



# Iglesias & the Southwest

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## Why Go?

Silky beaches, prehistoric treasures, haunting mines – Sardinia's southwest is rich in history and natural beauty. The main drawcard is its thrilling coastline, which stretches from the great untamed sands of the Costa Verde to the cliff-bound coves of the Iglesiente and the seductive bays of the Costa del Sud. Offshore, the Isola di San Pietro and Isola di Sant'Antioco boast 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, there's a rather melancholy feel to the area around Iglesias, the southwest's charming main town. This was once the island's mining heartland and the silent hills are today pitted with abandoned mines, many of which have been resurrected as museums and visitor attractions. Further in, the Marmilla's voluptuous green countryside harbours rich archaeological pickings, including Sardinia's greatest *nuraghe* (Bronze Age settlement), the Unesco-listed Nuraghe Su Nuraxi.

## Road Distance (km)

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

## IGLESIAS

POP 27,500

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, an appealing ensemble of lived-in piazzas, sun-bleached buildings and Aragonese-style wrought-iron balconies, creates an atmosphere that's as much Iberian as Sardinian – a vestige of its time as a Spanish colony. Visit at Easter to experience a quasi-Seville experience during the extraordinary drum-beating processions.

### History

Although named after its churches – Iglesias means churches in Spanish – the town has a long history as a mining centre. The Carthaginians are known to have mined the surrounding area, as did the Romans who extracted silver and lead, and established a mining town, Metalla, in the hills south of modern-day Fluminimaggiore.

Iglesias itself was founded in the 13th century by Ugolino della Gherardesca. A Pisan noble with a shrewd head for business, Ugolino reopened the Roman mines and organised the town, which was originally called Villa di Chiesa, as a Tuscan-style *comune* (self-regulating town) with its own currency, rights and laws. These laws were subsequently codified and recorded in a book known as the Breve di Villa di Chiesa.

The city thrived but in 1324 it fell to the Catalan-Aragonese, who promptly renamed it Iglesias. More seriously, they closed its mines, and for the next 500 years the pits lay abandoned until private entrepreneurs, such as Quintino Sella, revived their fortunes in the 19th century. As a nascent industrial centre in a resurgent and soon-to-be-united Italy, Iglesias once again flourished until WWII and modern economics tolled its death knell in the 1970s.

### Sights

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 to browse the shops and hang out in the bars. It's also in the *centro storico* (historic centre) that you'll find many of the churches that give the city its name.

★ **Cattedrale di Santa Chiara** CATHEDRAL  
(Duomo; Piazza del Municipio) Dominating the eastern flank of Piazza del Municipio, the Cattedrale di Santa Chiara boasts a lovely Pisan-flavoured facade and a chequerboard stone bell tower. The church was originally built in the late 13th century, but it was given a comprehensive makeover in the 16th century, which accounts for its current Catalan Gothic look.

Inside, the highlight is a gilded altarpiece that once held the relics of St Antiochus. This was originally on the Isola di Sant'Antiocho but it was bought to Iglesias in the 17th century to protect it from the threat of pirate raids. And although the clerics were later forced to return the relics they managed to hold on to the altarpiece.

Flanking the cathedral on the piazza is the bishop's residence, the **Palazzo Vescovile**, while opposite is Iglesias' neo-classical **Municipio** (town hall). Neither of these buildings is open to the public.

★ **Chiesa di San Francesco** CHURCH  
(Piazza San Francesco; ☺8am-noon & 4-8pm) From Piazza del Municipio, Via Pullo leads to the dainty rose red trachyte of the Chiesa di San Francesco. Built over a 200-year period between the 14th and 16th centuries, this small church is a wonderful example of Catalan Gothic architecture with its simple austere facade, circular windows and single-nave interior. Flanking the nave are a series of chapels squeezed in between the buttresses.

**Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie** CHURCH  
(Piazza Manzoni 7; ☺6.45am-8pm) Originally constructed at the end of the 13th century, the modest Chiesa di Santa Maria delle Grazie retains little of its original form. About the only surviving element is the base of the medieval facade, which is topped by a pinky baroque structure, added in the 17th and 18th centuries.

**Piazza Quintino Sella** PIAZZA  
Iglesias' focal square, Piazza Quintino Sella was laid out in the 19th century in what was at the time a field outside the city walls. It soon became a central meeting place and still today it throngs with people during the evening *passaggiata* (stroll). The statue in the centre commemorates Quintino Sella (of Sella e Mosca wine fame), a 19th-century statesman and champion of the area's mining industry.