

Lisa Mullenneaux
© 2007

SARDINIA: WILD AND WONDERFUL

A fierce independence separates Sardinia from the rest of Italy, “il continente,” as islanders call the mainland. Whether its the heroism of the Sassari Brigade that won gold medals in World War I and the epithet “red devils” from their Austrian enemies or the Renato Soru government, which wants to kick out both coastal developers and the US military, the Sard’s message is: show respect. Last year, they took on the House of Savoy when Prince Vittorio Emanuele, the son of Italy’s last king, insulted the residents of Bitti.

Secretly taped phone conversations, leaked to the press, quoted the prince calling Sards “pieces of shit” and “stinky.” Local officials in Bitti in northeast Sardinia were not amused and declared their town a “Savoy-free zone”. Roads, squares, and monuments dedicated to the former royals will be rechristened after “patriotic Sardinians”. The prince, who is accused of corruption and prostitution, may have committed a worse offense by underestimating Sardinian pride.

Sards have much to be proud of – a rugged topography of matchless beauty and traditions tied to the agriculture that has sustained them since prehistoric times. There are festivals celebrating horses, peaches, cherries, wines, tomatoes, chestnuts, hazelnuts, sausages, and during carnival men dress in sheepskins – which makes sense on an island where sheep outnumber people three to one. Sardinia has always been a hit with Italians on summer holiday, and cheap airfares from the UK attract swarms of English-speaking tourists yearround. But Americans are as scarce as gold ducats – and that’s a pity.

On a recent 10-day visit, I based myself in the port city of Alghero and set aside plenty of time to explore other areas of the coast and the mountainous interior. Alghero is Sardinia's most picturesque medieval city, evolving from its original fort into three zones: historic, modern and beachfront (called The Lido). Conquered by the Spanish in 1353, residents still speak a form of Catalan. This city of some 40,000 offers the same charm as Barcelona – with better beaches.

The Old Town or Centro Storico lies in a maze of narrow, cobbled alleys enclosed by fortified walls on its seaward sides and marked with street signs in Catalan. A popular activity at sunset is to stroll the ramparts that jut into the Mediterranean and overlook a busy marina. As night settles over Alghero, the air cools and lights illuminate the waterfront and via Lido stretching north. Across the bay is the promontory of Capo Caccia with a lighthouse perched at its tip. It's a scene few visitors ever forget.

By day Old Town is hopping with tourists who enjoy pizzas topped with lobster, mussels, and shrimp and who shop for locally crafted coral and gold filigree jewelry. Another type of jewel on elegant via Carlo Alberto is the cloister of San Francesco, in summer the perfect venue for alfresco concerts. The church itself combines Romanesque and Gothic styles. Its interior was restored in the late 16th century. Further along via Carlo Alberto, the colorful majolica dome of San Michele Church recalls Valencia.

Palazzo d'Albis is a rare example of Catalan civic architecture, famous for hosting Holy Roman Emperor (and King of Spain) Charles V in 1541. The emperor liked what he saw of the town and rewarded its residents with a

flattering speech from the palace balcony in which he called them all “gentlemen.” Then he slaughtered their cattle for his soldiers and sailed away to fight corsairs in North Africa.

All that remains of the entrance to Old Town is Torre Porta a Terra, which now houses a bookshop and information center. The tower was originally one of two gates. When the inside walls were destroyed in the 19th century to allow the city to expand, a sprawling public garden replaced them. This green space effectively separates the old city from the new city that radiates north, east, and south.

If Alghero’s intimate, sand-colored Old Town basks in an amber glow, its beachfront throbs to the pulse of motor traffic and high-rise hotels and restaurants catering to sunseekers. Via Lido leads north to tiny Fertiglia, the airport, and white-sand beaches that dot the sweeping bay. Don’t expect privacy at Bombarde or Lazzaretto beaches; they have long ago been discovered. For privacy, park on a side road and walk down to the shore. The quiet and clarity of the water more than make up for the lack of an umbrella and snack bar.

CAR RENTALS:

Sardinia offers some of Europe’s least spoiled scenery and seems determined not to sell it to the highest bidder. From the heights of the Gennargentu massif to its underwater caves, this island’s natural beauty is not to be missed. But you’ll need a car to fully appreciate it as train and bus service are inadequate. Several local companies (my favorite is Sardinia Rentacar, www.autonoleggiosardinya.it) and most international companies - Avis, Hertz, Budget - have offices at the airport. Sardinia’s roads are impressive, especially in the mountainous interior.

Expect switchbacks, sheep crossings, and aggressive driving. Gas stations are plentiful and offer both full- and self-service.

SIDE TRIPS FROM ALGHERO

NEPTUNE'S GROTTO: A must-see for any visitor is an excursion by boat (or car) to this enormous sea cave at the foot of the Capo Caccia headland. Several boat operators at the port make the 2 ½-hour trip several times a day.

BOSA and SANTU ANTINE: The coastal route south from Alghero hugs the cliffs above the sea (like Northern California's Rt. 1). If you break for lunch, Sa Pishedda at 2 via Roma and Ristorante Mannu on viale Alghero are good choices. You can tour the churches and newly restored Malaspina Castle. Then head inland on Rt. 292, connect with the autostrada (131) and exit at Torralba to see the archaeological (nuragic) village of Santu Antine. Return to Alghero via 131 and Rt. 291.

STINTINO and SELLA & MOSCA WINERY: The beaches at Stintino are no less crowded than Alghero's, but the sea is purer, the vistas dazzling. Windsurfing centers at Pelosa Beach offer catamaran trips to Asinara Island National Park, snorkeling and scuba diving as well as windsurfing. Before you leave, drive up to the piazzetta and enjoy a gelato on the terrace where you can admire the panoramic seascape. On the return trip to Alghero (just north of the city) stop for a tour of Sella & Mosca, the largest winery in Sardinia (www.sellaemosca.com). A section of its museum is devoted to the prehistoric necropolis Anghelu Ruju, on the estate grounds.

SASSARI and CASTELSARDO: A tour of Sardinia's second largest city would include its Cathedral (Duomo) and Sanna Archaeological Museum. Not to be missed is the Romanesque shrine of Santissima Trinità di Saccargia (Church of the Trinity of the Spotted Cow) six miles south of the city. Heading north, follow scenic Rt. 200 to the coast with perhaps a break for lunch at Da Vito in Sennori. Leave plenty of time to explore the medieval fortress city of Castelsardo. On a clear day, you'll see Corsica from its imposing Castello.

WHEN TO GO: All year, but best from May to June or September to October. Avoid July and August when Italians are on holiday. Book as far ahead as possible.

HOW TO GO: There are no direct flights from the US to Sardinia. Eurofly offers reasonable fares from NY to Rome; Alitalia, Delta, American, USAir, and United also fly to Rome and Milan. Air One flies from Rome to Alghero, RyanAir from Pisa. Another option is to take an overnight ferry from either Civitavecchia (near Rome) or Genoa to Olbia, about 2 ½ hours from Alghero, or Porto Torres, about 30 minutes from Alghero.

WHERE TO EAT: Paco, on Largo San Francesco in the Centro Storico, is the current hot spot, and it's easy to see why: attentive service and delicious regional dishes at reasonable prices. Other options: Mabrouk for seafood, via Santa Barbara; Al Vecchio Mulino, 3 via Don Deroma; and Al Tuguri, 113 via Maiorca.

WHERE TO STAY:

AGRITURISMO means farm stays and either Sa Mandra on the airport road or Le Tre Grazie in Santa Maria de Palma are excellent choices.

B&Bs (Modern Zone) Blue iris, 8 via Giovanni Giolitti; www.bbplanet.it; Tel.

0139079982561.(OldTown) Hotel San Francesco, 2 via Ambrogio Machin;

www.sanfrancescohotel.com; Tel. 0139079980330.

HOTELS (Lido or beachfront) Hotel La Playa, 3 stars, pool, gardens, balconies;

14 via Pantelleria; singles: 57-84€, couples 77-140€; Tel. 0139079950369.

APARTMENTS (Lido or beachfront) Marisal, 35b viale Europa; www.marisal-

alghero.com; Tel. 0139079950046. This owner also rents apartments at 8 via

Carlo Alberto in the heart of Old Town. (Fertiglia) Diving Center Capo Galera.

This is a real find if you have a car and enjoy watersports. The Center, owned by

Gaddo Riso, has rooms and apartments for 25 guests with use of a kitchen. A

15-minute drive from the airport. www.capogalera.com; Tel. 0139079942110.

CAMPING (Lido or beachfront) La Mariposa; www.lamariposa.it; 22 via Lido;

April-October. Right on the beach, La Mariposa offers rooms, bungalows, and

trailers as well as campsites and full services.