



**LAZY DAYS:** Wendy cruised the uninhabited islands off Sardinia on Jacaranda, a converted fishing boat. Right: The view from Mount Tiscali

Wendy Driver explores uninhabited islands and remote

# How Sardinia's summits took my breath away

**T'S** A tough climb. As I scramble up the steep stony path, I frequently stop to catch my breath in the hot, still air. I squeeze through narrow slits in the cliff, cling to ropes to haul myself over boulders and balance on ladders made from tree-trunks.

Far ahead, my guide, Gianni, scampers along like a mouflon, the wild long-horned sheep which inhabit this mountainous terrain in the central highlands of Sardinia.

The views make the effort worthwhile. From the summit of Mount Tiscali I gaze across limestone crags, canyons and gorges whilst at my feet lies a massive natural crater where the ruins of mud-coloured stone houses shelter under overhanging cliffs. They are a Nuragic village built over 3,000 years ago in the Bronze Age.

I wonder how the inhabitants survived in such an arid landscape but Gianni points out pistachio trees and wild fig growing straight out of rock which is peppered with what looks like bullet holes. It is the beginnings of erosion caused by wind and rain.

'The whole region is like a Swiss cheese,' he tells me. 'Beneath these rocks there is a network of rivers, lakes and caves that stretches for miles.'

At the Ispinigoli Grotto, half an hour's drive away, I venture into an enormous underground cavern over 150ft deep. Visitors can visit for only half an hour as the spotlights illuminating the bizarre rocky shapes – created by dripping water – cause ferns and mosses to grow. Peering down into the dark abyss I see towering pink and green col-



umns coated in what looks like broccoli, organ pipes and waving folds of fabric.

I am spending the first few days of my twin-centre holiday exploring the Supramonte Massif. Only a couple of hours from the glitzy resorts of the Costa Smeralda, it feels incredibly remote. The mountain trails are deserted and the only traffic jams are caused by shepherds herding their flocks.

My hotel, Su Gologone, is a favourite with Italians. Its whitewashed

buildings, scattered up the hillside, are smothered in purple bougainvillea and blue plumbago. It is owned by a glamorous artist, Giovanna, who has put her own unique stamp on the decor. Hand-embroidered shawls and skirts adorn the corridors. Ceramic and metal sculptures of animals are dotted around the flower-filled courtyards and her own works of art hang in the bedrooms, each furnished with local antiques.

Vegetables from the organic garden are served in the open-air

restaurant overlooking the pool where you can try typical Sardinian dishes. Its crispy suckling pig is, according to locals, the best on the island.

Even though the hotel is virtually full, I rarely see another guest. Terraces with spectacular mountain views are hidden away in the gardens, making ideal spots for watching the sunset or surveying the star-studded

**STAR GUEST:** Designer Stella McCartney stayed at Su Gologone

night sky with a local astronomer.

The patios have secluded corners where you can relax on comfy loungers in total privacy. No wonder this quirky establishment has appealed to celebrities such as Richard Gere and Stella McCartney.

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## mountains in the Mediterranean



**ARTIST'S RETREAT:** The fascinating Su Gologone hotel, where Wendy stayed

### GETTING THERE

**Sardinian Places** (sardinianplaces.co.uk, 0845 330 2050) offers a seven night twin-centre holiday from £949. This includes three nights' half-board at Su Gologone, four nights' B&B at the Relais Villa del Golfo & Spa, flights from Gatwick with easyJet and car hire.

### QUIRKY STYLE:

A sculpture at Su Gologone



'When Madonna stayed she loved everything about the hotel,' Giovanna says. 'But I had to replace a couple of my paintings in her room with her own Frida Kahlos.'

My second hotel near the Costa Smeralda has very different feel. The Relais Villa del Golfo is set above the seaside village of Cannigione, surrounded by exclusive villas. It is spacious and airy and its pretty pool area looks out to the blue waters of the Gulf of Arzachena.

It is a short walk down to the beach, but a better option is to take the free shuttle bus along the coast which drops you at sandy bays a few miles away.

My favourite beaches are on the Costa Smeralda itself. With icing-sugar sand, they are still crowded in September, but head off along

unmade tracks and you can have one to yourself.

At Li Itreceddi I follow a narrow path down to a sheltered pink sand cove. The only blot on this idyllic landscape is music blaring from a millionaire's mega-yacht, the size of small cruise liner, moored offshore.

The best way to see this breathtaking coastline is by sea. One day I join Captain Simone aboard the Jacaranda, a converted fishing boat, to explore the uninhabited islands off Sardinia's most northerly tip.

It is a wonderfully relaxing day with just a dozen of us on board. Dolphins leap alongside while seagulls hover overhead, swooping down to pick morsels of cheese from Simone's hand. They have developed a taste for the local pecorino.

We drop anchor beside isolated coves and swim in an impossibly turquoise sea as Simone grills fresh prawns to go with spicy pasta.

On my last evening I visit another Nuraghe settlement in the hills in Gallura. Arianna, my guide, leads me to Li Mizzani, the Giant's Burial Site, where a 30ft-long tomb in the shape of a bull's head is aligned with the setting sun and dominated by a two-ton headstone. 'The grave has healing properties,' she explains. 'One lady who could barely move comes here every year and now walks unaided.'

I am highly sceptical, but sit down to watch a pink glow disappear below the horizon. Afterwards I feel a great sense of wellbeing.

Whether that was down to the stones or the week in Sardinia would be hard to tell.

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### BARGAIN

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### BARGAIN

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at the characterful Old Swan and Minster Mill beside the River Windrush in the Cotswold village of Minster Lovell. A double room is from £575 half-board until the end of March. [oldswanandminstermill.com](http://oldswanandminstermill.com), 01993 774441.

### BARGAIN

#### BEST CRUISE A NINE-night cruise aboard

Norwegian Spirit costs from £499 for departures on February 20. It visits Barcelona, Casablanca, Funchal, Lanzarote and Malaga and includes flights from Gatwick and



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full board. [virginholidayscruises.co.uk](http://virginholidayscruises.co.uk), 0844 488 3084.

### BARGAIN

#### BEST SHORT BREAK FLY to Rome

before March 25 for two nights' B&B at the four-star Augusta Lucilla Palace Hotel from £149. It is situated in the historic centre and the deal includes return flights from Gatwick. [qwertytravel.com](http://qwertytravel.com), 020 8588 9943.

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