

Octane

Fuelling the passion

Alfa Romeo 8C-2900B

RALPH LAUREN'S RESTORED MM SPIDER



plus

- ASTON MARTIN V8 • JAGUAR MK1
- 1980s CLASSICS • 1955-'57 CHEVROLETS
- ONE-OFF LANCIA AURELIA • ROVER-BRM

COLLECTORS' EDITION

#58

APRIL 2008

Above fashion

The greatest sports car in Alfa's long history is restored to its former glory for one of the world's foremost collectors, and reopens the eternal debate: what is art?

Words: Dale Drinnon Photography: Martyn Goddard

It's silly, really, what a thrill the smallest of pleasures can be, but when I get back behind the wheel of Ralph Lauren's Alfa Two-Nine for my turn again, I can't wait to press the starter button. Because I've noticed something especially marvellous and unique about this most marvellous and unique of automobiles: a merest touch of the button and it's running.

No, no, you don't understand: I mean it's running right then, instantly, and 70-year-old race cars aren't supposed to do that. They're supposed to spin and spit and grumble and finally 'explode into action', and granted there's a certain element thereof when starting this one from cold. But once it's warmed up it can be stone silent one eye-blink and gloriously alive the next: no crank-over commotion; no spool-up of rotating masses; not even a lingering echo of electric motor whir. I wasn't prepared for that. It's magic, there's no other word for it, and when the engine fires, I think I actually giggle out loud.

Which is probably not the proper mature journalistic response to one of the most celebrated, published and revered cars in existence: Alfa Romeo 8C-2900B Mille Miglia Touring Spider Chassis Number 412030, runner-up in the 1938 Thousand Miles and the only example of the four built still in its

»



original bodywork. And it's certainly celebrated, more so since its purchase by premier designer Ralph Lauren, its world-class restoration by Paul Russell and Company, and the Best in Class at Pebble Beach.

There was also the featured role in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts *Speed, Style and Beauty* exhibition of Lauren's finest and in a Discovery Channel documentary. The car's notoriety undoubtedly increased thanks to scattered, but vociferous, critical sputterings along the lines of 'You can't call that art'. I've always found this position curious, especially when taken by people who routinely spend good money on galleries filled with dead animals in formaldehyde, unmade beds and jewel-encrusted skeletal parts.

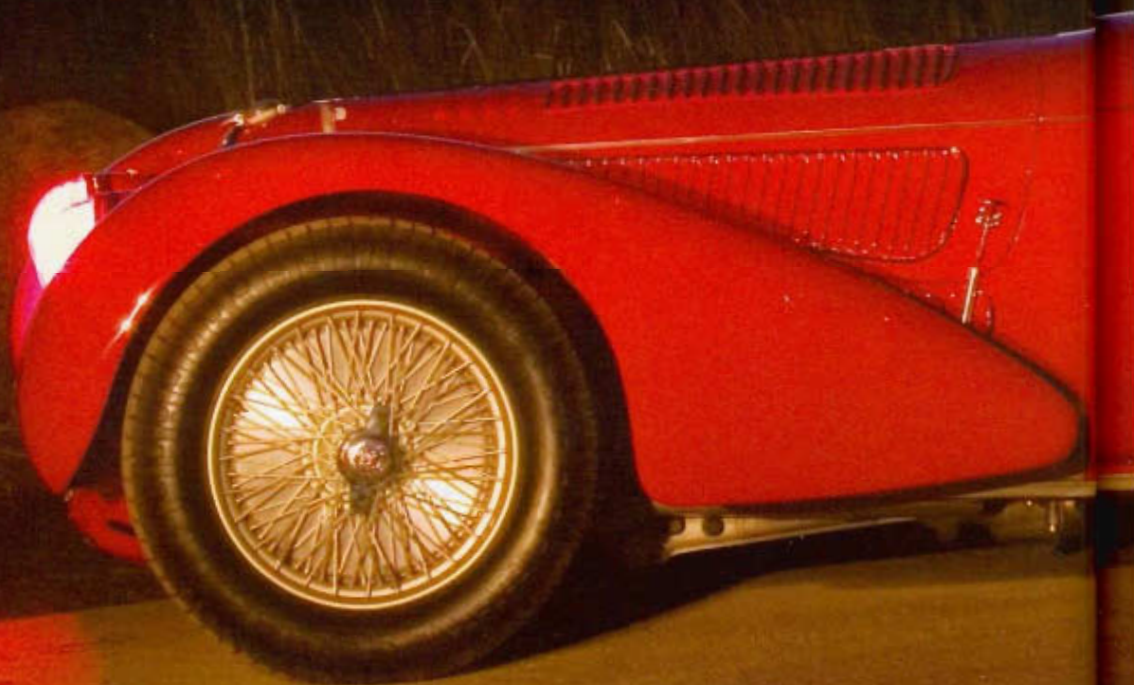
Surely, the nayest of naysayers can't deny this is one of the most beautiful objects created by human hand, and certainly not if they were sitting in this cockpit looking over the sensual sweep of Carrozzeria Touring carriagework oft proclaimed the greatest in all Christendom. In total shape and balance I would call the car perfect; like a P51 Mustang or Michelangelo's David it's a design that couldn't be changed in any aspect without decreasing the impact of the whole. Like every truly first-rank racing car it's a completely honest design. Everything has a reason and plays a part in the search for the Ultimate Answer.

But there's something else to the beauty here, something decidedly unjournalistic, because we writers rarely have minds that think that way. It's something Martyn Goddard, with his photographer's eye, has put to me many times while snapping away at things I've walked blithely past in a fog, and in almost exactly the same terms as used by Ralph Lauren in that Discovery documentary. The car's real beauty, RL says, is subtle: it's in the details and the more you look the more they start coming out at you; you start to see all the little things that make the car even more exciting.

Of course he is completely correct, and on this particular automobile the effect is so striking I think my writer's brain is finally beginning to grasp the notion. Part of it is down to Touring's pure technical initiative: the rad-cap latch up front, gracefully tapered to sooth the onrushing wind; the matching, mirror-image fuel filler behind doing the same for wind departing; the elegantly flowing exposed door hinges alongside doing both at the same time.

Part is the sensitivity of Paul Russell's restoration: resisting the temptation to remove panel dimples left under those hinges by the deforming force of human hands installing them 70 years ago, or establishing and duplicating precisely the incredible standards of

'The car's real beauty, says Ralph Lauren, is in the details'



preparation and finish the proud Alfa organisation once lavished on what some manufacturers would have considered 'just a race car'. Plus, of course, Ralph Lauren's role as the final decision maker and arbiter of good taste; would some other collectors have the sang-froid to say originality be damned, I'm not having any bloody ugly numbers on this car?

Full credit to Lauren, too, for understanding that an automobile is only movable sculpture if it actually does move; a good deal of the reverence reserved for this machine has always been for its qualities as a working, breathing, vibrant organism. It offers the most magnificently visceral driving experience you can imagine, while at the same time challenging you to reach inside yourself for a bit more.

Under the skin, you see, 412030 is a pure, full-on racer, a '30s Grand Prix car, and it was never intended to be user friendly, it was intended to go fast. As such, it has certain expectations of the operator and, as with any pure racer, some of them are not easy to fulfil when driven distances on the street. Get it right, though, meet the challenges, and the satisfaction dividend is enormous; it is as if the car has presented you with a little test of your abilities and you have passed, thus proving yourself worthy of sharing a piece of its greatness. »

Coming to America

Surprisingly, there's little information on how 412030 wound up in the USA. Tradition says it spent the war in the same cheese factory that saved the 158 Alfettas. From there Ferrari's US mastermind Luigi Chinetti possibly played a role. We do know the first American owner was media heir Tommy Lee.

From Lee the car moved on to renowned service with Phil Hill, doing several West Coast races. The next owner, James Magin, also campaigned the car before donating it to the museum of industrial designer Brooks Stevens. In 1982 the car passed to Bill Serri, and remained with him until his death in 2001.

Enter Paul Russell. As a friend of the Serri family he was asked by Bill's widow if he knew of anyone who might like the Alfa? Having restored Lauren cars since 1981, Paul thought he did; he loaded it on a trailer and pitched it personally at Ralph Lauren's home, and Lauren fell in love.





The gear shifting procedure, for example, although hardly ever mentioned in length, is rather special. First of all the shift pattern is flipped and the 1-2 gate is near the starboard-seated driver, where the 3-4 would normally be. Furthermore, the old reliable double-declutched upshift, sans throttle blip, that smooths out most non-synchro boxes doesn't work for toffee with the Alfa. The Alfa transaxle likes a positive hand on the lever, right across the gate, not too fast, not too slow and a touch of wristy action. Basically the same technique you'd use if shifting clutchless, which is likely what the works drivers did all along.

Fortunately, I suppose, that last thought doesn't occur to me while I'm bobbing around behind Martyn in the camera car, practising my decisive, wristy upshifts, thankful that standard old throttle-blipping double-declutches on the downshift work just fine. It's also good to remember the occasional extra dip of the clutch and burst of revs to clear the plugs (undignified spells at low rpms are not graciously received). During it all the car is incredibly alert and refined, and so mechanically tactile you'd swear you can feel the air coursing through the inlet runners.

The wee stubby central throttle pedal, on the other hand, is frankly scary as hell if you contemplate the consequences of a botched stab on the wrong slot. But it makes a certain amount of sense when you understand the huge 17-inch brake drums might sometimes need the big, heavy part of your foot for a heel and toe instead of the small, light part, and the throttle response itself is almost clairvoyant. As for the complete futility of a rear-view mirror that only the riding mechanic can see, well, it's more than compensated for by the glorious harmonised singing of every gear on the thing, from the camshaft sprockets to the final drive, and the exhaust yowl when the rev-counter rises. Better than sex? Oh heavens, it *is* sex.

There's only one small fly in the proverbial driving ointment so far. It seems at this last driver change that Mark Reinwald, curator of the Lauren car collection and

»

'Under the skin 412030 is a full-on racer and was never intended to be user friendly'



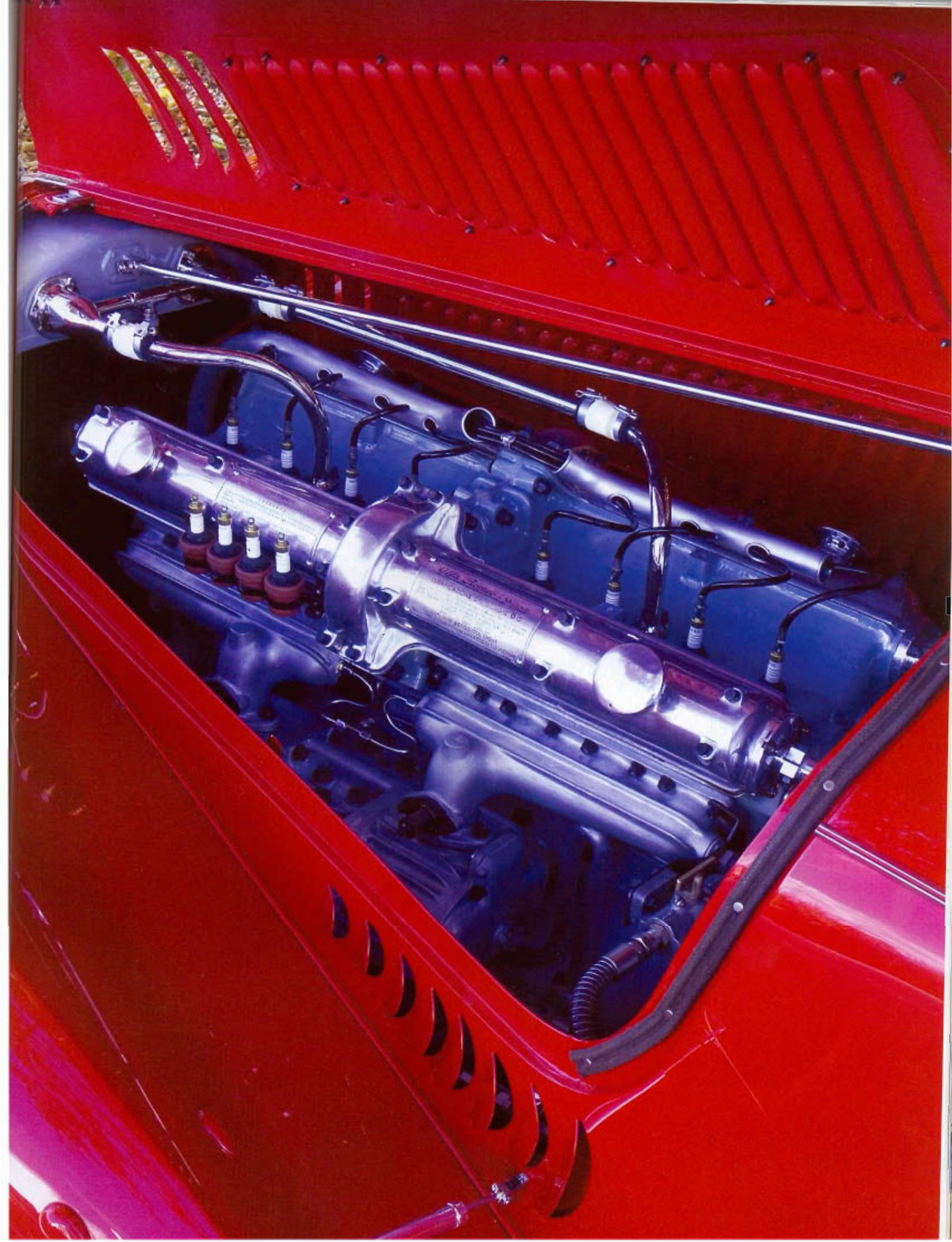
A Hard Thousand Miles

That an Alfa would win the 12th Mille Miglia was a foregone conclusion, Alfa having claimed ten of the previous victories. As to which driver it would be, there remained some question.

The smart money would have been on Clemente Biondetti. Although friend and team-mate Carlo Pintacuda had two victories already to his credit, Biondetti had secured tricked-out car 412031, with an extra 75 horses.

But Pintacuda was not to be easily denied. He led in 412030 until past the turnaround at Rome. Then the brakes went soft and a stop for repairs let Biondetti past. Pintacuda caught him on the road but, try as he might, couldn't get past; legend says Biondetti drove an especially wide car that day and Pintacuda, outraged, never spoke to him again.

Biondetti apparently felt no lasting guilt. After the war he won three more Mille Miglias in a row. Pintacuda? He moved to Argentina and, in failing health, opened an antique shop after unsuccessfully trying to revive his racing career.





‘Surely the naysayers can’t deny
this is one of the most beautiful
objects created by human hand’



1938 ALFA ROMEO 8C-2900B MM SPIDER

SPECIFICATIONS

Engine
2905cc all-alloy straight eight, dry sump, dual overhead cams, dual superchargers with Weber carburetors

Power
225bhp @ 5400rpm

Torque
230lb ft @ 4200rpm

Transmission
Four-speed manual transaxle, rear drive

Suspension
Front: independent via dual trailing arms, coil springs, hydraulic lever shocks. Rear: independent via swing axles, radius arms, transverse leaf spring, hydraulic lever and friction shocks

Brakes
Drums all round


Performance
0-60mph 8.5sec
Top speed 140mph

guardian of this extraordinary machine, has parked it on the loose gravel shoulder, and ever-so-slightly on an incline. And none of my fellow scribes would probably admit this, but the supercharged torque and the metal-on-metal clutch, with a total travel between embarrassing stall and smoking wheelspin of approximately a micron, have already stalled me about half-a-dozen times. The vehicle from which Martyn is photographing my efforts (and Mark is watching them) is also parked in a prime position to have unparalleled viewing of the slightest error.

So I try to take some comfort from Mark's earlier piece of kind advice following an aborted take-off and the knowledge that others have struggled with this problem before. 'Phil Hill gave me a tip,' he said gently, bless him. World Champion Phil Hill, former owner, is the Gold Standard for driving lessons on Alfa Spider 412030, and every journo who has ever been in this car has probably needed this tip. 'Phil says just ease the clutch out with no throttle at all until you get rolling.'

For anyone accustomed to racing cars that launch with lots of stick and judicious clutch-slip, the notion is completely counter-intuitive. No, let's be straight, it's just plain wrong and it's physically much harder than it sounds.

Nonetheless, it was Phil's wisdom that helped me tame the gearbox, so I give it my damndest – and get cleanly away, disturbing not a single pebble. A little left-hand nudge onto the tarmac, a healthy dose of the boot, then a flawless measured-but-firm snap of the crash box into second gear; the blower sucks a mighty gulp, the world rushes into a blur and suddenly I'm laughing like a maniac. I'm so proud of myself I could burst. Suddenly, by God, I am Phil Hill, I can do anything.

Which, my friends, is most definitely magic, and if magic and challenge and beauty don't qualify as art, then what does? 

» Thanks to Ralph Lauren; Mark Reinwald, curator of the Ralph Lauren Automobile Collection; and Paul Russell and Company, Massachusetts, USA (+1 978 768 6919, www.paulrussell.com). The UK airing of *Speed, Style and Beauty* is scheduled for the Discovery Channel in May 2008.

Last of a Thoroughbred

Italy's GP cars may have struggled by the late '30s, but her sports cars were second to none. Although the 8C-2900 series, Alfa's final pre-war sports-racers, stretched the line between the two severely. With roots reaching back to Vittorio Jano's successful P3 monoposto, the proto-supercar 2900s were the most advanced road automobiles of their era.

The engine was a 2905cc edition of the Jano twin-cam, twin-supercharged *otto cilindri* already seen in the 8C-2300 Monza of 1931, the P3, and the 8C-35 with which Nuvolari overcame the Germans at the 'Ring in 1935. Underneath the 2900 was also the GP suspension system: dual trailing arms front, swing axles rear, and the four-speed transaxle.

Most early examples, later called 2900A, were two-seater 8C-35s, and even after the 2900B appeared in 1937 the racing essentials were still there, just covered with Carrozzeria bodywork. Evolution honours must go to the four Touring Superleggera 2900B Spiders built for the 1938 Mille Miglia. They captured the first two places of the race, while an enclosed derivative came back in 1947 for Alfa's 11th Mille Miglia victory.