

a taste of

Italy

LOCAL WINE, DELICIOUS FOOD AND FOOTBALL INTRODUCES **HANNAH JAMES** AND HER BOYFRIEND BEN TO THE ITALIAN PASSION DURING A WEEK ON SARDINIA'S NORTHWEST COAST

With *Big Brother* and Euro 2008 putting on a better show than the UK summer last June, there was even more reason to trade a grey week in Bristol for a bit of Sardinian sun. And while my boyfriend Ben wasn't as keen as I was to escape the football, I agreed to watch at least 'some' of the games, and with that we booked our easyJet flights. Besides, in the absence of any British teams in the show, the idea of being surrounded by Italians while watching Italy play football sounded like fun.

Plumping for some luxury, we decided on a villa as a base for our exploration of northwest Sardinia. Friends had warned of the island's expense, and considering the ever-strengthening Euro, the freedom of self-catering had growing appeal.

Reaching the end of *Elle* while Ben watched Sardinia get closer

through the aeroplane window, I turned to the travel section only to see the villa we were hurtling through the air towards gracing the pages before me. Described by the girlie magazine as an idyllic romantic getaway, it seemed like fate that we'd opted for this style of trip. Our excitement heightened by the gorgeous description of Casa delle Palme and an introduction to Mustafa, the villa's resident dog, we quickly got through the airport, picked up our hire car and headed to our new home for the week.

Arriving in the late afternoon, Sardinia was warm, sunny and inviting. Neither of us had been to the Italian island before, so the two-hour drive across its width introduced a surprising landscape that was far more dramatic than expected. Lush green hills grew in the distance as we passed pretty villages hidden in valleys. It was also our first experience of Italian drivers.

Evidently blind corners and narrow roads are no obstacle to overtaking, but it made for an exciting journey through much of which I had my eyes firmly closed (luckily Ben was nominated driver).

Reaching the island's west coast and driving straight through Alghero, the beautiful old fishing port that was our closest town, the bright blue Mediterranean Sea appeared lined by a thin strip of white sand and plenty of people enjoying the late afternoon sun. Unsure of what to expect from Sardinia, we were relieved to find a skyline filled with boat masts rather than high-rise hotels. The town's old battlement walls rose before us with narrow entrances that invited further exploration. First, however, we were to find and settle into Casa delle Palme.

According to the directions, 'Casa delle Palme is number 128a – with painted green gates'. So, as



The views of Alghero on a moody day



Casa delle Palme: ideal for some relaxing



Catching up on the latest Euro 2008 scores

we pulled up beside rusty grey gates that were to reveal our mysterious villa, panic set in as we noticed the remnant flakes of green paint that once was. Would this be like one of those TV programmes, where a derelict, unloved home had been sold under false pretences? I needn't have worried; as the gates opened onto a long drive bordered by our very own private olive grove, we edged the car slowly towards the house. Stepping through the gate, welcomed by Mustafa and the villa's owners in a mass of enthusiastic hand gestures and broken English-come-Italian, Casa delle Palme bathed in sun looked like the ideal base from which to enjoy our first Italian adventure.

Arriving on a Sunday, there was nowhere open to buy essentials, but luckily our kitchen was stocked with freshly baked bread, local cheese and prosciutto, sweet, plump cherries and ripe cherry tomatoes. Along with two bottles of wine from local vineyards, we had plenty to enjoy our first balmy Italian evening on Casa delle Palme's veranda.

EXPLORING ALGHERO

Deciding on a couple of well-deserved days of sunbathing before

venturing much further than the boundaries of our villa, a trip to Alghero was in need before we could collapse onto the sunloungers lying beside our very own pool. Heading into town, we were disappointed to discover that the town's popular fish market was closed for restoration, but across the street a small fresh vegetable and fruit market was still open, so Ben and I headed off in opposite directions to collect a brightly coloured assortment of produce.

Despite my lack of knowledge of the Italian language, I managed to communicate with a smiley market vendor who sent me off with an enthusiastic "ciao bella" and a heavy bag of fruit to add to Ben's

vegetables. They may not have passed EU regulations for shape, colour and size, but the deep purple plums, juicy nectarines and crisp salad tasted as fresh food should.

Having stocked up, we made the most of the laze-inducing sun to stroll through Alghero. There in June, we'd arrived before the hordes that descend on the pretty fishing port during the hottest months, leaving us to explore without the crowds. Although popular with foreigners, Alghero remains a thriving fishing port and has maintained its character and

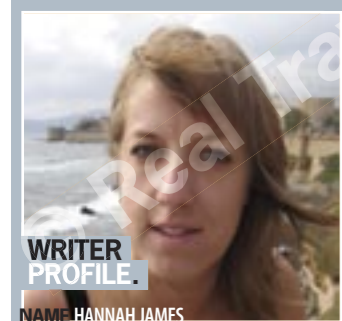
charm. Its white beach may hold stalls selling postcards and cheap souvenirs, but once we reached the attractive old town we entered a car-free maze of narrow Italian streets, where designer labels and deep red coral encrusted jewelry adorn shop windows.

Each armed with a large gelato that more than lived up to the Italian ice cream's notoriously good name, we walked along the high walls that skim the sea facing edge of town. The town is understandably famous for its catch-of-the-day seafood, so in between admiring the splashing waves that reached towards us from the moody sea, we browsed menus outside the string of enticing restaurants that adorned the promenade in the fading sun. As the bright afternoon moved into a sultry low-lit evening, our attention turned from sourcing tasty food to finding a spare seat to enjoy a cold beer and a little footie.

Passionate Italians crowded around large flat-screen TVs outside each bar along Via Carlo Alberto, the town's main thoroughfare, so we settled for one with a table that



Ben and Hannah enjoy a coffee break

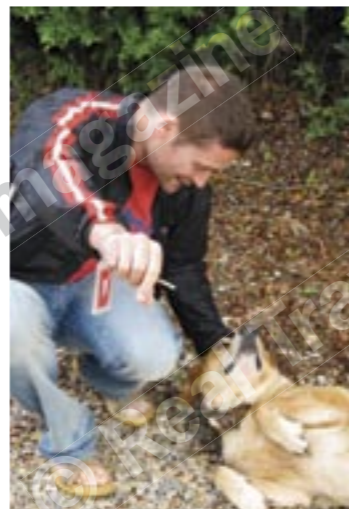


WRITER PROFILE

NAME HANNAH JAMES

AGE 27

INFO Having spent time getting to know South America, Australia, New Zealand and Southeast Asia, Hannah wants to turn her attention to exploring what is right on her doorstep in Europe.



Alghero is still a thriving fishing port

infobox.
 Hannah and Ben booked their flights from Bristol to Olbia (northeast Sardinia) with easyJet for around £200 return per person. www.easyjet.co.uk

SELF-CATERING ACCOMMODATION
 The couple booked seven nights in Casa delle Palme villa with Sardinian Places. Seven nights at the three bedroom villa in Alghero, northwest Sardinia, is available from £1,068 which includes a welcome hamper. This is a special offer price offering a discount of £100 from the brochure price and is valid for travel between May 2 to 22 and September 19 to October 31, 2009.

For more information, contact Sardinian Places reservations 0845 330 2050 www.sardinianplaces.co.uk

SANTA MARIA LA PALMA
 Cantina Santa Maria La Palma vineyard isn't officially open to the public, but phone ahead and you should be able to arrange a short tour and tasting session.

The outlet shop sells all of the wines produced by the co-operative. 0039 (0) 79 999 008, www.santamarialapalma.it



» hadn't yet succumbed to the lengthening shadows. Ordering a drink, the bright orange shirts of Netherlands' supporters were easy to spot, and while there weren't many, they sat among the blue shirted Italians apparently oblivious to the rivalry that would no doubt occur as the match (and drinks) flowed freely. Cringing as a particularly zealous orange-clad man ran and whooped around the square each time Holland's lead increased, I was surprised that the most violent act we witnessed was an Italian fan stripping off his patriotic shirt as the third Dutch goal marked the beginning of the end for Italy's opening Euro match.



Sampling the wine and food of Alghero's many restaurants

As the football ended, waves of blue shirts sulkily withdrew from Alghero's streets, leaving us to weave our way through the handful of celebrating oranges and return to cosy Casa delle Palme. Mustafa excitedly awaited us as he did each time we arrived home, so after paying him a little attention we guiltily left him at the gate and went in to enjoy a home-cooked

"GROUPS OF LOCALS BARELY BROKE THEIR STREAM OF ANIMATED CONVERSATION TO TUCK INTO BOWLS OF STEAMING SPAGHETTI"

meal of fresh vegetable pasta and a glass of warm red wine.

Neither of us being the type to do nothing for long, after a couple of days of relaxation and over-indulgence in fresh local cuisine, we were almost relieved that a rainy day brought with it motivation to get out of the island's northwest corner and take the road south to Bosa. Heading inland to complete

JOINING THE LOCALS

The sky was turning ominously darker as we crossed the mountain ridge that took us into Villanove Monteleone. But, as a deluge of rain more befitting an Indian monsoon than the Mediterranean summer began to fall, we decided now wasn't the time to explore this curious town that appeared to tumble precariously down the

sloping landscape. Besides, we had missed the daily market and as morning turned to afternoon, our grumbling stomachs were leading us onwards.

The views disappeared behind a curtain of misty rain until we reached the top of a spiraling descent into Bosa. The valley leading us from mountain to sea cupped within it red-roofed buildings that were scattered around the winding Temo River and the skeleton of a castle left behind from medieval times. On closer inspection, Bosa appeared a little rough around the edges compared to elsewhere in Sardinia; the unloved town lacked that sparkle of a resort that has been dusted off to impress visitors, but as we huddled beneath our umbrella and wandered the deserted streets, we liked it.

Escaping through the inviting door of a café on Bosa's main street, it became clear where all the people had gone. An Italian soap opera played loudly from the

wall-hung TV, while groups of locals barely broke their continuous stream of animated conversation to tuck into delicious bowls of steaming spaghetti before them. Settling in to avoid the outside elements, we passed an enjoyable couple of hours soaking up the friendly ambience while sampling the daily special of simple olive oil and tomato pasta. The journey back to Alghero was, to put it simply, impressive. Returning via the coast-hugging road, towering white cliffs rose before us, overlooked all the while by the brooding weatherfront.

Approaching Alghero from this new angle, we admired the attractive town as it perched regally over the sea. The rain didn't look likely to cease, so we stopped to book a table for two at the ordinary-looking, but recommended Trattoria Maristella before moving towards the shop-lined streets. Leaving Ben in a café, I went in search of a retail therapy fix – the only problem being that



with designer labels come designer prices, which resulted in more window-shopping than actual spending, so it wasn't long before I returned to Ben's side.

Arriving at a bustling Trattoria Maristella, we passed a short string of hungry hopefuls at the door, pleased to have booked our place in the evidently popular candle-lit, brightly painted room. Plentiful muscles, clams and chunks of delicate flaky fish were tangled among our plates of freshly made pasta which we washed down with the inevitable glass of wine before sharing a more than hearty bowl of flavoursome tiramisu.

Before leaving our very own corner of Sardinia, we were determined to search out some of the delicious wine sampled during our stay and return with a few bottles for those inevitable evenings spent reminiscing back

home. Phoning ahead to arrange a tour (and tasting session) at Cantina Santa Maria La Palma, we drove the short distance north from Alghero to the 700-hectare vineyard. After 50 years of production, this wine producers' association now has 350 members that work together as a co-operative to produce 3.5 million bottles of quality wine each year.

Reaching right down to the beautiful white sands of the stretching northwest coast, we took a drive through fields that were crammed with apparently never-ending bright green, regimental stripes of grape-heavy vines before returning to sample a few glasses of their finest. Opting for a few bottles of both red and white wines from the Cantina's outlet shop, we splashed out on one bottle of the award-winning I Papri Vermentino before leaving to spend our last afternoon

celebrating the return of the sun while watching surfers dance on top of the waves at white-sanded Porto Ferro.

Having polished off most of our Sardinian wines since our return, we had saved the best for last. Slightly reluctant to open our final bottle, the I Papri was finally drained over Christmas. Drinking it beside an open fire as we awaited Santa's arrival on Christmas Eve wasn't quite the same as sipping it on a warm Italian summer evening, but fond memories of Mustafa's wagging tail waiting patiently for us outside Casa delle Palme came flooding back as we discussed where we would go to stock up the wine cellar in 2009. ■



Catching the waves on Porto Ferro

