MODI & TEMPI

Hidden Sardinia

Sulcis and Portoscuso: traditions and quite, relaxing tourism

by Monica Tiezzi

Sardinia (less trendy is the Sulcis Iglesiente: a southwestern territory of the isalnd, 80km froma Cagliari airport) is still little touristy (not a criticism), with a noble industrial past and a present in transition, but firmly anchored to local history and traditions. Carbonia, Sant'Antioco, Calasetta, Gonnesa, Sant'Anna Arresi, Iglesias, Carloforte are among the best-known locations: imposing cliffs, free beaches (as in much of Sardinia – www.sardegnaturismo.it – an accessible and democratic sea) and waters with an extremely high salt concentration, good for the skin, respiratory system, and muscle tension.
Among the gems of Sulcis is Iglesias (www.iglesiasturismo.it), a town austere yet elegant, with a very lively nightlife, and Carloforte, an island with a fascinating past: in 1738 King Charles Emmanuel III of Savoy granted it to the Ligurian community of Pegli (Genoa) which had settled in Tabarka (Tunisia) and whose living conditions in Africa were no longer sustainable. From here comes the Genoese dialect (specifically the "Tabarchino" dialect) that you can hear on the island, where pesto and farinata appear among the typical Sardinian dishes.

But it is Portoscuso that we want to talk about. True to its name (from Catalan "hidden port"), it is a secluded town where, even in high season, the beaches are mostly frequented by locals. The ideal place to rest and to experience Sardinian hospitality. The Pro Loco is active, but – even here – its goal is to keep the town lively rather than entertain tourists.
Do not miss a guided tour (reservation required at the Pro Loco, and if you are lucky, you may have Demetrio Sanna as your guide) of "Su Pranu" ("in the plain"), the tuna fishery that for centuries was the town's wealth.

Portoscuso above, the sea in front of the sixteenth-century Spanish Tower, in the town centre and the excursion to Capo Altano.

Along the coasts of Sulcis, "tonno di corsa" is fished: bluefin tuna harpooned during its migration for reproduction, a period when its meat is of excellent quality. The tradition has evolved (no longer in the old tuna fishery but in new facilities) with the company Althunnus.
Part of the fishery (and more suggestive than the parish church of Santa Maria d'Itria) is the ancient little church of the tuna fishermen dedicated to Saint Anthony: vaulted ceilings of trachyte, stone flooring, wooden and straw chairs.
Also, at Su Pranu (where events and concerts take place from July to September) there is a craft workshop where traditional skills are passed on (including teaching schoolchildren) such as basket weaving with dwarf palm and rush, lace with four needles and bobbin lace, tapestry weaving (looms are in use, worked on in the evenings by local women), and embroidery of traditional costumes. These traditions survive beyond fashion and conformity. They are not for tourist display: people dress for the designated festivals, sometimes for weddings. Carla Rivano (a Portoscuso native who lived in Fontanellato but could not resist the call of her hometown) explains that she learned the embroidery of traditional costumes from her grandmother and mother: "I am finishing a shawl; sometimes it takes years." Unique and precious pieces (costing around 2,500 euros) that she herself wears or lends to her twenty-year-old daughter. Like traditional gold filigree jewelry, passed down in the family.
A few steps from the tuna fishery, the 16th-century Spanish tower no longer defends against raids (like the one by Tunisian corsairs who attacked Carloforte in 1798, enslaving half the population) but watches over breathtaking and silent sunsets.
The best place to observe the setting sun (or sunrise, if you are an early riser) is Capo Altano, about three kilometers from the town center. An easy walk (or a bike ride: there is a cycle path, and bikes are rented in town) takes you to 106 meters in height: the view embraces the Sulcis archipelago, the red volcanic rocks plunging into the sea, the lush and fragrant vegetation of helichrysum, the remains of towers and trenches from the last war, and the always thrilling spectacle of the sun sinking, painting the sky red.

Where to stay

Vento D'Estate

Brand-new B&B, inaugurated in June, in front of the Spanish Tower and the sea (www.ventodestatebnb.it).
Modern and tasteful furnishings, contemporary sculptures and paintings. Descending 15 steps in front of the entrance leads to the cliffs, and a five-minute walk brings you to Portopaglietto beach.
Four rooms with eight beds (the structure is currently not equipped for dogs and small children) and a panoramic terrace with sun loungers and armchairs. All rooms have a sea view and a bathroom. There is air conditioning, but turn it off: open the windows, the evening wind will cool the room, and you will fall asleep to the sound of the waves and the intermittent light of the lighthouse.

Free time and hobbies

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