



# Iglesias & the Southwest

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## Why Go?

The southwest comprises diverse regions, their characters rich in history and attractions. The area's superb beaches hold the most pull, starting from the magnificent, untamed sands of the Costa Verde to the tropical waters of the Costa del Sud. Iglesiente offers photogenic coves, and the twin islands of San Pietro (Isola di San Pietro) and Sant'Antioco (Isola di Sant'Antioco) have their own distinctive charms: San Pietro with its animated and instantly likeable atmosphere, and Sant'Antioco with its earthy character and rich archaeological legacy.

Inland, Iglesias and its surrounding hills have a more melancholy quality – once the island's mining heartland, many of the abandoned mines have been resurrected as tourist attractions, resulting in some eerie sightseeing tours. Further in, at the heart of the voluptuous Marmilla region, sits Sardinia's greatest *nuraghe* (Bronze Age fortified settlement), the Unesco-listed Nuraghe Su Nuraxi, a real archaeological treat.

## When to Go

Sardinia has its most impressive festivities in March and April for Easter celebrations – and Iglesias excels with its hooded processions and deathly drumming. Another wonderful time to visit the southwest is at the end of May and beginning of June, for the start of the tuna season and wonderful culinary adventures on the island of San Pietro. Don't miss the high summer; August is perfect for joining beach parties along the southern coast, but even better for getting away to the remote wilderness of the Costa Verde.

## IGLESIAS

POP 27,800

Surrounded by the skeletons of Sardinia's once-thriving mining industry, Iglesias is a historic town that bubbles in the summer and slumbers in the colder months. Its historic centre is an appealing ensemble of lived-in piazzas, sun-bleached buildings and Aragonese-style wrought-iron balconies, and it's here that the townsfolk gather on warm summer evenings. The atmosphere is as much Spanish as Sardinian, as is the town's name, which is Spanish for 'churches'. Visit at Easter to experience a quasi-Seville experience during the extraordinary drum-beating processions.

### History

The death of mining in the 1970s hit the area hard. Mining has been big business here since classical times. The Romans called their town Metalla, after the precious metals they mined on Monte Linas. But the Romans weren't the first to exploit the mines; when they were reopened in the 19th century, equipment belonging to the Carthaginians was discovered. Populated by slaves and immigrants, Iglesias grew, with each group establishing a church. Their buildings gave the town one of its earlier names, Villa di Chiesa (Town of Churches).

Centuries later in 1257, the Pisans grabbed the Giudicato di Cagliari (Province of Cagliari) and granted Iglesias to Ugolino della Gherardesca, a Pisan captain and member of the pro-papal Ghibelline party. He had a good business head and quickly organised the town along the lines of a Tuscan *comune* (self-governing town) with its own laws and currency. He even instituted the statute of laws known as the Breve di Villa Chiesa, a revolutionary code that granted social benefits to the miners. You can still view it on request at the city's Archivio Storico.

In 1323 the Catalano-Aragonese troops landed at Portovesme and took Villa Di Chiesa the following year, renaming it Iglesias. They had little interest in the mines and for the next 500 years the pits lay abandoned until private entrepreneurs, such as Quintino Sella (after whom the main piazza is named), revived their fortunes. As the nascent centre of heavy industry in a resurgent and soon-to-be-united Italy, Iglesias once again became an important town – until WWII, and then later modern economics, tolled its death knell in the 1970s.


## Sights

Much of modern Iglesias harks back to the 19th century. This was the period of the last big boom in the city's mining fortunes, when new laws allowed a syndicate from the Italian mainland to buy up the mines and reopen them. To herald this exciting new era, the bulk of the town's medieval walls were demolished and the spacious **Piazza Quintino Sella** was laid out in what had previously been a field just outside the city walls. The piazza became the central meeting place of the town and even today it throngs with people during the evening *passeggiata* (stroll). The **statue** in the centre commemorates Quintino Sella (of Sella e Mosca wine fame), a Sardinian statesman and vigorous promoter of the reborn mining industry.

Much of the pleasure of visiting Iglesias lies in the small medieval centre. There are no great must-see sights, but the narrow, car-free lanes and suggestive piazzas are in good nick and are much appreciated by locals who flock here throughout the day and night to browse the shops and hang out in the bars. It's also in the **centro storico** that you'll find many of the **churches** that give the city its name.

### Duomo

DUOMO

(Piazza del Municipio;  closed for renovation) Dominating the eastern flank of Piazza del Municipio, the Duomo retains its lovely Pisan-flavoured facade, as does the bell tower, with its chequerboard stonework. The Duomo was begun in 1337, but Catalan architects gave it a makeover in the 16th century, which accounts for the rich internal decoration. Inside, the highlight is the gilded altarpiece that once held the relics of St Antiochus. Originally this was on the Isola di Sant'Antioco, but it was bought to Iglesias in the 17th century to protect it from

### ROAD DISTANCES (km)

Carbonia	57			
Iglesias	34	23		
Portovesme	55	14	21	
Pula	91	70	77	84
	Arbus	Carbonia	Iglesias	Portovesme