



Cagliari & the Sarrabus

Includes ➔

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Best Places to Eat

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- ➔ Per Bacco (p58)
- ➔ La Pola (p55)
- ➔ Martinelli's (p58)

Best Places to Sleep

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Why Go?

From urban clamour and cultural gems to wild, inhospitable mountains and thrilling coastlines, Sardinia's southeast makes for a wonderful introduction to the island.

The main gateway is Cagliari, Sardinia's largest city. Cultured and cosmopolitan, the island's historic capital is a joy to explore with its bristling waterfront, colourful alleyways and formidable hilltop citadel. Its museums, galleries and baroque churches are among Sardinia's best, harbouring innumerable treasures. Yet for all its riches, Cagliari remains a busy working port and a trip here is as much about the simple pleasures as sightseeing: seafood dinners in neighbourhood trattorias, people-watching at pavement cafes, strolling through medieval alleyways.

East of Cagliari, the landscape becomes increasingly wild as urban sprawl gives way to the verdant, wooded mountains of the Sarrabus. This great unspoilt wilderness boasts inspiring scenery and magnificent white beaches at Villasimius and the Costa Rei, two of the area's most popular summer destinations.

When to Go

- ➔ Summer sees an annual influx of visitors heading for the area's glorious beaches. Resorts such as Villasimius and the Costa Rei are at their busiest, particularly in August when many Italian families take their holidays.
- ➔ Cagliari is at its best in spring and early autumn when it's still pleasantly warm but not so hot that sightseeing becomes hard physical labour.
- ➔ The first few days of May means party time in Cagliari as thousands take to the streets to partake in the city's great annual celebration.
- ➔ For the best hiking conditions in the Sarrabus, spring and early autumn are generally the best times.

CAGLIARI

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Forget flying: the best way to arrive in Sardinia's historic capital is by sea, the city rising in a helter-skelter of golden-hued *palazzi*, domes and facades up to the rocky centrepiece, Il Castello. Although Tunisia is closer than Rome, Cagliari is the most Italian of Sardinia's cities. Vespas buzz down tree-fringed boulevards and locals hang out at busy cafes tucked under arcades in the seafort Marina district.

Like many Italian cities, Cagliari wears its history on its sleeve and everywhere you go you come across traces of its rich past: ancient Roman ruins, museums filled with prehistoric artefacts, centuries-old churches and elegant *palazzi*.

Edging east of town brings you to Poetto beach, the hub of summer life with its limpid blue waters and upbeat party scene.

History

The Phoenicians established themselves in the area in the 8th century BC, but it wasn't until the Carthaginians took control of what they called Karel or Karalis (meaning 'rocky place') around 520 BC that a town began to emerge.

It remained a Carthaginian stronghold until the Romans occupied it in the First

Punic War (218–201 BC). Julius Caesar later declared it a full Roman municipality in 46 BC, paving the way for a golden age as a prosperous port. But with the eclipse of Roman power came more turbulent times.

Vandals operating out of North Africa stormed into the city in AD 455, only to be unseated by the Byzantine Empire in 533. By the 11th century, weakening Byzantine influence (accentuated by repeated Arab raids) led Cagliari and the other districts to become virtually autonomous.

In 1258 the Pisans took the town, fortified the Castello area and replaced the local population with Pisans. A similar fate awaited them when the Catalano-Aragonese took over in 1326. The Black Death swept through in 1348, with frequent repeat outbreaks in the succeeding decades.

With Spain unified at the end of the 15th century, the Catalans were subordinated to the Spaniards. Cagliari fared better than most of the island under Spanish inertia, and in 1620 the city's university opened its doors.

The dukes of Savoy (who in 1720 became kings of Sardinia) followed the Spanish precedent in keeping Cagliari as the vice-regal seat, and it endured several anxious events (such as the 1794 anti-Savoy riots). From 1799 to 1814 the royal family, forced

CAGLIARI IN...

Two Days

Get off to an uplifting start by summing the **Torre dell'Elefante** (p44) and enjoying fabulous city views. Suitably inspired, follow the narrow, twisting lanes of the **Castello district** (p43) up to the **Cattedrale di Santa Maria** (p44). In the afternoon, bone up on Sardinia's prehistoric past at the **Museo Archeologico Nazionale** (p43) before seeing out the day over cocktails at the **Caffè Libarium Nostrum** (p59).

On day two, breakfast at **Antico Caffè** (p59) before heading up to the **Galleria Comunale d'Arte** (p44) for a blast of modern art. Afterwards, clear your head in the green confines of the **Orto Botanico** (p47). Lunch on seafood in the Marina district, perhaps at **Antica Cagliari** (p58), and spend the afternoon mooching around the shops on Via Giuseppe Garibaldi and Via Sulcis. Round things off with an al fresco aperitif on **Piazza Yenne** (p46).

Four Days

Rise early on day three and stock up on picnic goodies at the **Mercato di San Benedetto** (p61). Then head out to **Poetto beach** (p45) for a day of sunbathing, swimming and windsurfing.

On day four, take a day trip, choosing between the pristine beaches of Villasimius (p64) or a visit to the **Cantine Argiolas** (p62), one of Sardinia's top wineries in Serrana. Alternatively, strap on your walking boots for some hiking in the wooded mountains around **Monte dei Sette Fratelli** (p59).