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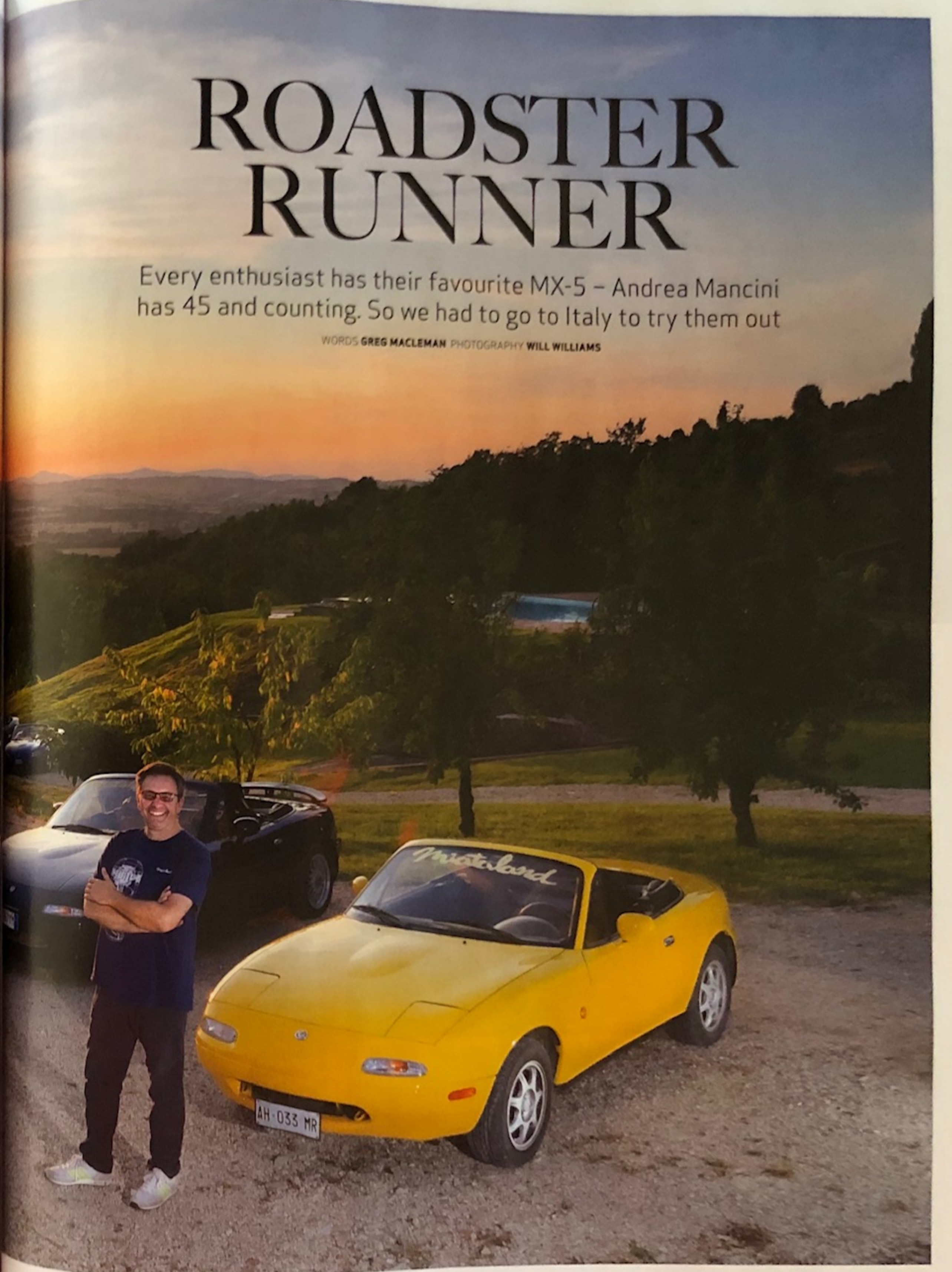
EXCLUSIVE BLAST IN A MIGHTY BUGATTI T59

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ROADSTER RUNNER

Every enthusiast has their favourite MX-5 – Andrea Mancini has 45 and counting. So we had to go to Italy to try them out

WORDS GREG MACLEMAN PHOTOGRAPHY WILL WILLIAMS



'Mancini isn't in the habit of parting with cars. In his long dark garage, stifling hot from a continent-wide heatwave, MX-5s of every colour and flavour stretch out'



Clockwise from above: compact NA contrasts with the chunkier NC Mk3; decals betray the special M2 1001; strut brace among many tweaks; cabin was further stripped of any already minimal luxuries



Ask most people the meaning of life, the universe and everything and you'll probably be told "42". Ask a petrolhead, and they're more likely to say Mazda MX-5 – or Miata or Eunos Roadster, as it was badged in the USA and Japan.

Andrea Mancini can be counted in the second camp. Despite a day job in the finance department of Jaguar Land Rover, the Italian has a passion for Mazda's diminutive roadster that is obsessive, curating what is widely accepted to be the largest collection of MX-5s in the world. In total, the collector-turned-hotelier owns a scarcely believable 45 examples, spanning all four generations. The cars are based at a hilltop Umbrian home that has all the makings of a Bond villain's hideout – only instead of world domination, this car fan has his sights on winning people over to the Mazda's myriad charms.

"It all started in 1998, after nine years of, shall we say, love at a distance," says Mancini. "I bought a German grey import from a lady who was trading it in for a Ford Ka. I hadn't even driven one before, only seen them in showrooms – but I had a lot of brochures! I was living by the sea near Rome and I'll never forget the feeling of that first top-down drive from the dealership. It is impossible to describe."

That first car was eventually sold to fund the purchase of a brand-new Mk2. "I discovered that I cannot stay without a Mk1 – you need both," he laughs. "That car remains the only one I ever sold. I saw it in Palermo years later, but it wasn't in good condition. I left a note on the windscreen

but unfortunately no one ever got in touch."

Mancini's second MX-5 now sits alongside 44 others at the collector's home-cum-bed-and-breakfast, Miataland, which is nestled in the hills south of Perugia. The luxury pad is themed around the roadster, with rooms named after paint colours and wooden latticework along each bed aping the design of the Power Plant Frame. Outside, meanwhile, lies a vast wooden storage facility reputedly once used to house a collection of Maseratis, and which now features glass doors emblazoned with the name 'Miataland'.

Stepping into the long, dark garage it quickly becomes clear that Mancini isn't in the habit of parting with cars. Through the gloom, stifling hot from a continent-wide heatwave, MX-5s of every colour and flavour stretch out, shrouded in dustsheets. With a flourish, Mancini draws back the cover on the first, a 1993 model breathed on by Mazdaspeed: "It's fitted with a supercharger, and the exterior kit is done by a German company called NoPro, which raced in the Japanese equivalent of DTM with a car just like this."

He draws back another cover, revealing a tidy RS Limited finished in Montego Blue – as all 500 examples were. "And with the right seats," he exclaims. "To drive, the RS is one of the best. It has Bilstein suspension and a Torsen limited-slip differential, and also 15in BBS rims – the best-looking wheels for the Mk1 for sure."

From here things begin to get more unusual, the next thin veil shrouding something completely different. "This is the Pit Crew MX-5," he says proudly, revealing a curious front-end treatment with fixed round lamps in place of the pop-up lights. "I think it looks some-

thing like the Volvo P1800." As our eyes begin to adjust to the darkness something altogether more menacing takes shape, with aggressive bonnet louvres and wide, sticky tyres bulging beneath its arches. "This is the most powerful car that I have: Mega Monster," says Mancini. "Instead of the usual 1.8-litre engine the car has a supercharged 5-litre V8 from a Shelby Mustang – it has around 430bhp." Fun in the wet? "And also in the dry! It's on R888 semi-slick tyres, but even then... in third gear, full gas: Wooooooo," he says, sawing left and right at an imaginary steering wheel. "It's unbelievable. The cost for the transformation was \$50,000."

Mancini suggests we fire up three of our favourites for a countryside blast. It seems only right to select one example from each of the first three generations, and we quickly settle on a trio comprising the ultra-rare M2 1001, the top of the range run-out Mazdaspeed NB and perhaps the most focused of all the NCs: Open Race.

Even die-hard fans may never have heard of the M2 1001, such is its rarity outside Japan. It's thought that there's only a handful of examples currently in Europe, the lion's share of which have been hoarded by Mancini, who owns two cars from the initial 1992 production run of 300 – numbers 49 and 62 – plus a later M2 1002.

As close to the Holy Grail of Mk1 MX-5s as you're likely to find, the M2 1001 was the first product of Mazda's skunkworks, M2 Incorporated, a separate division headed by 'father of the MX-5' Masakatsu Kato to create low-volume variants of its most popular models. Unlike some special editions, which seemed to appear every second week and sometimes involved little more

Clockwise from above: Mazdaspeed NB is a high point of the critically acclaimed but less revered Mk2; interior retains similar feel across Mk1 and 2; Mazda's first in-house turbo MX-5



