

# VESPA *Love*

More than just a *moto*, Vespas are a true style icon that's loved worldwide, and they reflect the Italian love of beauty, design and quality of life. **Mark Abouzeid** dons his helmet and hits the road to find out more...

Article and photos by **Mark Abouzeid**

**T**hey rode more than 300 kilometres in driving rain with little more than ponchos and helmets to protect them. Two abreast, the 40-odd bikers occupied the entire right-hand lane of Italy's north-south highway. By nightfall, they had reached their destination of Castelmuzio, doubling the population of this medieval Tuscan village. By morning, the *mos* were all polished and ready for a road rally that's married to the Italian love affair with a time-honoured design classic – the Vespa.

The Tuscan Vespa Rally, held on May 1st, like so many others across Italy has little in common with typical car rallies – there are no clock timers, no starting line, no finish line and no trophies. Instead, these events serve as a common ground for adoration and enjoyment of Italy's most cherished symbol. Attendees meet, ride and, most of all, wax lyrical about the Vespa. It's a metaphor for everything that's good in Italy: beauty, design and quality of life. »



Left: Vespa rallies are hugely popular and attract riders from all over Italy, and from around the world  
Above: The Lambretta is a cultural icon that represents far more than just a top-quality scooter





**A LASTING ROMANCE**

This love story begins, as so many do in Italy, just after World War II, with Enrico Piaggio's decision to design a low-cost transport for the masses. Unhappy with anything on the market, he enlisted the help of Carradino D'Asciano, an aeronautical engineer, to realise his vision.

From the beginning, the Vespa was different to any other *moto*: the body shape ensured drivers stayed clean; the front fork allowed for easy tire changes; the 'bench' seat meant women could ride 'politely', even in a long skirt, as pilot or passenger; gears were located on the handlebar; and most importantly, the drive chain was encased in the body to ensure that oil remained far away from clothing.

Dubbed the Vespa for its wasp-like appearance, its success was immediate. With ads targeting women, 35,000 units had been produced by 1949, and in ten years, that figure had reached over one million. By the mid-1950s, Vespas were being produced in Germany, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Spain and, of course, Italy.

The world's love affair with the Vespa had little to do with its functional design, though. It was, and still is, a symbol of love, freedom and romance; one that regains meaning with each generation. The Vespa is made for couples, for romance, for posing and for friends. While other bikes lure young men to attempt daring speeds on winding roads, the Vespa inspires couples to drive, hug, talk (something that's

actually possible on a Vespa), explore and, more than anything, be seen.

**A HOLLYWOOD LOVE STORY**

Who hasn't dreamed of circling the Trevi fountain and Roman monuments on a Vespa, like Audrey Hepburn and Gregory Peck in *Roman Holiday*? What woman wasn't struck by the sight of Jude Law shirtless astride his *moto* in *The Talented Mister Ripley*? Growing up in the 70s, it was Phil Daniels riding *en masse* among friends in *Quadrophenia* and, ultimately, throwing his Vespa off a cliff as he abandoned his Mod life. Today, the song *Vespa Special K* still ranks as one of the most popular Italian songs of the past decade.

Hollywood, like all the arts, loves the Vespa. Salvador Dali personally customised one, which is still on display. Ursula Andress received one as payment for a film role. Despite riding a Triumph in *The Wild Ones*, Marlon Brando's personal favourite was, of course, the Vespa.

In 60 years, it has played starring roles in over 150 films, is the symbol for Mod/Ska music scene and is on permanent display at museums in London, Buenos Aires and Milan. In fact, it's so popular that the name Vespa has become synonymous with all scooters.

If the cult of the Vespa extends across the globe, then those in attendance at the Tuscan Vespa Rally are the pillars of its church. They're here to carry the word; to shine light >>

**Above:** Vespa rallies are all about being seen, and so hundreds of horns are sounded as riders pass through towns and villages

## “BIKES AND RIDERS MUST LOOK THE PART, INSPIRE ADMIRATION AND DEFINE ‘STYLE’ AS THEY RIDE”

on a faith which promises life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They've travelled hundreds of kilometres this weekend, and will do so again in meetings across Italy.

### LA BELLA FIGURA

This is Italy and one must be seen. Bikes and riders must look the part, inspire admiration, define 'style'. As they ride through Tuscan towns, their almost comical horns sound to ensure that windows are open and eyes are fixed upon them. At each break, the women fix hair, scarves and whatever make-up needs retouching.

The rally is not about winning or losing but about living life. The riding is important but so too are the dinners of Tuscan delicacies with copious amounts of wine, where the guests of honour are the bikes themselves. Songs are sung late into the night and new friends are made.



Above: Vespa rallies are as much about meeting new and old friends and socialising as they are about the actual bikes and riding

## Italian resources

- **Vespa Club d'Italia** ([www.vespaclub.it](http://www.vespaclub.it)) has links to all recognised Vespa Clubs in Italy, a calendar of events and all the information you could want on the history and mania of Vespa.
- **Viaggi in Scooter** ([www.viaggiinscooter.it](http://www.viaggiinscooter.it)) is a loose association of scooter lovers who plan outings throughout Italy and Europe.
- **Vespa Online** ([www.vespaonline.com](http://www.vespaonline.com)) is an Italian internet community for lovers of Vespas. It includes bulletin board discussions, *moto* and part sales, manuals with specifications, photo galleries, legislative updates and, best of all, a calendar of rallies.
- **Scooter Club Italiani** ([www.scooterclubitaliani.com](http://www.scooterclubitaliani.com)) is for lovers of all scooters (mainly defined as Vespas or Lambrettas) with fun events and rallies. They also organise the Elba rally.

### RALLIES NOT TO MISS

- **World Vespa Week**: Treviso, May 29th – 31st and June 1st – 2nd 2008  
[www.worldvespaweek.it](http://www.worldvespaweek.it)
- **Vespa Club d'Italia National Congress**: Perugia, March 8th – 9th 2008  
[www.vespaclub.it/Congresso/](http://www.vespaclub.it/Congresso/)
- **9th Scooter Rally Toscana**: Elba, last year held April 28th – 30th and May 1st  
[www.greenonions-sc.com](http://www.greenonions-sc.com)
- **2nd Annual Tuscan Vespa Rally**: Castelmuzio, May 1st, 2008

### MOST SOUGHT-AFTER MODELS

- **Vespa 98**, 1946 – the first Vespa
- **Vespa 125**, 1948 – the first 125cc engine
- **Vespa 150 GS**, 1955 – the most popular
- **Vespa 150 GL**, 1963 – the best-looking
- **Vespa ETA 150cc**, 1999 – the first four-stroke
- **Vespa Granturismo 200L and 125L**, 2003 – the most powerful
- **Lambretta SX150** – the most unique

Punctuality is optional but entrances are important. As Paolo Lazzari, the rally's organiser, cursed the members of the Bologna Vespa club, who had yet to be seen half an hour after the scheduled start, a chorus of 40 horns was heard. As if from a movie, the cypress-lined road was suddenly populated for as far as the eye could see by the strong colours of the bikes and their riders. All but Paolo forgot the time. The Vespas were in force and their arrival was truly beautiful.

Most of the riders have a good story to tell, such as Mauro Zacchei, who, having found the burned frame of a 1957 Vespa 125 in his friend's garage, spent five years rebuilding it by hand, often with parts so rusted they had to be retooled from scratch. Ask him about it and you'll spend the next half an hour looking through photo albums of each step of the process.

Then there's the couple, whose names have been withheld due to conflicting matrimonial arrangements, who met at a stop light riding matching bikes. Their mutual spouses had no appreciation for the church of Vespa so now they ride upon a single Lambretta, sharing their love for Vespa and each other at weekend rallies.

Luckily for our couple, Vespa rallies are quite common throughout the country, including a Jude Law-styled summer ride around the Tuscan island of Elba each May. This year, the Vespa Club d'Italia hosted its annual convention in Tuscany, where thousands of riders invaded the town of Perugia on the 8th and 9th of March. It's a sight well worth catching next year... **TIM**