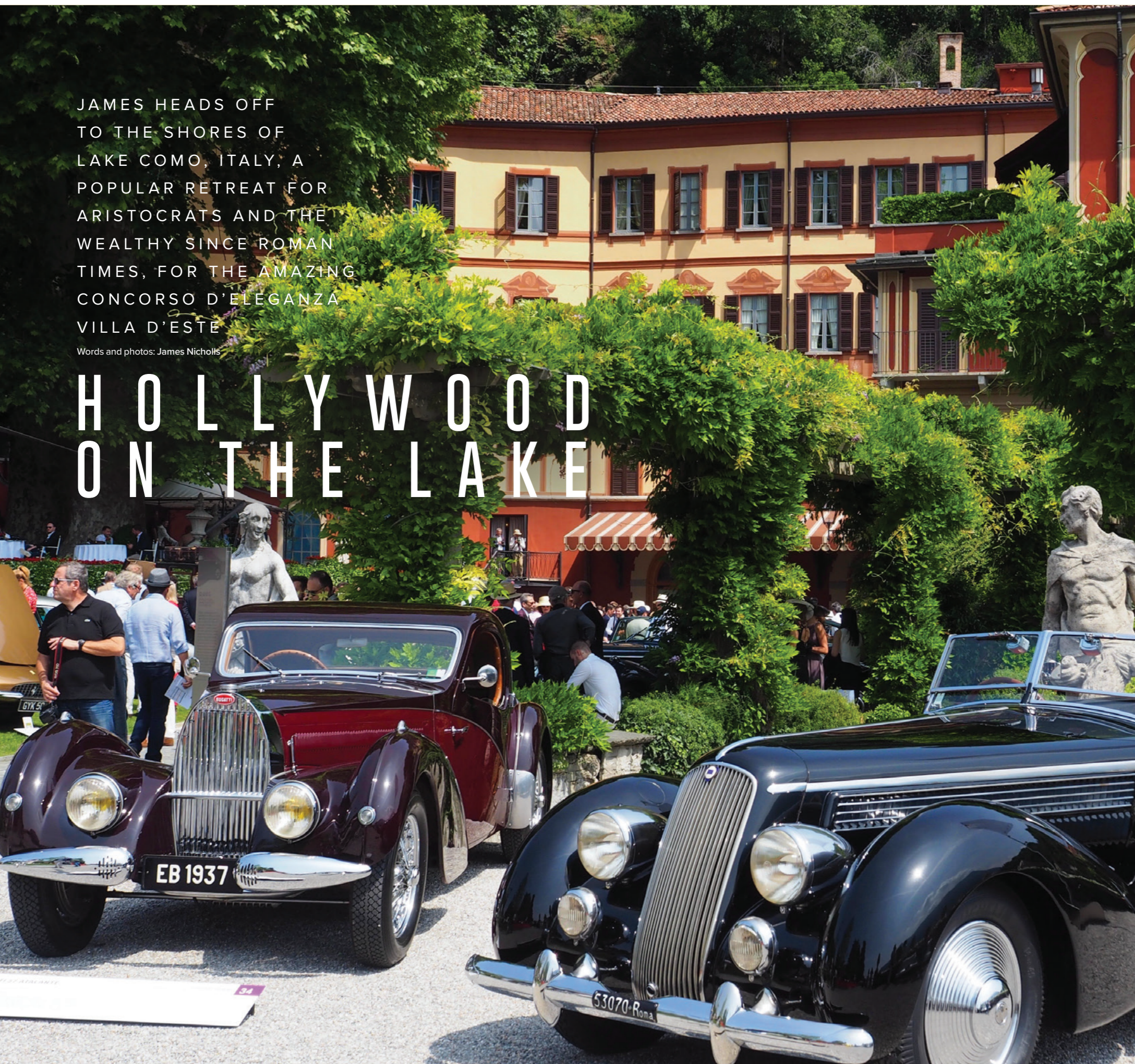


JAMES HEADS OFF TO THE SHORES OF LAKE COMO, ITALY, A POPULAR RETREAT FOR ARISTOCRATS AND THE WEALTHY SINCE ROMAN TIMES, FOR THE AMAZING CONCORSO D'ELEGANZA VILLA D'ESTE

Words and photos: James Nicholls

HOLLYWOOD ON THE LAKE



The Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este, held every year at the Grand Hotel Villa d'Este on the shores of Lake Como, was first held in 1929. Then, the movie industry was still in its infancy and the Great Depression was beginning after the Wall Street Crash. This year, 89 years later, it celebrated perhaps two of the 20th century's most important socio-historic events — the arrival of the automobile and its relationship with the cinema — and was entitled 'Hollywood on the Lake'.

Villa d'Este, built in 1568, was originally the summer residence of Cardinal Tolomeo Gallio, becoming a hotel in 1873. Since then, it has always been a destination for aristocrats of Europe partaking in the 'Grand Tour'. In the 20th century, as today, it became the meeting point for the internationally famous, many of who became so almost overnight by dint of their exploits on the silver screen. For this reason, the hotel, to insiders, became known as 'Hollywood on the Lake'.

Style and purpose

The 50 cars featured in the Concorso this year were divided into a variety of classes according to their style and purpose: pioneering racing cars (The Titans), including venerable Alfa Romeos

and Bugattis; opulent automobiles (From Manhattan to Mayfair), of which surely none was more luxurious than the gold-plated 1929 Rolls-Royce Phantom, seemingly touched by the hand of King Midas or the Ian Fleming character Auric Goldfinger himself; and stunning art-deco *grande routières*, exemplified by the 5.5m long 1936 Lancia Astura Serie III or the beautiful Bugatti Type 57 Atalante from the following year, named after the Amazon hunter from Greek mythology.

GT cars were in abundance, with wonderful and exotic specimens from the great marques Ferrari, Bentley, Jaguar, and Aston Martin, from the pens of the great coachbuilders Mulliner, Vignale, Pinin Farina (which became Pininfarina only in the 1960s), and Scaglietti.

For the first time, too, Formula 1 was a featured class at the Concorso, designated by the risqué title 'When Sex Was Safe and Racing Dangerous!' Here were single-seaters, or *monoposti* as they are known in Italy, which had been driven by those who hold a place in the pantheon of *piloti* such as Stirling Moss, Harry Schell, Jean Behra, Luigi Musso, Luigi Villorosi, Juan Manuel Fangio, Jim Clark, John Surtees, Jo Bonnier, Wolfgang von Trips, Jean-Pierre Beltoise, Ronnie Peterson, Andrea De Cesaris,



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Gerhard Berger, and Alain Prost.

Some of the most interesting cars, though, were in a class entitled '80 Years of Automotive Archaeology'. Here were cars that have amazingly avoided the ravages of time without need of restoration. Foremost among these was the incredible 1913 SCAT (Società Ceirano Automobili Torino), which was in the family of its first owner for 104 years! Other worthy 'relics' were the 1954 Fiat 8V still sporting its lustrous turquoise paintwork and the cute 1958 Fiat 500 Spiaggia, of which only two were made by coachbuilder Boano. One of these beach cars was owned by Aristotle Onassis, and this one by Giovanni Agnelli, who utilized it at the world's most expensive villa, La Leopolda, in Villefranche-sur-Mer on the Côte d'Azur.

The Concorso d'Eleganza's original *raison d'être* was to showcase the latest new cars, and this still exists today with the Concept and Prototype class — Flavio Manzoni's Ferrari SP38 coupé drew lots of attention from one and all, as one might expect in Italy, and Ferrari's head of design told me that he had created this one-off for a major international art collector who wanted his motor car to represent his life in art.

Stars of the Silver Screen

It was the Stars of the Silver Screen class, though, that truly encapsulated Hollywood on the Lake. The 1939 Delage D8-120, which I had last seen earlier in the year in India at the 21 Gun Salute International Vintage Car Rally and Concours Show, appeared in the 1951 movie *An American in Paris* with Gene Kelly behind the wheel. Another dancer/actor, Rita

Hayworth's present from her ex-husband Prince Aly Khan (who was to die at the wheel of his Lancia Flaminia GT aged just 48) in 1953 was a similarly coloured Cadillac Series 62, the first car ever to feature twin headlights. Also a gift was the 1958 BMW 507 presented by Elvis Presley to his co-star Ursula Andress in the 1963 film *Fun in Acapulco*. It was later purchased from the captivating actress by a king of another kind, George 'King of Kustom' Barris, who added its cool bumpers.

Fittingly parked next to Ursula Andress's BMW was one of her co-star's chariots. Apparently, there were six Aston Martin DB5s used in the making of the early James Bond films, but only one of them, the one on display here, was driven by Sean Connery in *Goldfinger* and *Thunderball*.

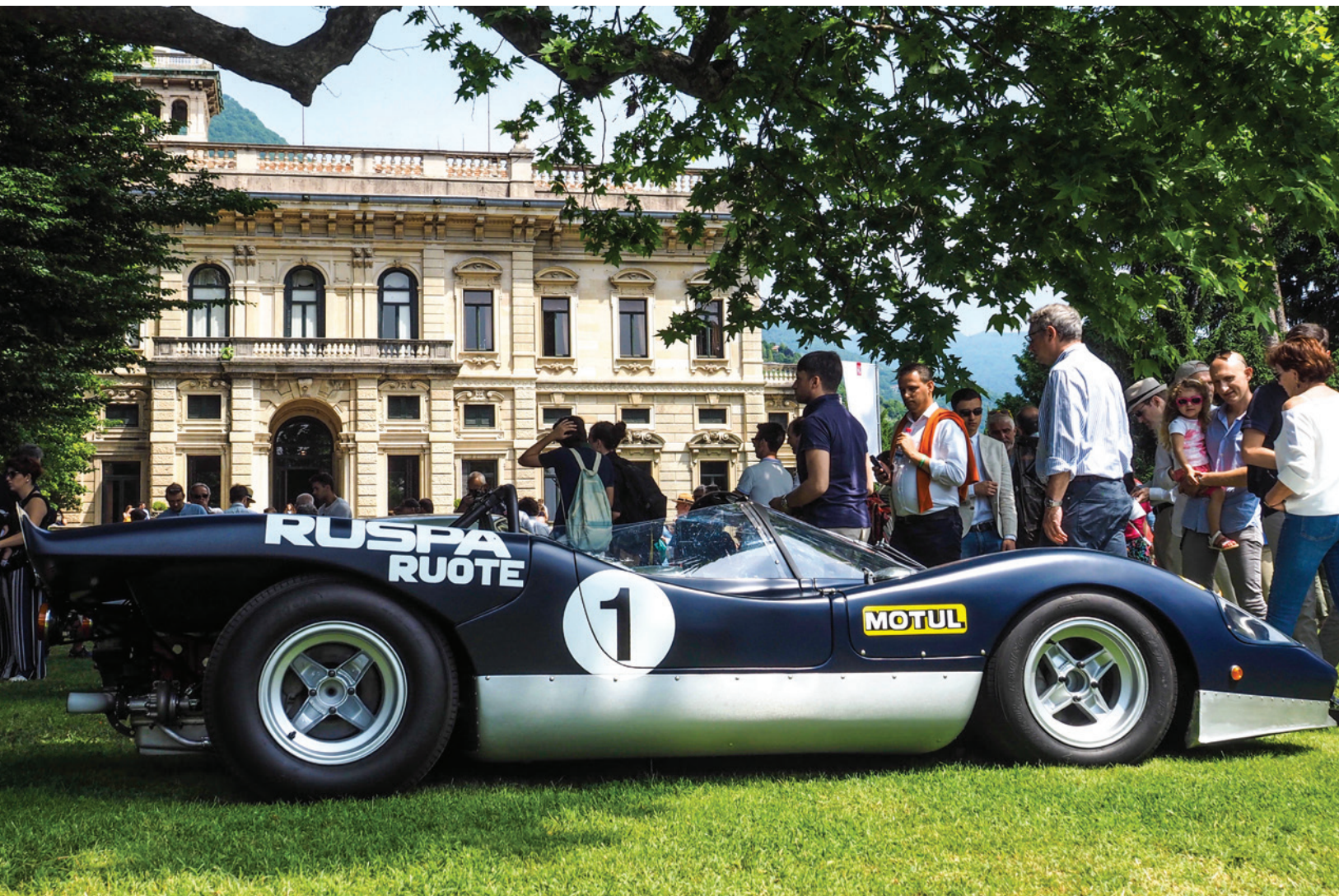
Also in this group of 'film stars' was the jet-age-looking Lancia Stratos Zero. Created by Nuccio Bertone, legend has it that he drove the wedge-shaped sled under the barrier at the factory gate when he delivered it to Lancia — at its highest point, the car stands at just 84cm. It did not appear in film, as its owner would not release it, but a replica was made especially to appear in Michael Jackson's fantasy *Moonwalker*.

One of my favourites in this class and, indeed, the whole extravaganza was the gold 1965 Ferrari Superfast. This five-litre beauty, capable of 280kph was the Earls Court Motor Show car and first owned by none other than Peter Sellers. Sellers is well known for his taste in beautiful women and beautiful motor cars, and this was one of his most treasured, owned when he was at the height of his fame for comic genius and married to Britt Ekland.



Fantastic cars in a fantastic setting. Great fun was had by all, topped off by boat rides on classic rivas and a fancy-dress ball for 'the insiders'. The theme was, of course, Hollywood on the Lake, with the inspiration being *Casino Royale* and *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. Both were filmed in part at the enigmatic Villa del Balbianello (built in 1787 and formerly the home of gentleman explorer Guido Monzino) and not a stone's throw away along the water's edge.





A third film theme for the ball was *Ocean's Twelve*, which, for the location of The Night Fox's villa, utilized Villa Erba, erstwhile home of film director Luchino Visconti, and, on the Sunday, where the Concorso cars were on show to the public. Let us not forget, too, that the protagonist of the Danny Ocean series, George Clooney, also has his own villa close by on the shores of this, the most glamorous and deepest of all of Europe's lakes. ■

