



How our writer fell for the beautiful Italian island

By **ROB MCGIBBON**

My two previous holidays to Sardinia did not go well. The first was in 1977 as part of an annual exchange with a French family. I was 12, lonely and lost to the language of my hosts and the country, so two weeks in paradise felt like hell. But then I fell for a pretty Italian girl with a perm.

One problem - she was 15 and I looked about 10. Oblivious to the fact that I had no chance, I researched the vocab', then blurted out the immortal words in the hotel's junior disco: "Ti amo!". I love you, no less. I deserved a passionate kiss for courage, but she muttered "Grazie," and patted my arm as if consoling the recently bereaved. Sardinia unfairly suffered for this rejection.

I ventured back there in 2014 with my wife, Emma, and our son, Joseph, but this trip was ruined by a rotten apartment in the middle of nowhere. We spent most of the week in the car getting lost. Sardinia got the blame again.

But today my love affair with this jewel of an island has finally blossomed. I am stretched out on the netting at the bow of a 1927 wooden sailing boat called Pulcinella. Our energetic and chatty deckhand Leonardo has just released the burgundy sails and we are gliding across the most exquisite turquoise sea I have seen this side of the Maldives.

Joseph, now 14, is next me and staring out in silent awe at the islands of La Maddalena Archipelago in the far north. Emma is sipping chilled Vermentino local white wine beneath a canopy. This is the last day of our holiday and, without doubt, Sardinia has delivered la dolce vita dream. Mama mia, where to begin?

In summary, Sardinia has everything: perfect weather; endless sandy beaches, crystal-clear water; delicious cuisine and a friendly welcome wherever you go. It is blessed with charm, authenticity and variety. You can slump under the sun and do nothing, or you can venture off to explore local culture and discover something historical or rustic. Amazingly, all this is just two hours from Gatwick.

We have been in the embrace of Delphina, one of Sardinia's most respected hotel groups. It was founded in 1992 by two

“SARDINIA *ti amo*”

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CANOËING AT VALLE DELL'ERICA



VALLE DELL'ERICA POOLS



VALLE DELL'ERICA

Sardinian friends - Francesco Muntoni and Salvatore Peru - and is still run by both men and their families. Today, it has eight properties scattered across the north. It repeatedly wins a clutch of awards in the annual travel biz Oscars, not least the prestigious 2022 title of World's Leading Green Independent Hotel Group.

All hotels are run on 100% eco energy and follow an impressive list of planet-friendly initiatives. There is no greenwashing here. Delphina is also driven by using all things Sardinian, from local food and staff to the handwoven wicker bins and rainbow rugs that add splashes of colour throughout the hotels. Even the tiny bright mosaic tiles that are stylishly inlaid everywhere are hand-painted and kilned locally.

Our trip began with two nights at Caldi di Falco, one of Delphina's smaller hotels

on the famous Costa Smeralda. Its simple tranquility is an ideal place to quickly decompress from London stress. The sea is just across a track from the pool and the lively town of Cannigione is a 15 minute stroll away. Perfect for an aperitif or dinner.

From here, we drove north to the oasis of luxury that is Valle dell'Erica, a five star resort in the Gallura region. This sits discreetly in 28 hectares of unspoilt hillside studded with huge grey granite boulders and swathes of wild flowering bushes and herbs.

Erica is bordered by the most gorgeous coastline that looks out to the islands of the archipelago and Corsica. Our first few days drift by in easy, self-imposed seclusion. We hit La Licciola beach most mornings, then retreat in the afternoons to one of the many swimming pools (all salt water), or the spa.

Then we have one last sun-downer dip in the small private pool by our luxury duplex room on the hill before changing for dinner.

One recurring treat at Erica is undoubtedly the food. From day break to nightfall, it is sensational and never falls short. Instead of tables of pre-prepared food, there are multiple chefs on hand to cook freshly for you. Whether it is the huge catch of the day, langoustines, fillet steak, lamb chops, pasta, seared tuna or octopus, nothing is too much trouble. These aren't buffets, they are banquets.

It is hard to tear yourself away from the dell'Erica resort, but we set off exploring on many occasions. We visited Porto Cervo, the mecca for glitz where superyachts drop anchor, the street markets at Palau, and wandered among the stone houses in the old village of Aggius.

An unforgettable day for me was hiking with Jospher at the most northerly point of the island at Santa Theresa Gallura - stupidly, during the height of the midday sun. We picked our way over and between enormous shapes of granite that looked like dinosaur vertebrae until we reached the sea. There, we dipped our tired feet in the cool water and sluiced our burning faces, to then gaze at the coast of Corsica seven miles across the Straits of Bonifacio. Wonderful.

It had taken me 45 years, but it felt good to put my hand on my heart and say: Sardinia - ti amo! 🇮🇹

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ROOM AT VALLE DELL'ERICA