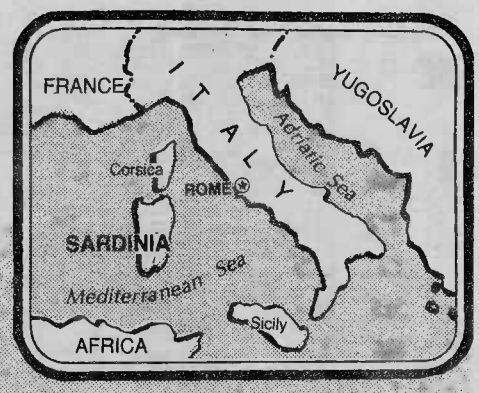
Sardinia: Island of Contrasts Moving Into the Mainstream



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It is only the aquamarine sea, the rocky coves, sandy beaches and jagged mountains, the indomitable natural beauty, that is not in a state of flux in Sardinia. And an all-out construction boom attempting to keep up with a relatively recent phenomenal tourist invasion is creating many new seaside panoramas, at that.

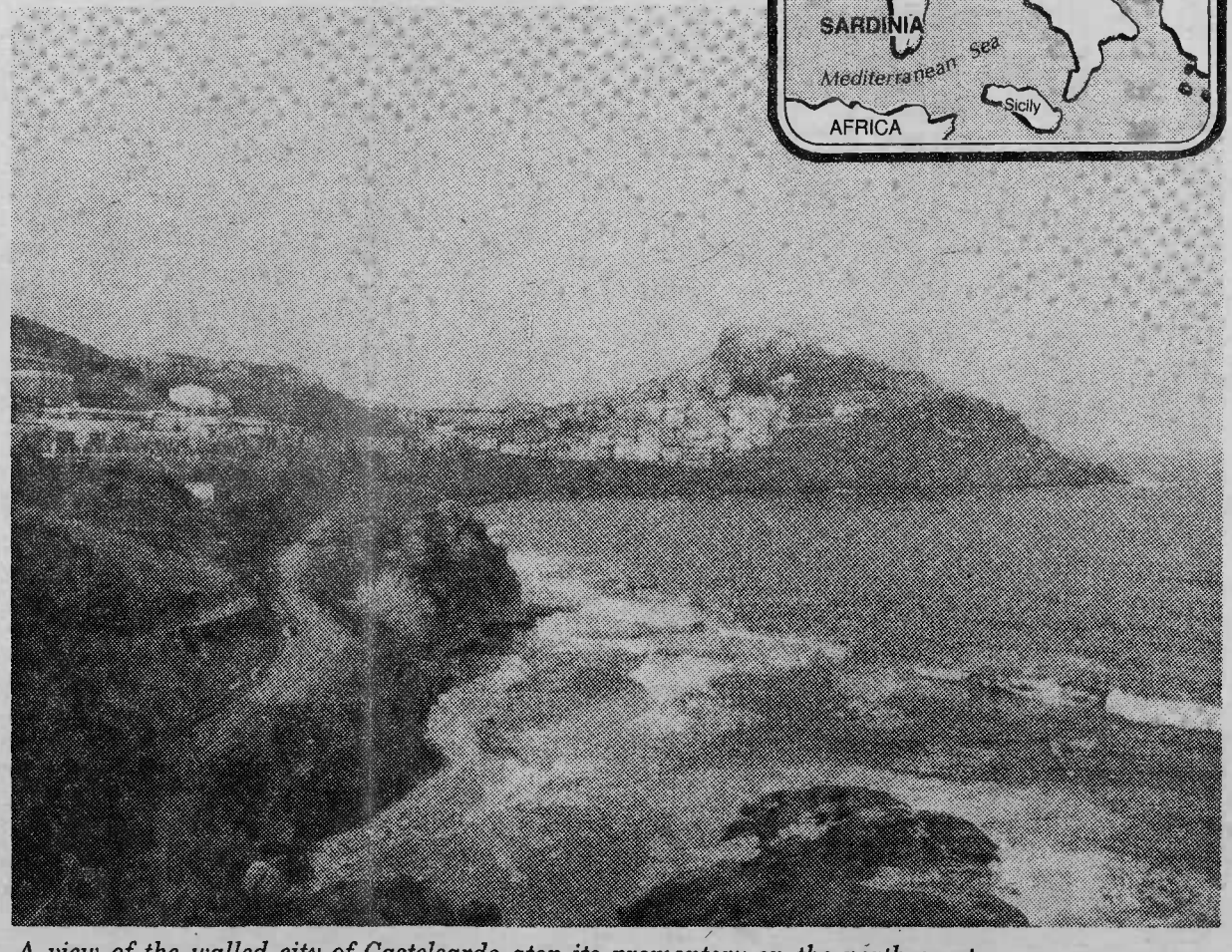
Throughout its history, Sardinia has been the melting pot of the Mediterranean. Today, it is an island in transition, of startling contrasts with tourists the latest addition to the melting pot.

One day in early spring in Rome airport, I came upon a group of women dressed in black from head to toe. They were laughing and carrying on among themselves—it seemed evident they weren't dressed for a funeral, and they weren't nuns. When I approached to ask about their attire, complete silence dawned and eyes never met mine. I learned that the women of Sardinia have traditionally worn black for centuries. In fact, up until the 1960s, Sardinian women didn't venture into the streets without a veil—this is Italy, in cosmopolitan Europe.

Some weeks later, I visited Sardinia half expecting to find an island living in the past, centuries removed from the continent. I soon realized that within a few years ladies in black will become but a memory, immortalized on postcards.

Sardinia is virtually in the center of the western Mediterranean, only 112 miles from the Italian mainland. Its 1,149 miles of coast is a continual alternation of virgin, white sandy beaches, plummeting cliffs, and rocky, picturesque bays, coves and promontories—unlike on the continent, left abandoned and for the most part uninhabited until this last decade.

Over the centuries, Sardinia was rocked by successive, continual waves of invasions. Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Genoese, Arabs, Spaniards, among many others in turn con-



A view of the walled city of Castelsardo atop its promontory on the north coast.

small villages and towns in the interior, has shown the Sards more of what is happening in the world

gulping down *vernaccia* (the potent, 15 per cent alcohol wine of Sardinia that goes down smooth but

quered and occupied, each leaving their mark on the culture and history of Sardinia. For most of the 20th Century, however, Sardinia had been left alone, forgotten by the rest of Italy, and the world.

The Sards, a very proud and clannish people anyway, turned inward. They didn't migrate or seek work in Germany and Switzerland like so many mainland Italians. Local, summary justice was often the only law and order, ancient customs and rules of social conduct remained intact, vendetta killings were common, pastoralism remained the mainstay and banditry flourished. Among a people whose history had made them suspicious, austere and introverted, the "Law of Silence" continued to reign. It goes like this: "I wasn't there. Even if I was there, I didn't see anything. Even if I saw it, I didn't understand what happened. But even if I understood, I don't remember anything."

This was Sardinia at the dawn of the 1960s with tourism beginning to come of age as a major industry. It was inevitable that such a natural jewel, so close to the European continent, with its 9,300 unspoiled square miles, would not be overlooked for long. Once discovered, the development of a tourist industry skyrocketed overnight.

The Costa Smeralda, or Emerald Coast, named for the color of its sea, became the first bearer of arms. It extends about 30 miles in the northwest corner of the island—a pristine area with just a handful of villages only 15 years ago.

It was the Aga Kahn, in conjunction with a group of Italian and foreign businessmen, who first invested intensively in the development of the Costa Smeralda. Within a few years, it had become a summer resort area of international repute, and the new village of Porto Cervo had become the playground of many of the world's rich and famous.

Construction of elegant, well-appointed tourist villages and facilities, hotels, shops, night clubs and villas has continued unabated—never keeping up with demand.

In just over a decade, the Costa Smeralda was transformed into a paradise for the worshiper of sun, sand and water sports in a natural environment unparalleled in Europe. But it does not end at the Costa Smeralda. Half the coastline of Sardinia is undergoing such transformation. Tourists have become the conquerers and occupiers of the 1970s.

This increasing influx of tourists, along with the fairly recent introduction of television to even in the last decade than in the previous century. It has also brought new wealth, but not riches, to what has been a backwater of Europe. Today, seeing a peasant driving a new Fiat from village to pasture to attend his sheep is not a rare sight. In contrast to the ladies in black, the young, male and female, in villages as well as cities, are dressed in skin-tight jeans and corduroys, high-heel, pointed boots, tight shirts and leather jackets. Everywhere on Sardinia, the visitor experiences the 20th Century confronting a startled, traditional world.

Around cool, Spanish-style houses with patios, flowered balconies and wrought iron, or quaint, geometrical adobe houses, invariably, modern houses are being built. A few miles from new, bustling seaside resorts are still long stretches of wild beaches. Inland from camping sites jammed with foreigners, flocks of white heron silently rest on jagged rocks. The Gennargentu mountains are the last remaining habitat of the European wild sheep which look like large goats and have powerful, curved horns. Wild horses still breed on the plateau of Giara di Gesturi, and a forgotten race of white donkeys roams the tiny offshore island of Asinara.

Sardinia offers not only the good life by the sea, but adventure, history and diversity. It is an island to be explored by road because there is something of everything. (Bus tours circling the island are well established; cars can be rented in all ports, airport and tourist centers.)

Narrow, zigzagging country roads through the green, rocky, mountainous interior take you past flocks of grazing sheep attended by a shepherd who has fenced off the land with rock walls and past peasant houses of brown stone—the whitewash long ago worn away—with red-tile roofs. Often for many miles the only live sights are birds soaring in small flocks.

The intermittent villages and towns are a splattering of many architectural styles: flat roofs and sloping terra-cotta roofs, mud walls and old stone houses, arched windows and square windows with balconies, winding narrow streets—a melting pot architectural legacy on an island that had known new rulers from century to century.

The spire of the Catholic church always dominates the village skyline. Fruit and vegetables are for sale in the open market place. Cigarette smoke wafts through the bars where the local men, dressed in gray and black and wearing berets, are strikes back with a vengeance when you try to stand up) and boisterously engaging in polemics.

On the north coast, a walled city clings to the summit of a high promontory. Castelsardo is topped by Castel Genovese, a castle constructed by the Genoese occupiers in the 12th Century. The dark, narrow streets of the citadel, where one can only go on foot, are broken by staircases and arches.

Seen from afar, Castelsardo is perhaps the most inspiring man-made vision on Sardinia, a gift from one of many peoples who have contributed to this melting pot of the Mediterranean.

Over 7,000 nuraghi stand in mysterious silence throughout the countryside in Sardinia. These massive, rotund, megalithic constructions of stone are found only in Sardinia. Built from the 13th to the 5th Century B.C., they served as fortified dwellings, similar to medievil castles. As you drive down a Sardinian road, a nuraghe will suddenly loom on the horizon, eloquently bearing witness to an ancient Bronze Age people's struggle to survive in a harsh environment.

Indeed, it does not end with the Costa Smeralda, nor with the nuraghe, Castelsardo or the white donkeys of Asinara. Virtually every nook and cranny along the coast and through the interior of this island of contrasts harbors something unique or delightful—breathtaking panoramas, new tourist resorts, unspoiled natural beauty, the remains of an ancient civilization or the legacy of past conquerers. It is an island to be explored.

There are extensive sea and air communications between Sardinia and the continent.

First-class hotels generally charge $15-$25 single, $20-$45 double, with breakfast. Full board runs about $20-$40 a person daily.

Second- and third-class hotels usually offer under-$15 singles and under-$25 doubles with private bath. Full board is considerably lower than first-class rates.

Pensions run under $5 single, under $10 double, without private bath or breakfast. Full board runs under $10 a day per person.

Reservations are a must during the long May to October tourist season.

For further information contact the nearest Italian Government Travel Office (ENIT—in New York at 630 Fifth Ave., [212] 245-4822) or the Sardinian Tourist Industry Board, Via Mameli 97, Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy. ■