

# Sardinia and Corsica

## With SAGA Holidays and 37 Wonderful British Travelers

### May 20 - June 1, 2015

Sardinia (Italy) and Corsica (France) have been on my "A" list for a long time. Ever since visiting Malta and touring gorgeous neolithic sites with Cloe Mifsud ([www.goddesstourstoMalta.com](http://www.goddesstourstoMalta.com)), I have wanted to visit the archaeological sites on these two islands. The problem is not many land tours are available and those that are seem to be way too heavy in archaeology. Not only that, but they are pricey - from \$7,000 to \$10,000 for two weeks.



Most people who visit Sardinia and Corsica do so on a cruise. It is very difficult to find a general sightseeing land tour. Thank goodness for Saga Holidays!

Stan Bach, one of the best travelers I know, had visited Sardinia and Corsica with Saga Holidays, a British Company, a few years ago and his excellent trip review was published in the July, 2013 issue of International Travel News Magazine:

<http://www.intltravelnews.com/2013/07/sardinia-and-corsica-saga>

If this trip was good enough for Stan, it is good enough for me.

After spending about two weeks in London, including a theater program with Road Scholar, I had just one night free. When I originally booked with Saga, the departure time from Stansted Airport was 8am - which meant a 6am check-in at the latest .....ouch!! So I arranged a night at the Stansted Hilton Hotel as it was close to the airport and offered a shuttle. I never would have made the transfer from London in time if I waited until morning as it would take about 45 min. to get to Liverpool Station to board the train, then an hour's ride to the airport.

So on the last day of Road Scholar's Theater Program, I spend most of the day in London, then take the Stansted Express train to the airport.

Since this is my first time on EasyJet, I stop by their customer service desk to reconfirm the flight, get a boarding pass, ask about carry-on (one SMALL bag only) and weigh my checked bag. Oops! I am over by 9 lbs, and if I don't do anything about it, it will cost an additional 40 GBP (about \$60.). So once in my hotel room I re-pack. Out go all the extra paper I had collected and planned to read on the plane; my four books on Sardinia/Corsica go into carry-on; I consolidate items in my cosmetic bag and eat some of my snacks for dinner. This pays off the next day when my checked bag weighs in at 43 lbs -- 10 lbs less than what I started with.



As for traveling on EasyJet.... well, it's an experience. This is one of the more popular European budget carriers flying around Europe and North Africa. Its longest route is to Cairo - 5 1/2 hours. It is not very pleasant, but it is cheap and it is the carrier SAGA Holidays selected for us to fly to/from Sardinia and Corsica. In all honesty, it can be a bit of a nightmare:

For sure, chances are 84% you will be assigned a middle seat. And guess what, aisle seats cost an extra 10GBP (\$15.00) and exit row seats are more.

I paid 20 GBP (about \$30.USD) for an aisle seat coming and going. Luckily, on the return flight, I moved to an aisle seat in the exit row, and after some discussion with the flight attendant (showed her my receipt), she let me settle in.

Be aware that on EasyJet:

- everything costs extra -- including water
- there are strict luggage allowances (44lb.) with high charges for any amount over
- very tight 3-3 seating
- seats don't recline (this is probably a blessing!)

Security at Stansted is very different from what we are used to at home. There is no grumpy TSA uniformed creature scrutinizing your boarding pass and passport. You scan your own boarding pass then get in a line that snakes around a few times. There are helpers to organize your belongings in a bin, and finally you pass thru the electronic portal.

Then I am in for a treat -- the walk to the waiting area is thru a shopping mall. At this airport they don't announce boarding gates until 30min. before departure. So the main waiting area is lined with more shops than I have time to visit as well as lots of restaurants. It would be very easy to spend my whole travel budget before I get on the plane!

## The Trip

Well, it was wonderfully leisurely. We rarely had a morning departure before 9:30 and most of our touring was on the bus with sightseeing and photo stops, coffee and lunch breaks (I drank a lot of cappuccinos on this trip), and comfort stops. I had hoped to visit a few of the 2,000 archaeological

sites on the islands (some are UNESCO properties) during the free time. But there wasn't any free time.

We spent our days on and off the bus sightseeing — my favorites are the gorgeous sepia colored villages which tumble toward the sea, reminiscent of Cinque Terre.



The scenery is stunningly beautiful on these two islands. We always enjoyed walking the alleyways of small villages as well as riding along the spectacular coastline.

Of course there are stops to see how olives are pressed, a wine tasting and a botanical garden. I loved its garden art made of reeds. Museum visits were always interesting.





As a group, we visit one Nuraghe. And just what is a Nuraghe? Sardinia is known for these megalithic towers built about 1500 BC - there are at least 2000 of them that can be visited, though archaeologists believe that originally there were over 10,000. We visit the Nuraghe of Santu Antine near the town of Torralbaone which is considered of the better ones, and have a good time climbing its steep stone stairs to the lookout towers and investigating its tunnels. Just what was their function — religious temples, ordinary dwelling, ruler's residence, military stronghold, meeting hall, or???? No one knows for sure.



Sketch of the Nuraghe of Santu Antine (above) and the circular staircase (left) to the upper level. And... Oops! I walk in to Terri's photo in one of the tunnels!

I signed up for all four optional excursions so every day was jam-packed. The best block of “free time” was at our last hotel in Golfo Aranci, but I heard the soft, white powdery sand on the beach calling my name.

Both islands are stunning. Imagine a scalloped shaped coast with curve after curve of white, powdery sand beaches. Small towns' terra-cotta roofed houses tumble down to marinas crowded with million dollar yachts. Boardwalks are lined with seaside restaurants and stylish shops. Each village has quietly elegant neighborhoods. Though Sardinia belongs to Italy and Corsica belongs to France, each has a much different atmosphere than their mainland.



Surprisingly I sometimes ask myself “Where is everybody?” Some of these lovely towns seem deserted. Come to find out that these islands have a “season” during late summer/early fall when Europeans flock to their luxurious vacation homes.

In a way, I was on concurrent trips. A visit to two beautiful Mediterranean islands; but also, since I was the only American in the group, a cultural immersion. And there were times I needed a translator for British-isms: just what is a noddy bus?

I certainly got my money’s worth.

## The Group

What can I say -- they are wonderful. Every single person is very well travelled and interested in the places we are visiting. I think it’s a characteristic of the British that there is not one grouser, complainer, whiner or cranky person in the bunch. There were a few endearing curmudgeons, but in the last analysis, it was part of their charm.

What I loved the best about the people in this group is that they enjoyed telling me about their trips to America -- some have seen more of my country than I have! They all seem to love our National Parks, our Southwest, Disneyworld and our stores. I guess sport shoes and jeans are so expensive in the UK, that many, when they visit, come with an empty suitcase so they can shop till they drop. The GBP has always been strong against our USD - so it’s like our whole country is on sale.

And as luck would have it, on my first day on the bus I sit near two friendly British women just a bit younger than me. We start talking and don’t stop until it is time to hug goodbye 12 days later. Terri and Lorraine made my trip. And isn’t it true that your travel companions are what make it so memorable? Over the 12 days we learn each others story, laugh, eat, shop and explore together. And Trevor, the one single man on the trip soon joins us to complete the quartet.



We even placed in Maggie’s (our guide) “20 Questions Quiz” based on her lectures and our tour experiences. Just before our farewell dinner, everyone assembled into teams of four and gave themselves a team name. We are the Dream Team. And guess which team won a prize with a score of 17 correct answers out of 20 !!!

Terri (left), Lorraine (center) and Trevor on our night-time walk along the city walls of Alghero, Sardinia.

And Wonderful, Considerate, Informative, Kind Maggie Reeves-- our tour director par excellence.

I love her from the beginning - a well-experienced guide, who has traveled on this itinerary so many times, she knows everything and everybody. She was also Stan's guide three years ago.

She is so thorough. Every day she comes around and talks to everyone on the bus. She anticipates problems. For example, for some hotels, where the lights or the door locks are particularly obtuse, she takes time to explain how they work. Though at one hotel, I couldn't figure out how to turn out the desk light so I just slept with it on all night long. Some things in this part of the world are just too over-engineered!

She leads us on walking tours at our main stops, sometimes booking a tourist train to take us around. We follow her through medieval like cities with winding lanes and citadels perched on the highest hill.



Maggie and Christian, our driver, try to enjoy a peaceful dinner. It didn't work — all 38 of us are just a few tables away!

What especially endeared me to Maggie was that she took care to point out any monuments of particular interest to Americans. In Calvi, Corsica, she made sure I noticed a memorial of a Boeing B17 Flying Fortress that had crashed offshore during WWII.

She had no favorites -- we were all her favorites. Maggie is one of the most admirable guides I have ever met.

## Shopping

I'm trying not to shop. Yes, this is Esther speaking. But sometimes I run across such interesting pieces too hard to resist. Sardinia is known for its coral jewelry and I must admit it is beautiful. I saw the best piece of the trip at our first hotel, but I wasn't attuned to what was available and local costs so didn't buy it. I wish I could transport myself back to Alghero for that two strand 30" necklace with a beautiful and usual hand-made silver and coral clasp. You snooze, you lose.



Though these are museum pieces, they are indicative of the beautiful jewelry available.





Hark -- what is that over there??? Could it be a street market??? This is my kind of place and my own personal nirvana! Almost all the vendors are from Bangladesh, India or Africa and the South Asians had the best stuff. Silver! Unusual Pearls! Precious stones!

One woman had a silver (925) tribal bracelet on display and it took two days of bargaining, along with Terri and Lorraine's help to get it down to a reasonable price. We played "good girl," "bad girl" — and it worked.

The next most fun shopping was on the beach in front of our hotel in Golfo Aranchi. It's those Africans again, but now they have sunglasses, beachwear, hats and..... Rolex watches. One looks pretty good and after Trevor explains to us how to tell the real from the fake, I hope to run into that vendor again. No such luck. Soon an Indian man ambles along. Like Aladdin, he pulls out pearls, rubies and emeralds from his briefcase. Luckily the "Bank of Lorraine" lends me money so I can pay right away and don't have to make him wait while I run to my room.

Some teeny, weeny, insignificant negatives:

- Some bus rides and hotel transfers were long. The killer is our arrival day -- three hours early for airport check-in, a two hour flight to Caligari Airport, then about 6 hour drive along the beautiful Sardinian coast to Alghero at the island's southern tip.

The pot of gold at the end of that first day, however, is a four night stay at the 5-star Carlos V Hotel. The location is beautiful and a picturesque 10 min. walk to the old walled city (Restaurants! Shops! Street Market!!). My room has a great view of the pool and if I lean way out over the balcony I have a sea-view. And come to find out ..... all non-alcoholic beverages in the minibar are complimentary. I loved the mineral water but the juices and soft drinks were too sugary for me.

•prices -- the prices in Sardinia are on the high side; in Corsica, they are astronomical. But on vacation, you just whip out that credit card and sign on the dotted line. I was grateful for all the bountiful breakfasts and included dinners so I could often skip lunch. Our group dinners were very good, with choices in each course. I didn't go hungry.

Our dinners were always delicious, fun and with interesting conversation. Know your politics and world events when traveling with a British group — they know what's going on in the world!  
(l to r): Terri, Trevor, Lorraine, Madelaine and Olwen.



And I tried so very hard to be Miss Perfect American Traveler and not be the stereotyped that annoys people throughout the world:

- I spoke softly
- didn't compare anything we were seeing to what we have in the US

- never, ever broke into a queue
- never complained about my room (one was very stinky, another was very teeny), just kept a stiff upper lip if anything wasn't to my liking
- And I really tried to pack light and handle my own luggage

I'm glad I brought

- my dual voltage coffee maker (though I use it only to heat water for early morning coffee). Unfortunately it goes kaput four days before the end of the trip. Trevor looks it over and confirms it is dead. With a tear in my eye I thank it for being my companion for so many years all over the world -- Southeast Asia, India, China, Africa, Australia and even Antarctica. I remember the many times I've loaned it to someone feeling under the weather so they could make soup or tea. I smile, thank it, then throw it in the garbage.
- two pairs of walking shoes -- to give my little feet a rest as walking on cobblestones in these old cities is murder on the feet

I wish I would have brought:

- my filigree jewelry to wear. It is so popular here and I never get a chance to wear it at home



We spend our last night at a hotel in Cagliari in order to be near the airport for our flight back to the UK the next day. Within minutes of our arrival, four of us were in a taxi to the magnificent National Archaeological Museum. Their display of pre-nuragic statues as well as fabulous gold jewelry found at various archaeological sites is a highlight.





## Last Day in London



All too soon, the trip is over. I take the Stansted Express back to London with Branwen, a lovely woman from Wales who sounds just like Mrs. Doubtfire! She is so charming that people offer to help us with our luggage. I return to the Number 63 Hotel for two nights and on my last full day in London return to Hampstead for lunch, then explore the “Stables” section of Camden Market for some last minute shopping.

I couldn't resist these made-to-order hand-painted shoes! When you visit Camden Market, stop by Booth 515 in the Stables section. There are hundreds of designs to choose from and your shoes are ready in 45 minutes!

## Time To Go Home

I usually don't go on about airport lounges, but Virgin Atlantic's “Clubhouse” is such a good experience, that I need to comment. Have you ever heard of a drive-through check in? Virgin has it. Unfortunately my driver (a private car transfer) did not want to use it as he as well as his car must go thru security which takes time. But even check-in at the Upper Class (Business/First on this airline) is speedy and includes their own security line.

And the lounge ... Imagine walking into the lobby of a 5-star hotel. That is what the “Clubhouse” lounge is like. It is huge and includes a restaurant, a spa (free treatments), a library, TV room and showers. The way the furniture is arranged makes each seating area feel private. And all food is cooked to order -- no buffet on warming tables. You order from the menu and it is brought to your table. Good cappuccino too!



It was a light load today -- only 10 in my cabin which seats 32. And here is where the only negative of the flight comes in. Seats are in a herringbone layout and because of the high seat dividers I could not see out of the window. And I love having windows to look out of! But the seats were comfortable, the movies were good and the food was wonderful. You have to pace yourself on this flight so you can enjoy everything.

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## HOTEL AND RESTAURANT REVIEWS I POSTED ON TRIPADVISOR

### SARDINIA HOTELS

Carlos V Hotel  
Lungomare Valencia, 24 - 07041  
Alghero, Sardinia

<http://www.hotelcarlosv.it/en/>

This is a beautiful property a short walk from the old city. I had room 505 which has a pool view. If I leaned out and looked out, I could see a bit of ocean. The room was large, comfortable and had a balcony with a table and two chairs. I loved the availability of complimentary water and juices in the mini-fridge.

The bathroom design is interesting. It is a little tight with the commode and bidet. The sink is a good size for washing out smalls.

There were a few problems with my room: one floor-lamp never worked and neither did the safe. These were never fixed.

The complimentary wi-fi was good and fairly stable.

The breakfast buffet is wonderful. There are about 6 stations and I didn't even see one until my third day at the hotel. I loved their yogurt machine, located by the coffee tureens - the first one I have ever run across.

I had dinner in the restaurant two nights and the food was good.

Reception staff is friendly and helpful.

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Hotel Gabbiano Azzurro, Golfo Aranchi  
Via dei Gabbiani, 07020  
Golfo Aranci, Sardinia

[www.hotelgabbianoazzurro.com](http://www.hotelgabbianoazzurro.com)

This is a great property for a beach holiday. The public rooms are beautiful, bright and spacious. I was with a group, so was in a standard room. My first room was #112 which was close to the elevator and overlooked a patio. It thought this would be noisy, so asked for a change. I was given #209, which is the exact same room configuration, but further away from the elevator and another floor away from the patio. The one nice thing

about the room is that it had a view of the beach. The food and service is excellent in the dining room and the wait staff are professional and efficient.

Be sure to take a look in the library next to reception to enjoy early photographs of the city.

Be aware of the following:

- the mosquitoes are menacing. Reception gave me a plug-in repellent for the room which worked reasonably well. I also kept the air conditioner on as mosquitoes cannot fly in the cold.

- If you want a beach holiday, then the location is great. But Porto Aranchi is not that interesting a town and the main shopping street can be investigated in about 15 minutes.

- The information booklet in the room states that "The water in the room is not suitable for drinking." This is the only place this is mentioned, there is no sign by the sink. There



View from the balcony of my room - #209

is no complimentary drinking water available- and small bottles of water in the min-fridge are 2.50 euro. There are several grocery stores on the main road to buy water -- you can find 2-liter bottles for .25

The wi-fi is excellent and (supposedly) costs 6euro per day. There is free wi-fi in the lobby area. You can ask for the password at the reception desk.

There is a very nice walk along the beach on a boardwalk. You will see some cafes, bars, fountains and art galleries.

I would stay here again for a beach holiday.

XXX

T-Hotel Cagliari  
Via Dei Giudicati, 66 I 09131  
Cagliari, Sardinia

<http://www.thotel.it/en>

I had room A305 and it was fine for one night. I was with a group so had a standard room. Unfortunately there is no view as the windows face in inner courtyard and all you see is the roof of the lobby restaurant. This room had an odd smell, so I left the windows open when I went out, and it was much better when I returned.

Rooms are ultra-modern in design, and comfortable. Wi-fi is stable and complimentary. The buffet breakfast is excellent and the wait staff will bring you a cappuccino if you ask.

The hotel is a 9 euro taxi ride from the citadel with its excellent Archaeological Museum; and an 11 euro ride from the harbor area.

## RESTAURANTS IN SARDINIA

MoVida Ristorante  
Bastioni Magellano  
Alghero, Sardinia



Four of us had dinner at this picturesque restaurant on the city wall and it was fine. The starter of Salumi e Formaggi (14euro) was excellent. Two of us had grilled tuna as a main course, it was sliced thin and came with a small serving of grilled vegetables (18 euro). We had Seadas for dessert; a warmed pastry filled with melted cheese and honey poured over it (5 euro) and it was interestingly good.

We were offered a complimentary lemoncello liqueur after coffee.

On looking over the bill, we found we were charged for an extra salad. So if more than two people are eating, and each paying for their own, be sure to look over the bill. Unfortunately I have noticed this tactic at other restaurants.

XXX

Lu Fanali  
Stintino, Sardinia

This is probably the prettiest place in town for a seaside lunch. Though the restaurant has inside seating, it is nice to sit across the street in their outdoor seating area overlooking the beach. I had the Seafood Salad as an appetizer (9 euro) and it was excellent. Be forewarned that when large groups arrive, waiters get overwhelmed and service is slow. One person in our group of four waited about 40 min. for an iced coffee. I would eat here again.

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Gran Cafe Garibaldi  
Piazza Garibaldi, 8/9, 07024  
La Maddalena, Sardinia

This is a lovely spot on the main shopping street and across the pedestrian walkway from the municipal building. Service is reasonably quick, but if you are paying by credit card, it is best to go in to pay at the register. I had the caprese salad and the Grand Marnier crepe for dessert. Places like this are not inexpensive -- you pay for location and ambiance.

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La Pirata Restaurant  
Reganlo 11  
Cagliari, Sardinia

If you like fish and seafood, this is an excellent choice. Four of us ate here and each was very pleased with their food. The starters are generous. I had the seafood salad and it was excellent. For the main course, two of us had the seabass, which was listed as prepared in a white wine sauce, but we asked for it grilled. The whole fish came perfectly seasoned and delicious. Service is friendly and the location just 1 1/2 blocks from the road along the port. I would eat here again.

## CORSICA

Hotel L'Abbaye Calvi  
Route de Santore BP 18  
20260 Calvi, Corsica

[www.hostellerie-abbaye.com](http://www.hostellerie-abbaye.com)

This is a lovely old-world property and I enjoyed every minute of my three nights here. Reception and breakfast staff are friendly and helpful, their buffet breakfast, although "French" is generous and there is lots of protein available. I had room 311 which had a small balcony (no room for chairs/table) overlooking rooftops. It was a double room, nicely designed and comfortable. There was good lighting for reading in bed. Wi-fi is complimentary and stable. The grounds are lovely. You can buy a panini for lunch in town, and enjoy it in the hotel garden. The hotel does not serve lunch or dinner.

XXX



Santa Maria Restaurant  
Rue Georges Clemenceau  
20260 Calvi, Corsica

This has to be the best value in the city. The picturesque restaurant has a regular menu, but also offers various set menus. I had the 20.50euro menu, which has a good selection of starters, main courses (including wild boar stew) and desserts. Service is friendly and efficient and the waiter had no problems with separate checks as we were in a large group. I would eat here again and again.

A beautiful view walking down  
from the citadel in Calvi, Corsica

(Note on Restaurants: the restaurants listed are where we ate on our own. Other establishments were used for group meals. I did not post those on trip advisor as our meals were often pre-selected for us and given to us plated)

## PRIVATE CAR TRANSFERS IN LONDON

I love London's traditional Black Cabs - but they are expensive. Drivers have to pass "The Knowledge," a test where they need to know every street, alley, cul- de-sac, etc., as well as colloquial names for buildings, corners and areas within 6 miles in every direction of Charing Cross (considered the center of London). It often takes drivers 3 or more years to pass the test.

But.... for airport transfers I like to use a Private Car Transfer service as they quote a set price and it doesn't go up even if traffic is bad. If drivers don't know your destination, they use their GPS. These are the companies I use:

Swift Cars — [www.swiftcars.co.uk](http://www.swiftcars.co.uk)

Simply Airports — [www.simplyairports.co.uk](http://www.simplyairports.co.uk)

Olympic Cars — [www.londonolympiccar.com](http://www.londonolympiccar.com)



The Dream Team  
l to r: Terri, Trevor, Lorraine and me