

# Destination Sardinia

Despite its celebrity as a holiday destination, Sardinia remains remarkably enigmatic. Hidden behind the golden facade of swanky coastal resorts and spectacular beaches is an altogether different Sardinia, an island of untamed nature and proud tradition, of dark granite peaks, dizzying valleys and endless forests, all shrouded in an eerie coat of silence. Almost 7000 *nuraghi* (stone towers) lie strewn about the countryside, a reminder of prehistoric life on the island.

This beautiful Celtic landscape has fostered an isolated lifestyle still evident today. Although access is now assured by modern roads, for centuries many inland communities were cut off from the outside world by Sardinia's mountainous terrain. As a result inlanders, though unfailingly polite and helpful, can be diffident towards outsiders, and many towns bear the hallmarks of a difficult existence.

To address the traditional scourges of rural life, the regional authorities are aggressively promoting Sardinia as a year-round holiday destination. The island's fabulous outdoors potential means that hiking, biking and climbing are becoming popular activities for visitors. Regional festivals – not only great spectacles but genuine expressions of local pride – are drawing tourists seduced by Sardinia's folkloristic appeal and unique gastronomic traditions.

The Sardinian coast, however, continues to attract most of the attention and most of the visitors. An increase in low-cost flights into Alghero and Olbia has seen tourist numbers rising in recent years, and the Costa Smeralda (Emerald Coast) remains the destination of choice for oligarchs, captains of industry and media moguls.

But while tourism thrives, the rest of the economy struggles. After two years of expansion, industrial growth slowed going into 2008 – exports of oil, chemical and metal products fell – and with the spectre of recession hanging in the air, the economic outlook looks grim. Further exacerbating the situation is the EU's decision to reduce funding to the region – up until 2007 the EU considered Sardinia a backward region and financed it accordingly.

The man with the job of balancing the books is regional president Ugo Cappellacci. Elected on a centre-right ticket in February 2009, Cappellacci took the reins of power from Renato Soru, an unflinching character whose four-year tenure sparked controversy and division. Central to much debate was a coastal building ban and a tax on holiday homes and super-yachts, which Soru had introduced as part of a wide-ranging plan (the *piano paesaggistico*, or landscape plan) to regulate development on the island. But the political pendulum has swung right again and with Soru out of the way, the path is clear for Cappellacci to set his own agenda. The new president has highlighted poverty and unemployment as priorities, and has promised to modify Soru's landscape plan.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 1.65 million

Area: 24,090 sq km

Italy's GDP: €1.4 trillion

Sardinia's GDP per head:  
€18,570

GDP growth: 1.3%

Inflation: 4.75%

Unemployment rate:  
11.8%

Population density: 68  
per sq km

Number of sheep: 3  
million

# Getting Started

Sardinia may be an island, but it's a big one. Even with your own transport, you may be surprised how long it can take to get from A to B. In many inland places the tourist infrastructure is also very basic and it really pays to come prepared. If time is limited, consider trying to organise trekking, climbing and diving activities before you arrive. Also be aware that changeable weather in the autumn and spring can play havoc with carefully laid plans.

Undoubtedly the most popular (and expensive) areas are the Costa Smeralda, Alghero and Cagliari, but for the independent traveller there is much to discover away from these hot spots. Although the island is well serviced by European airlines and ferries, a potential problem is Sardinia's popularity during summer. You will need to book a long way in advance if you're travelling in July and August. In general the only way to really see Sardinia is to hire your own vehicle; train and bus services are reliable but can be limited in the interior, especially outside of high season.

## WHEN TO GO

Sardinia is famous for its seven-month summer and in a good year you could be happily stretched out on the beaches from April till as late as October, when temperatures still hover around 20°C. Touring the interior is best between March and June, when many towns celebrate their patron saints' day (see p17). It's great fun to visit during these festivals, but you'll have to book well in advance.

Average temperatures are 25°C in summer (a little hotter inland) and around 8°C to 10°C in winter (a little colder inland, naturally decreasing with altitude). Rain falls mainly in spring and autumn, and the mountainous interior receives the bulk of it, which falls as snow on the higher peaks; the plains and coastal areas in the east and south are significantly drier. The ideal time for walking in the Gennargentu is between March and June, when the wildflowers are in bloom and the countryside is at its greenest.

From mid-July all of Italy thunders to the sound of millions hitting the holiday roads – and Sardinia is one of their primary objectives. Hundreds of thousands pour in daily until the end of August, when the flood starts to flow in the opposite direction. It's a bad time to join in, as accommodation can be hard to find, prices reach for the sky and the summer heat can become unbearable.

Another thing to bear in mind are varying costs between the high season – Easter and from mid-June to early September – and the rest of the year,

See Climate Charts (p223)  
for more information.

### DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Travel insurance that covers everything you hope to do, especially if planning to dive, cycle, climb etc (p227)
- Your ID card or passport and visa if required (p231)
- Driving licence and car documents if driving, along with appropriate car insurance (p242)
- An adaptor for electrical appliances
- Some wet-weather gear, a warm sweater or fleece and sturdy, waterproof walking boots if you plan on trekking (p138)
- A set of smart clothes for those nights on the Costa Smeralda

when even the busiest resorts drop their prices. Between November and February some places close altogether (especially campsites), so do your research first if you plan to travel during this period.

## COSTS & MONEY

### HOW MUCH?

City bus fare €1

International newspaper  
€2.50 to €3

Coffee and *cornetto* €2.50  
to €3

Bowl of pasta €6 to €8

Gelato €2.50 to €4

How much you spend in Sardinia depends on where you go and when. Staying at the top resorts in July and August can be bank-breakingly expensive, but visit the island out of season and you'll be surprised at how cheap it can be. Certainly, the island compares favourably with mainland Italy, which is generally more expensive. See the Directory's Accommodation (p219) and Food (p225) sections for detailed information on the pricing system we've used in this book.

A prudent backpacker might scrape by on €50 per day by staying in cheap *pensioni*/hostels, buying food at supermarkets and eating in pizzerias. Realistically, though, a traveller wanting to stay in a comfortable midrange hotel, eat two square meals per day, hire a car and not feel restricted to one site per day should reckon on a daily average of about €120 to €150.

## TRAVEL LITERATURE

Despite the island's striking beauty and rich, rural past, there is relatively little travel literature to recommend. Sardinia's most famous commentator was DH Lawrence, whose sharply drawn portrait of the island is the only real travel book of its kind.

**Sea and Sardinia** (DH Lawrence) Lawrence's classic Sardinian travelogue was written after he'd grumped his way around the island for six days in 1921. His empathy with the rural essence of the island tempers his acerbic, and often hilarious, tantrums at the inadequate accommodation and food.

**The Lead Goat Veered Off: A Bicycling Adventure on Sardinia** (Neil Anderson) This witty, light-hearted read follows Anderson and his partner Sharon as they pedal their way round Sardinia, meeting eccentric locals and sleeping in out-of-the-way spots. There are no great revelations, but if you've always fancied cycling but don't have the thighs, it's the ideal substitute.

**Grazia Deledda: A Legendary Life** (Martha King) The biography of Sardinia's greatest female novelist, this concise volume reveals much about the Nuorese society in which Deledda grew up and the boundaries she had to break in order to write.

**The Bandit on the Billiard Table** (Alan Ross) A waistcoat-straight account of Sardinia in the 1950s. Alan Ross has the tone of a schoolmaster and he takes the island to task in a masterly way, with anecdotal stories and some sensitive insights.

**La civiltà dei Sardi** (The Civilisation of the Sards; Giovanni Lilliu) Unfortunately only printed in Italian, Lilliu's magnum opus is the definitive book on the history, archaeology and culture of the island.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Get Around Sardinia** ([www.getaroundsardinia.com](http://www.getaroundsardinia.com)) Great for practical advice on travelling Sardinia by public transport. Has links to bus companies, notes on major towns and plenty of useful tips.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Check out the Cagliari destination guide and exchange Sardinia info on the Thorn Tree forum.

**Mare Nostrum** ([www.marenostrum.it](http://www.marenostrum.it)) A fantastic Sardinian portal listing events, exhibitions, festivals, hotels, restaurants and much more, as well as all the latest news.

**Sardegna Turismo** ([www.sardegnaturismo.it](http://www.sardegnaturismo.it)) Sardinia's official tourism site is comprehensive, easy to navigate and packed with background and practical information.

**Sardinia Hike and Bike** ([www.sardiniahikeandbike.com](http://www.sardiniahikeandbike.com)) A great route planner for hikers and bikers. You can download trail maps and read up about routes, divided by area and level of difficulty.

**Sardinia Point** ([www.sardiniaipoint.it](http://www.sardiniaipoint.it), in Italian) Here you will find oodles of cultural information, from what's on right now to recipes and accommodation.

**Sarnow** ([www.sarnow.com](http://www.sarnow.com)) A magazine website with well-written features on the island and plenty of itinerary suggestions.

# TOP PICKS

SARDINIA  
ITALY

Rome

## TOP CONSERVATION AREAS

Sardinia's compelling landscape has largely escaped the ravages wrought by development. But conservation is an issue and here we highlight the island's most beautiful protected areas.

- The **Parco Nazionale del Golfo di Orosei e del Gennargentu** (p200) encompasses the mountainous Supramonte (p198) and Golfo di Orosei (p207).
- The **Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago di La Maddalena** (p178) comprises seven islands and some 40 islets.
- The **Parco Nazionale dell'Asinara** (p147) is home to a population of pint-size albino donkeys.
- **Isola Tavolara** (p169) boasts translucent waters and great views.
- Just off the Sinis Peninsula, **Isola di Mal di Ventre** (p111) features a windswept landscape and sandy beaches.
- The woods of the **Riserva Naturale Foresta di Monte Arcosu** (p98) are roamed by the *cervo sardo* (Sardinian deer)
- The **olivastru millenari** (p176) are a group of thousand-year-old olive trees overlooking **Lago di Liscia** (p176).
- Said to have been created by St George, the **Scala di San Giorgio** (p218) is a picturesque gorge near Ulassai.

## MUST-HAVE MUSIC

Cultural isolation has made Sardinia a mecca for ethnomusicologists. These CDs provide a good introduction to the original and sometimes strange sounds; see p36 for more on Sardinian music.

- *Suoni di Un'Isola* (2003) A compilation of traditional *tenores* (vocal songs).
- *Intonos* (2000) and *Caminos De Pache* (2005), Tenores di Bitti. Vocal music from Sardinia's most famous *tenores* outfit.
- *Launeddas* (2002), Efisio Melis and Antonio Lara. Historic recordings of the *launeddas*, Sardinia's unique woodwind instrument.
- *Alguimia* (2003), Franca Masu. A homage to Alghero's musical traditions, sung in the local Catalan dialect.
- *Organittos* (1999), Totore Chessa. Guitar renditions of traditional Sardinian folk music.
- *Forse il Mare* (1986), Ritmia. Innovative Sardinian folk music.
- *Sonos* (1988), Elena Ledda. A popular singer and friends' take on Sardinian folk.
- *Launeddas* (2003), Franco Melis. Traditional *launeddas* music from a modern master.
- *Sardegna Canta* (1970), Maria Carta. The first album by Sardinia's legendary folk musician.

## TOP BOOKS

Sardinia has more of an oral storytelling tradition than a written one. However, the post-WWI years have proved fruitful and Sardinia is now well established on the literary map. See p38 for more.

- *Sardinia Blues* (2008), Flavio Soriga
- *Canne al Vento* (Reeds in the Wind; 1913), Grazia Deledda
- *Sardinian Brigade* (1938), Emilio Lussu
- *Il Giorno del Giudizio* (The Day of Judgment; 1975), Salvatore Satta
- *Padre Padrone* (1975), Gavino Ledda
- *Il Figlio di Bakunin* (Bakunin's Son; 1991), Sergio Atzeni
- *Cosima* (1937), Grazia Deledda
- *Diario di una Maestrina* (Diary of a Schoolteacher; 1957), Maria Giacobbe
- *Il Desertore* (The Deserter; 1961), Giuseppe Dessi

For sustainable-tourism listings, see the GreenDex on p270.

## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

In a 2006 *National Geographic* survey of the environments of 111 island-holiday destinations Sardinia came 31st. It was commended for its beaches and unspoilt coastline but marked down for its poor transport networks and underdevelopment of tourist facilities. This summarises the situation pretty well. Sardinia is largely unspoilt and the transport network is inadequate, although to claim that tourist facilities are underdeveloped is debatable. Certainly in some areas, particularly inland, they are almost nonexistent, but in the big coastal resorts they are second to none. The challenge facing travellers today is how to get the best out of Sardinia while contributing to the island's welfare, or at the very least not damaging it.

Your choice of accommodation can make a difference. Many of the big resorts are owned by international companies which contribute surprisingly little to the island economy. There are, however, a growing number of locally run B&Bs and *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation). These rarely offer the facilities guaranteed by the big hotels but they're generally cheaper, they're often in beautiful locations and many serve superb food. Useful websites include [www.agriturismodisardegna.it](http://www.agriturismodisardegna.it), which has lists of *agriturismi* with prices, and [www.bed-and-breakfast.it](http://www.bed-and-breakfast.it).

Restaurants recommended by the **Italian Slow Food** ([www.slowfood.it](http://www.slowfood.it)) organisation – look out for stickers bearing its snail logo – will usually use local ingredients and serve traditional food. Another way of supporting island food producers is to visit markets and local food festivals.

Transport is a tricky one, and there's really no escaping the fact that if you want to get off the beaten track, you'll have to hire a car. Unless, of course, you cycle (or walk). Bike hire is available in most big towns and there are an increasing number of local operators offering cycling and hiking tours. Many of these take you into parts of the island that you'd be unlikely to visit under your own steam.

Similarly, there are a whole range of locally run cooperatives offering excursions and outdoor activities (trekking, climbing, caving, kayaking etc). Even if you loathe the idea of a guided tour, don't dismiss these guys out of hand. The Sardinian wilderness can be challenging and if you venture into unchartered territory, there's a real danger of getting lost. For further details see the Tours section, p244.

Common sense rules should also be applied wherever you go: don't waste water; keep to marked paths; respect barriers; don't pick wildflowers; don't light fires in unauthorised areas; and give way to sheep on the roads.

# Festivals Calendar

Sardinia's festival calendar comprises everything from saints' day celebrations and religious festivities to costumed processions, insane horse races and jazz jamborees. For information on food festivals see p46.

## JANUARY

**FESTA DI SANT'ANTONIO ABATE** 16 Jan  
With the winter solstice passed, many villages in Nuoro province celebrate the arrival of spring with great bonfires. You'll be sure to find raging conflagrations in Orosei, Orgosolo, Sedilo and Paulilatino.

**FESTA DI SANT'ANTONIO ABATE – MAMUTHONES** 16-17 Jan  
An eerie pagan festival celebrated in Mamoiada. A dozen townspeople don hairy costumes with a half-human, half-animal allure. Ritually chasing them are eight *issokadores*, in the guise of out-moded gendarmes.

**FESTA DI SAN SEBASTIANO** 19 Jan  
Similar to the festival of Sant'Antonio. Towns all over the island set up their winter bonfires for San Sebastiano.

## FEBRUARY

**CARNEVALE** Period up to Ash Wed  
Many towns stage carnival festivities. Highlights include the burning of an effigy of a French soldier in Alghero; the sinister *mamuthones* in Mamoiada; costumed displays in Ottana; and the townsfolk of Bosa inspecting each others' groins.

**SA SARTIGLIA** Shrove Tues & preceding Sun  
Oristano stages a medieval tournament of horse-men in masquerade involving bright processions and knightly challenges. More anarchic horse races take place at Santu Lussurgiu and Sedilo.

## MARCH/APRIL

**PASQUA** Easter  
Holy Week in Sardinia is a big deal and is marked by solemn processions and Passion plays all over the island. The celebrations in Alghero, Castelsardo, Cagliari, Iglesias and Tempio Pausania are particularly evocative.

**FESTA DI SANT'ANTIOCO** 2nd Sun after Easter  
Costumed parades, dancing, concerts and fireworks are held over four days in Sant'Antioco to celebrate the town's patron saint.

## MAY

**FESTA DI SANT'EFISIO** 1-4 May  
On 1 May a wooden statue of St Ephisius is paraded around Cagliari on a bullock-drawn carriage amid colourful costumed celebrations. The saint is carried to Nora, from where he returns on 4 May accompanied by yet more festivities.

**FESTA DI SANTA GIUSTA** 14-18 May  
Held in the town of the same name just south of Oristano, the festival involves parades and music over four days.

**CAVALCATA SARDA** 2nd-last Sun in May  
Hundreds of Sardinians in traditional costume gather at Sassari to mark victory over the Saracens in AD 1000. They are followed by horsemen who make a spirited charge through the streets at the end of the parade.

## JUNE

**FESTA DELLA MADONNA DEI MARTIRI**  
Mon after the 1st Sun of Jun  
The people of Fonni dress in traditional costume and stage a procession with a revered image of the Virgin Mary, starting at the town's grand basilica.

## JULY

**S'ARDIA** 6-7 Jul  
This impressive and ferocious horse race celebrates the victory of Roman Emperor Constantine over Maxentius in AD 312. An unruly pack of skilled horsemen race around the chapel at Sedilo erected in Constantine's name.

## L'ISOLA DELLE STORIE, FESTIVAL LETTERARIO DELLA SARDEGNA

1st week of Jul  
Gavoi's three-day literature festival has enjoyed enormous success since it was inaugurated in 2006. Readings, author Q&A sessions and concerts are held in and around the pretty Barbagia lake town.

**FESTA DELLA MADONNA DEL NAUFRAGO**

2nd Sun of Jul

This procession takes place off the coast of Villasimius, where a statue of the Virgin Mary lies on the seabed in honour of shipwrecked sailors.

**ISOLA TAVOLARA CINEMA FESTIVAL**

Mid-late Jul

Outdoor screenings are staged against an atmospheric backdrop of bare rocky peaks on the Isola Tavolara.

**NARCAO BLUES FESTIVAL**

Last week of Jul

The otherwise unexceptional town of Narcao hosts Sardinia's top blues festival, attracting big-name international artists and passionate crowds.

**AUGUST****ESTATE MUSICALE INTERNAZIONALE DI ALGHERO**

Jul &amp; Aug

Alghero's medieval centre comes alive with the sound of classical music as concerts are staged across town.

**FESTA DI SANTA MARIA DEL MARE**

1st Sun of Aug

Bosa's fishermen pay homage to the Virgin Mary with a river parade of boats bearing her image. Town celebrations continue for four days.

**MATRIMONIO MAUREDDINO**

1st Sun of Aug

Santadi's costumed townsfolk reenact a Moorish wedding in the central piazza. The grinning bride and groom are carried in on a traditional carriage drawn by a hefty bull.

**I CANDELIERI**

14 Aug

Sassari's great annual festival. The traditional high point is the *faradda*, when the city's nine trade guilds, along with drummers and pipers, parade giant timber 'candles' through the streets.

**FESTA DELL'ASSUNTA**

15 Aug

Held in Orgosolo, this is one of the most important festivals in the Barbagia. The event is marked by

processions of religious fraternities and the colourful local costumes worn by the women.

**ESTATE MEDIOEVALE IGLESIENTE**

Mid-Aug

Since the mid-1990s Iglesias has hosted a popular 'medieval summer', the high point of which is the *Corteo Storico Medioevale* (Historic Medieval Parade), a grand costumed affair.

**TIME IN JAZZ**

Mid-Aug

A big music fest with jazz jams, dance happenings, dawn concerts and wine tastings. Centre of operations is Berchidda, but concerts are also staged at Olbia, Tempio Pausania, Oschiri and Ozieri.

**FESTA DEL REDENTORE**

2nd-last or last Sun of Aug

Sardinia's grandest costumed parade is accompanied by horsemen and dancers. A torch-lit procession winds through Nuoro on 28 August and an early-morning pilgrimage to the statue of Christ the Redeemer on Monte Ortobene takes place the following day.

**SEPTEMBER****FESTA DI SAN SALVATORE**

1st Sun of Sep

Several hundred young fellows clothed in white set off from Cabras on the *Corsa degli Scalzi* (Barefoot Race), an 8km run to the hamlet and sanctuary of San Salvatore.

**FESTA DI NOSTRA SIGNORA DI REGNOS ALTOS**

Mid-Sep

The people of the old town of Bosa decorate their streets with huge palm fronds, flowers and *altaritos* (votive altars) in honour of the Virgin Mary.

**DECEMBER****NATALE**

Christmas

In the run up to Christmas processions and religious events are held. Many churches set up elaborate cribs or nativity scenes, known as *presepi*. The day itself is a quiet family affair.

# Itineraries

## CLASSIC ROUTES

### SEVEN ROYAL CITIES

#### Two Weeks / Cagliari to Castelsardo

Kick off in **Cagliari** (p55), Sardinia's down-to-earth capital. Take a couple of days to explore the labyrinthine **Il Castello** (p57) and the jumble of the **Marina** district (p62). You must visit the **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** (p59), with its wonderful bronze figurines, while kids will enjoy **Poetto Beach** (p64).

Travel west to **Iglesias** (p78), the heart of Sardinia's mining country. Dangle along the enormous **Grotta di San Giovanni** (p82) on the way. Dawdle along the beautiful **Costa Verde** (p84) and marvel at the dunes of the **Spiaggia della Piscinas** (p86) before arriving in **Oristano** (p103). Nearby are the Phoenician ruins of **Tharros** (p110).

Head inland to see the nuraghic complex of **Santa Cristina** (p114) and the **Nuraghe Losa** (p115). Detour to **Santu Lussurgiu** (p113), where you can eat well, before arriving in medieval **Bosa** (p117). Beyond is salty **Alghero** (p148), with its distinct Catalan flavour. Tackle the cliff-side steps of **Capo Caccia** (p161), which descend to the enormous sea cave of the **Grotta di Nettuno** (p161).

Continue on to Sardinia's second city, **Sassari** (p123). Check out the **Duomo di San Nicola** (p127) and the archaeological museum, **Museo Nazionale Sanna** (p126). Finally, hit Sardinia's north coast at scenic **Castelsardo** (p135), perched on a rocky bluff above the sea.



This 285km itinerary will take you through Sardinia's seven royal cities, its most famous archaeological museums and along some lovely coastline. Two weeks is enough to cover this route, but with an extra week you could really savour the Costa Verde beaches and explore the area around Oristano. Trains and buses serve all these towns.

**PAST MEETS PRESENT** One to Two Weeks / **Alghero to the Costa Smeralda**

Fancy a swim in Caribbean-blue seas or a walk in an ancient cork forest? Whether you want to mingle with celebs or meditate in Sardinia's Romanesque churches, the north of the island is a smorgasbord of delights.

Start gently in picturesque **Alghero** (p148) with its cobbled lanes and honey-coloured walls. Day trip to the dramatic cliffs of **Capo Caccia** (p161) and dine in some of the island's most stylish restaurants (p154).

Meander north to isolated **Stintino** (p146) to laze on one of the island's best beaches, **Spiaggia della Pelosa** (p147), or visit the strange **Parco Nazionale dell'Asinara** (p147). Then duck inland to gritty **Sassari** (p123) for its city atmosphere and excellent dining. Tour the Pisan Romanesque churches of the tranquil Logudoro valley – **Basilica della Santissima Trinita di Saccargia** (p132), **Chiesa di San Michele e Sant'Antonio di Salvenero** (p132), **Chiesa di Santa Maria del Regno** (p132), **Chiesa di Sant'Antioco di Bisarcio** (p132) and the **Chiesa di Nostra Signora di Castro** (p132) on the shores of Lago di Coghinas.

Jump on to the SS127 and head northeast to **Tempio Pausania** (p185), deep in verdant cork forests. Shop in **Aggius** (p188), which produces nearly 80% of Sardinia's carpets and rugs, explore the weird landscape of the **Valle della Luna** (p188) and drive to the peak of **Monte Limbara** (p187)

To the northeast the country is rich with prehistoric sites, especially around **Arzachena** (p174), beyond which the bright lights of **Porto Cervo** (p171) beckon. Armed with a fistful of dollars, enjoy the high life along the Costa Smeralda before heading on to island-hop around the **Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago di La Maddalena** (p178).

A week is enough to cover this 265km itinerary, but if you want to kick back on the beaches and explore the woody slopes around Tempio Pausania you could easily fill a fortnight. It's preferable to have your own wheels, although you can get to the main towns on public transport.



## SARDINIA'S GRANITE CORE

Two Weeks / Nuoro to Tortoli

Encompassing some of Sardinia's most spectacular scenery, this route takes you through the Parco Nazionale del Golfo di Orosei e del Gennargentu, the island's uncompromising granite heartland.

Start in **Nuoro** (p191), capital of the Barbagia hill country and birthplace of the island's most celebrated writer, Grazia Deledda. Check out the **Museo Deleddiano** (p193) and the **Museo della Vita e delle Tradizioni Sarde** (p191), before hitting the road for **Oliena** (p198), famous for its red wine.

Some 20km to the east, the bustling town of **Dorgali** (p209) makes an excellent base for exploring the surrounding wilderness. From here you can visit the **Grotta di Ispinigoli** (p210), home to the world's second-tallest stalagmite, and the nuraghic village of **Serra Orrios** (p210).

From Dorgali, it's a roller-coaster ride down to **Cala Gonone** (p211), a popular resort on the **Golfo di Orosei** (p207). This is Sardinia's most dramatic coastline, harbouring some superb beaches, such as **Cala Luna** (p213) and the sublime **Cala Mariolu** (p213), as well as the purple sea cave of **Grotta del Bue Marino** (p213). To get to these places you'll need to jump on a boat.

Continuing south, the SS125 rises through a spectacular granite landscape to the Genna 'e Silana pass. In the wilds to the west of the road you can trek to the nuraghic village of **Tiscali** (p211), and the **Gola Su Gorruppu** (p210), a vast rock chasm dubbed the Grand Canyon of Europe.

Back on the main road, you'll need to pass through the nondescript town of Baunei to reach the **Altopiano del Golgo** (p217), a weird highland plateau. A couple of restaurants make it a memorable place to lunch.

At the end of the road is **Tortoli** (p214), a resort town with a brassy atmosphere that will bring you back to earth with a bump.



On this 180km trip you'll discover hidden gorges, prehistoric villages, a stunning stretch of pristine coastline and beautiful, secluded beaches. Two weeks is enough to cover it, as long as you have your own transport.

## TAILORED TRIPS

### THRILLS & SPILLS

Sardinia's 1849km coastline and untamed interior provide superb outdoor opportunities, ranging from hard-core trekking and mountain biking to climbing, diving, caving and windsurfing.

Windsurfers are spoilt for choice but the top spot is **Porto Pollo** (p178), where winds are funnelled through the Bocche di Bonifacio, the strait that divides Sardinia from Corsica. Here you can also try kitesurfing, sailing and diving. Other hot spots include **Capo del Falcone** (p147) and the **Sinis Peninsula** (p111).

Divers will love Sardinia's waters. You can trawl shipwrecks in the **Golfo di Cagliari** (p65); dive off the coast of **Alghero** (p148) and explore the Grotta di Nettuno, the Mediterranean's largest sea cave; visit an underwater mountain on the **Capo Carbonara** (p73) and Roman ruins at **Pula** (p96).

On terra firma, the choices are endless. There's superb trekking in the **Supramonte** (p198), where grottoes provide endless fun for cavers, and the magnificent **Golfo di Orseoi** (p207), whose 45km *selvaggio blu* is reckoned to be the toughest trek in Italy. The sheer rock faces around **Ulassai** (p217) and **Cala Gonone** (p211) are a mecca for climbers.

Cyclists are well catered to, although the largely mountainous terrain sets some tough challenges. One of the more accessible routes is the scenic coastal run from **Bosa** (p117) up to Alghero.

Horse riding is also popular. The biggest school is the **Horse Country Resort** (p109), near Arborea, where you can arrange treks along the Piscinas dunes. Another good riding school is **Mandra Edera** (p116), near Abbasanta.

### THE SARDINIAN TABLE

Sardinian cuisine is a weird and wonderful experience. If you arrive in **Cagliari** (p55) or **Alghero** (p148) you'll enjoy lots of seafood, in particular red and grey mullet, rock lobster, sardines and Spanish-inspired paella. Other seafood hot spots include **Carloforte** (p89) for its tuna- and saffron-flavoured *casca* (couscous); **Cabras** (p109) for mullet, *bottarga* (mullet roe) and smoked eel; and **Olbia** (p164) for stuffed squid and smoked cuttlefish, along with a range of Gallurese dishes such as *suppa cuata* (cheese and bread broth). Spanish and Genoese accents are to be found in **Sassari** (p123), where you can sample *panadas* (pies filled with meat and game) and *fainè* (a pizzalike snack), but Sardinia's most ancient culinary roots are in the mountains of Barbagia. In villages such as **Orgosolo** (p200) you can buy world-class *pecorino*, and in towns like **Oliena** (p198) you'll find fragrant honey. Other specialist products are the velvety *bue rosso* beef, peppery olive oil – produced around **Seneghe** (p112) – and the sweet Malvasia wine of **Bosa** (p117). Round it all off with a selection of honey-drenched treats or almond-flavoured biscuits, best sampled in **Durke** (p71) in Cagliari.



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