



Mad for Maddalena

Sardinia's secret archipelago has never been so peaceful, writes Kathryn Tomasetti

MED AND BOARD

Getting there

The nearest airport is Olbia, on Sardinia, accessible from several European cities. Bus and ferry service to Palau. Then Saremar Ferries (€4.70, HK\$46) from Palau to La Maddalena. saremar.it

Where to eat & drink

- L'Avventura
Via Amendola 21
ristorantelavventura.com
- Bar Madrau, Piazza Garibaldi Giuseppe 2
- Bar Zi' Anto', Punta Tegge

Where to stay

- Hotel Excelsior
Via Amendola 7, La Maddalena
Doubles from €105
excelsiormaddalena.com
- Hotel Le Nereidi
Via Don Vico 9, Padule;
Doubles/apartments from €45
lenereidihotel.it

Getting around

Boat hire from €80 (no licence needed), plus €30 for fuel

For more information

lamaddalenapark.it

Sardinia's Maddalena Archipelago is as undiscovered as it is exotic. This Italian island chain in the Mediterranean spreads out from La Maddalena, its main town, in a sprinkle of 60 islands with ice-white beaches and turquoise waters. Information about the archipelago is scant. Only fishermen and the odd Italian holidaymaker frequent its 180 kilometres of coastline, and much of it was until recently off-limits because a Nato naval base was located there.

The 20-minute boat ride from Sardinia to the main island, also called La Maddalena, transports passengers from tranquillity to timelessness. The first glimpse of the archipelago reveals handsome stone houses. Prickly pears, juniper and thick pines form a herby green carpet along the deserted coast.

We disembark at La Maddalena's age-old port. Bakeries are packed with residents loading up on carta da musica, wafer-thin Sardinian flatbread, and formaggelle (sweet ricotta and raisin pastries). At the covered market, tuna from Sardinia's southern coast is laid out alongside prawns and piles of plump squid.

We duck into the waterfront restaurant L'Avventura, a snug spot

renowned as La Maddalena's finest eatery. The backdrop of sepia-toned photographs of 19th-century Italian royalty may be dated, but the cuisine is modern. Mixed antipasti includes crispy crab cakes doused in thick balsamic vinegar and grilled aubergine slices wrapped around tomato-marinated octopus. Skinny vermicelli is layered with clams and bottarga, a local salted fish roe. Fregola sarda, toasted whole wheat pasta served in soup, bob in the broth like giant, unctuous couscous.

Thanks to the scented island foliage and a dearth of traffic, La Maddalena is perfect for exploration on foot. Early the next morning, we hike trails that loop into the countryside and along the tranquil shores. Our route takes us uphill to Guardia Vecchia, the island's old military fort, before plunging back down to a cobalt blue sea. At the bay of Cala Francese (French Cove), we follow a dirt track down to the water, picking our way between bulbous pink granite rocks, shaped and sculptured by the wind. We spread our market picnic – smoky ricotta cheese, mortadella ham and fresh focaccia – by the water's edge. On Spargi, the island opposite, beaches beckon. Before us, cormorants slip beneath the translucent sea, while seagulls dive for fish in the surrounding bay.

Back in town we round off the day with a glass of Prosecco at the century-old Bar Madrau. Set in the heart of Piazza Garibaldi, the terrace is perfect for people watching. A bronze sculpture of Giuseppe Garibaldi occupies a permanent place on the piazza's central bench. This 19th century general was crucial in bringing together Italy's disparate city states into a unified country. The archipelago has treated Garibaldi as an adopted son after he retired here in the 1870s in the hope of some very un-Italian peace and quiet.

The waitress at Bar Madrau says the only way to get to know La Maddalena like a local is to hire a *gommone* boat and explore the tiniest islands. Don't we need a licence? "Figurati! Little boats with little engines are not Ferraris. Give it a try."

The next morning we amble down to the seafront Piazza Umberto, where a clutch of old men rent out *gommoni*, or RIBs (rigid inflatable boats). Local law states there's no need for a nautical licence to pilot boats with motors less than 40 horsepower.

After careful consideration – studiously avoiding a chrome and matt-black craft too ostentatious for our tastes – we select our *gommone*. The owner smoothes a crumpled



When we round the southern cape and catch sight of Cala d'Alga, we know we've found our island paradise

map of the islands before us: where do we plan to go? We debate heading to the northernmost trio of islands, Razzoli, Santa Maria and Budelli. The last is home to a crescent-shaped arc of pink sands, Spiaggia Rosa, but its protected status makes its beauty both mythical and off-limits to visitors. Yet we were enchanted by the turquoise slashes we'd seen on the horizon the day before, and our hearts are set on visiting the nearby island of Spargi. He nods in approval. The wind is light and blowing from the southeast, so Spargi is an excellent choice.

The three of us all jump aboard our little boat, and the owner begins our practical instruction. Squeeze the throttle to accelerate. Push down to reverse. Drop the anchor to