Sardinia, the Mediterranean’s second largest island, has a land mass of about 9,300 square miles. To the north across the narrow Strait of Bonifacio is the island of Corsica. To the east, approximately 150 miles across the Tyrrhenian Sea, is the Italian mainland. To the south is Tunisia with its capital of Tunis, the site of Sardinia’s ancient enemy and conqueror, Carthage. To the west lay the Balearic Islands and Spain which ruled Sardinia for hundreds of years.

Sardinia has a long and violent history as many foreign conquerors have sailed to her shores. The interior of the island is very rugged with hills and mountains, deep valleys and deeper forests. The Sardinian people, who sought shelter in the central mountains for thousands of years, have been protected, isolated and therefore have changed very little throughout the generations. The official language of the island is Italian, of course, but the language of the people in the rural countryside is closer to Latin and ancient Roman. Today the island is an autonomous region of Italy with an officially recognized genetically and ethnically distinct population.

In ancient times Sardinia grew great quantities of grain. Much of it was exported through the port of Olbia, founded by the Carthaginians on Sardinia’s Emerald Coast. Ironically, the name Olbia means “happy city.” Over the centuries the town has been anything but happy as it has faced invader after invader and razed to the ground countless times only to be rebuilt and destroyed again.

Since the 1960s quiet, peaceful Sardinia has seen a slow yet steady invasion of another kind. Tourists … not that the island has been overrun … far from it. It is simply that after long centuries it has only been recently that people have arrived with smiles upon their faces rather than frightening scowls and cameras in their hands rather than swords and spears. Thooc days Sardinia will welcome and amaze you.

HISTORY

The island of Sardinia has been inhabited long before written history was ever pressed into the first soft clay of a tableau rasa. Human remains have been discovered on Sardinia and dated as far back as 250,000 BC, to the age of Homo Antecessor and Homo Heidelbergensis. Some have written that the earliest Sardinians were a group of people that were driven out of Egypt by an early Pharaoh and ended up settling on the island. Others have written that a migrating people from Sardis called the Shardana first settled the island and gave it its name. Studying DNA evidence some scientist have come to the conclusion that original Sardinians may be a separate, distinct, ancient yet unknown pre-Indo European group much like the Basque of the Pyrenees.

With so much of Sardinia’s earliest history shrouded in mystery, it is known that parts of the island were rich in obsidian, the incredibly sharp glass-like rock, evidence of volcanic eruption. Capable of being chipped into tools and weapons like an ax, knife, arrowhead or spear point, this rock was highly prized throughout the entire Mediterranean. Having obsidian in great supply brought the Sardinians into contact with many other people in the region.

The Sardinians of the Neolithic and Bronze Age, 5,000 BC, where highly skilled stone masons. They built amazing forts, towers, tombs, bastions, walls and observatories. Thousands of examples of their brilliant work remain today. The sheer numbers of the structures point to a large population.

Around 800 BC the Phoenicians, from the costal area of modern day Syria, Lebanon and Israel, were expanding their trading empire. As they did throughout much of the Mediterranean, the Phoenicians founded a number of trading posts along the coast of Sardinia. These villages were built not only for trading
purposes but also to provide shelter from storms and facilities for re-supply and repair of their ships. Among the towns founded by the Phoenicians would be the capital of the island, Cagliari.

In the early 500s BC the islanders attempted to throw the Phoenicians out. The Phoenicians turned to their allies and close relations, the Carthaginians of North Africa, for help. Sardinia was quickly swept up into the Empire of Carthage. In 264 BC war broke out between the Carthaginians and the Romans as the two cities struggled for control of the Mediterranean. This would become known as the First Punic War. After 23 years of conflict, both on land and sea, the Romans were finally victorious though both sides were financially, physically and emotionally exhausted. Sardinia was still in the hands of the Carthaginians, however. Carthage had a serious problem in that she could not pay the mercenaries she had hired to fight with her against the Romans. The mercenaries turned on the Carthaginians and massed for a siege against the city. Other mercenaries took Sardinia as their payment. Rome offered to defend the mercenaries on Sardinia against Carthaginian attack then wisely sat back and watched and waited. Carthage had had enough of the Romans, for a while at least, and did not contest Sardinia. Rome had taken Sardinia without a fight. She would turn the island into her growing empire’s grain basket. It would be bread from Sardinian wheat and barley that the legions of Rome would eat as they marched off to conquer much of the known world.

As history unfolded in the Mediterranean over the centuries, Sardinia would be conquered by the Vandals in 456 AD. Their control of the island would last less than a century. In 534 AD the Vandals would be driven out by the Byzantines of the eastern Roman Empire. By the late 700s and early 800s the Byzantines could no longer defend their possessions as Muslim Saracens and Berbers, as they would throughout much of the Mediterranean, brought continual havoc down upon the coastal towns of Sardinia.

In 1492, having recently fought its way out from under Muslim domination, Spain was unified. Not long afterward she would take control of Sardinia and maintain it for nearly 400 years. Having passed back and forth a number of times to different mainland Italian city-states, finally in 1860 it was Sardinia’s turn. The island’s King, Victor Emanuel II, would become the king of a newly united Italy.

OLBIA PLACES OF INTEREST

Olbia, is on Sardinia’s famous Emerald Coast. Though Sardinians have lived in the area for millennia, long before the arrival of foreigners, the town itself was established as a port by the Carthaginians in the VI century BC. Today Olbia is Sardinia’s main point of entry for guests from around the world. There are many nice restaurants and shops in the town.

The Church of Saint Paolo is in the Old City’s Piazza Civica. It was built in the 1600s, which in terms of the history of the island, makes it almost brand new. The architecture of the old buildings in the area is extremely interesting.

2 The Church of San Simplicio, on the Via Simplicio, is an important site in Olbia. The church is dedicated to Saint Simplicio, the former bishop of the town who, it is believed, was martyred for his faith by Emperor Diocletian in the 3rd century. Construction began in the 11th century upon the site of a large Roman graveyard, remains of which can still be seen within the church.
Beyond Olbia

It is not difficult to get around on Sardinia and the town of Olbia is a great starting point. North to south on the island is only about a four hour drive. East to west takes about 2 hours.

A few miles outside of the city is The Holy Well of Sa Testa, dating back to the 700s AD. Some believe that religious ceremonies were performed at the well. Though its exact use is uncertain, the fact that fresh water was available made the well an important site.

Tavolara Island is just off the coast from Olbia. There is wonderful scuba diving and snorkeling in the clear Mediterranean waters. There are a couple of small restaurants on the island. At one point in the 19th century, the island had a king by the name of Bertolini. The only problem was that, at the time, King Bertolini was the sole resident of Tavolara.

Pedres Castle is just a few miles to the west of Olbia. As far as can be determined, the fortress was begun in the late 1200s and construction continued for close to a hundred years. The castle offers a commanding view of Olbia Bay and the surrounding area.

Cabu Abbas is a fine example of the Bronze Age Nuraghe structures dating back to around 1500 BC. An ancient wall surrounds the site.

Li Lolghi – The Giant’s Tomb is about 15 miles outside Olbia. It is the finest example of a prehistoric stone burial chamber on Sardinia. It is estimated that the site dates back from 1250 – 2500 BC.

Arzachena is about 15 miles outside Olbia. There are numerous interesting and mysterious prehistoric sites in this location.

The Li Muri Necropolis is in the Arzachena area near the Giant’s Tomb. This “City of the Dead” is said to have been the final resting place of important islanders dating back to the Neolithic Age, around 3,000 BC.

Porto Cervo is home to one of the most expensive and more exclusive shopping areas on the island. Gucci, Moschino, and Versace all have stores here. Located overlooking the local marina, Porto Cervo is also one of the more scenic towns in Sardinia and is touted as the capital of Costa Smeralda.

SHORE EXCURSIONS

To make the most of your visit to Olbia, Porto Cervo and surrounding areas we suggest you take one of the organized Shore Excursions. For Information concerning tour content and pricing, consult azamaracclubcruises.com or contact the onboard Shore Excursion Desk. When going ashore, guests are advised to take with them only the items they need and to secure any valuables.

LOCAL CUSTOMS

Bargaining: Most items have fixed prices, but it may be possible to get a discount on a large purchase. It is normal to bargain in markets, except for food items.

Tipping: Generally a 10% service charge is added to restaurant bills, however, as this amount does not all go to the waiter, it is normal to offer a 5% tip to the waiter in addition to any service charge. For taxi drivers, a 5-10% tip is acceptable.

LOCAL CUISINE AND DRINK SPECIALTIES

The Sardinians were, and many still are, hunters of wild game and wild mushrooms, herdsmen raising large flocks of sheep, goats and pigs. They were and are successful, self-sufficient farmers growing impressive fields of fine wheat. It has only been in relatively modern times, along side the traditional inland cuisine that a coastal cuisine has slowly developed. Some of the favorite local dishes include: Flame or Pit Roasted Meats slowly cooked and usually prepared whole. Agnello con finocchietti is a slowly simmered lamb stew with tomatoes, a few selected herbs, onions and fennel. Favata is a thick bean stew with pork sausage and bacon fat. Sa corda is stewed sheep intestines with tomato and onions. Culurgiones is a type of ravioli filled with pecorino in a rich tomato sauce. Malloreddus is another name for the famous gnocchi, those little ridged pasta or potato dumplings, added to sausage that has been stewed in basil and garlic based tomato sauce then sprinkled with grated pecorino. Aragosta alla Catalana is lobster grilled with lemon and olive oil. Bottarga, a coastal favorite on the island, is pressed tuna row. Sardinia’s Wild Mushrooms ... among the best are: Antunna, found in the hills and mountains, it has a brown head and is often covered with olive oil or pig fat and roasted over an open fire. Ovules are very sweet, have an orange top and are usually found in the island’s forests. They can be served raw in a salad or baked in any appropriate dish. Sardinian bread or Pane carasau, is thin, dry and hard. This is not because they do not know how to make good bread on Sardinia, but rather due to the fact that pane carasau keeps for an extraordinarily long time. The wives and mothers made this traditional bread for their husbands and sons who were shepherds that spend weeks and months away from home in the hills and mountains tending their flocks. Sardinia’s Cheese is justly famous due to the fine quality of their mountain raised sheep, goats and cattle. There is hardly an inland family that can not or does not make a wide variety of wonderful cheese. A few of the favorites are: Caprini and Pecorini are soft sheep’s milk cheese often served on a slice of civruxu (soft bread) or used as a rich flavoring in soups or pasta. Pecorino Sardo has two separate varieties, both of which have the distinction of being granted the DOP seal, meaning that they are protected by European Union law as unique to the region; the very traditional Il Fiore Sardo and the internationally famous Pecorino Romano.

Up until just a few years ago most experts would have said that the
wines of Sardinia had been originally imported by the numerous invaders and conquerors that had taken and colonized the island over the millennia. However, two recent discoveries have astonished the wine world. The first discovery was by Italian university researchers who now believe that Sardinian Cannonau is, in fact, not a Spanish import, but rather a grape indigenous to the island. The second finding was made by a team of archeologists from Italy and Holland. In a number of ancient sites scattered around the island, wine sediment and literally hundreds of grape seeds have been unearthed ... they date back to 1,200 BC. In other words, though wines in ancient Mesopotamia have been traced as far back as 4 to 8,000 BC, as far as the central and western Mediterranean is concerned, Sardinian wines may very well be the oldest. If this discovery proves accurate the ramifications would prove startling. It would mean that many of Italy's sophisticated wines may actually have their roots firmly planted deep in the ancient soil of humble Sardinian vineyards. Among the favorite wines of Sardinia are: Cannonau, a rich red wine that goes especially well with fire roasted lamb. Carignano is a red wine that goes well with hors d'oeuvres, especially full bodied cheeses. Semidano is a very nice everyday white table wine that is wonderful with the first course. Vernaccia di Oristano, a light dry white wine that is the favorite accompaniment to local sea food and lobster dishes. It is also wonderful with sweet pastry. Bottled water is recommended.

LOCAL CURRENCY

The unit of currency in this port is the euro. There are 8 euro coins with a common face. On the reverse, each member state contributes a design. There are 7 euro notes. All euro coins and notes are legal tender in member states. Most major credit cards are accepted.

TELEPHONE FACILITIES

Most public telephones take local coins and/or telephone cards which can be purchased at the Post Office or Tobacco consists.

A coin or telephone card may be required to dial these access numbers:

AT&T: 800.172.444
MCI: 800.90.5825

TRANSPORTATION

If you decide to take a taxi keep in mind that they can be quite expensive even over short distances. A few taxis will be available at the pier. It is important to negotiate a fare before departing. In order to rent a car you must be at least 18 years old and have had your driver's license for over one year. If you are under 25 years old the rental company may require a surcharge. Seatbelts and child seats are required. Driving in Sardinia is easier than driving on the Italian mainland. It is much less chaotic. Keep in mind that if you are stopped by a policeman for a traffic violation they can require you to pay the ticket immediately. Due to the lack of dependability timetables the use of local buses is not recommended.

USEFUL WORDS AND PHRASES

Yes • Si
No • No
Good Day • Buon Giorno
Good-bye • Arrivederci
Thank-you • Grazie
You're Welcome • Prego