

Travel Italy

Where does a war correspondent go to relax?



More used to reporting from conflict zones, **Christina Lamb** finds the perfect place to switch off among the resorts and beaches of northern Sardinia



Staring at a wall of bandits was not what I'd had in mind when contemplating a holiday in Sardinia. But the second biggest Italian island is famed for its brigands and who could resist a museum of banditry? The museum (64 museo diaggias.it) was in the former courthouse in Aggius, a town in northern Sardinia with cobbled streets empty of people yet an unsettling sense of being watched. This was the epicentre of Sardinian banditry for about 300 years. Inside, we were confronted by dozens of black-and-white photos that resembled wanted posters in westerns. A glass cabinet housed confiscated masks with long barrels, while handwritten ledgers

carried police reports with details including a line about a bandit's "soft body, little beard and feminine voice". Much of this banditry seemed more like resistance to occupation, as it took place from the mid-16th century, when the island was under Spanish rule, to the mid-19th century, under the House of Savoy, and often involved a refusal to pay taxes. One display case, however, was dedicated to Il Mito di Gallura, a particularly ruthless deaf mute outlaw who had been involved in a feud that left more than 70 people dead. Like others, he hid out among the granite rock formations that surround Aggius. Today, the area is known, attracts Buddhist monks from far and

wide who believe that the giant stones harness telluric energy and magnetic forces. But bandits and moon rocks weren't the only revelations on our first visit to Sardinia. There were also its white sands and crystalline turquoise waters, which have earned it the moniker "the Maldives of Europe". Sardinia, it turns out, is nothing like mainland Italy – perhaps not surprising given that it is nearer to Tunis than Rome. Fiercely autonomous, it has its own language, Sardu, while everywhere we went we saw the island's somers-but alarming flag – a St George's Cross with the severed heads of four Moorish princes. And while Italy elected its first female prime minister in 2022 from the right, Sardinia last

year elected its first woman as president from the left. My husband and I had come to the island for a friend's wedding in Cagliari, the capital, and decided to make a holiday of it. We left Lisbon early on a grey July morning to emerge three hours later into the bright blue skies and skin-caressing sunshine of Olbia, also in the north. There was something satisfying about passing the turn-off for Costa Smeralda – aka the Emerald Coast, developed by the late Aga Khan and beloved of celebs, footballers and mega-yacht owners – and driving another hour to reach Gallura. We were headed to the largely untouched coastline facing the Maddalena archipelago, a national park of 62 islands with about 300 beaches and numerous rare plants. It seems that we were just in time – no many others have discovered it in the past year that there is talk of limiting visitor numbers. Our destination was Valle dell'Erica, an award-winning, five-star resort sprawled along the coast and hillside. It is so

vast that a fleet of golf buggies ferries guests around the narrow lanes, lined with azaleas, between the pools, beaches and restaurants. We would have needed more than our four days there to fully explore, but we did our best, swimming and sunbathing at various coves and beaches. We also spent an afternoon at the resort's Thalasso spa, which really is to die for, sampling the four seawater pools with their massage jets and varying temperatures, including one with underwater exercise bikes amid granite rocks. One evening we tried a sound bath on the beach, lying on the sand listening to the waves lapping and the low vibration of a gong over our bodies, with the occasional rustle of a rainstick. I don't know if it achieved anything but it was a nice way to pass an hour. On other evenings we'd sit on the terrace of our lovely, spacious room watching the sun go down over the sea as we sipped chilled local vermentino and crunched on pane carasau, a crack-



Clockwise from below left: La Maddalena; Cala Corsara on Spargi; Christina and her husband on Sardinia; a cooking lesson at Valle dell'Erica



like flatbread, while making the biggest decision of the day – where to go for dinner. We sampled four of the seven restaurants, ranging from large buffet-style operations to a tiny romantic spot with five tables on the beach. Our favourite was Li Cusani on the hillside, where we looked out over hundreds of stars while tucking into wonderful local meats and cheeses, followed by delicious pasta, made in front of us by the owner's sister-in-law, and sucking pig, a local speciality. The weird thing about Sardinia, reflected in its food, is that for all its incredible coastline its population is inland facing, having endured waves of invasions by the Romans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Vandals, Barbarians and Visigoths and spent almost four centuries under Spanish rule. Even Napoleon tried to invade – his first taste of battle was as part of the revolutionary French army that attempted to take Maddalena in 1793 and was forced to retreat. Apart from various ruins, the invasions left a hardened population for whom age-old cultural traditions survive, partly owing to the relative isolation of much of Sardinia – the island has nearly twice as many sheep as people. The islanders must be doing something right, though, as their life expectancy is long. Sardinia is known as one of the world's blue zones because of its unusually high percentage of centenarians. Asked the secret, one 102-year-old woman told me: "Put family first, take a walk, laugh with friends and drink a glass or two of red wine daily." "Family" is also the word used to characterise Valle dell'Erica by the Delphina group, the family company that owns the resort and six others on the island. It feels homely despite the size, the staff are super-friendly and if I still had young children I would have appreciated the

Three more places to stay

PALAZZO DOGLIO
City chic in Cagliari
This five-star property might be in the heart of Cagliari, the Sardinian capital, but it feels more like a self-contained resort than a city-centre hotel. It's built around an expansive cobbled courtyard with a grandiose fountain and is surrounded by boutiques and restaurants, including a pizzeria, tapas bar, pastry shop and the fine-dining Osteria del Forte, specialising in Italian cuisine. Rooms are traditionally decorated in rich shades of grey, brown and peacock blue, with Carrara marble bathrooms. The old town and the swish boutiques of Via Giuseppe Garibaldi are within strolling distance, while Poetto beach is ten minutes by car.
Details Seven nights' room only from £840pp, including flights (tw.com)

decor in shades of cream, with wooden floors, carved headboards and billowing white voile curtains shading floor-to-ceiling windows. There's an open-air gym, bikes and pedal boats to use, plus regular boat excursions. The hotel can also arrange quad-biking, horse riding, sailing lessons and wine tastings.
Details Seven nights' B&B from £2,259, including flights and car hire (sandinianplaces.co.uk)

IL CHIAS
West-coast wine retreat
Surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, Il Chias is a tranquil boutique hotel and solar-powered wine farm on the west coast of the island. Choose between cosy rooms in the main farmhouse or one of 12 cone-shaped suites in the garden, all with stone walls, a thatched roof and private pool. There's also a communal freshwater pool, treatment room for massages and an excellent restaurant serving four-course dinners. The chef hosts cooking classes and the hotel owner offers tours of his vineyard and tastings of the farm's wine.
Details Half-board doubles from £192 (chias.com). Fly to Cagliari

LA VILLA DEL RE
Adults-only beachfront luxury
With panoramic sea views from its infinity pool, an Italian restaurant spilling onto a sun-soaked patio and a private sandy beach steps from your door, this child-free spot in Costa Rei ticks a lot of boxes. All 50 rooms here have simple

like flatbread, while making the biggest decision of the day – where to go for dinner. We sampled four of the seven restaurants, ranging from large buffet-style operations to a tiny romantic spot with five tables on the beach. Our favourite was Li Cusani on the hillside, where we looked out over hundreds of stars while tucking into wonderful local meats and cheeses, followed by delicious pasta, made in front of us by the owner's sister-in-law, and sucking pig, a local speciality. The weird thing about Sardinia, reflected in its food, is that for all its incredible coastline its population is inland facing, having endured waves of invasions by the Romans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Vandals, Barbarians and Visigoths and spent almost four centuries under Spanish rule. Even Napoleon tried to invade – his first taste of battle was as part of the revolutionary French army that attempted to take Maddalena in 1793 and was forced to retreat. Apart from various ruins, the invasions left a hardened population for whom age-old cultural traditions survive, partly owing to the relative isolation of much of Sardinia – the island has nearly twice as many sheep as people. The islanders must be doing something right, though, as their life expectancy is long. Sardinia is known as one of the world's blue zones because of its unusually high percentage of centenarians. Asked the secret, one 102-year-old woman told me: "Put family first, take a walk, laugh with friends and drink a glass or two of red wine daily." "Family" is also the word used to characterise Valle dell'Erica by the Delphina group, the family company that owns the resort and six others on the island. It feels homely despite the size, the staff are super-friendly and if I still had young children I would have appreciated the

“The Maddalena archipelago has 62 islands with 300 beaches”

yet with lots of shady spots and a terrace restaurant where we enjoyed an unbelievable lunch of amberjack fish washed down with local rosé. A perfect day ended with sunset at Capo Testa, the northernmost tip of Sardinia. We walked to the lighthouse on a promontory through more granite rocks, this time worn into strange formations by centuries of winds over the Mediterranean. The Romans so prized this granite for their columns that they set up a small mining town to extract it and ship it to their capital. Weirdly, it seems that not all Sardinians want to stay on Sardinia – we read that the island was having to import shepherds from Kyrgyzstan because many young workers head for the mainland. From bandits to beaches, we were sorry to leave Gallura. But we had a wedding to get to.

Christina Lamb was a guest of Delphina Hotels and Resorts (delphinahotels.co.uk), which has half-board doubles at Capo d'Orso from £172pp (hotelcapodorso.com) and at Valle dell'Erica from £446pp (hotelvalledell'ericca.com). Fly to Olbia

kids' club, which even takes its members on an overnight Treasure Island experience. To its smaller sister resort, Capo d'Orso, Delphina assigns the word "romance", so one day we drove the half an hour there, east along the coast, and jumped in a boat to explore the archipelago. The skipper, Giovanni, took us to Spargi Island and we stopped to swim at coves including Cala Soraya, named after Princess Soraya, wife of the Shah of Iran, who loved swimming here in the 1960s. And it was easy to see why – the water was a fabulous turquoise, clear and warm. At the next beach, Cala Corsara, the crew told us to hide any food as wild boars might try to board the boat. I thought they were joking until we spotted a family of the animals running along the beach – apparently there are so many that the island had been closed for a cull. In La Maddalena, a busy spot on the main island of the archipelago that looked a fun place to stay, we stopped for cappuccinos and doughnuts. Across a bridge from there is the small island of Caprera, where we swam at another pristine cove. This was the last resting place of Giuseppe Garibaldi, the general who united Italy and clearly had good taste in beaches.