



Sardinia

Archaeology, architecture & art

4–12 September 2026 (MM 156)

9 days

Speaker: Dr R.T. Cobianchi

Includes the best of the island's material culture, from Neolithic and Bronze Age, through Punic and Roman to mediaeval and Renaissance.

The unique Bronze Age nuraghi are a striking feature, as are Tuscan-style Romanesque churches and 16th-century Catalan altarpieces.

Comprehensive range of sites from the south to the north following the west coast of the island.

Despite being the second largest island in the Mediterranean, Sardinia's cultural treasures remain largely undiscovered by travellers. Its extraordinary jagged coastline and clear blue seas have earned it a deserved reputation for beach tourism, with villas and resorts clinging to the cliffs along the Costa Smeralda. Yet the wealth of prehistoric sites, Punic and Roman remains and Pisan-Romanesque churches make it a fascinating destination for those prepared to forgo the luxury of the coast and explore inland.

As with all the larger islands in the Mediterranean, Sardinia was plundered and settled by a succession of pirates and empire builders. However, due in large part to its rugged and impenetrable landscape, Sardinian identity was never wholly extinguished. Her Bronze Age settlements truly set it apart. Deep gorges, craggy limestone and slate mountain ranges and swathes of verdant countryside hide over 7,000 nuraghi, peculiar conical stone structures which were forts, palaces and simple domestic dwellings. Much is left to the imagination as little is known about these edifices, though digs are leading to some fascinating insights.

Evidence of Phoenician power on the island can be seen at Tharros on the west coast, established in the eighth century bc in a strategic position jutting into the sea in the Gulf of Oristano. Later colonised by the Romans, the site is a remarkable example of a coastal city-state. Finds can be seen in Sardinia's superlative collection of archaeological museums.

The decline of the Roman Empire left Sardinia open to Goths, Lombards, for a short spell the Byzantines, and to the new Muslim empires of North Africa and Spain. The Pisans and Genoese in the eleventh century left an



Cagliari, late-19th-century engraving from Gazetteer of the World, Vol. II.

indelible mark on the island with their superb Romanesque churches in the Logudoro region, indeed some of the finest in Europe.

Rule by the Kingdom of Aragón brought a Spanish dimension to the island's culture, most evident today in the Catalan-Gothic architecture of the fishing port at Alghero and, concealed in mediaeval churches in tiny villages the length of the island, sumptuous sixteenth-century retables which rival coeval ones on the Italian mainland.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 4.00pm (British Airways) from London Gatwick Airport to Cagliari. First of three nights in Cagliari.

Day 2: Cagliari. The morning is spent in the Cittadella dei Musei: the art gallery has works by the foremost Sardinian retablo painter, Pietro Cavaro, and the excellent archaeological museum has important finds from the Nuragic, Phoenician and Roman periods. See the Giganti di Mont'e Prama, nuragic stone figures representing warriors, boxers and archers that have been recently reconstructed from over 5,000 fragments excavated in the 1970s. The cathedral has a remodelled Pisan-Romanesque façade and a sculpted pulpit from 1160.

Day 3: Barumini, Tuili. The Nuraghe Su' Nuraxi is the largest of the Bronze Age nuraghi, with an impressive central tower constructed of basalt. At nearby Tuili, the unprepossessing Chiesa di San Pietro houses an exquisite retablo by the Maestro di Castelsardo (c. 1500). Final night in Cagliari.

Day 4: San Giovanni di Sinis, Oristano. Begin our journey to the north of the island. Tharros is a magnificently located Punic and Roman site, with fine views over the Gulf of Oristano. The nearby Byzantine Church of San Giovanni in Sinis is the oldest of Sardinia's churches. Lunch at a fish restaurant in the town of Cabras, before continuing through the marshes of the lagoon, arriving in Oristano proper mid-afternoon. Overnight here.

Day 5: Santa Giusta, Paulilatino. Continue north, breaking the journey first in Santa Giusta. The Basilica, erected in 1135, is one of the earliest of the Tuscan Romanesque churches. Visit the picturesque Nuraghe Santa Cristina, surrounded by olive groves and with an astounding underground shrine from the second century bc. After lunch, Nuraghe Santu Antine, the most complex nuragic site in Sardinia. Continue to Alghero for the first of four nights.

Sardinia continued

Day 6: Alghero. Alghero is a picturesque seaside town, still functioning as a commercial fishing port. A Catalan colony for nearly 400 years, the Spanish influence can be seen in the Catalan-Gothic architecture of the old town. Visit the nearby Domus de Janas site Anghelu Ruju, a fine example of the pre-nuragic hypogea found all over the island.

Day 7: Sassari. Drive to Sassari, which has a network of charming mediaeval streets culminating in stately 19th-century piazze. The cathedral of San Nicola has one of Italy's most lavish Baroque façades. There is a large collection of pre-historic, Punic and Roman artefacts in the Museo Sanna, as well as excellent models of the nuraghi and tomb complexes.

Day 8: Porto Torres. At Porto Torres, the Basilica di San Gavino is a monumental Romanesque structure, Sardinia's earliest and finest, with almost thirty Roman columns flanking the nave. The Copper Age sanctuary of Monte D'Accoddi is entirely unique in the Mediterranean, reminiscent of the tombs of the Aztecs.

Day 9: Logudoro. Homeward journey. See two examples of Pisan-Romanesque churches, each in a very different setting in the rural landscape. Santissima Trinità di Saccargia is a splendid example, built in black basalt and white limestone in 1116. Santa Maria del Regno has a magnificent ornate retablo from 1515. Fly from Olbia to London Heathrow, arriving c. 3.30pm.

Lecturer

Dr R. T. Cobiachi. Art historian and researcher specializing in Italian art and architecture of the Renaissance and Baroque. His interests also span from the iconography of the late Middle Ages to the sculpture of Neoclassicism.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach throughout; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 3 lunches, and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; admissions, tips, taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Palazzo Tirso, Cagliari (palazzotirsocagliari.com): a well-equipped, 5-star hotel overlooking the marina. **Mariano IV Palace Hotel, Oristano** (hotelmarianoiv.com): the only centrally located 4-star hotel in the vicinity, in need of refurbishment. Bedrooms are a good size but noticeably dated. **Hotel Calabona, Alghero** (hotelcalabona.it). A charming beachside hotel with attractive outdoor space and pool. *Single rooms are double for sole use throughout.*

Flights. *Please note the outbound flight departs from London Gatwick and the inbound flight returns to London Heathrow.*

How strenuous? This itinerary involves a lot of walking, both over rough ground at archaeological sites and cobbled or uneven paving within the town centres. Fitness and sure-footedness are essential, particularly for clambering up the Nuraghi. Some days involve a lot of driving. Average distance by coach per day: 75 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.