

**A Short Italian Holiday**

**T**HERE was a week's holiday left. Various causes, most of them to the credit of this particular employee's disorganizational genius, fixed the week for the first in September last summer. After a delightful tour in an MGB two years ago (*Autocar 14 December 1967*), I wanted to holiday in an open two-seater again, open cars making by far the most pleasant touring cars in my opinion. Something flippant was also needed for chauffeuring a friend over the last bachelor miles on the way to his marital doom (and, in case he sees this, a very nice doom too). Having enjoyed the privilege of a long-term test Alfa Romeo 1300GT, it would be interesting to try basically the same very satisfactory engineering with more poke and some Pininfarina bodywork. Alfa Romeo (Great Britain) Ltd. kindly lent a bright Italian-red 1750 Spider Veloce. There had to be an objective at which to point it. My family would be staying at Assisi then; it would be fun to head that way and join up with them briefly. To make it all worthwhile, we would obviously have to hurry.

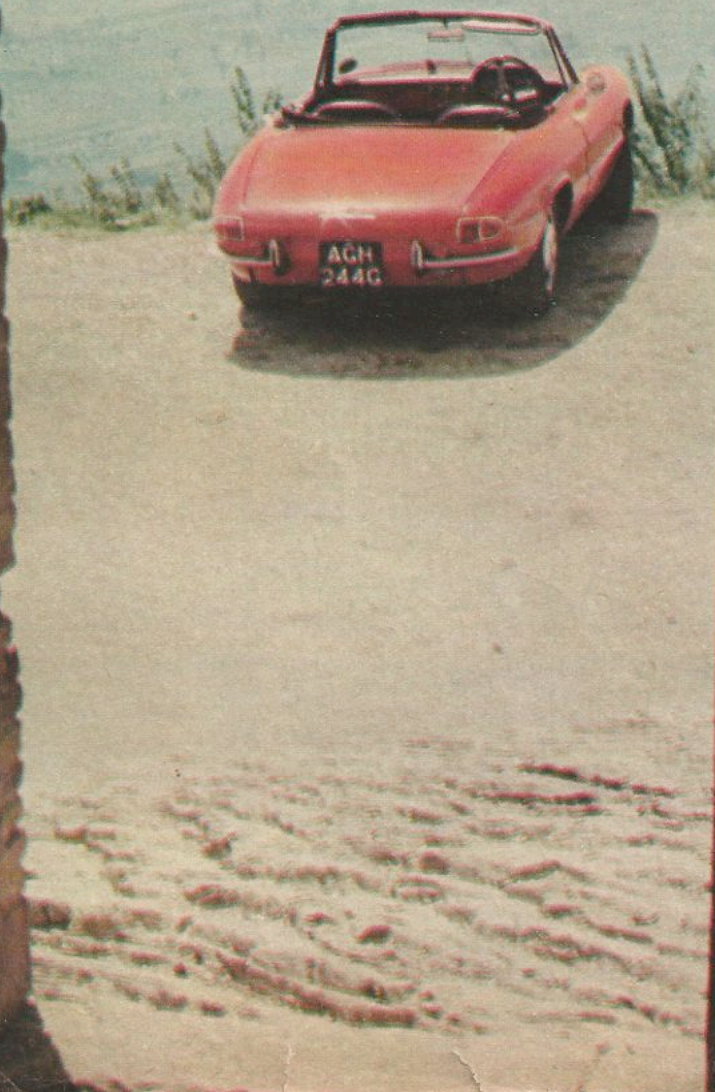
After the 1300, whose torque curve seems to have rather a hole at the bottom end, the pull of the 1750 all the way through the revs was delightful. Until I discovered what a very useful-sized boot it had, I didn't care for the Spider's long tail. The interior looked a bit sparse and none the worse for that, and here was still that superb and quite unique-feeling frictionless Alfa steering, sweet long-levered five-speed gearchange, excellent brakes and the lovely Alfa sizzle from the exhaust. This trip promised well.

We (the Alfa and I) took the 8 a.m. Dover-Calais ferry, which turned out to be the *Chantilly*, a very fine boat which is run

Left: Alfa overlooked from an entrance to the Rocca Maggiore (also known as the Rocca Medioevale), the 14th century castle itself overlooking Assisi

# An Alfa to Assisi

By MICHAEL SCARLETT



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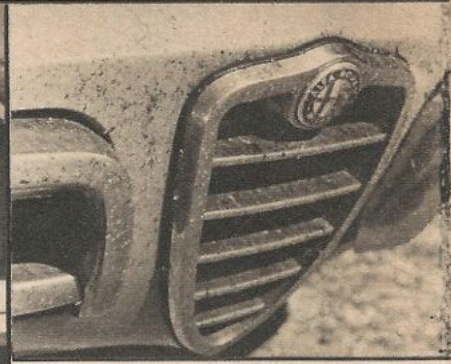
by the well-known nationalized gambling consortium, *La Société Nationale du Chemin-de-Fer Français*. You get the best of both worlds at breakfast on the *Chantilly*—English marmalade and toast, French coffee—served promptly in very pleasant surroundings.

First stop after Calais was meant to be Champéry in Switzerland. We cleared Calais at 9.50 and took a familiar route. Béthune, Souchez (how *does* one *souche*?), Arras, Cambrai, St. Quentin, Rheims, Chalons sur Marne and Vitry le François. Up till here the weather hadn't been too good, but now it was better, so the hood came down—one of the quickest I've ever used. Lunch was eaten on the move, so that only three petrol stops delayed us—apart from having to stop briefly in the Vallée de la Loue between Besançon and Pontarlier to gaze at layers of mist hanging in the gorge and shot through by late afternoon sun.

We crossed the border near Ste Croix just after 6 p.m. and in spite of heavy last-Sunday-in-August traffic (partly because of the Ollon-Villars hill-climb), reached Champéry at 8.20 p.m., 10½ hours and 504 miles from the coast (48 mph overall).

The next day, Monday, was going to be interesting. My family meant to camp at or near Assisi, but were not sure exactly where they'd be when I arrived. We'd therefore agreed to meet at 8 p.m. on Monday night in the Piazza di S. Francesco Inferiore, wherever that was in Assisi, after I had decided that I could be there by then. I assumed times and averages for the 480-mile journey in three stages—85 miles from Champéry to the beginning of the Aosta valley *autostrada* (via the St. Bernard tunnel) in 3 hours, 335 miles of *autostrade* in 4.8 hours, and 60 miles from motorway to Assisi in two hours—a total of near-enough 10 hours, which meant leaving by 10 a.m.

However, a late night on Sunday took its toll. The driver overslept, which was probably just as well, not leaving Champéry until 11.35 a.m.—1½ hours late. We did quite well at first, taking only two hours to the *autostrada* which now began 8 miles earlier than before; the descent to Aosta gets better every year as more road widening is carried out. From then on whenever possible the Alfa cruised at 4,800 rpm, which in its long-legged 21.9-mph-per-1,000 rpm top gear gave 105 mph—this all on *autostrada*—Ivrea, Santhia, round Milan on the *tangenziale*, then down the *Autostrada del Sole*. I stopped for half-an-hour's late lunch near Parma. Huge and spectacular cumulus clouds hung over the Apennines, slowing everyone down as we climbed into most un-Italian murk. Out and down the other side it cleared fairly well and I made for the turn-off at Monte S. Savino, taking after 4¾ hours (333 miles—70 mph including lunch and petrol stops). Anyone doing the same trip might like to note that the officially recommended exit is Chiusi-Chianciano Terme, two stops and quite a few more lire further on. We later realised that the best exit is Arezzo, one before "mine". The road from there towards Assisi isn't at all bad, and you save an appreciable amount of toll.



Left: Very leisurely 3,000 rpm in fifth gives a true 66 mph: ashtray lid makes a good holder for *autostrada* toll ticket. Above: Low flying low flies floating through *strade* stickily slain by bug-smearly Spider snout. Right: One of the Alfa's most popular party pieces is its scorpion-like self-erecting boot lid, released from the cockpit. Below: Sparrow's Cinemascope view of camp at the very good Bologna site



It was 6.20 p.m. and I was glad to get off the motorway though it—and the now much-loved Alfa—had done me proud. Motorway travel in Italy is in the main a wonderful tonic for the limit-threatened Englishman. No 70 mph absurdities, a breed of driver who appreciates but mostly does not abuse speed and one who moves over smartly as you come up behind—even if you must always use your horn or lamps rather than his mirror.

There were still 60-odd miles to go and only 100 minutes in which to do them. Dusk was falling and this drive into the hills of Umbria seemed to be taking ages. I was delighted to find a little stretch of *raccordo*—a peculiar Italian thing, a sort of two-way single-carriageway motorway as found between Siena and Florence—but this one didn't last. We passed near Cortona, round one side of Lake Trasimene, near Hannibal's battlefield of that name where the streams ran with the blood of 16,000 Romans, including the Consul Flaminius—"who had given battle in spite of unfavourable omens," which though hard on the other 15,999 clearly served him right. Perugia was the next obstacle, an ancient city once ruled by tyrants such as the Baglionis, one of whose wives was the famous cook Zsa Zsa Baglioni, thought to have invented the well-known bubbly pudding.

I wondered where Assisi had got to. By the time I had driven to Santa Maria degli Angeli it was dark and I was tired. By now I was also late, which was irksome after having caught up an hour earlier in the day. A little before this place there had seemed to be strange lights elevated slightly in the distant darkness; I thought my eyes were playing tricks. I forgot about them, and followed the signs which at last admitted the existence of Assisi.

Clearing the town, I realized that those lights weren't my eyes. I drove on, staring and staring. The road had straightened, aiming directly at a point a little under the glowing things, which I gradually saw were buildings—towers, walls, churches, a castle, all made more than solid by floodlight and yet disconnected from the ground, jewelled things floating warm and pinky whitened in the airs above the earth. It was an astonishing sight, one I shall never forget. I backed off the throttle to stare the harder, then remembered my 1,050-mile appointment and accelerated to enter the vision, which was now obviously Assisi. I'd not read anything at all about the place beforehand as I should have, and this luminous glory was a total surprise.

The Alfa passed under an arch in high walls and I stopped to try my ten-word Italian to ask the way. In the warm night the hood was still down, and I moved on an



Franciscan Order. It has hardly changed since the Middle Ages, and yet is no dead museum piece in this 20th century. When you wander round its climbing and diving streets, you at first question why the place is so unspoilt—what makes it so out of this time yet still very much alive. Then, after visiting a few shops or eating places, you suddenly realize that it is the lack of any incongruous modern shop fronts. Nearly every shop has a similar simple stone-arched entrance. The interior can be as up-to-date as the owner wishes, but the outside stays part of the overall period of the town. It makes an incredible difference, coupled with the fact that it is extraordinarily (and most unusually) clean and tidy (and also has safe drinking water). I wondered if there was some Assisi "amenity society" to preserve things so, or whether it was just the native good sense of the *Assisiana* plus an eye to the tourist trade. Whatever the reason, the result is a place of the greatest charm. There is a host of sights to see, but I will not risk boring you by playing the second-hand guide book. Go and see for yourself—Assisi is in Umbria, which is one of the most beautiful and intriguing parts of Italy, yet is oddly off the tourist track. It is worth more than a journey—a long stay would be much better.

I had only two nights there before beginning a leisurely return, but would warmly recommend the Fontemaggio camp-site just outside the town. We left it on the Wednesday, stopping at another excellent site, San Lazzaro di Savena, in Bologna. Leaving there the next day, we stopped at a typical *autostrada* Tourist Market for food. These are marvellous places in their rather expensive way—you can buy such a range of mixed useful things, all in polythene packets—assorted biscuits with a football, chocolates with a model of the moon, five-foot-long strips of 15 patriotically coloured lollipops. It was there that I added usefully to my Italian. Did you know that Pif! Paf! Pof! is the Italian for Snap Crackle Pop?

We ambled on northwards and westwards the way I'd come but rather more slowly, cruising at 65 to 70 mph which did wonders for my petrol consumption; the interval figures up to Assisi had been around 25 mpg, but this less hurried stretch eked out to an incredible 34.9 mpg—light-throttle cruising and hardly any acceleration made all the difference.

As we entered the Aosta valley again, the rains came down suddenly, making me glad of that rapidly-erecting hood. The rain stayed with us over the St. Bernard and down the other side, so we chickened-out of camping at Aigle in Switzerland, instead stopping that night in the same pleasant Hotel du Valais I'd bed-and-breakfasted in at Champéry on the way out. On the Friday, to see the Dents du Midi better and make sensible use of the fact that we were a two-car team, we left the Spider in Champéry, piled into the much more comfortably riding family MG1300 and drove round to Les Crosets which is a place at the bottom of one of the ski-runs served by Champéry, Ski-runs in September, green since late spring, are surprisingly soggy, but the walk was worth it in spite of view-spoiling cloud.

Next day, Saturday, the MG1300 party moved off after lunch for the coast and Sunday's 7.30 p.m. ferry, whilst I, trusting the Alfa's fleetier feet, stayed one more

night before an early start on Sunday. This time I got up in time, and we left at 7.55 a.m., aiming for the same Calais boat. Thanks to unusually clear roads we made great time all the way to Vitry le François, four miles after which the Alfa gave me a fright. Having averaged 47.7 mph up till then, I was mentally working out that with only 225 miles to go, we should arrive an hour early when in the mirror I saw a horrid trail of blue smoke. Thinking we were on fire, I switched off, at the same time noticing that the oil pressure was just starting to drop. The sump drain plug had come unscrewed and fallen out. As I'd been doing a good 80-odd at the time, the oil trail was about 200 yards long, and with no plug lying in the road at or visibly near its beginning. Cutting a long story short, my advice to anyone similarly struck is a), remember that the French for sump plug is sump cork (*bouchon de carter*), b), you won't find one easily on a Sunday afternoon in Vitry le François, so make a wooden one instead, and c) keep your penknife sharp. Mine wasn't, and what with everything else it took just over two hours to whittle the right bit of green tree to the right size. It worked though, getting us to Calais at 7.30 in spite of heavy traffic over the last bit.

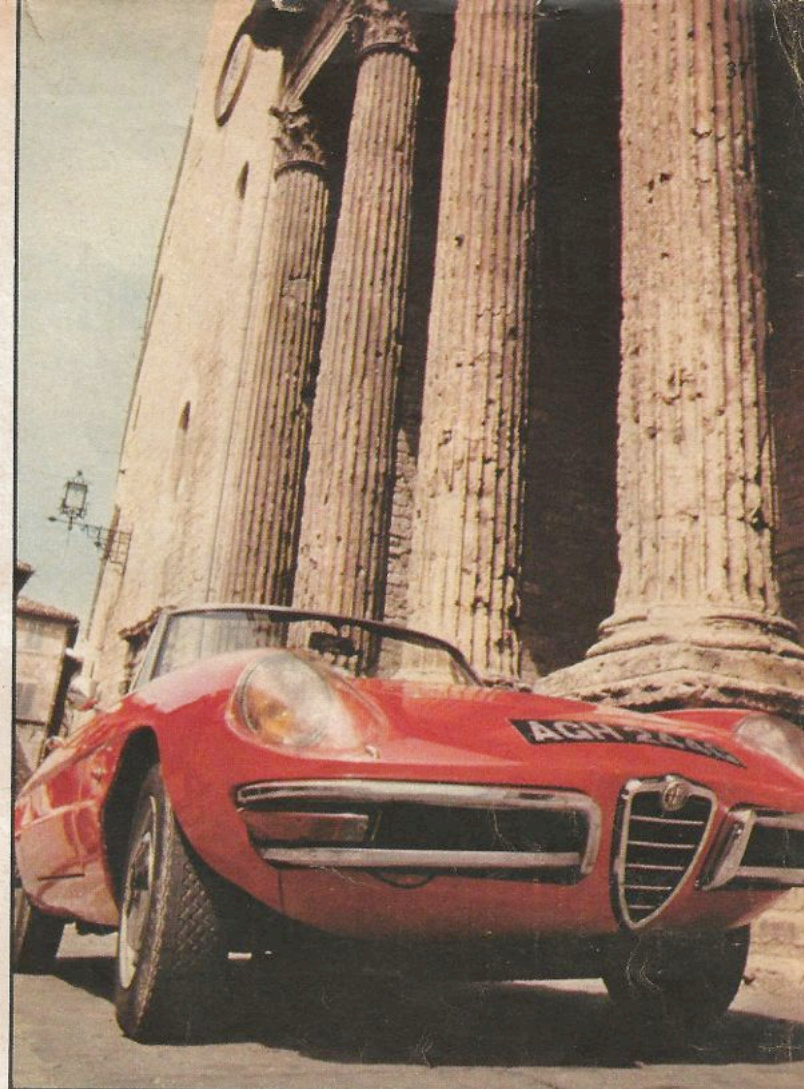
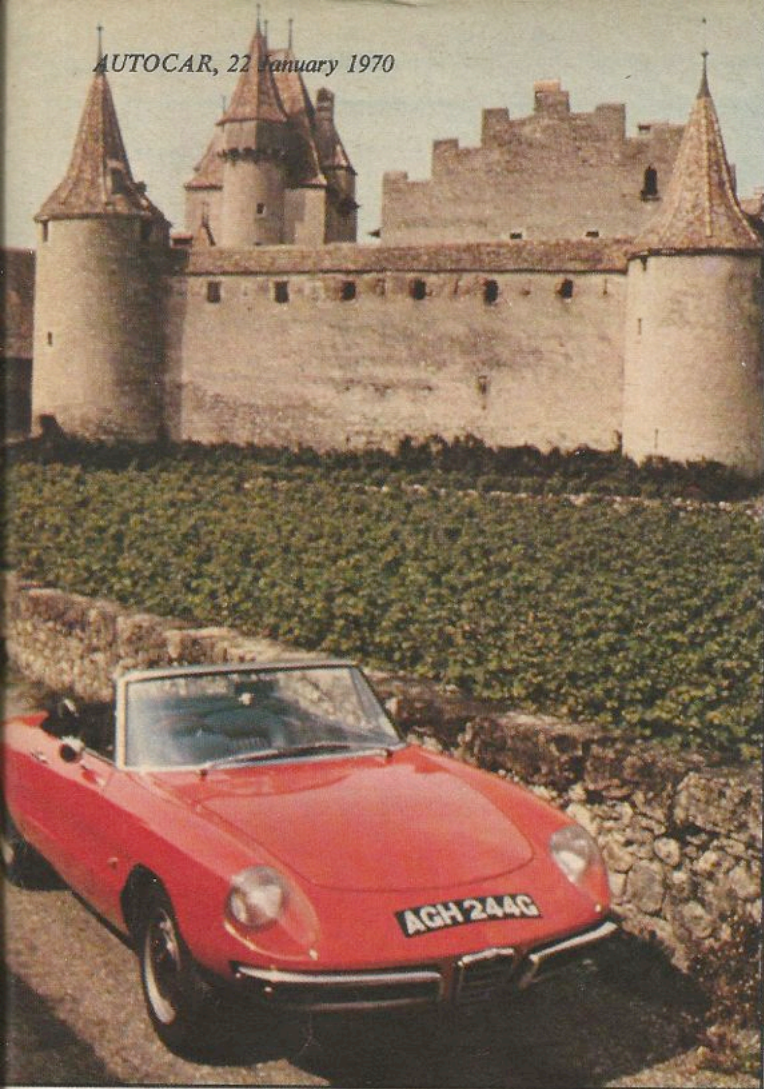
I realized that there was no hope of catching the Townsend ferry, but when we arrived at the docks and saw it still tied up, I wanted to assure my family that we were all right but delayed. I went to the RAC office and asked how I could get a message aboard. The young French RAC chap there was superb; he said "Follow me quickly", left his office and started running. We belted on board to the astonishment of an assortment of aghast officials, and surprisingly quickly I found my people. They were not at all surprised that the Alfa wasn't on board; in spite of having booked weeks in advance and being in the embarkation shed well before time, the gendarmes had held their queue back and let every other car booked or unbooked on first; they had only got on board after furious arguments and most un-British arm-waving.

After another breathless run off the packed boat, I returned to the car and re-booked for the late crossing. We then drove gently back into the town, found what looked like a quiet café in which to unwind and eat, which was slowly accomplished whenever I could distract the waiter from his devoted attention to a noisily embattled French-dubbed Western on the television.

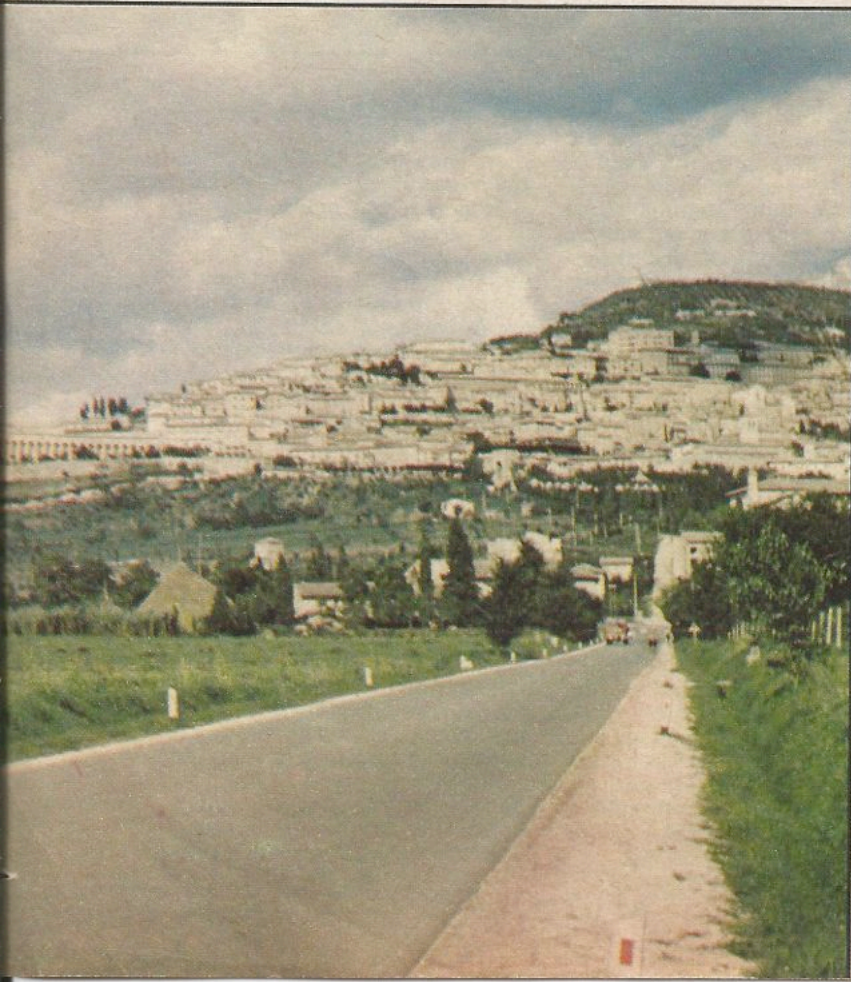
In spite of the lost bath-plug, which was unlucky, I was delighted with the Spider. Like all Alfas, Lancias and most Fiats, it has the drawback for lengthy Englishmen of being built to fit only the Italian Standard Ape; which is surprising—really, because during this trip I realized that nowadays there are plenty of strapping 6ft. Italians. At night it paid to remove the Perspex headlamp covers for better illumination. Its steering, handling and brakes—plus that very quick and easy hood—and the excellent performance had made it the greatest pleasure to drive. And regardless of the way I had responded to that pleasure, overall corrected fuel consumption for 2,332 miles was 28.1 mpg, pretty good after the way it had worked. This made the second time in a couple of months that I was very sorry to part company with an Alfa Romeo. *Grazie tante!*

easy conversational level with volubly informative café-tables, easy in physical height that is, rather than in depth of communication. With my halting, probably ungrammatical *Dov' e il Piazza* etc., etc. and the delighted string of answering *sinistras, destrás* and *tutto dirittos*, almost all *troppo rapido* for me, it was most surprising that the Spider ever arrived at the right spot. The wonderfully spared medievalism of this city did not help, distracting me from my directions with its fascinating tight little streets. The inevitable Topolini scurried and roared between cracks in the houses, and the Alfa crawled after them like a timid, purring cat. Finally, passing into a deserted colonnaded open square, the headlamps picked out my parents and brother, who had patiently waited, suspecting as parents do that their aged offspring had done something stupid like getting confused about Italian summer time. I was 40 minutes late—478 miles in 9 hours 5 minutes, an overall average of 52.6 mph, which reflected great credit on the Spider. We locked it up and went off to swap stories over a very welcome dinner.

Assisi rates three stars in Mr Michelin's most useful guide—that means it is "worth a journey," ranking with Florence, Rome, Siena, Venice, and other such famous cities. It is, of course, the city of St. Francis who is buried there and who founded the



Above left: Another castle, at Aigle in Switzerland's Rhone valley, rebuilt after the original 10th century one was burnt during a canton war, which is all the guide-book tells you; only when you try to visit it do you learn it is the town jail. Above right: Assisi was a Roman city. Sitting fly's eye view of a Spider in the Piazza del Comune, once the forum, outside the majestic Corinthian pillars of the Roman Temple of Minerva, behind which is a relatively modern Baroque Christian church. Below left: One's superb first sight (by day) of Assisi approached from Santa Maria degli Angeli. The almost Tibetan arched building jutting on the left is the monastery of St. Francis, really two churches on top of each other and a crypt, consecrated in 1253. The Rocca Maggiore is partly visible on Monte Subasio's crest (on right edge)



Above: Upper Basilica of St. Francis, an unusually light and airy church for its period; the rose window is common in Assisi. Below: 600 miles later, after Vitry le Francois, during the enforced roadside oil change

