

EXPLORER

Getting a Goat's View of Sardinia's East Coast

By TIM NEVILLE

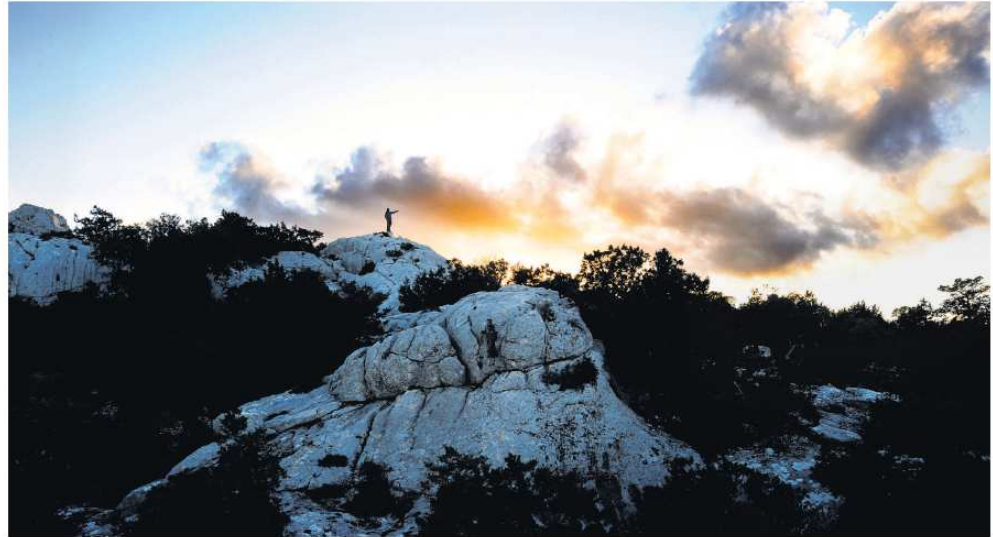
ON the ruggedly gorgeous coast of the Orosei Gulf, in eastern Sardinia, purple limestone cliffs erupt from the Mediterranean like thousand-foot-high walls of some unconquerable redoubt. Ravines wild with goats tumble onto isolated beaches. On hot days when the sirocco wind blows, the land can smell of wild rosemary and thyme.

For all its physical flamboyance, the Orosei (pronounced oh-roh-ZEYE) offers a quieter holiday than the Costa Smeralda, its tony neighbor about two hours north. There, Italian playboys and Arab oligarchs moor their megayachts in twinkling harbors while the paparazzi have a field day.

"The Costa Smeralda is not for us," said Cosci Vasco, a butcher from Val d'Aosta who was vacationing last summer on Sardinia's eastern shore with his wife, Paola, a librarian. "The Orosei is very pretty."

Breathtaking is more like it. About half a dozen remote beaches sit tucked into the limestone folds along the roughly 35 miles of gulf coast, and the customary way to reach many of them is by boat.

Every half hour or so in warm weather, captains from towns like Santa Maria Navarrese, a port to the south, grind their bows onto beaches like Cala Luna and disgorge scores of sun-pickled mainlanders. Moms and dads lounge in skimpy swimwear while kids dive from muffin-top rocks. (The 40-minute ride to Cala Luna costs 30 to 35 euros each



CHRIS WARDE-JONES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Dusk on the Selvaggio Blu along the Orosei Gulf. The trail stretches 30 challenging miles past shepherds' huts and quiet coves that few tourists ever see.



round trip, about \$41 at \$1.32 to the euro.)

But there is another way to see the Orosei, one that few visitors know about. If you don't mind some rough terrain, you can hike.

"Many old shepherds told us we would find paths to the sea, but that to walk along the coast, to cross the ravines, would be very difficult," said Mario Verin, a 66-year-old Tuscan mountaineer who along with a fellow climber, Peppino Cicalo, explored the Orosei coast in the early 1980s. "They were right. It was nearly impossible at first."

But they kept at it in stages over two years, bushwhacking through dense brush, backtracking around dead ends, and following animal paths when they could. Eventually, they mapped a 20-mile south-to-north walking route along the Orosei from Santa Maria Navarrese to Cala Sisine beach.

Fittingly, they named the trail the Selvaggio Blu, or "Wild Blue." Although few English speakers know of it, it has

A rugged trek along animal paths and gorgeous beaches.

evolved into a backpacking adventure, by far the best way — perhaps the only way — to explore one of Sardinia's few undeveloped pockets.

Now, after more exploration farther north, the Selvaggio Blu has grown to about 30 undulating and challenging miles. It works its way under olive trees, past old stone shepherds' huts and along dazzling overhangs that thrum with swallows. It drops to quiet coves and steep limestone inlets that few tourists ever see.

The most extreme hikers bring harnesses and ropes to rappel sheer cliffs that lead to the loneliest sections of coast. Others hike by day and hire rubber dinghies to whisk them back to quaint inns each night. No matter the

method, hiring a guide is a must because finding the route among the many paths made by animals can be difficult.

"It certainly isn't for everyone," says Marcello Cominetti, 48, an English-speaking Italian mountain guide from the Dolomites. Mr. Cominetti spent much of his childhood on Sardinia and in the 1990s helped develop portions of the trail.

With my friend Dan Patitucci and his wife, Janine, both photographers, I set out to hike 20 miles of the most eye-catching terrain over four days, and we hired Mr. Cominetti as our guide. Because virtually no fresh water is available along the route, he arranged for boats to drop packages laden with bottled water — along with biscotti, pecorino and other food — at secluded coves. We hiked pretty much unencumbered, with only very light packs.

Soon after setting out on a trail high over the sea on a hot summer morning, we were bounding along boulders with edges as sharp as cheese graters. We reached a breathtaking vista near the

Cape of Monte Santu, a rocky elbow teetering a thousand feet over the deep blue sea, and paused in the shade of a juniper tree.

Looking over the limestone backstop that rings the gulf, it is easy to see why the Romans, Byzantines and other invaders found it hard to control this area. To this day, the coast remains dotted with ancient towers that Sardinians built centuries ago to look for enemies.

The islanders have historically been mountain people, leaving the once malaria-stricken lowlands to invaders. But the Orosei coast's steep ravines, sheer cliffs and caves — a Tora Bora of sorts — provided cover for wily insurgents who harassed the unwelcome armies. Even after Sardinia officially became an autonomous region of Italy in 1948, bandits and kidnappers hid on this coast, Mr. Cominetti told us.

Today, the gnarled terrain is the biggest problem for visitors, but the rewards for braving it are spectacular. After about six miles and nearly 3,000 ver-

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tical feet down steep, loose terrain, we emerged from the shade of Syrian pines onto a shoulder of broom and gorse to find a splendid limestone ford. Purple rock walls 40 feet high ran parallel out to sea, creating a magnificent natural hallway perhaps 30-feet wide that surged with green Mediterranean waves.

We were the only people there. I stripped down and eased into the water, utterly in awe of what surely must be one of the planet's best swimming holes.

We found the first resupply box left for us on a rock near another lonely inlet a short walk away and made camp under a spreading oak tree. Our feast included olives and tomato-sauce pasta with thin, crispy bread that I draped with salami.

In the morning, Mr. Cominetti whipped up surprisingly frothy instant cappuccinos, and we were walking by 9 a.m.

"For me, the Selvaggio Blu is very beautiful, but sometimes it is not logical," said Mr. Cominetti, who has a shock of curly brown hair and a muscular frame. "I make some variations."

We turned inland and followed goat paths past stumps where 19th-century woodsmen harvested timber for Italy's railroads and made charcoal for steamships. Today, locals hunt these grounds for wild pigs, even though Italian lawmakers declared much of the land around the Orsei Gulf a national park in 1998.

By midday, we reached Cala Goloritzè, a tiny beach at the base of a pleasant ravine. High above, a needle of black limestone punctured the sky. Mr. Cominetti reached deep into a crevice in the cliffs that surrounded the sand to find a rare pocket of fresh water. It tasted earthy, the way wet rocks smell.

WHILE the original Selvaggio Blu continues north past a series of panoramic vistas, we left the trail for a 3,000-vertical-foot hike up to the cliff rim, where a dirt road leads to a gorgeous but basic inn run by a local cooperative. A cold beer and a meal of suckling pig with apricots didn't sound bad, and before long we'd convinced ourselves that staying in a bed wasn't cheating.

On the third day, facing the most technically challenging part of the trip, we fueled up on fresh ricotta drizzled with honey — Roman god food — and headed



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS WARDE-JONES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE The Selvaggio Blu takes hikers along sheer cliffs above the gulf. RIGHT Marcello Cominetti, a guide, rappels down rock face on the trail.

back out. The thermometer on my watch that day read 101 degrees by noon, impressing upon us why hiking in fall and spring are more popular. After about an hour, the trail ended at a cliff and Mr. Cominetti began whistling Pink Floyd's "Learning to Fly."

"Time for some fun," he said, anchoring a rope to a juniper tree. I put on a harness and tied into one end of the rope. Mr. Cominetti passed the other through a friction device to lower me gently off the cliff.

I stepped into the void, and 150 feet of air lay beneath my dangling shoes. To my left, white boats sowed rows of bubbles across the brilliant gulf. The view, or perhaps the height, was stunning.

We did this three more times, each time dropping off cliffs that cut across the trail with no way down them save an airy rappel. The spookiness of dangling so high above the ground was well rewarded when we reached another beach, Biriola, this one with a rock anchoring out of the water that we took turns jumping from.

While we had seen no one on the trail, dozens of sunbathers were at Biriola,

having arrived by boat. Kids splashed while dads strutted in Speedos. One fair-skinned woman in an aqua bikini burned her wrinkled belly so horrifically that it looked like an undercooked roast. It was hard to believe that moments ago, deep in the woods, we had watched a wild goat give birth right before our eyes.

Before long, however, the boats came and spirited everyone away. We were alone again, free to swim and explore on our own schedule.

The next day, our last, we would hike a few short hours to Cala Sisine to catch a boat back to Santa Maria Navarrese, but tonight, the third night out, proved to be the highlight of the trip. Mr. Cominetti led us off the beach and around a corner to a yawning cave in the rock, 60 feet over the waves. It was palatial, with three levels offering a choice of "suites," each with ocean views. Stalactites clung to the ceiling and an evening breeze buffeted the walls.

I have camped all over the world — on top of a 21,000-foot peak in Nepal, on deserted islands in the Philippines, deep in the Mongolian steppe — and



can say with confidence that little compares with the uniqueness of this spot.

We spread sleeping bags across the slick rock, and I lay on my back watching dusk creep across the sky. This spot seemed far too beautiful and remarkable for any concern about whatever hardship it took to get there. When the sea began to shimmer with moonbeams, I knew that I was right. ■

PRIMAL BEAUTY

The best time to hike in Sardinia is in the spring or fall; there is scorching heat in the summer, and it may be chilly for swimming in the winter.

GETTING THERE

Alitalia (www.alitalia.com) has daily flights from Kennedy International in New York to Cagliari, Sardinia, through Rome. From there, it's about a two-hour drive to Santa Maria Navarrese.

Moby, a ferry company (www.moby.it), runs boats from Genoa, Livorno, Piombino or Civitavecchia (Rome) on the Italian mainland to Olbia, on the northeast tip of Sardinia, several times daily. The trip takes six to eight hours from Livorno and prices range from 30 to 70 euros, about \$39 to \$92 at \$1.32 to the euro. Cabins are available at additional rates. You can bring a car. It's about a two-hour drive from Olbia to Santa Maria Navarrese.

GUIDES

Even the most experienced backpackers will find hiking the Selvaggio Blu challenging, with numerous ways to get lost, unreliable maps, and precious little water and flat ground for camping. If you know Italian, you can get information at www.selvaggioblu.it, where you can also order an English guide, "The Selvaggio Blu Trek," for 16 euros.

But hiring a guide is advisable. Marcello Cominetti, a certified mountain and trekking guide with Guide Alpine Star Mountain (39-019-681-6206; www.guidestarmountain.com), is one of the few guides familiar with the region who speaks English. His fees start at 670 euros a person for a group of six for six days on the trail, including two nights in hotels, and most food and boat transfers. Star Mountain also offers sailing trips along the Orsei that include hiking and swimming at some of the coast's most spectacular spots.

WHERE TO STAY

The Albergo Santa Maria in Santa Maria Navarrese (Viale Piammas, 30; 39-0782-615-315; www.albergosantamaria.it) is a comfortable hotel with 37 rooms a short walk from the sleepy town center and with its own beach. Doubles are 57 to 88 euros a person, depending on the season. A restaurant in the hotel has a lovely outdoor patio and serves antipasta, seafood and panna carasau, a local thin, crispy bread.

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