

EUROPE

# Forget Sardinia's beach resorts — the island's best bolt hole is inland

Madonna and Richard Gere have stayed, but there's nothing blingy about this unspoilt haven



The Art Suite at Su Gologone in Sardinia

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Night time in Sardinia, and I am lying in a canopied bed beneath a dazzle of stars. To my left, the twin lobes of a giant prickly pear cast Mickey Mouse shadows. Apart from the spit of logs from a nearby fire pit and the soothing belch of distant frogs, all is quiet. And then there's a rustle and the flash of a long bushy tail as a pine marten halts by my bed, sniffs, and scampers away.

No, I'm not glamping. Not as such. I'm on the terrace of my Wild Suite, the newest addition to Su Gologone, a country lodge in the heart of the Italian island. And very lovely it is (this terrace at least), befittingly wild in its abundance of birds and cacti, juniper and cork trees. There's also more than a nod to human comforts in a huge double bath, a hammock, rattan day beds and a glass basin set among fig branches.

Yet as fabulous as this terrace proves, I am less than wild about the €1,480 per night price tag. At that price I'd expect serious pampering — complimentary water at the very least. And although I like our bedroom's bright embroidery notes, artful copper-bound juniper ceiling beams and sinuous tree trunks, the rest is somewhat underwhelming: two so-so bathrooms and an interior space that we barely use because it lacks natural light.

That said, a nose around the other rooms proves that all you need for a delightful stay here is a classic double. Decently sized, many with views over the scarred limestone folds of the Barbagia mountains, they all have Su Gologone's distinctive decor: traditional Sardinian embroidery, natural wood features and paintings by the island's leading artists.



The garden bar by the pool at Su Gologone

If you crave the outdoors, there's an abundance of concealed hideaways, so no need to upgrade to a suite. Little nooks come with rattan club chairs, hammocks hang in flower-filled gardens, and the cool, tucked-away Terrace of Wishes and Terrace of Dreams (always empty during my stay) have colour-drenched slouchy cushions, calico awnings and day beds.

Su Gologone is owned by the Palimodde family and started life in the Sixties when Peppeddu Palimodde set up the region's first restaurant. As tourists and Sardinians got wind of the excellent rustic food and local Cannonau wines, so bedrooms followed and the estate grew in size.

Factor in the creative savvy of its present owner, the artist Giovanna Palimodde, and you have a hotel that's delightfully boho, a world away from the blingy resorts of Costa Smeralda. Small wonder that Madonna block-booked the hotel and respite was found for Richard Gere.

The look is bold and ever so slightly Mexican, culled from Giovanna's carefree hand-printed fabrics and a pleasing palette of blues, turquoise and searing scarlet against whitewashed walls. Pottery, old masks and framed traditional costumes add an arty finishing touch.

Su Gologone describes itself as an experience hotel, and there are plenty of opportunities to discover Sardinian culture both on and off site. My days unwind in a pleasant blur of activities: a mooch around the hotel's Botteghe d'Arte, admiring pottery, looms and the bright flower-themed needlework made by a team of cheery local ladies; an early evening lesson in traditional bread-making (Su Gologone has a pizza-style oven), where we are mesmerised as flattened discs of semolina dough rise to soft white cushions before collapsing and browning to parchment thinness.

I could easily laze away my time here, but the hotel is well placed for exploring lesser-known Sardinia, and what a surprise this region is. I'm also in luck because spring has brought a burst of green to the wide valleys, and a warmth that is highly agreeable (I'm told that high season can be unbearably hot), without any threat from the island's vicious tiger mosquitoes.

A Land Rover ride one morning takes us past vineyards and wild silvered olives, the valley spreading to almond groves and meadows of wavering asphodel and broom. In the distance, the town of Nuoro lies cradled between hills; up above, the morning light pulls the eroded façades of the Supramonte mountain range into sharp relief. Soon we are driving on a bone-jolting track to its summit.



The restaurant at Su Gologone

I am with Gianni, Su Gologone's highly knowledgeable guide, and as the track narrows, the turns grow more acute and our wheels skid in protest. I quietly send thanks for his driving skills as fog swathes the toothy summit, casting long shadows onto the valley below. Before long, we are swishing through oak forests, where wild cyclamen pattern the ground with dots of purple beneath tangled trunks.

It was these trees, Gianni explains, that fed the island's charcoal business in the 19th century, the fuel later transported to power Italy's industrial north. He sighs: "And the legacy is a big problem with deforestation."

At the top we enter a rubble-strewn landscape, hiking on trails peppered with wild thyme and mint, occasionally playing daredevil and leaning out on a rock lip at the edge of a 1,200-metre drop. The wind claws at our jackets; ahead is the bone-white peak of Mount Corrasì, and below, through the mist, the just-discernible pattern of green fields.

This weather-scoured world where mouflon and goats graze on sparse vegetation looks pure Old Testament, so it's no surprise to learn that part of John Huston's blockbuster *The Bible* was filmed here in 1966. Colour returns when we drive to the coast. The sea is a shock after those relentless mountains, its sun-sparked turquoise so clear that we can see the fish beneath.

We are at Cala Gonone, an unassuming little resort thirty minutes from Su Gologone. Old-fashioned hotels and fish restaurants shaded by umbrella pines line the dinky harbour where we board an inflatable boat and whisk along a cave-nibbled coast relieved by tiny arcs of white sand.

Our captain, Antonio, slows the engine, the waves quietly slapping while we watch cormorants returning to nests in the cliff. Farther along, there's flopping time and a picnic on the fine sands at Cala Luna, empty this afternoon, save for a handful of dozing souls.



There are several cozy terraces at Su Gologone

There is history in this region, not just borne out in the dank and gloomy bandit caves. Above the Lanaiho Valley behind Supramonte we find Sa Sedda e Sos Carros, a surprisingly well-preserved Bronze Age village. Circular stone huts with fire pits lead up to the heart of the village, with a sacred fountain that looks remarkably like a modern-era steam room, its stone benches and water channels still intact.

The site's circular huts are not so dissimilar to the shepherd's hut we visit later, set in a crevice of the surrounding mountains, its roof draped with sheaves of juniper branches. This is where the region's shepherds shelter during summer grazing, and it is where guests of Su Gologone can experience a night in the wild (no loo, no shower), with fabulous valley views and breakfast brought by a herdsman.

For me, it's a lunch made by a wiry shepherd called Salvatore: tangy cheeses, rough red wine, honey-doused fresh ricotta and tender kid roasted on the hut's interior pit.

"Would you like the brain?" Salvatore asks, and I am suddenly aware that the plate before me is indeed a severed skull. I decline politely because Su Gologone has a more appetising line in spit roasts — pork and veal cooked to an appetising softness by the restaurant fire are a longstanding speciality.

Preceding these feasts are drinks at the Magico Tablao bar, a cool assemblage of whitewashed terraces lined with bright cushions where you can watch the sun tingeing the limestone façades of the Barbagia range. And this being a Friday, there's more Sardinian culture: a recital by the Tenores, a local band whose guttural polyphonic singing is a Barbagia tradition dating back to 3,000BC.

As the extraordinary noises reverberate around the terrace and night-time glooms the mountain range, I can't help but be reminded of sheep bleating in the local pastures. These may be human voices, but it's a befitting sound to ensure a good night's sleep.

### **Need to know**

Louise Roddon was a guest of Su Gologone ([sugologone.it](http://sugologone.it)), which has B&B double rooms from €198 a night. Easyjet flies from London Gatwick to Olbia for about £90 return. The hotel is 70 minutes from Olbia