

MARCO  POLO

SAR

Travel with
Insider
Tips

SARDINIA THE SOUTH



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THE SOUTH

SUN-KISSED & STRESS-FREE

The south of Sardinia is different. Despite being the location of the island's buzzing capital, the population down here is famously chilled. And this attitude is wonderfully infectious – even the flamingos that loll around the lagoons on the edge of Cagliari seem to have picked it up. They have succeeded in securing themselves one of the shortest winter migration flights possible. It is just 180km from here to the coast of Africa.



Cagliari's old town has a commanding position above the Campidano Plain

The climate reflects this proximity: it is markedly warmer off the south coast, so swimming is pleasant from May until November.

Today's tourists are not the first people to discover the joys of Sardinia's south. For centuries, people have invaded this region, attracted by the fertile Campidano Plain, the iron ore-rich area around Iglesias, as well as the plentiful fishing in Oristano. Each group has left its mark on the landscape, perhaps most notably in remote pre-historic standing stones, some of whose forms are unique to Sardinia.

THE SOUTH

On the Sinis Peninsula you can enjoy a natural massage with the added healing power of quartz.

MARCO POLO HIGHLIGHTS

★ SINIS PENINSULA

A steppe-like landscape on steep, rocky cliffs from which you can watch the flamingos and seabirds frolicking in the lagoons > p.5

★ COSTA VERDE

Endless dune-backed beaches, many of which can only be reached on foot > p.11

★ ISOLA DI SAN PIETRO

A Mediterranean paradise with more on offer than palm trees and partying > p.14

★ CAGLIARI

Daytime paddling, night-time partying at Poetto > p.15

★ TORRE DI CHIA

If you were to imagine the perfect small beach, you'd find it hard to do better than this > p.20

★ VILLASIMIUS

Beaches so big (and beautiful) they never feel crowded > p.22

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Deer are protected here > p.24



M A R E

M E D I T E R R A N E O

MARCO POLO BUCKET LIST

6 Find sacred water in the underworld

At *Santa Cristina*, ancient stone steps lead underground to a holy spring, the centre of a 3,000-year-old culture ► p.7

7 Discover the ghosts of industry

The *abandoned mines and metal workings* on the west coast are an atmospheric reminder of the island's industrial past ► p.11 and p.12

The freshest fish: around Cabras you could almost catch the mullet with your bare hands!

If you want to combine a beach holiday with some excursions inland, then base yourself on the coast between Muravera and Villasimius.

The Costa del Sud promises beautiful bays, crystal-clear water and long beach walks.



SINIS PENINSULA

★ West of the regional capital, Oristano, the uninhabited and rugged Sinis Peninsula extends out into the Mediterranean.

The small brackish lagunas and ponds along its length often dry out in summer, but in winter they are home to thousands of flamingos who paddle in the ankle-deep water. Thanks to its rich diversity of flora, much of the coast around here is protected.

SIGHTSEEING

STAGNO DI CABRAS

This large lagoon is probably the best inland fishing spot on the island. You

can almost pull out saltwater fish like eel and grey mullet with your bare hands. Sardinians are particularly keen on mullet for their roe, which they use to make **♣ bottarga**. This local take on caviar, which was once the daily staple of fishermen here, is salted and dried and then cut into slices or grated over pasta.

Cabras (pop. 9,000) may not be the most stunning place on Sardinia but it does have some of the island's best fish restaurants. It is not uncommon for Cagliarians to drive here for a fish dinner. Two of the many good options are *Zia Belledda* (closed Tue | Via Amsicora 43 | tel. 07 83 29 08 01 | istorantezia.belledda.it | €€) and *Il Caminetto* (closed Mon | Via Battisti 8 | tel. 34 08 04 17 63 | ristoranteilcaminettocabras.com | €-€€). The main social focus for locals here is the sandy *Torre Grande* beach – whose lido effortlessly morphs

Sea on the left, lagoons on the right: the coastline near San Giovanni di Sinis



from daytime swimming spot into late-night party location.

SAN SALVATORE

If the name San Salvatore conjures up an image in your head of a barren wasteland occasionally spiced up by pistol duels, you won't actually be that far off the reality of this small hamlet in the middle of the Sardinian steppe. You could very easily be in Mexico ... which is exactly what the producers of spaghetti westerns in the '60s thought. They used the hamlet (once a place of pilgrimage) as a film set. Pilgrims still come once a year to stay in the colourful bungalows, and the only real thing to see is the church (whose opening hours are far from regular). If you find it open, go down into the crypt to discover a catacomb tomb, or hypogeum, from the Nuragic period.

THARROS

At the end of the road to *Capo San Marco*, holiday cottages and fishermen's huts surround the early Christian church of *San Giovanni di Sinis*. The squat cottages are covered in reeds in order to make them look more "authentic" in this ancient coastal landscape. Further along the narrow spit, *Tharros* (April/May and Oct daily 9am–6pm, June/July and Sept 9am–7pm, Aug 9am–8pm, Nov–March Tue–Sun 9am–5pm | *tharros.sardegna.it*), the biggest Punic-Roman town on Sardinia, offers a more authentic vision of ancient settlement on this promontory. And what a town it was! Excavations have so far only revealed the centre but this gives a pretty good

idea of how imposing this port town once was, with well-maintained houses, temples and baths. And the history does not end there. The crowning glory of the *Capo San Marco* is a monumental watchtower built by the Spanish in the 17th century.

BEACHES

The beaches of *Mari Ermi* and *Is Arutas* are well known across the island for their rice-like sand. What marks these beaches out is the idyllic contrast between the quartz crystals of their sand and the azure blue of the sea. **Maimoni beach is much less well known than the others but no less beautiful. Even at the height of the season, you should be able to find a secluded spot along its length.**

INSIDER TIP

Beautiful quiet beaches

The minuscule spherical grains of quartz make for a magical beach break; be careful though, taking sand off the beaches is strictly forbidden and can be punished with heavy fines.

AROUND SINIS PENINSULA

ORISTANO

8km southeast of *Cabras* / 15 mins on the SP 3, SP 1 and SP 56

The province's capital (pop. 32,000) sits on the edge of the Campidano Plain and is the most important city on

Sardinia for both agriculture and the fishing industry. In the 14th century, Oristano was the capital of the Judicate (Province) of Arborea and it was around this time that the city experienced its boom period. Under Spanish rule, it went into decline and became the provincial town it is today. There are plenty of pretty corners to make a stroll around it worthwhile.

Begin inside the old city walls, as it is only here that you get a sense of this as a living, even bustling place. The late medieval tower of *San Cristoforo* marks the entrance to the old town. The large *Piazza Eleonora d'Arborea* is named after a popular Sardinian hero, who is celebrated across the island; the square has an imposing statue of her in its middle. At the *piazza's* western edge lies the classical convent and church of *San Francesco*. And just a few metres further along the *Via Duomo*, the cathedral's spire towers out above the surrounding roofs. The depiction of the starry sky in its octagonal dome is the jewel of this building, constructed in 1195.

2 ABBASANTA PLATEAU

25km northeast from Cabras to Santa Cristina / 30 mins on the fast road

Most Sardinians only think of the Abbasanta as the point where three fast roads all called SS 131 converge. However, the plateau was a cradle of Sardinian culture and tradition, and the pilgrimage sites here are as impressive now as they were in the medieval period. Pilgrims to *Santa Cristina* today have it a lot easier than their forefathers. The archaeological

site lies just off the main road and is kitted out with an espresso bar and restaurant. But its best-kept treasure is the wonderfully well-preserved underground holy spring, *Santa Cristina* (daily 8.30am–sunset | 🕒 1½ hrs). There has been some kind of well here for over 3,000 years and not much has changed in its form since then. To reach it, you go down 25 steps: make sure to look up where the ceiling is a mirror image of the staircase. It's a superbly conceived Bronze Age geometric puzzle which must have depended on the most accurate measuring and cutting of the basalt imaginable. If you go past the olive trees, you will find yourself at the Nuraghic tower and an early Christian church with small cells for pilgrims.

The imposing *Nuraghe Losa* (daily 8.30am–1 hr before sunset | 🕒 1 hr), with its 13m-high tower, is one of the best-preserved Nuraghic sites on the island. Don't miss the entrance. The site's access road is well hidden on the outside of a bend in the road coming off a bridge over the motorway.

Fordongianus, with its red stone buildings, was an important military town in the Roman period. The *Antiche Terme Romane* (daily 9.30am–1pm and 3.30–7pm, in winter 3–5pm | forumtraiani.it) down by the river are home to hot springs that reach 54°C.

3 MONTE FERRU

33km north from Cabras to Santu Lussurgiu / 40 mins by car via the SP 1 and SP 15

Cork oaks, wild olive trees, *nuraghes* and endless walls are the backdrop to



The entrance to the Santa Cristina holy spring

a drive to *Santu Lussurgiu* along the slopes of Monte Ferru, an extinct volcano. From any of the many viewpoints at the top of the village you will notice how the houses here were built right in the middle of an old volcanic crater.

INSIDER TIP

Romantic waterfall!

This best kept secret in this mountainous place is the well-hidden 🏞️ *Cascata Sos Molinos*. The

small stream that runs through the villages continues for about 1km along a valley before cascading over a sheer drop into a lush, green gorge. To find it, keep an eye out for a small lay-by on the SP 15 towards Boncardo (after the bridge on the left side). Then walk down steps into the valley below.

The women of Santu Lussurgiu were still distilling home-made brandy in their cellars well into the 20th century. The *Distillerie*

Lussurgesi (*Via delle Sorgenti 14 | distillerielussurgesi.it*) continues the tradition of producing spirits in the village with great success. Visitors are allowed to sample everything they produce, and they sell their whole range in small bottles, meaning you can take a few varieties home with you. If you have to drive, don't; treat yourself to too many of the tasty but alcoholic Abbardente pralines. An old *palazzo* in the heart of the village houses the best restaurant in the area: *Antica Dimora del Gruccione* (closed for lunch | *Via Obino 31 | tel. 07 83 55 20 35 | anticadimora.com | €€*). It is not only the surroundings and excellent food that make this a worthwhile dining stop. The restaurant's owner, Gabriella Belloni, and her two charming daughters are experts in the art of sustainable, slow-food cooking.

San Leonardo de Siete Fuentes is a popular spot among Sardinians during the height of the summer heat. It houses seven icy springs in the middle of a holm oak wood. The small church of San Leonardo is – partially thanks to its large Maltese cross – an unusual landmark for Sardinia.

The SP 19 winds its way through the dense oak forests on Monte Ferru – still badly damaged from a large forest fire in 2021 – for some distance towards Cuglieri. It is well worth making a 20-minute stop at the *Casteddu Etzu*. After a steep climb to the ruined castle, you will be met by the most magnificent view. *Cuglieri* is best known for its excellent olive oil. The fruits for this expensive product come from trees on the volcanic western slopes of Monte Ferru. *Azienda Peddio* (*Corso Umberto I 87 | oliopeddio.it*) sells cosmetic products made using the oil.

4 S'ARCHITTU

20km north of Cabras / 25 mins by via the SP 8 and the SS 292
Santa Caterina di Pittinuri and *Torre del Pozzo* are two coastal villages whose charm partly comes from the fact that their best days are a few years behind them and the striking beauty of the coast they sit on. White chalk cliffs jut out of the sea in stunning formations. At sunset, when the landscape adopts a red hue, they look like lava streams flowing into the sea. This reaches its aesthetic peak at *S'Archittu*, where the sea's powerful waves have carved a perfect arch out of the cliff. The brave leap from the top of the arch into the sea below, while those who prefer slightly less hair-raising activities can rent kayaks and stand-up paddleboards on the beach. The seafood platters at *Centrale Marongiu* (*daily | Via Lungomare 32 | tel. 0 78 53 80 46 | €€*) are not to be missed – nor is the wonderful view from its terrace.



Perfect for pottering: Iglesias old town

IGLESIAS

Whichever direction you come into Iglesias (pop. 27,000) from, you cannot miss the traces of the 3,000 years of mining, which made this small city the centre of Sardinian's metal industry.

It all started with silver extraction and smelting, but this was quickly followed by lead, zinc and copper mining. Today the landscape around the town bears witness to this industrial past. There is a lot of industrial archaeological work going on here and newly restored mines allow visitors to see what it looked like when the mining was in full swing (*parco geominerario.sardegna.it*).

SIGHTSEEING

OLD TOWN

Iglesias means church in Spanish and the town spent a long time under Spanish rule – when many churches were built ... The old town (some of its old walls and guard towers still exist) provides an interesting window into small town life. Lots of the buildings have ornate ironwork balconies – reflecting the city's historic wealth. But this is not just a historically vibrant place, the narrow streets in the centre still buzz with life. The Romanesque *cathedral* and *Santa Maria di Valverde*, a mendicant order church just outside the walls, are both relics from the 13th century. The latter is particularly interesting for its complete lack of decoration. A network of alleyways leads out of the Porta

Sant'Antonio gate up towards the ruined *Castello Salvaterra*. On the hill opposite, another path takes you up to the pilgrims' church of *Nostra Signora del Buoncammino*.

EATING & DRINKING

LOCANDA S'ANNINNIA

If you leave Marcella's place in Gonnese (9km southwest of Iglesias) without having to loosen your belt, you only have yourself to blame. Traditional, regional dishes of the highest quality. Even the *culurgiones* are home-made. *Closed Mon in winter* | *Gonnese, Via Iglesias 107* | *tel. 0 78 14 51 32* | *sanninnia.it* | €

VILLA DI CHIESA

Sardinian and Italian cuisine right next to the medieval cathedral. Delicious pasta and fish, plus pizza in the evenings. *Closed Mon lunchtime in summer, all day Mon in winter* | *Piazza Municipio 9* | *tel. 33 94 75 26 87* | *FB: Ristorante Pizzeria Villa di Chiesa* | €–€€

AROUND IGLESIAS

NEBIDA, PORTO FLAVIA, BUGGERRU & CAPO PECORA

38km from Iglesias to Buggerru / 55 mins by car via Nebida

You have to stop in *Nebida*! The short walk to the *Belvedere* takes you around the hill where lead and zinc

were once mined. The view from the top of the old machinery is impressive, but to the north on the horizon is the jewel of this stop. With its striking elliptical form and sheer cliffs, the small island of *Pan di Zuccherò* looks like a ski jump in the middle of the sea. With this view to enjoy, the slow service in *Al 906 Operaio* (closed Mon), the small café/bar at the viewpoint, almost seems a blessing.

Deep in the rocks near Masua lies an underground mine and what is probably the most spectacular former cargo port on the island, *Porto Flavia* (daily 10am–5pm, Sat/Sun until 7pm, shorter hours in winter | tickets available from visitiglesias.comune.iglesias.ca.it | ☺ 1½ hours). The old loading ramp is now a fantastic terrace high above the sea.

The rest of your journey to the north will be marked by the extreme steepness of the road here. At an incline of over 13 per cent on a narrow road, you will need all your gear-shifting skills at the ready. Passing through the small bay of *Cala Domestica*, where abandoned port machinery reveals an industrial history, make sure to head up to the cliffs briefly to enjoy a great view. At the southern end of the beach, follow the path up to a defensive tower built by the Saracens. The view is so good that it makes you wonder if it was really about defence at all.

With a new marina, large camper van park and the renovation of the old *Galleria Henry* mine, the local authorities have made a largely successful attempt to turn the abandoned mine of *Buggerru* – with its vertical

rockfaces, hacked away by generations of miners – into a tourist sight. You can book the mine train ride online in advance: visitbuggeru.it/prenotazioni-galleria-henry.

Wind and frequent bouts of harsh weather on the *Capo Pecora* spit can make it an uninviting place to visit, but on a fine day a walk along the coast here to *Spiaggia delle Uova* is a must.

This beach, which is almost completely unknown, is covered in large pebbles which have been formed into perfectly smooth egg shapes. A quick glance and you might think you were in a dinosaur's nest.

INSIDER TIP

Egg-citing pebbles

6 COSTA VERDE ★

90km from Iglesias to Torre dei Corsari / 2 hrs by car via *Fluminimaggiore* and *Guspini*

If you were looking to describe the “green coast” between Marina di Arbus and Capo Pecora in two adjectives, you’d find it hard to do better than “remote” and “empty”. Its landscape contrasts between mile-long stretches of pristine white sand dunes and the scrubby, wild undergrowth behind them. A trip to this unique landscape is best begun in *Torre dei Corsari*, a small holiday resort next to Porto Palma, which is famous for its enormous orange dunes. As you carry on south, you will pass through the old holiday resort of *Funtanazza*, which is now little more than Ghost-Town-on-Sea. Watch out here, the ruins of these 1950s buildings might be so striking as to tempt you into



Abandoned zinc and lead works overlook the sea at Nebida

them but they are also extremely dangerous.

Skip the sad resort of Marina di Arbus to focus on the real adventure along the dune path (in bad weather it sometimes closes to traffic). You start by crossing two fords where you'd better hope your car hire is insured to the hilt. After this baptism of fire, you will arrive in the more sedate surroundings of the *Piscinas Nature Reserve*. The beach here stretches for 1km and is flanked by sand dunes which can reach up to 300m in height. There is nothing to do here but get out of the car and frolic in the dunes and then cool off in the sea.

Head back inland by following the bumpy dirt track through the Riu Piscinas valley. You will pass a number of abandoned mining villages before you emerge at Ingurtosu. One place definitely worth visiting in this inland section of the drive is the knife

museum *Museo del Coltello Sardo* (summer Mon-Sat 9am-2.30pm and 4-8pm, winter Mon-Sat 9am-2pm and 4-8pm | Via Roma 15 | museodelcoltello.it). As well as learning about the history of knife production on the island, you can pick up a traditional, finely crafted shepherd's knife with a ram's horn handle. The museum's in-house knife-maker and artist, Paolo Pusceddu, will gladly show you the largest folding knife in the world, which weighs in at 295kg.

GROTTA DI SAN GIOVANNI 🇮🇹

14km east of Iglesias / 15 mins on the fast road via Domusnovas

This 850m-long tunnel, richly adorned with stalactites, begins just outside Domusnovas. It is hard to believe that cars were allowed through just a few years ago; now it is only open to pedestrians and cyclists. As you pass through the tunnel, you will be

accompanied by the babbling mountain stream that runs its entire length. After 15 minutes trudging, you emerge into the light on the other side. *Mon–Fri 10.30am–4.30pm, Sat/Sun 9.30am–5.30pm* | grottasan giovanni.com

8 S'ORTU MANNU

15km east of Iglesias / 20 mins by car via Villamassargia

The “Great Garden” on the SP 2 is a huge park with over 600 fine olive tree specimens mostly from the 14th and 16th centuries. Among them is Sa Reina, “the Queen”, a 1,100-year-old monster whose trunk has a circumference of 16m.

9 CARBONIA & NECROPOLIS OF MONTESSU

25km from Iglesias to Carbonia / 30 mins by car on the SP 85 and SP 2

Despite the closure of the mines, the geographical triangle formed by Iglesias, Portoscuso and Carbonia has remained an industrial area. Carbonia is a planned town designed in the Mussolini era and formally founded in 1938. The extraction of cheap lignite here has long since ceased. A little further to the southeast, near the town of Villaperuccio, is the fascinating but rarely visited  Necropolis of Montessu (Tue–Sun 9am–7pm | FB: [Montessu Area Archeologica](https://www.facebook.com/MontessuAreaArcheologica)).

INSIDER TIP

Stroll around an ancient cemetery

There are 40 prehistoric graves here carved out of the mountains and spread

over two hills. The two royal graves are particularly impressive – they look like

two huge faces staring each other down.

10 PORTO PINO

50km south of Iglesias / 1 hr via Carbonia and Porto Botte

Porto Pino’s sandy beach is simply sensational. It stretches for miles along the length of a bay, protected by a lagoon on one side; its fine, white sand and many dunes make it look like a patch of desert by the sea. NATO practises desert warfare in a restricted area on Capo Teulada. However, in summer the soldiers retreat and the beautiful southeastern side of the bay is opened for visitors.

The best car-parking option here is in the middle of the lagoon – in the summer it dries

INSIDER TIP

Car park in the desert

out. Take the dusty road to the left just before the village to reach a decent spot to leave the car.

After so much white, something red is needed! The *Sa Mesa winery* (*Su Baroni* | tel. 07 81 96 50 57 | cantinamesa.com) 5km to the north has made a name for itself with its strong Carignano wines Buio and Buio Buio. You can also book tastings online.

11 ISOLA DI SANT'ANTIOCO

40km south of Iglesias / 45 mins via Carbonia

Sant’Antioco is separated from the mainland by a narrow stretch of water and a series of different-sized lagoons. The narrow land bridge linking the two was built by the Romans, and takes you so seamlessly from one side to the

other that you probably won't know at what point you have left Italy's second biggest island or arrived on its fourth biggest. The town of *Sant'Antioco* is a typical busy Mediterranean fishing port. Early in the morning, you can watch as the fishermen return to land in their small boats. You can even buy some of their catch – you won't find fresher fish anywhere.

There is a second fishing village at the island's northern tip. *Calasetta* was purpose-built for Ligurian settlers and little seems to have changed since. The *Spiaggia Grande* is the island's most attractive beach. For particularly special sunsets, head across the island to the southwest's craggy cliffs. The small islands around Sant'Antioco are not called *Mangiabarche* ("shipeaters") without reason. More than a few sailors have come a cropper or run aground on them.

12 ISOLA DI SAN PIETRO ★

40 mins by ferry from *Portovesme*,
28km from *Iglesias* or 30 mins from
Calasetta on *Sant'Antioco*

This small volcanic island is a world

unto itself. Its inhabitants are Ligurians who left their northern Italian homeland hundreds of years ago to settle in North Africa. They successfully kept hold of their distinctive culture, cuisine and language while there before moving north to San Pietro in the 18th century.

The "capital" is called *Carloforte* and exudes all the charm you would expect from a fishing village. There are plenty of places to go for a swim along the imposing basalt cliffs.

The lighthouse at *Capo Sandalo* is around 12km west of *Carloforte* and the breathtaking views from the cliffs here can only be topped by a dip in the sea in the rocky bay of *Cala Fico*. However, no one ventures this way just for a swim. The island's unique cuisine is the reason tourists make the trip. Freshly caught tuna is the main event in most restaurants in *Carloforte*. Two very reliable places to try it are: *Tonno di Corsa* (closed Mon | *Via Marconi* 47 | tel. 07 81 85 51 06 | tonnodicorsa.com | €€) in the centre of the old town, and *Da Nicolo* (April–Sept daily | *Corso Cavour* 32 | tel.

One of the finest beaches on the island is the desert-like *Spiaggia di Porto Pino*



07 81 85 40 48 | *ristorantedanicolo.com* | €€€).

Before getting back on the ferry, make sure to pick up a snack you can only get on Carloforte: proper Ligurian focaccia. This fat-laced flatbread has been baked on the island since time immemorial and you can do a lot worse for it than *Panificio Biggio* (daily 8am–1pm | *Via Matteotti 19*).

CAGLIARI

★ **Almost a third of Sardinia's total population (around 430,000 people) lives in its capital and the surrounding suburbs.**

The old town of Cagliari dominates its surroundings from atop a rocky plateau above the Campidano Plain, which – via a chain of lagoons and salt lakes – stretches out towards the Gulf

WHERE TO START?

Following the signposts leading to “Centro/Via Roma” takes you to the harbour, with the historic centre stretching out beyond. An ideal starting point is the large secure car park behind the railway station, from where it's only a short walk to the **Via Roma** boulevard. From there, you can explore the maze of the Marina quarter, and head up to the grand Castello, which sits perfectly placed between the three historic neighbourhoods of Marina, Stampace and Villanova.

of Cagliari in the distance. When the Western Phoenicians first came to Sardinia from North Africa 2,700 years ago, one of the first settlements they founded was “Karalis”, with its prime location on a natural harbour.

You can still see some traces from that period in the city today. The Romans wasted no time in adapting what the Phoenicians had left behind, and in doing so revived the city. The Pisans and the Spanish were responsible for building the medieval castle quarter with its cathedral and palaces for the archbishop, the viceroy and the island's noble families. The lower part of the city is dominated by Baroque cupolas and grand façades. Today most residents can't be bothered to tramp up to the castle district, so most of the action takes place down below and in the districts of Stampace, Villanova and Marina.

Cagliari is now a year-round destination: in spring and autumn you can browse and feast; in summer you can bake in the sun and party the night away; in winter you can shop, jog along the seafront or enjoy an *aperitivo*; and at Christmas time the island's largest Christmas market glitters and lights up.

SIGHTSEEING

CASTELLO

Casteddu is what the Sardinians call their capital, but for the Cagliariites it is just the name of the city's major hill, on which the old town and its castle sit squarely. Not much has changed about the way you enter it in



Believe it or not, the marble façade of Cagliari's cathedral dates from 1933

hundreds of years – choose one of the three city gates and ascend into the dark, narrow streets where washing flaps on lines and the smell of freshly made food emanates from every window – exactly how you might imagine southern Italy to be. The two main defensive towers, the *Torre San Pancrazio* and the *Torre dell'Elefante*, with elephantine sculptures, are the works of highly skilled Pisan architects from the medieval period. The gleaming white terrace of the *Bastione di Saint Remy* (a 19th-century addition) offers a fantastic panoramic view.

The network of narrow streets is home to a small number of artisans and craftspeople. Some of the old *palazzi* have been transformed into expensive modern apartment blocks with stunning views; in between them the townspeople still live in once-magnificent buildings with their narrow courtyards.

Getting up to the castle hill can be a sweat-inducing challenge. If you are in luck, at least one of the three well-hidden lifts will be in operation when you visit. The lifts are all in the area just to the north of Piazza Yenne: the first is near Santa Chiara church on Piazza Yenne; the second is on Viale Regina Elena near the Bastione Saint Remy; and the third and final one is located at the bottom of Piazza Palazzo. 🐷

You can also take bus no. 7 up to the castle.

This bus route also serves as a pretty decent sightseeing tour through the Villanova district. And all of that for 1.30 euros.

INSIDER TIP
City buses for a sightseeing tour

SANTA MARIA CATHEDRAL

In the middle of the rabbit warren of narrow streets, a grand square opens up filled with palaces once occupied by the island's rulers. In between



them, a white marble façade gleams out across the square. You'd think you were looking at a medieval building but this façade was in fact only added in 1933 when bits of the Baroque frontage began to fall off. Inside, everything is as old as it looks – heavy, pompous Baroque finery at its best. The many Spanish inscriptions around the interior are a helpful reminder (if you needed one) that this part of the world once belonged to a Spanish global empire. Make sure to go down into the crypt and inspect its 300 burial chambers. There are an incredible 600 different rose patterns chiselled into its vaulting. The marble Guglielmo pulpit at the cathedral's entrance is decorated with 12th-century relief sculptures depicting Jesus's life, which were originally intended for Pisa's

cathedral. However, when Giovanni Pisano completed a new pulpit there in 1311, the old one was donated to Cagliari. *Mon-Sat 9am-8pm, Sun 8am-1pm and 4.30-8.30pm* | duomo.dicagliari.it | 🕒 30 mins

MUSEO ARCHEOLOGICO NAZIONALE

The most comprehensive collection of pre-Christian and ancient objects in Sardinia is housed in the *Cittadella dei Musei* at the highest point in the city. The museum leads you on a chronological journey through Sardinia's complex history. Nuragic culture takes up the most space and the bronze statuettes in this section are of particular note – they resemble models for a sci-fi film. In reality, their function was far more important – these metal

soldiers, shepherds, animals and gods were used as votive offerings in graves or dropped into sacred wells.

The exhibition of *Giganti di Mont'e Prama* has been long in the making, as archaeologists sought to bring 38 3,000-year-old sandstone statues back to life from the 15,000 fragments they had found. Their success is plain to see, and this unique collection is now the museum's spectacular centrepiece. *Piazza Arsenale* | *Wed-Mon 8.45am-7.45pm* | *museoarcheo.cagliari.beniculturali.it*

HORTUS BOTANICUS KARALITANUS

Situated next to an amphitheatre to the west of the city centre, this botanical garden offers a very solid introduction to Sardinian (and Mediterranean) plant life. Under the shady protection of large pine and palm trees, the gardens thrive all year round. *Via Sant'Ignazio da Laconi* | *Tue-Sun 9am-6pm, winter 9am-2pm* | *sites.unica.it/hbk* | 🕒 1 hr.

EATING & DRINKING

There are plenty of food and drink options in the Marina Quarter in both the Via Sardegna and the pedestrianised Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. In the summer, when tourists tend to take up most of the space in the centre's restaurants, Cagliarians like to

decamp to the district of Villanova around the three *piazze* of San Domenico, San Giacomo and

Garibaldi, where a small but exciting restaurant and bar scene has developed.

GINTILLA

Virtually every trattoria will have at least a few decent vegetarian options but vegans may find life tough in Cagliari, the capital of an island in love with meat and cheese. As a result, this small, elegant restaurant sticks out from the crowd. Its food is experimental and delicious (and 100% organic). *Closed Mon* | *Corso Vittorio Emanuele II 210* | *tel. 0 70 68 06 65* | *gintilla.com* | €€

JOSTO

An industrial-chic dining room with the kitchen in view, from which comes high-end Sardinian cuisine that's rich in contrasts. In summer, dinner is served at dusk in front of the old palace. Have you ever tried an *aperitivo* made from sheep's broth? *Closed Sun* | *Via Sassari 25/27* | *tel. 07 03 51 07 22* | *FB: josto.restaurant* | €€€

RISTORANTE CALAMOSCA

Specialising in food from the mountains, this restaurant in the Castello District is run exclusively by women. Most of their ingredients are sourced from Barbagia, in the middle of the island. The cooking is exactly what you would get in the Nuoro Province ... but for the fact the portions are much smaller. Try as much as you can – the food is superb. *Evenings only, closed Mon* | *Via dei Genovesi 111* | *tel. 07 04 61 99 09* | €€

INSIDER TIP

Eat with the Cagliarians

RISTORANTE MONDO & LUCA

Famed far beyond the city, this restaurant serves up the classics of Sardinian-Italian cuisine – including fish fresh off the boat – in a no-frills setting. After antipasti and seafood pasta, you might struggle to find room for a main course or a dessert. Reservation necessary. *Closed Sun* | Via Mameli 101 | tel. 0 70 67 04 80 | @mondo_e_luca | €€

SHOPPING

Both of Cagliari's main shopping drags, the Via Garibaldi and the Via Manno, contain a broad but largely unexciting mix of international chains. However, tucked in among them are some more interesting old shops selling handmade clothes, shoes, hats and ties.

La Rinascente is a classic department store spread across four floors in the Via Roma. Alongside the usual department store fare, it stocks a lot of Italian design and fashion labels, local perfumes and more on its four floors. Its greatest selling point, though, is its café on the top floor. The views from up here over the harbour only serve to enhance the flavour of their cappuccinos and cake.

It's worth experiencing a walk through the narrow aisles of the huge covered market of *San Benedetto* (Mon–Sat 7am–2pm), although it's moving to temporary tented accommodation while the market hall undergoes renovations. Chaotic, screaming fishmongers and supremely fresh goods: just what market shopping should be like.

BEACHES

In the southeast, the 10km *Poetto* beach extends out along the coast beyond the Capo Sant'Elia peninsula (all city buses with P before the number will take you there). This beach is an archetype of traditional Italian beach life, with lots of lido options, swimming, bars and restaurants. Evening cocktails and late-night beach parties are a popular feature here, especially on the *Poetto di Quartu*, which is home to a number of trendy beach clubs, such as *Colibrì Beach Club & Bistrò* (IG: @colibri_poetto), *Aqua* (IG: @aqua_poetto), *Frontemare* (frontemaresardinia.com) and the event location *Operà* (operabeach.com).

NIGHTLIFE

Most of Cagliari's bars are grouped around the Piazza Yenne and the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. Drinking carries on here well into the warm evenings. Those who want to keep going even later tend to head towards Poetto and its collection of clubs and late-night bars, like the disco in the *Lido* (lidocagliari.com) where the dance floor juts out over the sea.

AROUND CAGLIARI

13 COSTA DEL SUD

52km southwest from Cagliari to Torre di Chia / 1 hr by car on the SS 195



Flamingos on the Costa del Sud

If you look in the right direction, the first 12km of this stretch of coastline couldn't be more idyllic. Small promontories extending out into the wide, open sea, and narrow spits separating azure *lagunas* from the ocean beyond. Look in the wrong direction, though, and you won't see much beyond the chimneys of factories and power plants. However, once the Sulcis mountains rise up out of the cliffs, these eyesores no longer have any space and the coast reverts to its idyllic beauty.

The Roman-Phoenician port of *Nora* (daily 9am–8pm) sits on a very pretty, small peninsula near Pula. Its stunning array of temples, mosaics, columns and an extremely impressive ancient theatre are well worth visiting. At the tip of the peninsula a huge 16th-century Saracen tower sits on top of the Phoenician acropolis. From its top, you get an incredible view over the Gulf of Cagliari, the lagoon and

Nora. If you are ready for a swim, the *Spiaggia di Nora* sits invitingly close to the archaeological remains.

However, if you think it can't possibly get any more beautiful, you need to get back in the car and head on to the ★ *Torre di Chia*. Both the beach by the tower and its near neighbour the 🌿 *Spiaggia Su Giudeu* are close to perfection, backed by dunes, with the smell of rosemary from the undergrowth and oleander flowers, and a nearby Saracen tower, in whose shade sit the remains of the Roman town of Bithia. If the hustle and bustle of the main beaches is too much for you, the smaller bays of *Sa Colonia* or *Su Portu* are just the right place.

If you are not quite done with coastal paradises by this point, head on to *Cala Cipolla*. From the car park there, it is a short walk to the fjord-like bay, which is not just a feast for the eyes but also one of Sardinia's best surfing spots. Following the path

through the brushy undergrowth along the coast, it will not take long for you to reach the lighthouse *Capo Spartivento*, where you can play at being lighthouse keepers (or wealthy holidaymakers – it is now an expensive holiday let) and look out over this stretch of coast. Still have a bit of time? Then follow the bumpy coastal path for half an hour to the *Spiaggia di Ferragione*. This remote, shingle bay is a wonderful spot to swim from, so dive


in. Apropos diving:

INSIDER TIP

Dive in!

the waters here are so clear and their wildlife is so diverse that it

is definitely worth bringing a snorkel.

Back in the car, the road continues down the coast to the beach of  *Tuerredda*. This one is on almost all of the postcards you will have seen in Cagliari. The result is obvious – in the summer you will need to pre-book your beach lounger at *tuerredda.spacli.it* – or get there early before the parking spaces are full. Slightly further down the coast, there are less busy but no less pretty small bays and beaches. From them, a series of paths means you can walk down to *Capo Spartivento* and *Capo Malfatano*.

The deep bay of Porto di Teulada marks the point where the road leaves the coast and heads towards the large farming village of *Teulada* with its lush orange orchards. From here the rest of the way to Santandi is marked by a much more mountainous, rocky landscape. At roughly the halfway point, you should definitely make a stop at the *Grotta Is Zuddas* (daily 10.30am, 11.15am, 11.45am,

12.30pm, 3.45pm, 4.30pm, 5.15pm | grotteiszuddas.com | ☺ 1 hr). Its dazzling stalagmites and stalactites are well worth seeing and the outdoor restaurant at its entrance offers decent food in a lovely setting.

14 MONTE ARCOSU

32km west of Cagliari / 50 mins via the industrial sprawl around *Stagno di Cagliari*

West of the capital, the Sulcis mountains stretch out across the island. Remote and in many places inaccessible, much of the range has now been turned into a natural park. The WWF conservation area of *Monte Arcosu* (weekends only, 9am–6pm | oasidelcervoedellaluna.it) is a park within this park. It was established to protect the *cervo sado*, Sardinia's endemic breed of small deer. At the entrance to the reserve, there is a series of ten sign-posted hiking trails of varying difficulty and distance, as well as an electric-bike rental service.

15 SAN SPERATE

22km north of Cagliari / 25 mins on the SS 131 and the SP 4

You don't very often encounter street art in small villages, but then again not all villages are like San Sperate. As soon as you leave the high street, you will be greeted by colourful murals on every wall. Ever since 1968, people have been painting their houses in bright shades here. Not only that but there is also an excellent collection of sculptures by the village's native sculptor, Pinuccio Sciola, dotted around the streets.

VILLASIMIUS

★ Once little more than a village for sheep farmers, Villasimius has been transformed into a chic and modern resort (pop. 3,700), with some of the best sea swimming in Italy.

This development should probably come as no surprise given that the beaches around the village are not only extremely hard to beat aesthetically but also big enough to cope with large numbers of visitors without too much fighting over the best spots.

EATING & DRINKING

DA BARBARA

West of Villasimius near the village of Solanas, this restaurant has been a favourite among tourists and locals for generations thanks to its successful blending of excellent, fresh fish dishes

with a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Reservation is an absolute must. *Out of season, closed Wed* | 11km west | tel. 0 70 75 06 30 | €€

PRIMO MOLO

The hottest sundowner location on the square, located right next to the yacht harbour and fishing port. Bid farewell to the day with DJ music, drinks and substantial snacks. Hop on Instagram to book the best tables. *Daily* | IG: @primomolo | €€

BEACHES

There is no other town on Sardinia with such diversity when it comes to beaches. For picture-postcard beauty, *Porto Giunco* (turn off the road to Capo Carbonara just before the harbour) is hard to beat with its idyllic location with the sea on one side and lagoon on the other. 🌴 *Punta Molentis* is a beautiful beach just off the SP 18 on the way

Spaggia Campus, just one of the beautiful bays of the beach capital of Villasimius





Miles of sand on the Costa Rei

to Costa Rei. It sits in a small bay with a granite rock desert behind it and a craggy island in the water. However, it is very popular so entry is restricted – book a parking space in good time at pass.brav.it/Villasimius/Frontof. The pretty sandy bay in which the Hotel Cormoran sits is called *Campus* and is just off the SP 17 heading towards Cagliari. *Calo Pira* sweeps round in a gentle curve under steep cliffs and is just off the SP 18 towards Costa Rei.

Calo Sinzias is not just stunningly beautiful with its golden sand and perfect turquoise water, it also has four beach bars which offer everything you need for proper lido service (at a full range of price points). Families will be best off at *Tamatete* (lidotamatete.it), while hipsters are likely to enjoy *Is Fradis* (FB: [isfradisbeachclub](https://www.facebook.com/isfradisbeachclub)). For uncomplicated, excellent food with wonderful views, *Il Galeotto* (tel. 38 83 82 53 43) is hard to beat. *Maklas*

(maklas.it) is so beautiful it has served as beach wedding location for thousands of happy couples. The bay at *Monte Turnu* is perfect for nature lovers. *Scoglio di Peppino's* version of paradise includes juniper bushes, white sands and shallow, perfectly blue sea, and its namesake rock from which you can jump into the sea; it is also the border between Villasimius and Costa Rei.

AROUND VILLASIMIUS

16 COSTA REI 🗺️

22km north of Villasimius / 30 mins on the coastal road

Apart from a large resort with countless cottages, a couple of apartment blocks and a few shops, the only thing here is the beach. Partly thanks to its excellent options for families, this is, however, one of the most popular holiday destinations on the island. Just north of the Capo Ferrato promontory, the apparently endless beaches of *Feraxi* and *Collostrai* stretch out into the distance.

Had enough of swimming and lying on the beach? Then go for a walk up to *Capo Ferrato*, where a very uneven path will take you to the old lighthouse. It does not get much more romantic. For a tougher walk, head to *Monte Ferru*. It will take about four hours to climb. Both walks are well signposted and start at the car park in Porto Pirastu.

A modest little herb dealer, 🗺️ *Erbe di Brai Loi* (*Feraxi* | brailoi.it) is run by a

Swiss man who has lived on the island for a long time. It may not have regular opening hours, but is a reliable source for excellent herbs, teas and

INSIDER TIP

The best seasonal seasoning

seasonings. From chilli to bay, rosemary or marjoram, he has everything and it is all organic.

To reach the shop, drive to the farm gate and then beep your horn until someone opens up. The advantage of this informal arrangement: you pay a very fair price.

17 MURAVERA

40km north of Villasimius / 45 mins via *Olia Speciosa* on SS 125 var

This village lies on the Flumendosa estuary and is surrounded by orange groves on all sides. Flat, windowless buildings give the place an otherworldly feel but real life carries on in the courtyards around which the buildings are built. It is a place filled with hidden wonders, including one of the best coastal views on the island from the old watchtower, *Torre Salinas*. To get there, park at the campsite of the same name, then scramble along a small, private path until you reach the tower.

18 PARCO DEI SETTE FRATELLI ★

60km northwest of Villasimius / 1 hr 20 mins on the fast road towards Muravera and the SS 125 towards Burcei until you reach Km30.1

This national park is one of the best areas to walk and mountain bike on Sardinia. There are plenty of spots for picnics and the informative exhibition in the *Giardino Botanico di Maidopis*

(daily 7am–3pm, May–Sept 7am–6pm) is a great introduction to Sardinia's flora.

More ambitious walkers should take route 812 to the stone towers of Perda sub'e Pari. The circuit (which also takes in a couple of summits in the Sette Fratelli) takes a whole day and has plenty of stunning views. Hiking maps are available at the visitor centre and in the 🐾 *Museo del Cervo Sardo* (daily 8am–3pm | short.travel/sar9), a museum devoted to the rare Sardinian deer of the same name.

SLEEP WELL IN THE SOUTH

A BLOOMING BOUTIQUE HOTEL

There are flowers and plants everywhere at *Hotel Sant'Efis* (45 rooms | *Su Guventeddu* | tel. 07 09 20 81 81 | santefishotel.eu | €€€) near Pula! Not to mention two swimming pools, a private beach and a lavish breakfast. Relax in a hammock between the palm trees and ponder why you would ever want to leave.

OUT IN THE STICKS

The *Sa Rutta Experience* (tel. 33 94 91 72 72 | saruttaexperience.com | €€) is an eco-camp on the edge of a wilderness reserve. Accommodation is provided in canvas tree houses and inflatable igloos with a clear view of the night sky. By day, you can do some scrambling and bouldering in the rocky surroundings or walk to one of the nearby waterfalls.

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