

Relics in Question

By JAMES RICE

There are few places in Britain where the old confidence of the nation feels quite so carefully arranged as in the British Museum. One enters through stone and symmetry into a world of hushed reverence: the Greek Revival portico on Great Russell Street, the long processional steps, glass cases gleaming under controlled light, fragments of lost civilisations laid out with academic calm, and the quiet assumption that history, once gathered, can be ordered into permanence. Within, the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court extends beneath Foster and Partners' glass-and-steel roof, all bright geometry and institutional self-belief, while Sydney Smirke's circular Reading Room sits at the centre like a scholarly planet, its restored blue, cream, and gold dome still carrying the romance of books, argument, and empire. The building has that particular vintage glamour of knowledge made physical: stone corridors, polished floors, labels like travel documents, the golden hush of old maps, brass locks, field notebooks, and cabinets that seem to contain not only objects but the whole thrilling promise of elsewhere. Down the galleries, the effect deepens. In Room 4, the Rosetta Stone sits among Egyptian sculpture and the monumental weight of Ramses II; in the Assyrian rooms, colossal human-headed winged bulls from Khorsabad stand guard while Ashurbanipal's lion-hunt reliefs and the siege of Lachish turn stone into movement, violence, and royal theatre. The Enlightenment Gallery, oldest in the present building, still carries the taxonomic drama of Sir Hans Sloane's world: astrolabes, fossils, shells, Greek vases, the strange theatrical Merman, a New South Wales bark shield, and objects gathered under the old desire to classify the natural and human worlds into one beautiful, impossible order. In the Africa galleries, the Benin plaques, commemorative heads, ivory, coral, and royal regalia hold courtly histories, ritual authority, trade, war, and memory in surfaces of brass and bronze. For generations this atmosphere carried a particular authority. The museum presented itself not simply as a storehouse of antiquity, but as a kind of intellectual settlement between beauty, power, and time: a place where the treasures of the world might rest under the stewardship of empire, preserved against ruin and admired in the dignified stillness of Bloomsbury. Yet that old settlement no longer feels secure. The artefacts remain extraordinary – still capable of inspiring wonder, still rich with the gravity of vanished kingdoms,

devotional worlds, and long-finished empires – but they now exist within a newer and more unsettled frame. Questions of ownership, removal, inheritance, and return have altered the atmosphere around them. The object in the case is no longer only an object; it is also an argument, a wound, a diplomatic question, a moral provocation. The Parthenon sculptures, the Benin plaques, the Maqdala material, sacred and ceremonial things whose labels now carry more tension than many speeches in Westminster, all sit inside a Britain trying to decide whether apology is an ethical act, a legal hazard, or simply another panel discussion with better lighting. In April 2026 this



question lands in a country governed by Sir Keir Starmer's careful Labour seriousness, with Kemi Badenoch's Conservatives attempting a recovery of first principles and Reform turning grievance into mass-market upholstery, recently varnished by donor-money headlines. The British Museum, poor thing, becomes the perfect national metaphor: everyone agreeing that the roof is magnificent, nobody quite agreeing who should own what is underneath it. And what makes this so compelling is that the tension cannot be reduced to one easy posture. There is no interest here in blunt accusation, nor in sentimental institutional defence, but rather in the complex and increasingly unavoidable space between them. What does stewardship mean when its origins lie in conquest, asymmetry, or imperial reach? What becomes of universal museum rhetoric in an age more alert to the violence, extraction, and unevenness that so often underwrote the gathering of universal collections? To walk through the British Museum now is to move between admiration and unease, between aesthetic gratitude and historical discomfort. The marbles, bronzes, carvings, manuscripts, and sacred remnants still command attention, but they do so in a changed moral climate, one in which beauty can no longer be entirely separated from the path by which beauty arrived. The museum becomes, in this light, not merely a repository of civilisation's relics, but a theatre of unresolved questions about empire, legitimacy, memory, and the strange afterlife of possession. Its dignity remains intact, but it is a dignity now asked to answer back. □



RACING RED

Series 4 Alfa Romeo Spider, Italian tailoring for the open road

LONDON'S CAR CULTURE REIMAGINED

By JAMES RICE

L ondon has always been a city of arrivals and departures, but just as often it is a city of idling: engines murmuring beneath plane trees, polished bonnets flashing in the pale afternoon sun, a row of vehicles outside a café or private club arranged with the care of a still life. In such moments, a car is never only a car. It is a declaration, a private admission to an agenda that is partly social, partly aesthetic, and partly theatrical, tailored not merely to the practical business of movement but to the public performance of taste. That is why the most interesting cars in town are often not the newest, but the



THE PAGODA

The Mercedes-Benz W113, famously known as the "Pagoda," was produced from 1963 to 1971. Penned by Paul Bracq, it replaced both the legendary 300 SL and the 190 SL.

ones with some stored British vintage cars carry a
eccentricity in them: an MGB language of proportion,

***'It doesn't cost any more to
make something pretty'***
— Sir William Lyons

GT drawn up outside a Notting
Hill florist, a Jaguar E-Type
slipping through Belgravia like a
cigarette case on wheels, a
Bristol 411 outside a club in St
James's, a Morgan Plus Four
with its bonnet straps looking
faintly embarrassed by the apps
on every passenger's phone.
CHAUVET COUTURE

patience, and weather; they
imply a driver who knows the
difference between tweed and
costume, between patina and
decay. In certain parts of the
capital this performance is
impossible to miss. One sees the
great modern pageant of
London car culture everywhere:

the revived Defender in
heritage green, made to appear
as though it has crossed
moorland, weather, and three

of cloud, Braemar after rain, the
road to Applecross unwinding
like a ribbon dropped by a laird
with a mild disregard for sat nav.

***'You can't be a true
petrolhead until you've owned
an Alfa Romeo'***
— Jeremy Clarkson

generations of dutiful
countryside stewardship,
though it may in fact know only
school runs, West London side
streets, and the gravel forecourt
of a hotel where no one has
ever genuinely needed mud on
their tyres; the Chelsea tractor
with all the softened brutality of
modern wealth; the eccentric
interior arranged in tones of
saddle leather, old brass,
rainproof canvas, and a sort of
domestic rural fantasy that
suggests dogs, guns never fired,
old curtains, and a life
somewhere between

There is something quietly
comic in all of this, and also
something revealing. The
London driver has become an
archetype: the woman who
handles the steering wheel as
though it were another silk
accessory in a carefully
assembled wardrobe; the man
with marbles in his mouth and
inherited certainty in his
posture; the couple who seem
less to own a vehicle than to
have purchased an entire
ancestral atmosphere. Against
the noise of modern Britain,
with its potholes, charging
points, ULEZ arguments, and
small administrative agonies,
there remains an undeniable
pleasure in this old motoring
romance translated into the city.
Here, metal, cloth, polish, and
petrol form their own kind of
language. A car becomes an
extension of house, family,
aspiration, and myth, answering
the drabness of the
contemporary with leather seats,
soft colours, weathered steel,
and the faint but persistent
dream of a more elegant road
just beyond the traffic light. □

Gloucestershire and a Laura
Ashley drawing room. The
fantasy reaches its annual high
church at Goodwood, where the
Revival turns the old 1948-1966
motor-racing world into a
complete social costume: pencil
skirts, silk scarves, mechanics
bent over engines, men in
belted tweed, and the delicious
theatre of people pretending to
have arrived from another
decade while still checking the
local election weather on their
phones. Beyond London, its
dream road runs north: the long
open lanes of the Scottish
Highlands, Glencoe under a lid

Keeping up with the Aristocrats

ABROAD



THE CROWN'S SECRET

Les Jolies Eaux was Princess Margret's villa in Mustique

By JAMES RICE

The golden hour of a certain British summer has long had very little to do with Britain itself. Almost as soon as London begins to soften into heat rose gardens opening behind stucco terraces, school terms ending, white linen and navy cotton returning to the city as though summoned by ritual rather than weather a familiar migration resumes. Cars are packed, trunks are sent ahead, dogs are deposited with someone capable, and the season slips quietly overseas. The old pattern remains remarkably intact: villas in the South of France with shutters half-closed against the noon light, houses in Tuscany where lunch extends into evening beneath vines and old stone, terraces in Mallorca, boats moving lazily between islands, tennis rackets left on chairs, deck shoes drying near salt-stiff railings, a glass of wine demarcating quiet luxury, heritage, and a confidence in leisure that is both inherited and learned. Before departure, there may be a final London rehearsal of ease: a boho picnic on Hampstead Heath or Primrose Hill with striped rugs, chipped enamel cups, seeded focaccia, warm strawberries, someone's badly behaved linen shirt, and the faint feeling that the whole capital has turned briefly into a Notting Hill mood board. Then come the continental stations of the season. Paris is entered through café terraces and limestone façades: Café de Flore at an hour

when the chairs seem to have been arranged by a novelist, Les Deux Magots under awnings, a zinc counter near Saint-Germain, women in flat sandals and severe sunglasses, men attempting the unbuttoned shirt with varying degrees of moral success. Monaco, by contrast, announces itself in polish: Café de Paris beside Casino Square, Belle Époque balconies, white jackets at the Hôtel de Paris, the harbour below glittering with vessels

"It was all an adventure to her... something she'd never had in her life."

— *Lady Anne Glenconner*

(regarding Princess Margaret's time on Mustique)

whose teak decks and brass fittings speak the older grammar of classical yachting, before wealth discovered the architectural aggression of the floating apartment block. There is something fascinating in the continuity of this world. The British aristocratic and near-aristocratic classes have long treated summer abroad not simply as escape, but as a seasonal rite, an extension of social order under softer skies. To go abroad in this way is not to abandon one's habits, but to transport them intact: the codes of dress, the calibrated informality, the understanding that taste is revealed most clearly in what appears unforced. Here are the old sunglasses, the faded glamour of holiday fashion, the silk scarf lifted by the

breeze, the linen suit loosened at the wrist, the espadrille, the Breton stripe, the tennis whites made leisurely enough that nobody quite remembers the score, the children turned half-wild by sea air and permissive afternoons, the adults playing out an annual pilgrimage marked by lunches, swims, evening drives, and dinners that seem to begin in daylight and end outside time. The setting may be Mediterranean, but the choreography remains unmistakably British, particularly in 2026, when even a lunch abroad can feel like a small act of resistance against the home news cycle: council elections, cost-of-living pledges, ministerial statements, and the faintly comic spectacle of political figures competing to sound most ordinary while no one at the next table has ever packed their own luggage. Beneath the charm and beauty of it all lies a longer story about class, mobility, and the geography of privilege: about where notable families return to year after year, where houses are kept or discreetly borrowed, and how the performance of ease abroad has become part of the broader inheritance of elite life. This is travel not as disruption, nor as earnest self-discovery, but as continuation an elegant preservation of mood, status, and style in climates that flatter all three. Across the map, notched with old photographs, inherited recommendations, and the memory of previous seasons lived well, the summer abroad persists as one of the last great stages on which the British upper class continues to look entirely at home. □