

Horse riding in the Garden of Eden

Sea, Sun, Fish, Horses – welcome to Sardinia!

The Sardinians are a unique people with an unusually high life expectancy. There are quite a few centenarians amongst the population of just 1 million. Anyone visiting this dream island in the Mediterranean will not be surprised by this: plenty of space, peace and quiet, lush nature, a mild climate with plenty of sunshine, magnificent beaches, healthy Mediterranean cuisine – it doesn't get any better than this!

What's more, most people here make their living from nature-friendly, extensive farming, fishing and, in summer, tourism. This means they generally work outdoors. No wonder our riding guide Manolo always has a contented and infectious smile on his face, and no wonder my friend has been on the lookout for houses she could buy from day one. Even if this, my fifth trip to Sardinia, doesn't have a positive effect on my life expectancy, it does bring me a wonderful time with horses, people and nature.



Together with a few friends and acquaintances, I travel to Cagliari in early April for our island adventure on horseback. I'm already familiar with the somewhat more affluent north and east of Sardinia, with its magnificent white beaches; now we're going to explore the even quieter south. Apart from us horse-riders, there are only a few surfers to be seen on the beaches; most tourists visit in August. Right at the start of the season, we enjoy undisturbed gallops by the sea, often stopping for lunch in a cove and roaming the deserted hinterland on several day trips. As well as the stunning coves, it is above all the vegetation that is so enchanting: we ride through eucalyptus and pine forests, past rich yellow mimosas, through groves of cacti, and through the dense maquis. The latter refers to the evergreen Mediterranean scrubland featuring juniper, strawberry trees, rosemary, the endemic myrtle, wild olives, low-growing palms and much more. Sometimes we have to duck down to make our way through the unspoilt wilderness along narrow paths. Paths that are up to 5,000 years old. Sardinia and its small neighbouring island, Sant'Antioco, are rich not only in nature but also in history. The town of Sant'Antioco (formerly 'Sulki') was founded by the Carthaginians before the Common Era and quickly developed into one of the most important trading centres on the Mediterranean route. We also pass two ancient nuraghi (stone structures with underground chambers) and medieval villages on our rides. The Nuraghe were a seafaring people who lived in Sardinia during the Bronze Age, around 4,000 years ago.

And everywhere there is an incredible profusion of flowers – it is as if you were riding through a single paradisiacal garden, created by nature. Here and there, a few sheep, to whom

we have to thank for the excellent Pecorino cheese at our lunchtime picnic. There are 5 million sheep in Sardinia, which means there are 5 sheep for every inhabitant. Just as important are the fish and seafood, which thrive in the clear, clean waters and provide special culinary delights every evening. Mussels, scampi, calamari, tuna and much more, fresh from the sea, feature on restaurant menus.

Waterbirds also benefit from the abundant fish and crustacean populations: on our rides through the vast salt flats between Sant'Antioco and Sardinia, we come across countless flamingos, grey herons, seagulls and sandpipers. The shallow water of the salt flats is tinged with a reddish hue from the crustaceans. This colour, in turn, rubs off on the flamingos, which are born white.



Incidentally, the Sardinians love horses; there are several major horse festivals, including the Carnival horse parade in Oristano, where costumed riders demonstrate their equestrian skills on richly adorned horses. It is quite possible that these festivals date back to the Spanish occupation in the late Middle Ages. Typical of the region are the large-framed Sardinian Anglo-Arabians, to which my lovely mare Aisha also belongs. Manolo has the right horse for every taste: amongst his 15 or so trail horses, there is everything from the lively Arabian to the athletic Anglo-Arabian and the calm Appaloosa. The horses are in excellent condition and enjoy themselves, especially when it comes to galloping. Some lovely galloping stretches by the water and along wide paths through the fields delight both horses and riders. The riding routes are very varied: one moment we're galloping along grassy paths surrounded by shallow seawater, the next we're riding along a narrow strip of sand right on the shore of the turquoise sea. Another time, we ride through the marshland alongside lush meadows.

Things get challenging on Sant'Antioco as we ride through the dense maquis. Narrow paths wind through the undergrowth and, whilst the horses clamber over rocks, we find ourselves ducking our heads time and again. A riding helmet and chaps are highly recommended! Often, however, there are wide, sandy tracks leading through small woods, fields and gardens. Artichokes, yellow daisies and blossoming almond trees grow in abundance here. Eucalyptus trees and cacti shield the fields from the wind.



Although it's already significantly warmer than at home in early April, with a maximum of 18 degrees, the coastal wind is quite brisk during the first few days and even brings a few rain showers on two of them. This doesn't dampen Manolo's good humour in the slightest; on the contrary, he's already looking forward to a good hay harvest after the lovely rain. At our request, he spontaneously changes the programme one rainy morning and we visit the impressive Is Zuddas stalactite cave, known for its white ceiling formations that look like thousands of ice crystals. In the afternoon, we ride through the salt flats amidst rainbows and sunshine, enjoying the magical play of light.

The week's riding with Manolo is organised so that you go on six rides lasting between 4 and 6 hours, mainly along the coast, but in between we also ride into the mountains in the hinterland, which is no less enchanting than the coast. At the Monte Pranu reservoir, a magnificent view of the lake, mountains and sea awaits us. On another occasion, we climb an old watchtower on Sant'Antioco, from where we enjoy a breathtaking view over the green island, the tiny neighbouring islets and the sea on three sides, stretching all the way to the southernmost point of Sardinia. It's hard to believe that the two dilapidated buildings in this absolutely idyllic spot, surrounded by a lush carpet of flowers, haven't long since been converted into a luxury villa! Presumably, the location is simply too remote, and high society prefers the Costa Smeralda in the north of Sardinia. Yet the south is just as enchanting. Another highlight is the wide white sandy beach at Porto Pino, which we explore on our very first day and which can easily rival the famous sandy beaches in the north-east. White sand dunes and the turquoise Mediterranean, glistening in the sun, instantly create the perfect holiday atmosphere.

We always stay at the same family-run hotel in Sant'Antioco. After our rides, there's always a little time to spare before dinner at the restaurant, which we like to use for a short stroll, a visit to the ice-cream parlour, the supermarket or for an aperitif at the harbour. Anyone travelling to Italy should always leave a bit of space in their luggage, so we calculate exactly what else we can take home with us. In the end, limoncello, pecorino, amaretti and other delicacies find their way into my suitcase. These make saying goodbye a little easier and will remind me of this wonderful time in southern Sardinia for weeks to come. Once again, I am absolutely thrilled by this Mediterranean island, the horses, the natural surroundings and the friendly people. It's also particularly lovely that Sardinia isn't dominated by large hotel chains; holidaymakers stay in apartments, campsites, agriturismos and family-run hotels. The coastlines are unspoilt, nature is respected and used sustainably – a true paradise for nature lovers. I'll definitely be back!



Jessica Kiefer, April 2023

Best time to visit: April/May and September/October

‘Island Adventure in Southern Sardinia’: www.reiterreisen.com/sulsta.htm