

Day in the life

INTERVIEW JAMES ELLIOTT



Alan McNaughton Gisby

Italian-focused classic car consultant on his business, Brexit, and an unexpected advantage of lockdown

MY LIFE PROBABLY looks totally chaotic, but it's pretty well-balanced. Just busy and complicated. I was getting jaded in corporate and persuaded my Italian wife (whom I met 21 years ago at 3M) that we should ditch our jobs and travel the world. While away, as a graduate mechanical engineer, I decided what I wanted to do with my life and in 2014 set up ASMG Italia (asmgitalia.com). Having tried to do it myself, I was sure there was a niche for someone to inspect and buy vehicles in Italy for people and to manage their projects out there.

The early years were slower because it is one of those jobs that gathers momentum only via reputation and that comes only with time. Now my website brings in most new business (about 60% of my work) and the US market has become really big, overtaking a currently docile UK market.

I was terrible at languages at school, but started learning Italian when I met Eleonora and really advanced when we moved to Italy – it was sink or swim. Now I carry out complex negotiations and can write contracts in Italian. Meanwhile Eleonora works for the Endurance Rally Association (ERA, part of HERO) so, ironically, she spends most time in the UK,

while Sussex-bred me is usually in Treviso. It also means I offer support on rally events, which adds another layer to life's tapestry.

That means I basically have three types of day: an inspection day, an admin day or a rally day. For inspections, which take up 25% of my time, any car up to six hours away can be inspected for three hours and written up in a single, long day, but further than that or an overseas job means an overnight stay. My reports used to be 90 pages long with photos, but I've got that down to seven and send the pictures electronically. The inspection is the same regardless of the value of the car and the priciest I have done is a \$500,000 Porsche.

Whatever type of day it is, I don't really have set meal times (I have clients in wildly varying timezones, so time can be a very fluid concept) but, if it is an admin day, I will definitely fit in a run. I have done a couple of marathons and enjoy it, but the heat in Italy means you have to run first thing in the morning or in the evening. Otherwise an admin day is emails, chasing or creating business and updating clients on the six projects I am currently managing in Italy for them, which accounts for 35% of my business.

Eleonora and I have eight cars at the

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moment, including a 1971 De Tomaso Pantera that I bought in 2013 and am very slowly restoring. The one owner before me parked it under a dripping air conditioning unit in the US that destroyed the engine over 20 years and it took me a year just to track down the correct cylinder head. My early classics were a clutch of MGs and a newer MX-5 and to this day I still have the Mazda and a crappy red MGB GT. They honed my knuckle-scraping skills – I am quite handy mechanically, but only on my own cars; client cars go to a workshop.

Purchase support accounts for more work than inspections because some people insist on buying blind. I have one client who said the inspections kept putting him off! I guess they could be deemed pessimistic, but people pay me to highlight every little fault. The challenge of Italy is keeping on top of all the changes because they are constant. When I moved here I learned that you ask questions to three people and if you get the same answer twice you go with that. You pay for every little document and item, too, but through the mist and the chaos there is logic, and that is why I exist.

When in the UK we are in Oxfordshire or on global rallies – ironically, the longest Eleonora and I are apart is when we are on the same event, but me on the rally and her in the office. I can run my business remotely; it is really only the physical inspections that I can't do when I am away and I am loath to get in someone else because the only way of guaranteeing uniform quality is to do every single one myself.

Of course, there are new challenges. Post-Brexit, the biggest issue is with procedure. Every car we've brought in has been dealt with differently. They will get on top of it, but there is disarray at the moment. Then there is Covid. Lockdowns actually threw up the benefit that Eleonora and I were in the same place at the same time for a while.

Our perfect evening is to have dinner together. I love to cook and she is very good at all the Italian staples, too, so we will spend two or three hours in the kitchen making a meal and then enjoying it. For us the cooking and eating and chatting are the evening's entertainment; we don't even have a telly in the UK and we never use the one in Italy.

At 46 I don't consider myself either young enough or old enough to have a 'bedtime'.