

THE SALT PATH

RECLINING ON SARDINIA'S MINERAL-RICH SOUTH COAST, CAGLIARI IS ONE OF EUROPE'S UNDERSUNG CAPITALS – BUT A CLUTCH OF NEW HOTELS IS SEASONING THE CITY'S ANCIENT SOUL

BY CATHERINE FAIRWEATHER. PHOTOGRAPHS BY LETIZIA CIGLIUTTI



Tuerredda Beach near Chia village in southern Sardinia

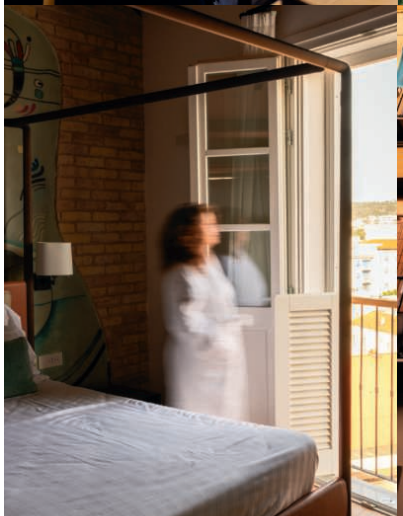














On the medieval ramparts of the Castello district in Sardinia's capital, Cagliari, the tables of Gli Uffici – a timeless and traditional restaurant in the restored Palazzo Boyl – are filling up fast. This is a city where the lunch hour remains sacrosanct and churches, schools and offices close in its honour. Locals and visitors come for views of the ancient citadel sweeping down to the port and sea, and to feast on the nostalgic favourite porceddu. A suckling pig is slow cooked with dandelion and rock salt extracted from Santa Gilla, the lagoon with salt pans that attracts the city's famous pink flamingos. The white crystalline pyramids there graze the horizon.

Reaching for the red wine, I knock over the salt, which has my Cagliaritana lunch companion, photographer Francesca Ardau, urging me to "appease the devil – throw a pinch over your left shoulder". It's a superstition, she tells me, dating back to the Roman conquest, when salt was too precious to spill. Its production was the foundation of the island's economy. In fact the word "salary" comes from it.

I relish lingering over lunch in Cagliari. Back in my student days in Italy, before EU standardisation and the office culture of lunch on the hoof took over, the imperative of time to sit down and eat, then honour the siesta hour, was a non-negotiable daily ritual. Globalisation has changed the rhythms of urban life even for the southerners of the Mediterranean basin, but Cagliari continues on its own course. Hovering between mountain and sea, Italy and Africa, unmoored, it remains a world apart.

The island has long been exploited for its mineral wealth and strategic position in the middle of the Med, with its residents enduring centuries of colonisation as a result. The Carthaginians, Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Genoese, Pisans, Aragonese and Spaniards all left their mark, but the islanders' historical insularity and isolation means a robust sense of self-reliance persists.

Sardinians remain outliers in the European genetic landscape too. "Those young beans that you enjoy podding and eating with a hunk of pecorino," says my companion conspiratorially, "yes, they can help you live longer, stronger – but if you are Sardinian, they can also kill you." Up to a quarter of the population has favism, a deficiency of the enzyme





From top right: Calamosca Beach; Faro Capo-Spartivento hotel. *Opposite, clockwise from bottom left*: Emerson Beach Club at Poetto beach; view of the Cathedral of Santa Maria; Antico Caffè; plants at the Sella del Diavolo viewpoint; windows on Via San Domenico; room at Casa Clàt hotel; customers at Antico Caffè





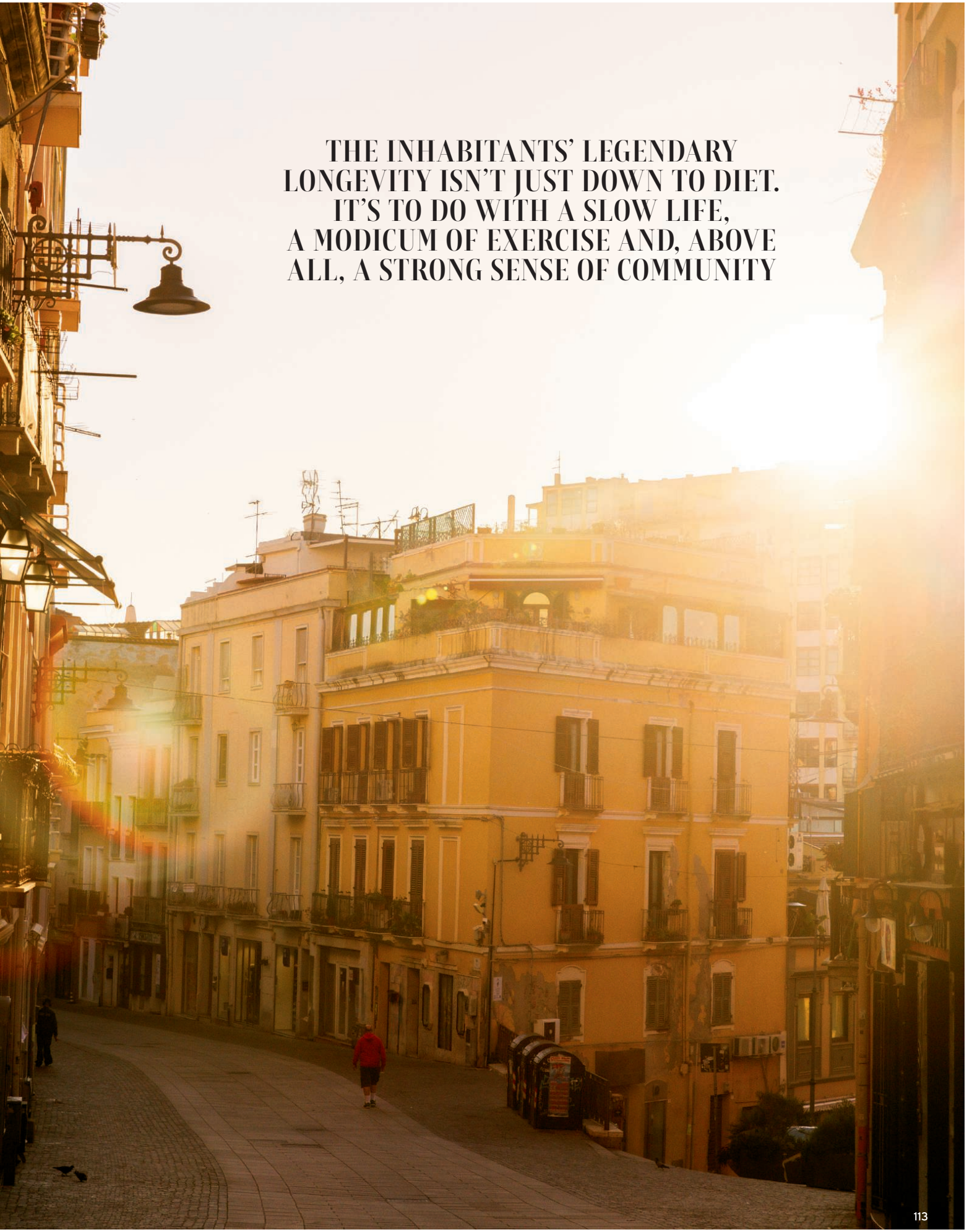
needed to digest the fava bean, a cornerstone of Sardinia's famous health-giving diet and its Blue Zone status, awarded to only five places in the world.

The inhabitants' legendary longevity isn't just down to diet and Cannonau red wine's artery-cleansing flavonoids. It's to do with a slow life, a modicum of exercise and, above all, a strong sense of community. All of which I imbibe the next day at San Benedetto, one of the largest covered markets on the continent. There's a pecorino merchant singing arias to his cheeses and joshing with the pensioner he's addressing as "giovanotto", or young man. I'm charmed, even though he doesn't take cards and I have to trudge off to find a cash machine. The same thing happens at the Villanova studio of ceramist Gianpaolo Olianas when I try to buy a pair of whimsical cerulean goats. Cagliari is an anomaly, perhaps the only remaining Western capital where cash is still king. But Olianas is keen to make amends for my troubles and insists I hang onto his only umbrella, to keep dry. A small gesture, but are civilised societies not built upon such consideration? I think of the pilgrim I met on the path to Mandas outside Cagliari, who hadn't slept in a bed for 59 months and was stunned to be offered a free night at the lovely Antica Locanda Lunetta inn. And I'm touched by the generosity of Easycletta, which refuses any payment for an e-bike rental when I run out of juice halfway along Poetto beach.

Admittedly the beach seems to go on forever. At more than four miles long, the bleached stretch of sand is one of the lengthiest in Italy, extending beside the bamboo-and-reed-fringed brackish lagoons of the Molentargius-Saline Regional Natural Park, where herons, egrets, harriers and flamingos come to breed. With more than 1,100 miles of coastline to choose from, it's inevitable that visitors to Sardinia will end up at a beach. In summer all of Cagliari seems to gather around the many kiosks on the shores of the Bay of Angels. There's also the freedom of a spiaggia libera – a wild beach such as those in Capo Teulada's protected naval zone or along the giant windswept dunes of the untrammelled west. Or there are the sunbeds and ice creams of the glamorous beach clubs, including the ones on Poetto.

NORA, A LITTLE more than 20 miles from Cagliari and founded in the eighth century BC, was the island's original coastal capital. Only a fraction of it is excavated and local newspapers intermittently publish headlines about divers emerging from the sea with ancient loot and fragments of Roman bling. In 2024, Dolce & Gabbana's Alta Moda show took place in Nora – spotlighting its ancient civilisation founded on the salt, wheat, obsidian and mineral trade routes between the Levant and Sardinia – with catwalks erected between the remains of Phoenician columns and bathhouses. Some of

From top left: Caffè Svizzero; butcher's shop on Via San Domenico. *Opposite*: Via Giuseppe Garibaldi at sunset



THE INHABITANTS' LEGENDARY LONGEVITY ISN'T JUST DOWN TO DIET. IT'S TO DO WITH A SLOW LIFE, A MODICUM OF EXERCISE AND, ABOVE ALL, A STRONG SENSE OF COMMUNITY

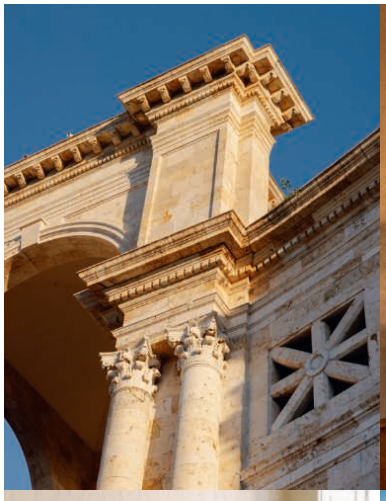
the fashion house's clothes were inspired by the rich legacy of the island's craftsmanship, its filigree jewellery and the intricate embroidery of pibiones textiles.

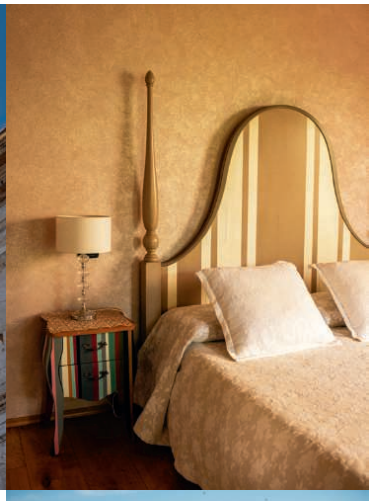
If Dolce & Gabbana's event seemed to herald a moment in the sun for Cagliari, the end of the pandemic fuelled feverish bouts of development and restoration. Hotels have mushroomed in a city where, only a few years ago, finding a decent place to stay was hard. Palazzo Doglio, the first five-star hotel, brings grandeur to a formerly down-at-heel neighbourhood, and Casa Clàt is an esoteric boutique gem that champions the island's cultural heritage. Progress can be slow and is often held up whenever a spade hits another fragment of historical masonry along the waterfront artery of Via Roma. With layers of history being peeled back each year, fresh discoveries keep adding to the narrative of an ancient yet still emerging city.

I LEAVE THE Archaeological Museum until the end of my trip in order to get a perspective on everything that's shaped Europe's oldest landmass. The weight of its 7,000-year history is captured in the immutable expressions of the Giants of Mont'e Prama, sculptures of warriors discovered in the 1970s, and in the stony Medusa missing an eye who stares down the centuries from her museum perch. Situated at the top of the Castello, the museum is a silent sanctuary from the crowds. When I finally emerge, the heat outside is abating. Along the grand wide avenues that wrap around the citadel, the deep shade of mighty old ficuses is a balm. I'm told they were planted by Sardinian soldiers before they left to fight in the Crimean War, and they're fine examples of Cagliari's astounding statement trees, along with the showy parades of jacarandas shedding purple over Avenue Buoncammino and the huge and headily scented mock orange plants. None of them are signposted – the city's treasures are blissfully unsung and underexploited.

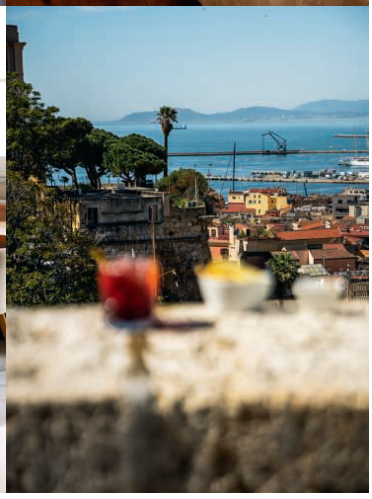
Some of the most vivid writing about Cagliari is by DH Lawrence, who came here briefly in 1921. He understood the strange enchantment of a stone city built on a vertical, with seemingly endless flights of stairs and sudden drops. He saw it as an otherworldly place, outside of time and history. "Lovely space about one," he wrote in *Sea and Sardinia*, "nothing finished, nothing final. It is like liberty itself." I stand upon the ramparts, watching the setting sun spill like paint across the rippling canvas of the sea, and ponder the meaning of freedom for an island that hasn't really found independence since the Middle Ages, but has nevertheless carved out an identity all of its own.











Clockwise from top right: view of Cagliari from Sella del Diavolo; Antica Locanda Lunetta hotel; aperitivo and view at Libarium; Casa Clàt; Bastion of Saint Remy. *Opposite, clockwise from top right*: tuna tartare at Luigi Pomata restaurant; Casa Clàt; Piazzetta San Domenico; building in the Castello district; Libarium; Antica Cappelleria Martello; Antica Locanda Lunetta


AGUS
SAIUS 6



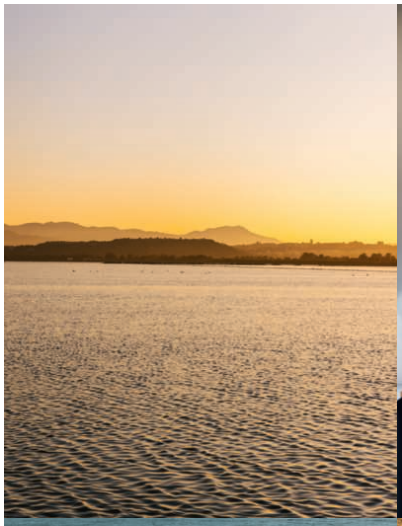




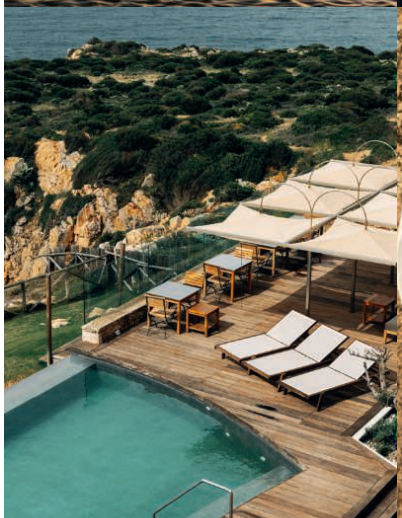














EXPLORING CAGLIARI

FAVOURITE HOTELS

Palazzo Boyl 1840

Contessa Tomassini Barbarossa still lives in this neoclassical palazzo in the medieval Castello district, which has recently become a hotel too. There are eight rooms (soon to be 12) overlooking the ancient fortifications, and cinematic views can also be enjoyed from the hotel's destination restaurant, Gli Uffici. This historical palace harbours secret passages, fading frescoes and suites in ancient towers. Eighteenth-century additions include a ballroom and living quarters, the latter now repurposed as a gymnasium containing a leather punch bag – a style signifier typical of hotelier Alessio Raggio, whose unusual aesthetic features four-posters, Smeg fridges in jaunty colours, a junky old road sign and modern artworks sitting beside weathered heirlooms. *palazzoboyl.com*

Casa Clàt

This all-suite hotel, opened in 2023, is handily located in the Marina district, a short walk from the Bastion of Saint Remy, with a buzzy restaurant that showcases products from Nieddittas fisheries. Works curated by acclaimed Sardinian artist Giorgio Casu decorate the colourful dining room, where tables spill onto the shaded hidden garden in summer. The wine list includes bottles from small-batch vineyards and rare labels such as Emù, a sophisticated Vermentino. The entire hotel is a paean to local producers, makers and artists: some of the suites feature textiles by artist Carolina Melis made in collaboration with the women of a Mogoro-based cooperative. The design surprises are extraordinary, from aromatherapy monsoon-steam showers to the oval bathtub in the Isola suite. The brilliant concierge team specialises in experiences such as exploring a hidden subterranean city, or special access to Emerson, the stylish Poetto beach club. *casaclat.it*

Palazzo Doglio

On the edge of the characterful Villanova neighbourhood, this coastal resort is the city's first five-star grand hotel. Run by the formidable Forte Village group, it's part of a complex containing high-end shops, half a dozen food and drink outlets, including the very fine Osteria del Forte, and a decent spa – unheard of in Cagliari – with a hydro-therapy pool. The historical neighbourhood around the Byzantine Basilica of San Saturnino has been revitalised as a pretty pedestrian zone, with Teatro Doglio, shuttered for nearly 40 years, reopened as an event and entertainment space in 2020. *palazzodoglio.com*

TRUSTED TRATTORIAS

Cagliari specialises in authentic and unpretentious trattoria – no menu, just whatever comes out of the kitchen, fresh from the market or farm that day. **Pani e Casu** in the Castello ramparts is legendary for its traditional Sardinian dishes such as porceddu (suckling pig) and malloreddus (a type of hand-formed pasta) with porcini mushrooms.

Stella Marina di Montecristo is a jewel of an old-fashioned restaurant serving no-choice seafood-themed dinners for about £30 per head. Visitors might get fregola with prawns, a mixed seafood antipasti, fried calamari or grilled sea bass.

Regulars at rustic Michelin-recommended restaurant **Sa Domu Sarda** come for specialities such as cod bottarga roe on dried bread, snails in tomato sauce and culurgiones (the regional version of ravioli).

For a more refined alternative, there's **Luigi Pomata** – a minimalist restaurant named after its chef, close to Casa Clàt on Regina Margherita – where the menu includes red tuna tartare, carnaroli rice with braised shellfish sauce, and "birrami-su" with coffee-beer cream.

COFFEE AND COCKTAILS

On weekends there's live music and a holiday vibe at **Bacàn**, a breezy restaurant on the waterfront that's good for cocktails and people watching.

Libarium is an old favourite for the views from the Castello ramparts and cocktails at sunset with DJs.

A professionally run classic, **Antico Caffè** is ideal for an aperitivo on its relaxed and lively terrace beside the Bastion of Saint Remy.

The recently restored turn-of-the-century interior is the main draw of the wonderful **Caffè Svizzero**, which serves coffee, ice cream and mortadella-stuffed croissants.

With terraces beneath the Capo Sant'Elia lighthouse overlooking the Bay of Angels, **Le Terrazze di Calamosca** is the best place to watch the sunset.

SHOPPING SPOTS

A husband-and-wife team create stylised and joyous animal-shaped ceramics with a contemporary twist at **Raku**, their dusty workshop and store in the Marina district.

At **Ceramica Olianas** in Villanova, ethereal images and drawings decorate blue-glazed plates and vases by Gianpaolo Olianas.

Antica Cappelleria Martello is a gem, the oldest hat shop in Sardinia. Its frontage on Via Sassari doesn't give a hint of the treasures inside: tweed caps, boaters and fascinators, top hats, Panamas and porkpies, all custom-made on the premises.

Sixty Seven, next to Casa Clàt, is a boutique with a persuasive stylist-owner who showcases Sardinian designers and easy-to-wear classics with an edge.

Su Trobasciu in Mogoro is run by an all-female cooperative who keep the tradition of the Sardinian loom and weaving alive with tapestries, carpets and linens using natural thread and dyes in collaboration with international artists.

BEYOND THE CITY

Easycletta rents out e-bikes for rides around the city marina, the headlands of the Devil's Saddle to Poetto beach and the Molentargius-Saline Regional Natural Park.

Out-of-town **Barumini** is the most important site of nuraghi, the 7,000 or so mysterious mortar-free defensive stone towers made by a civilisation that predates the Phoenicians and the Romans. Nuraghe Piscu is one of the best preserved nuraghi and is generally crowd-free. Only a 20-minute drive from Barumini there are rooms at the atmospheric **Antica Locanda Lunetta**, a 17th-century former post house with a secret walled garden, where DH Lawrence stayed a century ago.

Former mining storehouse **Le Dune Piscinas** (which appeared in *Condé Nast Traveller*'s 2025 Hot List) recently opened as a coastal hotel. About 40 miles from Cagliari on Sardinia's unsung wild western shores, it offers relaxation and hiking in an evocative landscape of windswept dunes and surf.

Only a fraction of the important Phoenician site **Nora** has been excavated, but visitors can walk the three-mile-long centurions' road from there to Bithia down the coast. Nearby, in Pula, Michelin-starred **Fradis Minoris** has decks overlooking the lagoon and ruins, and showcases the best seasonal ingredients and produce from the sea.

The blinding-white-sand **Chia Beach** is close to a working 19th-century lighthouse that has been converted into one of Sardinia's most expensive boutique hotels, **Faro Capo-Spartivento**, which sits high on a juniper-scented promontory.

Opposite, clockwise from bottom left: balcony at Casa Clàt; looking down on Poetto beach; sunset drinks at Libarium; Luigi Pomata in his restaurant; Libarium's seada, a Sardinian dessert; loungers at Faro Capo-Spartivento; Molentargius-Saline Regional Natural Park view