


FEATURE

# Sardinia's fountain of youth

**Trevor Ward** explores the exquisite climbs  
and even more exquisite delicacies of Italy's  
Mediterranean paradise



**T**he words of our guide, Enrico, are cruel but true: “Today is another battle in the war between cyclists and food. And I’m afraid you are going to lose again.”

With that, I polish off the last remnants of cheese, ham, almond tart and chocolate croissant from my breakfast plate, say a silent thanks for the elasticity of Lycra and head out to my bike for our latest day of touring the remote mountains and rugged coastline of Sardinia’s world-famous ‘Blue Zone’.

In an age of high-tech wizardry designed to wring every ounce of

The Sardinian landscape  
provides sustenance for the soul

Azure skies add even more blue to this zone



performance benefits from the bikes we ride, kit we wear and food we eat, we have come to this sun-soaked Italian island in search of the ultimate marginal gain – the secret of a long and healthy life. We’ve been kindly hosted by touring company Tourissimo, who are as keen to show off the island’s culinary delights as the breathtaking riding it has to offer.

This morning we have laboured beneath the soaring, pale limestone cliffs of the Supramonte mountains before ascending a quiet, twisting road to the village of Orgosolo for a class in the art of making the island’s wafer-thin bread, *pane carasau*.

This mountainous area used to be notorious for untimely deaths at the hands of bandits, but these days it’s the longevity of its residents that make the headlines. The so-called Blue Zone has the highest proportion of 100-year-olds anywhere in the world, with one recent study documenting 90 centenarians in a population of 18,000.

According to local legend, one of these residents regularly moaned that his son just sat around the house all day watching TV and never went out on his bike. “How

old’s your son?” he was asked. “Eighty,” was the reply.

After dusting off the flour from our bibshorts and clipping back into our pedals, we are given a reminder that it’s not just diet that contributes to the residents’ long lives. As we grind our way up the corkscrew of streets and squares that make up the village of Oliena, we come across a school sports day taking place in the shadow of a church tower.

Not for these youngsters a flat, grassy playing field; instead, the 100-metre sprint is taking place up a steep, cobbled street.

That night at our hotel, our “war with food” continues with a seven-course dinner that includes *maharrones lados* and roasted *culurgiones* – two types of pasta unique to the area – and a landslide of local cheeses including pecorino, ricotta and goat’s. It’s the perfect carb-

loading for what will be our longest and toughest day of riding the next day.

### Mercifully cool

With the sun still behind the bulk of the Supramonte, it’s mercifully cool as we start pedalling just after eight in the morning. Soon we have ticked off the town of Dorgali and are on the SS125 – “one of the most beautiful roads in Sardinia,” trumpets our guide Massimo

– and the start of the 28-kilometre climb to the Passo Genna Silana, which featured in stage two of the 2017 Giro.

It’s a gradual drag, never too imposing, on a wide, well-surfaced road with endless

## “That night at our hotel, the ‘war with food’ continues with a seven-course dinner”

views of the valley and mountains to our right. The occasional packs of touring motorcyclists – the only traffic we encounter – are at odds with the landscape below which is unblemished

**WHAT SARDINIAN-BORN  
FABIO ARU MIGHT FIND  
IN HIS MUsETTE:**



**Filindeu**

“Thread of God”  
extremely fine pasta

**Pane carasau**

Wafer-thin, lightly-toasted flatbread

**Culurgiones**

Pasta shells, usually stuffed  
with cheese or potato

**Seadas**

Honey and cheese pastry  
served as dessert

**Casu martzu**

Rotten, maggot-infested cheese,  
also served as dessert.

by roads or any other signs of modernity. On distant hilltops we can make out the occasional stubs of *nuraghi* – stone towers dating back almost 4,000 years.

The road eventually snakes through a gap in the rock to give us views of another valley on the island’s eastern flank. After threading beneath a series of landslide shelters, we emerge onto a lush plateau that, with its wild flowers and long grass, could be an Alpine meadow.

Though we’ve already crested the highest point 1,010 metres above sea level, it seems to take a forever of false flat before the road starts descending in earnest. Then we catch our first glimpse

of the Mediterranean as the road tumbles down to the sea. But our descent is cut short halfway when Massimo tells us we have to make a detour up a succession of switchbacks if we want lunch.

We eventually convene at a former shepherd’s home where a skewer of various animals’ intestines is being roasted over an open fire. This, our host informs us, is *trattallia*, a medley of sheep or goat’s hearts, liver and lungs wrapped in another slice of offal. It is absolutely delicious. I have no idea whether it contributes to a long life, but it surely makes a happy one.

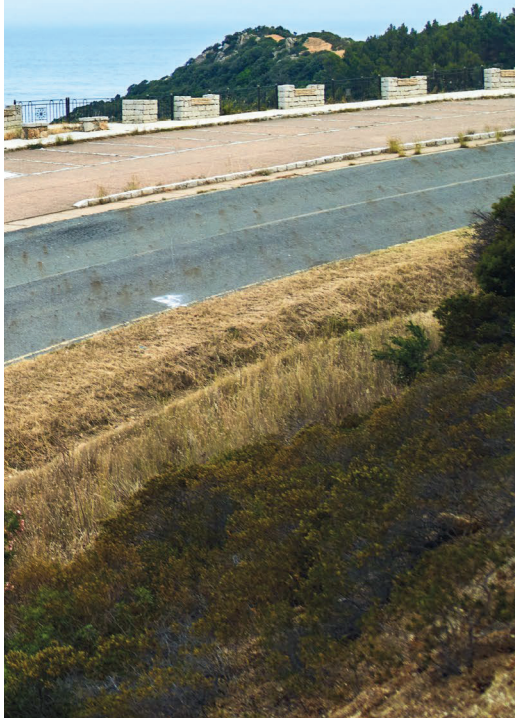
The final 10-kilometre descent to





Inland Sardinia is dissected by insignificant lengths of tarmac

Proximity to the Med makes for a nutritious plate and glorious pedal



Mining for maggots: Sardinian dining etiquette

## “We convene at a shepherd’s home where a skewer is roasted over an open fire”



In between courses in one of the island’s rustic settlements

our beachside hotel fortunately requires very little pedalling and we are able to squeeze in a quick swim in the translucent waters of the Mediterranean before dinner in the company of Blue Zone researcher Dr Ana Canelada.

Dr Canelada has been documenting the lifestyles of the Blue Zone’s residents for several years and reached some interesting conclusions, most of which are music to the ears of a bunch of ravenous and thirsty cyclists.

After raising her glass of red wine and declaring the Sardinian toast “Akentannos!” – “To a hundred years!” – she praises the healthy, al dente quality of the risotto we have been served and says the red saffron it is cooked with is “a jewel from our island” that has anti-depressant qualities. She also rubbishes claims made in an internationally renowned magazine that the residents of the Blue Zone live only on vegetables and fish. “It’s ridiculous to think that people like shepherds who worked with animals ate only beans,” she says, tucking

into her sausage, liver and broad beans. “Longevity here is not determined by a vegetarian diet or counting calories.” A cheer erupts from us cycling carnivores. Accompanying our group is acclaimed US chef Mary Sue Milliken. As well as owning a pair of successful restaurants in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, she’s also an accomplished road cyclist and one of the leading lights of the Chefs Cycle charity, which raises money for hungry kids with a series of sponsored bike rides.

I notice her and Massimo deep in conversation as the dessert of ricotta and honey is being served.

“We have something special on the menu for tomorrow,” says Massimo, “but we cannot say what it is. It is technically illegal and we are still trying to obtain it.”



Will it arrive in a Jiffy bag, I wonder as I head to my bed.

### Engineering wonder

The venue for the next day's lunch is the village of Villasalto, perched on a sun-baked plateau in the very heart of the Blue Zone. The 10-kilometre climb up to it is an engineering wonder.

It unfurls in a series of tight hairpins that somehow carve a route through the towering rockface. We're actually less than 50 kilometres as the crow flies from the bustling capital of Cagliari but might as well be on the moon for all the emptiness and silence surrounding us.

Silence, that is, apart from proud Sardinian Massimo expounding the merits of his island – “[Footballer] Gianfranco Zola and [jockey] Frankie Dettori are from here!” – as well as informing me he is the Strava Local Legend for this climb.

It's too hot – nudging 30 degrees – for me to consider attempting any KoM heroics so I settle into a rhythm and wonder what gastronomic pleasures await us at the summit. It also gives me time to reflect on the various reasons given for the long and healthy lives of the people who live in this part of the world. Could I, as a pasty-faced Anglo-Saxon living in the perpetual damp and chill of Scotland, learn anything from these sun-blessed, Sardinian Methuselahs? Is the key to a long life diet,

**“Is the key to a long life diet, lifestyle, community, or just bucket loads of Vitamin D?”**

lifestyle, community or merely bucket loads of Vitamin D? More specifically for cyclists, is there some new marginal gain to be added to our armoury of performance-enhancing tools? On this trip alone, older riders such as Doug and Caroline – both veterans of the US military medical corps – are riding e-bikes,

while their son Chris is using a Whoop wristband and Garmin Vector pedals to calibrate his efforts.

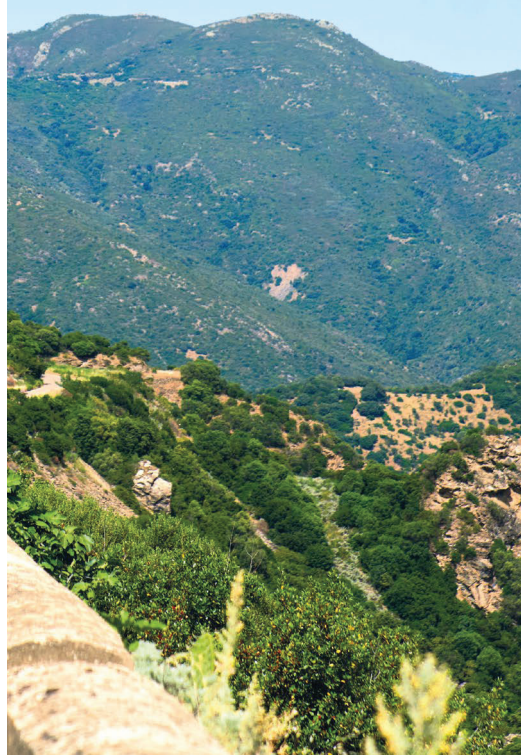
As I winch my way nearer to the summit, I wonder if Massimo has managed to source his illicit contraband and whether I'm about to encounter the Holy Grail of Marginal Gains, the secret elixir that will keep my limbs supple, bones dense, heart strong and KoMs preserved forever in aspic.

### Sun and shadows

Villasalto's narrow streets are deserted in the midday sun. Even the shadows are hiding. Massimo leads us through a wooden door into a grassy, flower-filled courtyard where the aromas of roasting meat and fresh herbs clash with our sweat and sunscreen. Mary Sue had arrived in advance and has joined forces with the



Mountain roads wind serenely to the island's summits



local 'Keeper of the Ancient Traditions', Teresa, to whip up plateloads of fried courgette and aubergines, meat and vegetable pies, pastas, *trattallia*, and mullet roe, all washed down with wine and beer. There's also a local shepherd's dish we haven't tried before, *callu de crabittu* – milk-fed goat's stomach – that is an intensely flavoured cheese with a palate-tingling aftertaste.

The war between cycling and food has recommenced and, with just a downhill ride all the way back to the coast still to come, we resign ourselves to surrender.

But then a hush descends on proceedings as our host Andrea arrives bearing a tray as delicately as if he is transporting nitro-glycerine. This is the

## KEY INFO

### GETTING THERE

Easyjet and RyanAir both fly to Sardinia direct from London with some prices as low as €35, but expect to pay closer to £200.

Regional airports such as Edinburgh, Manchester and Bristol can cost over £500 and may require you to change flights. A round trip from London to Cagliari costs 285kg of CO<sub>2</sub>.

### WHERE TO STAY

We stayed in a succession of luxury, five-star hotels, ranging from the Su Gologone Experience Hotel in Oliena – with its terraces and bars decorated like art galleries – to the beachside Hotel La Bitta in the seaside resort of Arbatax, all of which we'd recommend.

There are more affordable options such as Corte San Lussorio from around £60 a night across the island.

### WHERE TO EAT

Cagliari is well served with restaurants. Many lean heavily on seafood from the high end like Osmosis where dinner will set you back around €60 a head to the more down to earth family run places that dot the island. As you'd expect in Italy you're rarely far from a good eatery.

### WHERE TO GET THINGS FIXED

Bike shops are few and far between outside Cagliari. There you'll find Runner Cagliari which should be able to serve all your emergency needs.

mysterious dish Massimo had spent two days of furtive negotiations obtaining: *casu martzu* – 'rotten cheese' - billed by the *Guinness Book of Records* as "the most dangerous cheese in the world" and outlawed by EU food regulations. The reasons for its notoriety are the tiny white maggots or larvae that infest it, having been deliberately introduced to intensify fermentation.

Andrea plunges a knife into the crust of the pecorino and scoops away the lid, revealing its soft, crumbly interior.



We all lean forward looking for signs of infestation and a tiny maggot, less than five millimetres in length, duly appears. This, we are assured, is a good sign. As the centenarian Sardinian said to his octogenarian son, there's only one thing worse than finding a maggot in your cheese, and that's finding half a maggot.

A few brave souls, including your writer, scoop up some cheese and spread it on pieces of bread. Unlike normal pecorino, it is soft and pliable. After carefully checking for more maggots, I put it to my mouth. It is rich, creamy, delicious and highly nutritious.

That evening, Massimo and I manage a ride in the golden light of dusk. It's a loop from the hotel that takes us up a couple of long, straight climbs. From the top of one of them, with the sun sinking behind us, we can see row after row of mountain ridges defined sharply in the half-light. There is a sense of infinity about the view.

Later, over simple but welcome fare of pizzas and tiramisu, we raise our glasses to a successful week of cycling in Sardinia's Blue Zone. The toast is "Akentannos" – and an acknowledgement that good food, good riding and good company are surely the most precious marginal gains of all.

■ *Travel company Tourissimo offers 'Chef Bike Tours' in several Italian locations including Emilia Romagna, Friuli Venezia and Piedmont as well as Sardinia, all in the company of chef and cyclist Mary Sue Milliken. Accommodation is in luxury hotels with all food and wine included. Hire of Bianchi road and e-bikes is available. [www.tourissimo.travel](http://www.tourissimo.travel)*