

Walk This Way

On Sardinia, a coastal hiking trail leads **Gina DeCaprio Vercesi** away from the crowds and into some of the Italian island's most authentic corners.

Hiking toward Punta Giràdilli on the Selvaggio Blu trail, on Sardinia's eastern coast.

THERE'S AN ANCIENT Sardinian proverb—*Furat chie venit dae su mare*—that means, “He who comes from the sea comes to steal.” Waves of occupation—by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Byzantines, and Romans—instilled a culture of fierce independence. Over the centuries, those living near the coast escaped inland, where the mountains offered protection from seafaring invaders. There, a pastoral heritage took root and flourished, and Sardinia became a land of shepherds.

I had come from the sea on a Zodiac from the colorful port town of Santa Maria Navarrese, on eastern Sardinia's Orosei Coast. But unlike those bygone marauders, I had no plans for conquest. My agenda was to walk in the footsteps of the herders who spent



IMAGE PROFESSIONALS GMBH/ALAMY



From top: Hikers descending juniper-branch ladders on the Selvaggio Blu; Michele Barbiero (seated), a guide with Dolomite Mountains, at the agriturismo Ovile Bertarelli.

centuries blazing trails through this landscape. The Orosei bears little resemblance to Costa Smeralda, the swank seaside playground just a 90-minute drive north. Hemmed in by the rugged Supramonte massif to the west and the sparkling Tyrrhenian Sea to the east, this lesser-known region has emerged as a destination for trekkers from around the world.

The route I would follow was first mapped in 1987 by Tuscan alpinist Mario Verin and his Sardinian friend Peppino Cicalò, who traced and connected ancient shepherds' tracks. The two spent more than a year bushwhacking along this turquoise coast and named the new trail Selvaggio Blu—Wild Blue. For many years, the route appealed almost exclusively to seasoned climbers who were happy to set out armed only with water, food, and camping gear. But in 2018, **Dolomite Mountains** (dolomitemountains.com; six-night trips from \$3,000), a bespoke outfitter that specializes in hiking, biking, and skiing vacations, introduced a series of guided journeys that make the hike attainable for amateurs like me.

"That is where we go today," said my guide, an expert mountain climber named Michele Barbiero, pointing to the 2,461-foot sea cliff known as Punta Giradili. From the Zodiac, I took off my boots and socks and waded through the shallow, crystalline water to a small crescent beach at Baia di Fòrrola. Craning my neck, I considered the massive outcrop and wondered how he expected us to scale it.

Once on the trail, I heard the soft clucking of hand-forged bells from the bushes, evidence of grazing goats—a rustic refrain that would accompany us for the rest of our hike. Thick maquis shrubs punctuated by oleander, prickly pear, and yellow broom blanketed the otherwise arid terrain. Gnarled juniper trees, their limbs sculpted and smoothed by centuries of wind and rain, clung to the trail's outermost reaches.

From time to time precipitous rock faces and craggy overhangs impeded our progress. To pass, we relied on ropes, harnesses, and *iscale 'e fustes*—juniper-branch ladders placed by shepherds who needed to track their flocks in hard-to-reach places. "The shepherds know their goats by the bells," Barbiero told me. "If an animal gets lost, they follow the sound."

After several hours, we ended the day high in the mountains at **Ovile Bertarelli** (39-388-363-5356; set menu \$43), a sustainable *agriturismo* run by Silvio Bertarelli and his family. The scene was rustic, but the cold Ichnusa beers and bowls of olives brought out by Silvio's wife, Vicenza, were welcome luxuries after our hours on the rugged trail. I heard Silvio calling his goats in for ►



Left: A courtyard decorated with *acquasantiere*, or holy-water fonts, at the hotel Su Gologone. Above: Baking *pane e tamatta* in the hotel's wood-fired oven.

► milking with a sharp “Hey, hey, hey,” as I explored the farm’s buildings. With their circular limestone exteriors and funnel-shaped roofs made from silvery juniper branches, they looked like something out of a Tolkien novel.

When Silvio had finished the milking, I sat on a stone wall and watched him whittle a piece of wood into a *su camu*, a tool that has been used by Sardinian shepherds for centuries. The small wooden spindles are put into the baby goats’ mouths to help with weaning. “By late spring, all of the property’s milk is for making cheese,” Silvio’s son, Romolo, explained. The kids, once weaned, are transitioned to hay and pasture.

While we chatted, Vicenza returned with more olives, small glasses filled with homemade Cannonau wine, and a basket of *pane carasau*, thin sheets of crispy bread that are a Sardinian

staple. Inside the main house, a suckling pig—the island’s legendary *maialetto sardo*—roasted over the fire, soon to be enjoyed as the main event of a feast that featured bowls of tangy ricotta, platters of house-cured prosciutto, and Vicenza’s exquisite *culurgiones*—tiny parcels of fresh pasta filled with potatoes, pecorino, and mint. Each time Romolo brought something to the table, his father gestured to the terra-cotta wine jug with a grin, announcing “*c’è un buco nella caraffa!*” (there’s a hole in the pitcher!), and Romolo would fill it again and again with the luscious Cannonau, which local lore credits for the longevity of the Sardinian people.

Although I could have gotten a ride back to Santa Maria Navarrese—the home base for Selvaggio Blu adventures—I opted to spend the night in one of the Oville’s huts. In keeping with the setting, the experience felt more like camping, but even in a



spit-roasted suckling pigs over a blazing hearth. “This is the most authentic part of Sardinia,” Palimodde said, passing me a plate of pecorino. “Our traditions have survived because we are deep in the countryside. Outside influences haven’t been able to reach us here.”

As if to illustrate her point, a quartet entered the courtyard and began to sing. The sound was unlike anything I’d ever heard—a haunting, poetic polyphony called *cantu a tenòre*. The four men, representing a sheep, a cow, the wind, and a lonely herder, stood in a tight circle and chanted in harmony. Their songs told stories of nature, solitude, and hard work—the main ingredients of a shepherd’s life, and the main ingredients of a journey along the Selvaggio Blu. 🌐

sleeping bag on the floor I rested soundly. The next morning, Vicenza laid out fruit and *pane carasau* along with cups of espresso and fresh ricotta drizzled with chestnut honey.

Fortified in the manner of a Sardinian shepherd, Barbiero and I set out with Romolo for the short drive to the trailhead. Over the next few days, we scrambled up ridges slippery with loose limestone rocks and wound our way through shady groves of carob, holm oak, and myrtle. We dropped into yawning fjords to swim in brilliant jade coves and rappelled 100 feet down the side of a cliff to Grotta del Fico, a mammoth sea cave named for the fig tree that once concealed its entrance.

At the end of our journey, we toasted our efforts at **Su Gologone** (sugologone.it; doubles from \$350), a luxurious boutique hotel set in the lush foothills of the Supramonte. I joined artist Giovanna Palimodde, Su Gologone’s vivacious co-owner, for dinner in what she calls the Court of the King. Named to honor her father, Giuseppe “Peppeddu” Palimodde, who opened the hotel in 1967, the patio is used for weekly banquets that showcase local culture and cuisine. Heavy wooden tables with platters of antipasti filled the space. Beneath colonnades, women baked endless rounds of *pane carasau* in wood-fired ovens while the hotel’s chef



▲ A hiker navigates the craggy limestone cliffs along the Selvaggio Blu.