

## ITALY

Then into Italy, through Ventimiglia and towards San Remo. On the outer approaches we pulled into a vast, dusty car park that is an aire, and managed a position from which we could just see the sea over some coastal scrubland.

Warm enough to sit out and read, the first opportunity for quite a while. About 60 vans, plus some trucks and buses, in the facility - €10 a day.

### Sunday 10 May

Good night, considering the number of vans and people, and a sunny start to the day. Decided to take the coastal road to Genoa, rather than the autostrada. Plenty of interest, but too much stress, so having much of a look at the scenery is mostly impossible. We commented on how it is that national traits and behaviours, stereotypical as they are, come into play immediately the border is crossed. We were now in the world of ambitious driving without worrying too much about the rules, and apparently suicidal motor scooterists. The latter I tried to ignore, but without much success.

We had to pull in for a while to let a procession of decorated cars past, possibly in support of breast cancer, being very pink. Also with a very pink tinge were the route markings for the big cycle race, the Giro d'Italia, which it seemed we were just preceding, before the roads were closed. The race was apparently to run along the coastal road behind us, and it looked like all the police in Italy were there, plus high-vis-clothed marshals and countless cars, motorcycles and scooters crammed into every inch of available roadside space.

We still arrived in Genoa early afternoon. On the internet it had been indicated that the ferry offices were open on a Sunday afternoon, but the port area was an absolute shambles, with nowhere to park, grumpy officials and no way up to the terminal building.

For the night we did find an aire. The fee seemed OK, at €4, but with no facilities. However, the entry barrier was down, and the only way to get it open was ring a number, which we tried but with no success. So we backed in through the exit, where the barrier was up (broken, as it turned out). However, it promised to be noisy, and we were not too happy about the number of immigrant young men about. Another aire about 15 minutes away and on the road for tomorrow seemed a good idea, so we extracted ourselves with difficulty from Genoa and got there. It was tiny, but had space – at €24 a night! The alternative, chosen by several vans, was to park in the steep little street outside, but we chose to take on the Genoa traffic again and go back to the original. Backed into the exit again, and found out why there was only one other van there – the price was €4 per *hour*! A man did come round, assumed we had paid to get in, and assured us that if we wanted to get out “in an emergency” we had only to lift the exit barrier ourselves.

### Monday 11 May

Turned out a quiet night apart from background road and ventilator noise, and we weren't murdered in our beds. But by 7:00 am we were out and away, breakfasting in a nearby motorway aire.

By late yesterday we had decided we had done Genoa, and would take the autostrada to Livorno, from where we knew other motorhomers had taken the ferry to Sardinia. So that's what we did, a less stressful drive than in heavy urban Italian traffic, and taking only two hours to Livorno. (The Tomtom estimated 5.5 hours by the coastal road, which gives some idea of the built-up nature of the latter.)





Livorno was another busy city, and we wasted some time looking for a travel agent. We then went to the port, where there was a helpful man at the gate, easy parking – a full-service aire – and a terminal housing all the ferry companies. That was all that we needed, and we booked for the evening passage by Moby Lines at €219 with an outside cabin.

Spent the rest of the day in the aire, having dinner at 7:00 pm, then the usual queue-up watching the trucks manoeuvre into the huge ferry backwards. Lots of other vans in the

aire, but only one came with us to the ferry – all the others going to Corsica, we assumed.

Quick walk round the ship, then retreated to our perfectly acceptable little cabin, shower and bed.

## SARDINIA

### Tuesday 12 May

Woken at 6:00 am by PA announcement on the cabin speaker that we should vacate our accommodation and have breakfast, because arrival procedures were commencing. We took our time, and watched a good golden sunrise as we entered the Golfo di Olbia. Wiggled our way out of the ferry, because everyone (except the trucks!) had to be turned round for the exit. I had already identified a possible wild camp in the invaluable Europe by Camper web site, and this involved a drive out of the industrial suburbs into bushland and down through little roads to a splendid sandy lagoon just inshore of an attractive little beach, Spaggia di Nadu Pianu.

There is a cove here, with a couple of yachts anchored, and a view across the Golfo to Cape Figari, a big steep bare rocky headland about three miles away.



Spent most of the day reading while trying to not fall asleep after a busy few days. Beautiful sunny day, with a light but cooling sea breeze. We feel we are back in “cruising” mode.

There's a lot we will have to learn about Sardinia, officially an autonomous region of Italy. It is the second biggest island in the Mediterranean, after Sicily and before Cyprus. It is divided into eight provinces, and we have landed in Olbia-Tempio – although everyone seems to refer to it as Gallura. The island capital is Cagliari, which we visited briefly in *Cera* early in the first of the two years we spent in this sea. Its economy is now based primarily on tourism and increasingly on

the digital economy, being an early adopter of the internet (the second European web site), webmail and internet services. Economically, Sardinia is doing better than the southern mainland.



### **Wednesday 13 May**

Surprisingly cool night, but warmed up quickly in the sun. Stayed put all day, sorting some things out and doing a fair bit of reading and research. Did go over to the beach in the early afternoon, but by that time the sea breeze had picked up and even Norma thought it was too cold to go for a swim.

Young men are getting the beach ready for the season, fitting out and equipping the little café-restaurant or whatever it's going to be. The coves to the south and north of us both have houses around, and that to the north has a small Med array of beach lounges and umbrellas, not that anyone is using them yet.

Walking back, we realised that the little lagoon where we are parked is retreating in the sun. It seems likely that it was filled during a storm that allowed the sea to spill over the beach into it, but the beach has built up again since, probably with the help of human hand.

Nearly all day visitors gone by 8:00 pm, and we seemed likely again to be on our own apart from someone who appears to be staying in the café. And a lone heron who is wandering around the very shallow lagoon, insect-hunting.

### **Thursday 14 May**

Pulled out rather reluctantly after a very pleasant stay for our first few days in Sardinia. First stop for provisions, small supermarket on approaches to local town of Golfo Aranci, sufficient but not quite complete. Further into little port town, with a cruise ship anchored off, and picked up a small picture-book guide to Sardinia, just what we wanted. We only have the Lonely Planet e-guide on the iPad, with its dreadful new writing style and difficult navigation.

Drove up through the Costa Smeralda, not very impressive we thought: layers of pink and terra-cotta buildings and apartments ranged behind the enormous marina at Porto Cervo. But we were not able to park anywhere useful there, so we pressed on round the tip of the peninsula: impressive craggy boulders, perched grey above the dark green swathes of prickly macchia/maquis scrub.







A little inland we drove to the local market town of Arzachena, and pulled in to the tourist information centre on the outskirts for our introduction to the world of the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC Nuraghes, tower fortresses which were Bronze Age settlements

and their associated structures. Some 7,000 of them are scattered all over Sardinia and we will doubtless come across many more, but our first was the Nuraghe Albucciu. In the complex are the nuraghe itself, centrepiece of the



settlement and probably the home of the village chief, the villagers' dwellings, and tombs. The Tomba Moru, or "Giants' Tomb", is a long trench corridor covered by stone slabs. The tomb is faced by a giant slab of rock with a tiny door, which makes the whole structure look much bigger in pictures than it really is. During the excavations many Bronze Age artefacts were discovered, including ceramics and bronze decorations and utensils.

Sardinia was at the time at the centre of several commercial routes and an important source of copper and lead. Through this commerce with places as far apart as Anatolia and the Balearics the nuraghic civilisation became wealthy and sophisticated to an extent reflected in its artworks as well as its buildings.

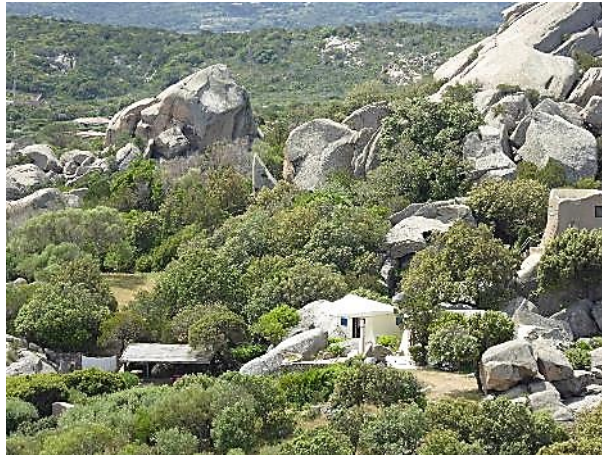
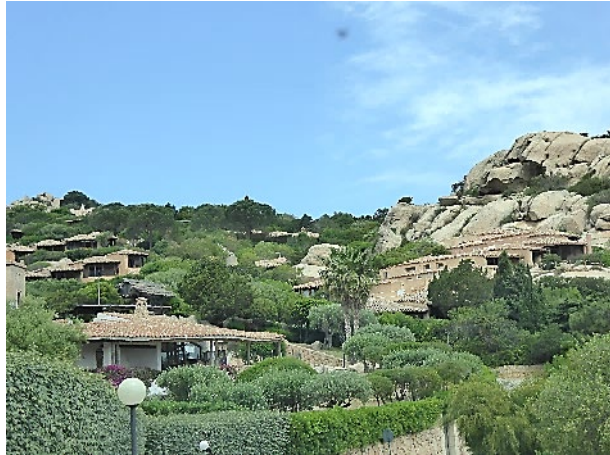
South of the town we visited another complex, a nuraghe village and associated tomb, the Nuraghe La Prisgiona. The name reflects an early opinion that it was a prison. We had a pleasant guide to ourselves for this visit, and she described the building techniques used for these tall circular tapered structures, with no keystone required but just a slab to complete the top. We have seen similar techniques in early British settlements, complete with the stairs winding up between two layers of wall. Pictures of nuraghes as they were when built show an astonishing resemblance to towered fortifications of around the 15<sup>th</sup> century AD, or about a thousand years later. The conical dwellings of the villagers, with wooden pyramids over stone bases, are very similar to those of early man that we have seen in the Highlands of Scotland.

The village was excavated only quite recently – since 2003 – and the intention is only to excavate and leave as is, not reconstruct at all. There is some neat detailing, seen in other nuraghes: the massive lintel over the door for the central tower has over its centre a small opening, so that the weight of the stones piled up high above is transferred to its well-supported outer ends.

All very interesting, and we will learn more about these Neolithic times as we go along. The weather has changed on us a bit, though: still generally sunny, but with a high white overcast and a strong, gusty and very hot wind: the Mistral.



The shady car park for the Nuraghe La Prisgiona has a little sign at the entrance saying “Area di Sosta”, so we decided to take this at its word and settled down to



stay among the olive trees. Early on, Norma befriended two lovely little dogs, probably associated with what looks like a dog breeding/puppy farming operation adjacent to the park.

### Friday 15 May

The weather continued to change overnight, becoming cool, more windy and with threatening black skies.

Stay  
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day



in this pleasant and quiet little glade, researching travel over the coming days and reading. Did a little walk up and down the road as the conditions improved during the day.

### Saturday 16 May

Fine morning, farewelled the dogs, and to the south-west of Arzachena on the bypass road we came across a large supermarket, “LD Market”. This turned out to be an excellent shop, good produce and selection of stuff at exceptionally good prices. Whisky at €5.99 a bottle!



Then round the west side of the town and up the west side of the Golfo di Arzachena, round Golfo della Saline and up to the big tourist town of Palau. Gorgeous jagged coastal scenery the whole way, with the seas becoming bluer as the sky continued to clear. The coast is a jumbled mass of granite and sandstone rocks springing up through the green macchia scrub, decorated with masses of wildflowers, and indented by coves – some with little harbours, but more with posh new marinas – and pink-and-pastel housing and apartment developments.

The island is one of the most ancient geologically in Europe, and unlike Sicily and mainland Italy is not now prone to earthquakes or volcanic activity. Its rocks date back to the Palaeozoic era, up to 500 million years ago. The rocks are of granite, sandstone, limestone, basal and schist.

We drove up past the very ritzy (and what from a brief glance looked to us to be a much nicer place than Porto Cervo) port and development of Porto San Rafael, and up to near





the head of the promontory of Punta Sardegna. The houses scattered throughout this very prosperous area are cleverly designed and built to meld with the landscape, a substantial contrast with the more typical mass developments. Having climbed up to a Martello-style viewpoint we had a gorgeous 360-degree view of the countryside to the south, the developments down the coast to Palau, and the seas between the mainland and the Isla Maddalena archipelago. We could see Corsica about 20 kilometres away to the north across the Straits of Bonifacio.



The next stop was at the next, and more northerly, headland to the west, Capo Testa. This is reached via the town of Santa Teresa Gallura, from where the ferries to Corsica leave. We had a look at the pleasant little harbour, then, ignoring all of the several no-entry signs for motorhomes, caravans and buses, crossed an isthmus to the cape. We drove as far as

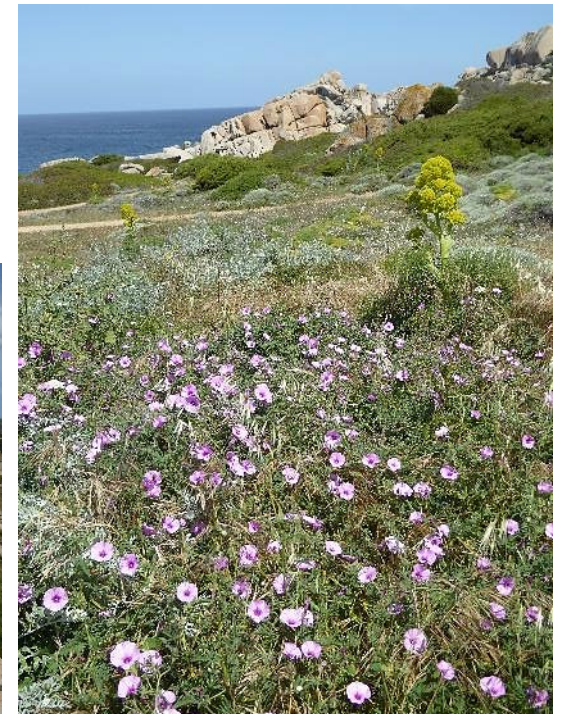
possible, then walked through a veritable wildflower garden among the rocks and up to the lighthouse. Here, again, we were treated to a staggering view which, especially to the north-west and following the strong and persistent nor-wester, featured a dramatic surf and white foam pounding the jagged rocks all around. A wonderful sight, now under blue and windy skies.

We were planning then to drive down the upper west coast to one of the only sostas in the neighbourhood, at Spiaggia di Vignole. The drive down was undramatic, with a view over the scrub to rough seas from time to time. The intended sosta no longer exists, the land having been taken over by a housing development under construction. The alternative offered there is a very large but highly unattractive-looking camp site, crammed with static caravans. We pressed on south to a possible parking spot in the fishing village of Isola Rossa, a pleasant little place – but the parking area was sloping and not real good. Again ignoring signs denying motorhomes to the area, we parked in the almost deserted car park right by the fishing and yacht port, in the sun and with some shelter from the wind.

Big surge coming into the harbour, despite the hefty harbour wall and over which we could sometimes see the spray. We enjoyed watching the fishing boats dancing in synchrony like a chorus line-up, with the floating wharf fingers as the backdrop.

### Sunday 17 May

Undisturbed overnight we got away in good time down the coast in search of a much-needed sosta with some basic services. Fine day, with the surf still running high.

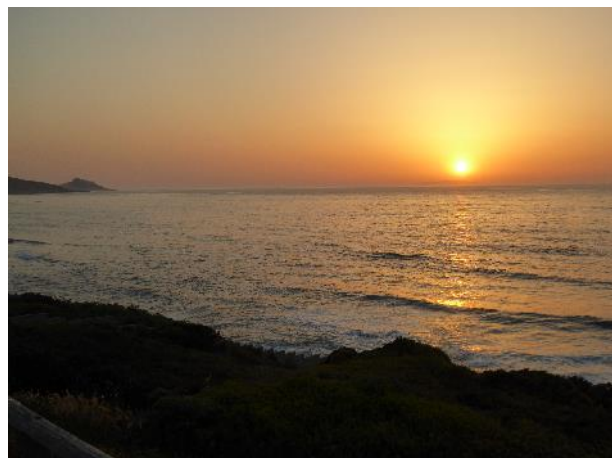




First stop just out of town was at a little store selling local produce. We got an understandably good welcome and bought some local wine out of a vat, cheese, green peas and pastries.

After only about 20 minutes further down the road, we stopped to look for a place based on its coordinates in one of our books. But that turned out to be a large and expensive camp site, just the kind we're not fond of. We had a walk round and saw some motorhomes up on a cliff just a bit further along. We traced them down to some nearby coordinates correctly given in another database, a simple motorhome sosta but with all the basics required.

We camped at the top of a high cliff with an outstanding view north and south along the sandy beaches, overlooking the kind of surf we associate with Australia rather than the Mediterranean. A lovely stop, which we set out to enjoy for a day or two. Norma did some washing, and we had showers in the cold-only outdoor cubicles, but otherwise sat in the sun and read. We are relying on our reasonably-priced mobile data SIM for international use in the iPad, and Norma did some of her regular book-selling business.



### Monday 18 May

A very fine, sunny and restful day. Our only outing was a walk down to the beach, where there was still quite a surf running after the recent winds. A pleasant Swiss couple with two little girls came in beside us – they had experience of back-packer travel in Australia, which they loved.

### Tuesday 19 May

Decided to stay yet another day in this



very pleasant place. This time, down on





the beach, we did go in for a swim – certainly “refreshing”, but not as cold as we had expected. High white wispy clouds developing during day, and forecast is for cooler conditions.

### Wednesday 20 May

Started by taking a short trip along the coast to the west to have a look at Castelsardo, but had to stop and photograph the rock formation l’Elefante, by the roadside up the foothills. Like most such rocks it is more of a tourist attraction than an important feature of the landscape, but obviously we had to see it because it is in all the

brochures!

Then into Castelsardo, hoping for a reasonable supermarket – but having driven past a couple of small ones earlier we found ourselves diving into the busy outskirts of the town, not usually a good idea lest we get stuck in narrowing roads. Still, we got a good view over to the ochre-tinged town itself, built on a large rocky outcrop in a very attractive and scenic position, with an impressive ruined fortress at its peak. Founded by a Genoese family in the 12<sup>th</sup> century it was originally called Castel Genovese, and when the region was taken over by Aragon it unsurprisingly became Castel Aragonese in 1445.

From there we turned inland, first visiting the little Romanesque church of St Pietro delle Immagini, as named in the maps and guides. It is actually known locally and signed as the “Church of the Crucifix”, because it used to hold a wooden group depicting the “Deposition of Christ from the Cross”. It’s currently being restored, so we couldn’t get in, but the main interest is in the exterior. This is one of the several churches built during the occupation by Pisa in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and like the others it features layers of alternating limestone and basalt with its stripes very reminiscent of the great religious buildings of Tuscany. It sits quietly alone in the middle of a valley of farming land.

On to the next church, not so successful; we tried to find the church of St Maria Maddalena along a quiet country track, because it had been mentioned in a guide and was on all the maps – but find it, we could not, only a little church a fair bit further, St Giusta, sitting in a meadow and protected by cud-chewing cows. A simple little block of a building, it did feature the Pisan stripes as well, reddish and white in this case.

Continuing south through steeply rolling farmland, we came across many volcanic cones and several flat-topped hills strongly reminiscent of mesas in the American West.







basalt and limestone. The basilica was originally part of a Carmelite monastery, and parts of its wall stand alongside.

The church was built by workers from Pisa and Pistoia in two phases during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The western face features a loggia with three columns, headed by an array of stone sculptures of plants and animals – including a slightly concerned-looking cow. The western face behind the loggia has an array of decorated star-like patterns. The interior, in contrast, lacks decoration except for a few frescoes along the otherwise bare walls of the tall nave and, especially, an outstanding set around the walls of the apse. A wooden 14<sup>th</sup> century Madonna stands in a protective glass box.

An easy run further south, then, along a dual-carriageway road, to a marvellous nuraghe site, Santu Antine. This lies in the wide flat expanse of the Valley of the Nuraghes, and from it, other nuraghe towers in less well



volcanic limestone cliffs. It is one of the only a few churches with a bell tower, and by far the highest at 40



An outstanding church visit on this churchy day was to arguably the most important, and to our mind (from experience and published photos) the most beautiful, the Basilica of the Holy Trinity of Saccargia. This stands proud and prominent for miles around in another farming valley fringed by ancient



preserved condition can be seen. (As can also be seen, in the far distance, a massive wind farm along the skyline of one of the surrounding hill ranges. We saw a raptor flying nearby, and hoped it would survive the turbine blades.) We waited for two school bus-loads of children to vacate the site before walking across the meadow to it, and enjoying the structure in peace.

Its construction probably began between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, with other buildings extending from it later. Its original design was based on a tall central tower, of which the top (third) layer is missing, surrounded by three smaller attached towers connected by walkways and galleries. The central tower is climbed by way of a staircase that spirals up between the two concentric walls. For the whole building, huge stone block is placed on huge stone block, layer on layer, getting smaller as the walls rise and slope inwards, and with no mortar or cement of any kind. The massive lintels we have seen before are over all the openings.

Around the main buildings are remains and foundations of several others, together being a village. Nearby in the fields there is also a reconstruction of a village dwelling, with its circular stone base and a conical roof of timber and twigs.







Stonehenge was built anywhere between 3000 and 2000 BC. In comparison, the tower-fortresses of the nuraghe civilisation started to be built about 1800 BC, so while they are younger by several centuries, in archaeological terms they are essentially contemporaries. The building methods, therefore,



from cutting and transporting the building blocks, to lifting and interlocking them, must have been much the same as in prehistoric Britain. Another outstanding visit.

We were parked in a quiet place near the small admin and ticket office, so decided simply to stay the night there.

**Thursday 21 May**

After a peaceful night and a shopping trip at a good supermarket in Bonorva, we embarked on the first of what would be two days of quite hard mountain driving. To start with we drove through some basically flat countryside, but scattered with multiple pyramids being the cores of long-extinct volcanoes. The island might be relatively free of earthquakes, but it certainly had plenty of volcanoes in very ancient times.

We diverted from the main route quite early to visit the Necropoli di Sant Andrea Priu. This is one of the most important in Sardinia, and is comprised of about 20 tombs, all built into a cliff face east of Bonorva. The tombs were dug into the solid cliff face about 5,000 years ago, in the Stone Age, 3500 to 2700 BC, and their use extended into Roman, Byzantine and Christian eras. On the top of the cliff stands a carved four-legged monolith, possibly representing a bull god but now without a head because it may have been cut off by a later Christian civilisation. The whole site is under reconstruction of its access points, so we were not supposed to be able to get up to the top to see the "bull", but there was nobody there . . .







Along with a German couple we were taken into the bigger tombs by a guide. The tombs are in several large chambers, all carved out of solid rock, with the larger ones having their upper surface carved to look like a constructed roofs. From each of the main chambers, or “anterooms”, extend smaller ones containing the tombs. In Christian times the site became consecrated and was decorated by frescoes depicting New Testament scenes, several of which have withstood time and nature. (Because of these, we were told, we could not take photographs even without a flash, which was not only nonsensical but also frustrating.) Some chambers were converted to include an altar and an apse.

Off cross-country through farming land then, gradually climbing out of the very flat Valle dei Nuraghi into the first of the generally north-south mountain ranges that divide the island. The dry-stone walls ranging up into the foothills were quite something: many were built from giant blocks rather than manageable stones, as in most parts of the world, and must have required at least a substantial team effort as well as some basic lifting mechanism.

On the way we

came across flocks of long, shaggy-haired Sardinian sheep. Most surprisingly Sardinia has a higher density of sheep (heads per square kilometre) than either the UK or New Zealand. We also came across some lovely white donkeys in a farm at the roadside, and subsequently read that there are places on the island that breed albino donkeys, which these might have been.



The hills and volcanic cones grew higher and steeper, with the most dramatic setting for the town of Burgos, clustered round pyramidal lower slopes that are topped by a dramatically placed ruined castle; a commanding position if ever there was one.



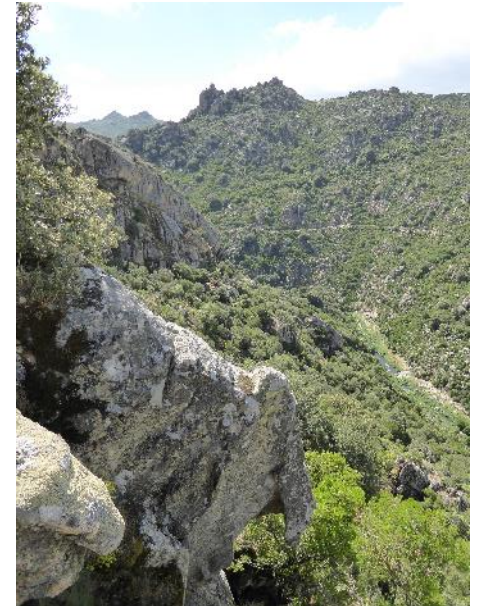
Down into a valley again then, and up into the next range of mountains forming part of what is known as the Barbagia. When the Carthaginians invaded Sardinia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century many of the Nuragic people took to these hills and high plateaus, and when the Romans succeeded the Carthaginians they named these people the Barbari, barbarians, and this was the end of the Nuragic civilisation. Guerrilla war was the result, but the hill people were unrelenting to the extent that they also came into conflict with other Sardinians, and a degree of separatism seems only to have been comparatively recently relieved by the opening up of roads and communications within the mountains.





We were commenting that the landscape was not as rugged as we had expected when we came across a large dam. On the flooded side of the wall the country side was green and heavily wooded, but downstream we could see a complete change in topography, with steep, rugged granite cliffs and boulders thrusting up through scattered scrubland,

all extending from the peaks to the stream far below. In this direction we were looking towards the northern extent of the National Park of Gennargentu and the Gulf of Orosei, which we would be crossing on our way to the eastern seaboard.



The wild flowers here, and generally in Sardinia we have found at this time of the year, are outstanding in their coverage and beauty. Norma was particularly impressed by the dill plants, which not only provided us with some free herbs but also grew tall enough to tower over us, covered in yellow flowers.

All this sightseeing, not to speak of getting confused and a bit lost in some narrow lanes in hill villages, made for slower going than anticipated, and we started to think about where we might stay the night. In this area there are no real camp sites, let alone motorhome parking places – most villages see us as an obstruction to traffic, hard as we try to keep out of everyone's way! Negotiating some fearfully narrow and steep streets in the village of Tonara we did get up to what a guidebook said was a camp site, but it soon became clear that it was shut and unmanned. So we pressed on, looking for a roadside camp, but the country roads were narrow and nothing looked promising. So we continued our very scenic drive later than usual, along tortuous roads up and down steep hills, until finally we came to a stop in a street used for parking in the village of Desulo.



Desulo itself is separated into two parts, as it is built on the side of a precipitous slope, and we had a good view down from the top half to the lower part. About 6 km to our east is the highest peak in Sardinia, Marmora, at 1834 metres.

### Friday 22 May

Rather to our surprise we enjoyed a very peaceful night, as the traffic stopped and we were of no interest to the locals. Driving further up the mountain above the village, in the inevitable way things are, we came across what would have been a perfect place for the night . . .

We set off with the clouds drooping over the mountains, so that we had misty, even rather foggy, conditions until the cloud base lifted a bit. Nevertheless, a cloudy morning.



Scenically and in terms of road conditions, most of today's driving was very similar to yesterday's: lots of hills, villages, winding roads, flowers and a few wild animals. We surprised a herd of wild pigs, which scuttled under the Armco barriers as we approached, and also caused some wild-looking goats rapidly to escape.



We also saw a completely deserted village, probably abandoned when a new bit of road was built right alongside it. Economically, people of these parts have little room to move when times become tight.

A town that once had a bad reputation is Orgosolo, known as the symbol of the "barbarian" people. They were even featured in a film, "Banditi a Orgosolo", and we read that until the 1980s tourists could still be held as hostages by the

communist terror group, the "Barbagia Rossa". No such fate for us, however. It is another place that seems to be perched tenuously on a cliff face, and is very hard to navigate through. (Especially as I had forgotten to reset the GPS, which kept trying to get us to its very centre!) It is known for its murals, or street art as it would be known these days. Much of it is very well done, some simply depicting simple scenes of daily life and farming, some based on modern abstract art, and with some overtly protest art with guns, death and messages that we could neither understand nor stop long enough to study.

The next range of mountains to be crossed was the Supramonte, with some knife-edge limestone massifs very similar to parts of the Italian dolomites. There is a fairly easy but quite dramatic pass through the range, which avoids the steepest bits, and culminates in a tunnel. At the eastern end of the tunnel the view opens



up to the Mediterranean again, but this time on the eastern side of the island. Down at the side of the sea we could see the small resort town of Cala Gonone, originally a fishing village until the steep multiple-hairpin road down to it from the mountains was constructed and allowed access for developers and tourists.





We checked in at the town's motorhome "sosta", or dedicated parking place, offering all the facilities of a camp site. We then walked along to the small harbour, filled these days with tourist excursion boats that take people to a "blue grotto" cave and to the several small beaches along the nearby coast. There is no land access to any of these.



#### **Saturday 23 May**

It has been cold these last few nights in the mountains, although we were never much higher than about 1,000 metres, and we were pleased to have a rather warmer night. Walked into town again in the morning for bread and spent a quiet afternoon back at the van, listening via the iPad to qualifying for the Monaco GP.

Warm in the sun, but the west wind comes gusting down over us from the Supramonte cliffs right behind us, and in the afternoon brought clouds, making it cooler again. We have certainly succeeded, as intended, to get here early enough to beat the hottest of the Med summer – indeed, we could do with it a bit warmer!

#### **Sunday 24 May**

Not that cold overnight, but overcast in the morning and for most of the day. Walked down to the "beach" – an attractive but very stony strip, but now being backed by a boardwalk – in the morning. Sat in the hour or so of sun that appeared during the day, and then followed the Monaco GP and its astonishing last laps. Recriminations to follow, I think.



#### **Monday 25 May**





Norma's birthday. Watered and cleaned up, paid the €60 (cash only!) for the three nights, and did a shop at the biggest – although not very good – supermarket in town. Also tried – again – to get a stamp for Norma's postcard to cousin Ann, and again were faced by a queue of people getting all kinds of financial business done by one bureaucrat. Gave up again.

But we then enjoyed a fantastic drive down the SS125 road, understandably a favourite



among motorcyclists from all over Europe. It has to be one of the best drives on the continent, with a good surface, lots of bends, and staggering scenery that varies all the way and demands several stops to admire and photo the view as often as possible. Basically it follows the Supramonte range, in our case southwards, with the road clinging to one side or other and taking a pass through it a couple of times. At the top of one of these passes there is a motorhome park with facilities and views both sides, at over 1,000 metres, but it was too early for us to stop.

Along the side of the range the topography is of grey rocks and scrubland, with a view down into flat valleys with massed olive groves and vineyards, backed on the other side by another range of craggy mountains split by deep gorges. Then, as the road finally starts descending back to the coast, the scenery becomes greener. Here it is known as the Oligastria, named after a rocky peak near the fishing village (past) and resort town (now) of Santa Maria Navarrese. We

stopped there for lunch.

It lies in a picturesque setting, backed by the mountains, with a clear blue sea, a 17<sup>th</sup> century coastal tower and a whitewashed 11<sup>th</sup> century eponymous church with an ancient olive tree beside it. The church was founded in 1050 by a daughter of the king of Navarre as an act of thanksgiving for having escaped drowning in a shipwreck.







A little further down the coast we bypassed the busy town of Arbatax on our way to a motorhome sosta – “literally, “resting place” – that we had found in one of our favourite blogs. It is in fact a thick grove of eucalypts, but not much else can be said for it, except for its proximity to a very pleasant, quiet, beach with fine “proper” sand. We took ourselves and the folding chairs to the beach for the afternoon, until the clouds started building up over the mountains behind us to our west and shaded the sun. A few people were in for a swim, but it’s still too cold for us! On the east coast of Sardinia the beaches are often much better for swimming than the west, which is open to the prevailing nor-wester Mistral.

### **Tuesday 26 May**

Very quiet night, completely on our own, and a fine sunny morning for the start of our drive down the lower eastern coast of the island. Our aim was as far as possible to follow the continuation of the original road N125, knowing that for extensive distances it had been paralleled by the new limited-access state route. But they were so intermingled that became impossible.



Nevertheless, it was another very good driving day. As for further north, the route mountain ranges, and we had more beautiful views of rocky, scrubby hills with cultivation of the alluvial valleys below.

Approaching Muravera the road dips down towards the sea, giving some great view water in the coves and bays under a blue sky. We drove out to a point where the first drain through the sand dunes into the sea, and are the home of flocks of flamingos. colour. There are several resort developments in the area, and – like the Med are open to the threat of over-development and falling tourism demand. This was glossy successful resorts, others in a stalled construction stage, and others badly



runs down inland of the coastal villages nestling in their folds and

of some lovely blue shades of the many salt-water lagoons Here we saw a few, very white in coastline many other countries – obviously the case here, with a few needing some care and attention

that their owners can't afford.

We've commented along the way about the wild flowers in Sardinia at this time of the year, and here in the south-east they are simply outstanding in their colour and density, even along the high-speed trunk roads. Oleander is a leading example, and its pink and white shades are matched by others in yellow, red and blue.



Finally through some not outstanding but very pleasant roads in and out of the hills we came to a village noted by a blogger, where we parked – along with another van or two – in a large, almost empty free car park on the fringe of the hamlet and right by the beach. Unfortunately, as it has done on most days recently, the mistral started honking in about mid-day. We sat out in the sun sheltering from the wind behind a bush in the dunes for a while, but by 5:00 pm we had to retreat into the van. But the sun has shone all day and Sardinia



continues to be a satisfying place to tour. Maybe we'll try the beach again in the morning.

### **Wednesday 27 May**

Wind eased a bit overnight, but still blowing in morning, so no chance of a swim or a peaceful sit on the beach. Instead, took a walk with the intention of having a look at the village. But the village, as we had observed yesterday, seems essentially to be shut. Couldn't find even a bread shop, and a walk up to the top of the hill in search of one did not appeal. However, driving out, we did come across a tiny "market" shop selling bread that at lunch turned out to be very good.

Tremendous drive again to start with, winding along a coastal corniche with a precipitous drop on the seaward side. Stayed on this road as long as possible, then allowed the GPS to start on the series of major roads that would help us bypass Cagliari on our way right across southern Sardinia. But some roadworks took us off the motorway, and when we got back on we were going the wrong way; then we took our own way off, and lo and behold, we were circling in a motorway loop that it appeared impossible to leave. Finally got out of the loop after half an hour's circling, still not sure where we had gone wrong (at least twice), and in to the outer eastern suburbs of the island's capital.



Pretty awful, as would reasonably be expected, but no further snags and we emerged on our way towards Iglesias in the west. An ordinary sort of drive on a major road through flat agricultural land for the most part.





The first view of Iglesias was of a typically ochre-coloured town in the foothills of the coastal ranges, but untypically the buildings were ranging up the hillside behind a huge and apparently abandoned mine. More abandoned mine sites were scattered to the south side of the road. The town is at the centre of the region of the Inglesiente and its mineral resources, particularly lead and zinc. These were first exploited by the Phoenicians, then the Romans, then more aggressively by the Pisans, and mining in the area continued under subsequent Aragonese rule and right on into more recent times.

We continued a bit further, to the coast, and dropped down to the hamlet of Fontanamare and a car park where could see a few motorhomes lined up behind the beach. We joined them, and immediately had to take in the long, long curve of beach and the expanse of white surf, driven by the Mistral. A lone, brave and very skilful parasurfer was making the most of it all.

#### Thursday 28 May

Wind and surf down again overnight, but no doubt will pick up again! Down the normal main road to Carbonia, an unimpressive place to look at but with some interesting history. First, though a stock up at the first Lidl we have come across in Italy, and a walk through its internationally familiar aisles.

Carbonia is a child of Italy's fascist times, having been planned and built on the orders of Mussolini in 1937. The intention was to boost the exploitation of the coal fields of the region, Sulcis. The regime fell from international favour after its invasion of Ethiopia, and saw massive expansion of the coal mines in this area as a permanent answer to its energy requirements. The town was "planned" under fascist principles: a vast central piazza, surrounded by prominent government buildings, and streets arranged in regimental order. We found the place morbidly soul-destroying, all buildings built as amorphous blocks with symmetrical square, blind windows. It did not look like a happy place, and we drove on through having explored (unintentionally) some of its least economically successful areas.

Mining, however, has always been important to Sardinia and to Sulcis and Inglesiente in particular. Bronze (1800 BC) and Iron Age artefacts show that mining had extracted minerals, and the Phoenicians





and Carthaginians began to exploit and trade with these resources. But it was under Roman domination that expansion of mining and resource trading became truly significant to the island. Under the Pisans silver became dominant because of its use as a currency, but thereafter the trade came and went under differing regimes until its relaunch in 1831 under a new directorate. Heavy European investment brought an infrastructure boom to the island and high employment, culminating in the fascist government's creation of a coal city, Carbonia.

Easy run, then, a bit further south and over the causeway and bridge to the island of Sant'Antioco. There were a couple of places we wanted to visit in the main town of the same name, just over the bridge, but the problem was finding somewhere to park. Also, the actual location of the main target, the Archaeological Museum, was exceedingly hard to find from the information in our several guidebooks: telephone numbers and web site addresses, yes, but street addresses and/or coordinates? No. Anyway, the first piece of information we could garnish (wrong, as it turned out) was that the museum was in the centre, where we didn't want to take the van. There were acres of open unused space along the waterfront, but closed to motorhomes. There was a tiny "sosta", really just another car park, but at €10 just to stop and €15 for the night, not acceptable.



We parked in a side street and started walking, and came across an actual map – that showed us that the museum was not where we thought, but in the outskirts, and presumably with some parking. Found it OK, and with a car park and no cars – but no motorhomes allowed! They seem to not want to accommodate the only tourists visiting Sardinia right now! We parked in the street again.

The museum was quite new, and presented very well a large and wide selection of artefacts from Neolithic to Roman times, concentrating on finds from the island of Sant'Antioco. The town was founded by the Phoenicians around the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC with the name of Sulci, or Sulky. Its port rapidly became an important trading centre, with routes ranging west to the Straits of Gibraltar, east to Pisa, south to Carthage, and to the eastern Mediterranean and what are now Athens and the Greek islands, Cyprus, and Phoenician Tyre on the Lebanese coast.

The most important displays are of finds from the *Tophet*, which is directly adjacent to the museum. It was used from the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC and abandoned during the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC. It is an open-air sanctuary dedicated to the god Baal Hammon and Tinnit, in which the Phoenicians and Carthaginians buried with special rituals the partially cremated remains of stillborn babies or children who died in infancy. Not having a defined social identity, in this way they were returned to the gods for care. It was not, as was once thought (and is asserted in the local guidebooks) a place where children were sacrificed. The remains were put into little urns which in turn were placed in natural rock crevices or buried in the ground. They were sometimes accompanied by funerary offerings. In later times the resting places were decorated by small stone carvings, or *stelae*, representing thanksgiving to the gods and hopes – often represented by female figures embracing their breasts – for continued fertility.

Along with only one other couple (also from a motorhome), and accompanied by a non-English-speaking guide, we wandered around the *Tophet*, with representative urns and pots scattered around, holes in the rocks where the pots might be placed, and *stelae* in appropriate places. A quiet and contemplative area, set on a rise, and worthy of the children whose cremated remains





were placed there.

We drove then up to the north-west tip of the island to the small town of Calasetta. This is essentially a port from where ferries take people to Carloforte, and the port area has acres of empty space for parking – but not allowed for motorhomes or any kind of camper. We squeezed through some narrow streets and found a really nice little parking area overlooking the north-west headland and over to Isla di San Pietro, where Carloforte lies. A couple of hundred metres or so of scrub protected us from the unrelenting afternoon mistral, as we took our place under a palm tree.



Many of the palm trees in Sardinia are dying, just as they are in southern France, Italy and most countries in the warm belt of the globe where palms are common. The cause is infestation by the red palm weevil, *Rhynchophorus ferrugineus*, which is actually a beetle of 2-5 centimetres in length. It lays eggs in vulnerable parts of the crown of the palm, and the larvae burrow into the heart. This causes fatal damage that may not be apparent until well too late. The infestation seems to have started in tropical Asia, and became evident in the Mediterranean in the 1990s. The beetles can fly great distances, up to 70 kilometres, so resisting spread is very hard. Many treatments are being tried and investigated, but from our own observations this year from the Cote d'Azur down to here in southern Sardinia, a huge number of trees are in a bad way, treatment or no. One imagines the infestation must soon be seen in tropical Australia, if it has not already been. The possible devastation in the Pacific islands can be imagined.



#### Friday 29 May

Very quiet night rather surprisingly, and it was a change to be away from the roar of surf and the wind.

Drove back into Sant'Antioco for a go at another museum. Had to go deep into the heart of the old town this time and found a place to park in the street. We watched the driver of a big semi-trailer enter the intersection in front of us and fail to make the necessary hairpin turn in accord with the one-way streets. We suspect he had to back all the way out again while someone stopped the traffic building up behind him, while he complained darkly about the dispatcher who sent him there in the first place.

We had a short walk to the hypogean village. This was originally part of the Punic necropolis of Sulci used between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, with tombs – *hypogea* – hewn from the rock in the way we had seen elsewhere. They were often family tombs with up to 20 spaces, approached via an access corridor or passageway, the *dromo*. What makes this site unusual is that the caves and their tombs were later used as dwelling places by the local poor. Some have been whitewashed and simply furnished as examples of how they might have been in this period.





After all this activity we took another short drive to Porto Botte. This is a big area of lagoons, and we drove to the end of the strip of land separating the sea from the inland waters where there was a small car park. We took position with a splendid view over the lagoons, marshes, and the birdlife, which included a large number of flamingos plus herons, black-winged stilts, and a semi-tame kestrel that had a nest box in a window of a house adjacent to the car park.



Calm when we arrived in the morning, but wind blew up again with the sun in the afternoon. A pleasant Brit couple came over for pre-dinner wine – the first English-speaking travellers we have met this year.

**Saturday 30 May**

Cool again and overcast in the morning. The weather is certainly still changeable. Norma out walking with the camera, but all birds stayed at a cautious distance.

Very pleasant little drive, down to the southern tip of Sardinia and along the Costa del Sud:

precipitous cliffs, a few little coves, well surfaced road. With some difficulty because of poor (no) signage, found the sosta Domus de Maria at the Spaggia di Campana near the village of Chia.



A very *That must be a good spot* busy sosta among gum trees, with many long-stay visitors and families. Walked down to the beach past the lagoon, plenty of shy flamingos as usual, in a very cool wind off the sea and some surf. This is another kite-surfing place, and dozens of them were out in wet suits on the cold-looking water.

Moved a bit away from a

noisy German group with lot of children, and pretty peaceful thereafter.







out of Cagliari, and it turned out many were restaurants and beaches at Nora, the site of the (not very impressive) Roman columns and amphitheatre. So the parking was full up, and we decided to press on the relatively short distance up to Cagliari, from where we intended to take the ferry (on the only available ferry line) to Sicily.



**Sunday 31 May**

Funny sort of day. Relaxed start, because we thought we were only going up to the Roman remains near Pula, half an hour or so up the coast. Encountered an enormous amount of obviously family beach traffic on the way, coming destined for the cafes,



In Cagliari, we parked near the Tirrenia ferry line office in the waterfront dock area, but it was not open for ticket selling until 5:00 pm. So we did a quick tourist walk round the capital city of Sardinia. Cagliari was probably founded by the Phoenicians and then expanded and fortified by the Carthaginians. Conquered by Rome, which held sway for nearly 700 years, it went through the typical rise, decline and fall: increased trade, wealth and welfare, the spread of Christianity, the invasion eastern German Vandals, the end of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages. By the 10th century, the *Giudici* (literally “judges”, a Byzantine administrative title) had emerged as the autonomous rulers of Sardinia. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century it came under Pisan domination, then Spanish, British in 1718, and finally back into the Italian realm under King Vittorio Emanuele I.

*Dead palm trees, so sad*

We walked along the impressively arcaded Via Roma, the waterfront highway, and looked at docks by the port captain’s office where we must have tied up when we called in here with *Cera* on our way from the Balearics to Sicily.

Then up into the old town through steep, medieval-looking streets and lanes, apartments many stories high with washing hanging from the balconies. We came to the base of the steepest part of the hill that forms the centre of the city, the Castello district, with its several defensive towers and walls providing protection from invaders over the centuries. Its southern gateway is the imposing Bastion of St Remy, an overwhelming structure fronted by a long flight of steps. Rather to Norma’s relief, the building was closed for renovation and we couldn’t walk up them. Lots of pictures of Cagliari feature this bastion, but it is a quite recent construction of 1900 on the orders of the then King Umberto I.





We knew there was an elevator up to the high Castello precinct, but the one shown on our tourist map was closed – for renovation, naturally. We started slogging up the sloping road alongside the Castello but soon came across a much newer and higher lift that was not on the map. And which we rode; it was of the “scenic” variety with three glass walls, which gives Norma the shivers and which she was pleased to leave.

The lift brought us up to the large Piazza Palazzo, a wide open and blessedly traffic free rectangle. Down to our left was the Cathedral of Santa Maria di Castello, started by the Pisans in 1200 and later finished by the Aragonese. It has been extensively modified inside and out over the years, and the façade dates only back to 1930. It was all shut up, so we couldn’t view the interior.



The other impressive building in the piazza was the Palazzo Reale, built in 1769 as the residence of the Viceroy of the Savoyans. Otherwise, around the square was a motley collection of residential apartments and bare walls of ruined buildings, rather in the style of what we remember of Palermo, although a lot cleaner.

At the top of the piazza is a gateway through to the Cittadella dei Musei, where the main museum is the National Archaeological Museum. This is in a modern building and contains a vast range of artefacts from all over the island, including sites we have visited during our tour. It is confusingly laid out – it starts well enough, chronologically, with a reasonable descriptions of the various periods in English – but then in upper floors the collections are site by site, with all descriptions of the collections and the individual objects in Italian, fairly useless for the average foreign visitor. However, we did enjoy viewing the artefacts from the ages unearthed here in Sardinia, and marvelled at the craftsmanship not only of the more recent ornaments, tools and weapons but also of those of thousands of years ago. The small bronze figures from the Nuraghic age were particularly enchanting and interesting.



We walked back down through more little streets and piazzas down to the Tirrenia Ferries office, and were surprised to find that the ferry to Sicily had been cut back to one day a week now, and that day was Friday. We decided under pressure to book tomorrow’s ferry to Civitavecchia instead, and drive from there down to Sicily during the week, rather than wait in Sardinia.





## Monday 1 June

Overnight we had a rethink, and changed the booking for the Friday ferry to Palermo without any problem. The cost of the additional fare was less than the fuel for the drive down would have been.

And there were still a few parts of Sardinia worth a visit, and where we could rest and relax a little. We drove north-west from Cagliari for little over an hour up the (mostly) motorway-standard state highway 131, traversing the agricultural plains of Capidano to Oristano, on the western coast. We didn't stop there, except for some basic provisions, but it has been an important town over the years. It was the centre of the constant struggle for domination by the various Mediterranean powers, including the Genoans, Pisans, Aragonese and French, but in the 14<sup>th</sup> century became a symbol of freedom and independence under one of the great ruling Judges of Sardinia, Mariana IV and his influential daughter Eleonora of Arborea. Eleonora inspired the resistance to Aragonese rule, Joan of Arc style, and the publication of a very early legal code based on human rights, the "Coda de Logu".

We pressed on through to the coastal village of Marina di Torre Grande, on the northern shore of the large south-facing Golfo di Oristano. The big tower was one of the most important observation and defence towers of the very many that are clearly visible on pretty well every cape on all the coasts. The village is mostly for tourists, and we passed a camp site which we knew was awful and a sosta that did not look too good. We saw many of the usual "no campers" signs. But on the western outskirts, sure enough, we saw a small gathering of motorhomes by the beach, so we passed the "no camping" and "no motorhome" signs and joined them. By the end of the afternoon several police cars had patrolled by, a local van told us "no problems", so we stayed.

We parked just a few metres walk across a low dune to the stony beach in what became hot and windy weather, and swam in the "extremely refreshing" water. All very pleasant.



Taking R and R seriously, we decided to stay and enjoy the position, the view, the weather and the beach. Overnight and during the day several other vans joined the group, as well as many locals for the beach. We rested, read, slept in the sun, took a long morning walk along the beach to the marina and small (rather inactive) fishing port to the west, and swam a little.

## Wednesday 3 June



## Tuesday 2 June



With a view to seeing if we could stay at another beach, and to visit the Roman ruins at the site of Tharros, we drove round to the headland settlement of S. Giovanni di Sinis and Capo S. Marco.

At the settlement there was a lovely little church on what used to be the Roman road connecting Tharros to Cornus. It was originally built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD with a symmetrical Byzantine layout, and rests now in its 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century medieval configuration.

The ruins at Tharros are visible between the village and the castello sitting prominently on a hill towards the tip of the cape. The site dates back to the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, established during the period of Phoenician expansion in association with Mediterranean trade. A Punic (Phoenician-based tribal) settlement was established there by the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. By the turn of the millennium the Italians were well established, and the settlement became the Roman imperial city of Tharros.



The layout is now typically Roman, with straight streets overlaying a sophisticated drainage and sewerage system, baths, and a forum. Not much remains more than a metre or two above ground, although two columns have been re-erected in the area of the forum. Archaeological studies are still active there. On a clear blue day like today, with exceptionally clear aquamarine water in the surrounding coves, what remains is a beautifully located ancient city. There is an anchorage off the site with moorings to protect those ruins that are now under water.



There was nowhere to park the van and enjoy a beach and a swim, so we returned to “our” place on the beach at Torre Grande.

**Thursday 4 June**

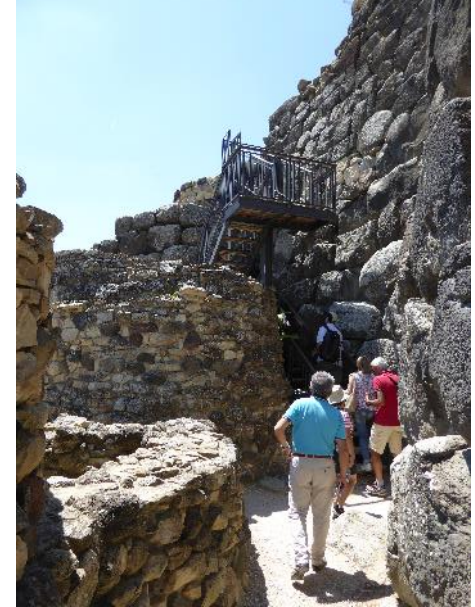






Off again at last after a very pleasant few days of relative inactivity and through undulating countryside to the village of Tuili. A little further and on the approach to Barumini lies Sardinia's only UNESCO World Heritage site, the

nuraghe Su Nuraxi. It was chosen as representative of all the 7,000 or so known nuraghes, rather than as the most exceptional. The buildings were not exposed until the 1950s. The central keep originally stood about 18 metres high, in three stories built in volcanic basalt blocks. The original tower was supplemented by four smaller towers right by it, and then these structures were surrounded by a curtain wall with seven more towers. The original buildings date back to the 16<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century BC and reached its ultimate form in about the 12<sup>th</sup> century BC.



Around this central (arguably but unproven) ceremonial and defensive structure were sited about 200 village huts, with their circular stone bases and pyramidal wooden roofs, and some of these were used as dwellings up to Roman times. A larger stone circle was probably a meeting place or council chamber, and a model of a nuraghe was found there. Such models have allowed reconstruction of the design of the typical nuraghe, as shown in museums including Cagliari.

We were required to be shown round this nuraghe in a group by a guide, who was competent and English-speaking but did not tell us anything we had not already learnt from earlier visits to nuraghes – especially Santu Antine – and reading about them and the civilisation around which they were based. In fact, the Santu Antine site is easier to understand than Su Nuraxi, quite apart from the fact we had it pretty much to ourselves, whereas here, at the nuraghe most visited, it was a bit of a scrum at times. What will it be like in high summer?



It seems probable that the architecture of the nuraghic civilisation was the most advanced of any in the western Mediterranean during this epoch, including those in what is now Greece. Many Nuraghic cultural activities and values appear to have been inherited by the Etruscans and Romans.



We needed the services of a sosta by this time, especially as tomorrow we must return to Cagliari for the ferry, and the only one anywhere near reach was at Tuili. The services – drain and water – were attached to a rather official-looking but unused building, and the park was an open walled space next door. It was very hot by this stage of the day, and both spaces were without shade, so we waited outside under a tree for a while until we had to ring the wee man and get the gates opened for us. We were able to have refreshing “showers” under the hose pipe!

### **Friday 5 June**

Cooled off overnight but sunny again in the morning. Sat around for a while, then took a run up to the top of an enormous basalt plateau, the Giari di Gesturi. It's about 14 kilometres long and 5 wide, and stands 600 metres high. Its flat top is covered by heavy scrub and is favoured for walking and cycling. Wildlife feature, apparently, but the most obvious of them are the horses. There are rare wild horses up here, but the ones wandering around near the quiet parking area did not look or act very wild!

Then down to the south-west through an undulating landscape, with swells and crests like a stormy sea. Several of the hills are gentle cones, and the region's popular name, the Marmilla, refers to their supposed likeness to breasts.

Lunch in the shade of eucalyptus trees, very common here, under one of the tallest and steepest of the hills, at the peak of which stands a ruined castello that can be seen for miles around. Early afternoon stop in the outskirts of Sanluri for a minor stock-up at Lidl – we were running out of wine of all things, and needed something for dinner before going on the ferry to Palermo.

Parked near the ferry embarkation gate in Cagliari about 4:00 pm. Moved in about an hour later, after being searched for foreign bodies. Several of these we had seen at the entrance to the truck entry gates, obviously camping for some time, complete with their families. Sad.

Another wait by the ship, had dinner during the wait, then asked to turn round and reverse a fair way back into the vehicle deck, with several changes of mind among the loaders on the way. Escalator up to the reception desk, given keys to cabin, and then watched from on deck the departure from Cagliari at 7:45 pm.



Had a walk around once under way, and it became obvious that this was a ferry, not a short-run cruise ship. Public facilities were limited to a posh restaurant and a café, with the seating areas on half of one of the seven decks already being taken up by those who could or would not pay for the miserable-looking reclining seats area. We retired to our cabin with a tetrapack of Vino Rosso.