

The Italian island of Sardinia has an incredible coastline that makes for spectacular hikes.

PHOTOS BY SUZANNE MORPHET/
THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Seduced by Sardinia

When a hiking trip along a wild Italian coastline goes sideways, **Suzanne Morphet** trades climbs for culture and ends up with a different kind of adventure

We've been walking gently uphill for a couple of hours when we come to a wall of grey limestone rock soaring into a brilliant blue sky.

Our guide, Mik, stops – not to let us rest or to take in the view, though it is stupendous. Sardinia's ruggedly gorgeous Orosei coast fans out below us, its dark-green oak and juniper forests spilling down to a turquoise shoreline. In the distance, we can see Pedra Longa, a rocky spire jutting out of the water, where we were dropped off by boat earlier this morning.

No, the reason we've stopped is to climb that wall for an even better one.

We pull on helmets and harnesses, then rope up. It's the first of many challenges we expect to face on the little-known, but extraordinarily beautiful Selvaggio Blu, the "Wild Blue" hiking route that hugs 60 kilometres of Sardinia's eastern coastline.

"Some say it's the hardest hike in Italy, others say the hardest hike in Europe," Mik says when the six of us gathered the previous evening in the small seaside village of Santa Maria Navarrese. "The biggest problem here is to find your way. You have to scramble, you have to use *via ferrata*, use ropes."

I first heard about Selvaggio Blu 10 years ago from one of Mik's mountain-guiding colleagues in Italy's Dolomites, where I spent a week climbing a variety of *via ferratas* – routes with iron rungs and cables – that were originally created to help soldiers onto the mountain tops during the First World War. Selvaggio Blu sounded even better, with promises of a swim in the warm Mediterranean at the end of each day. Last year, the route turned 30 and I turned twice that. It was time to tackle what promised to be the adventure of a lifetime.

The Gulf of Orosei is only a few hours south of Sardinia's better-known Costa Smeralda, where European playboys come every summer to drop anchor from some of the biggest pleasure boats in the Mediterranean – and to outwit the Italian paparazzi in their wake. But this coastline could be on a different island altogether. The Orosei is scarred with deep ravines and hidden canyons, where goats and boar run wild and on hot days rosemary and thyme perfume the air.

In the mid-1980s, mountaineers from mainland Italy arrived, attracted to the sheer limestone peaks of the Supramonte range. By the end of the decade a route had been mapped.

Many hikers take six days to do the entire thing, sleeping on secluded beaches at night and getting resupplied with food and water by boat each day. For us, Mik has devised a shorter version; four days of the most scenic terrain. At least that's the plan. Climbing the limestone wall of



Punta Giradili proves easier than it looks. Long ago, shepherds wedged juniper branches into crevices to give themselves footholds while climbing these mountains, quite likely chasing errant goats. Now, we use these same bits of weathered wood to help us along. Mik leads the way, keeping the rope taut between us.

From the top of the 750-metre monolith, the harder work of hiking over jagged limestone karst begins. The slabs of rock are so sharp that one misstep and tumble could rip our flesh apart. "No talking, just walking," instructs Mik as we turn inland toward a shepherd's farm where we'll spend the night.

But if the landscape feels inhospitable, the people are not. A lively fire is burning and a side of wild boar is turning on the spit when we arrive at the shepherd's impressive farmstead. He's built his house in a style similar to a traditional Sardinian *pinnetto*,

which has a limestone base and pointed roof made of juniper wood. Tonight, we'll feast on homemade pasta, *pane carasau* – the paper-thin bread of Sardinia – and plenty of roast pork before throwing our sleeping bags on the floor and turning in.

The next morning, the shepherd's wife brings out bowls of hot coffee and steaming milk, along with bread and honey. But soon after we set out it starts to rain. Mik decides hiking isn't just pointless – "there will be no views" – but dangerous with the area's cliffs. "We'll have a cultural day instead," he offers.

Driving inland on a narrow, winding road, it's easy to see how these mountains kept the Phoenicians, Romans and other would-be invaders out and why this interior region, Barbagia, remains isolated even today. "People from the rest of the island don't understand the dialect here," says Mik as we pass lonely farmhouses and towns that ap-

pear to hang precariously from exposed mountain faces.

This landscape feels dark and it's not just because of the weather. The region has a long history of banditry (Barbagia is a derivative of "barbarians") and Orgosolo, the town we're heading to, was the centre of a spate of kidnappings as recently as the 1960s through the 1990s. It was easy to keep people hidden in caves for months, says Mik, adding, "They cut off the ears of a couple people for ransom from their families." There was even a movie, *Bandits of Orgosolo*, released in 1961.

Today, the town is better known for its vibrant and politically charged street murals depicting all the ills on the planet, from poverty in Africa to terrorism in the Middle East. Maybe it's just me, but on this dreary day, the paintings seem less like a cry for justice than a sad truth about the sorry state of the world.

At the nearby village of Ma-

moiada, we tour the Mask Museum, where examples of the dour, black masks that men wear every January for the Festival of Saint Antonio are on display. Along with masks, men dress up in sheepskins and tie 30 kilograms of cowbells to their backs before parading sadly but noisily through the streets, flanked by other costumed men carrying lassos. This tradition is so old that no one knows when it started or even what it means.

This is certainly not the sunny day on the sparkling Mediterranean that I had anticipated. Yet I sense that I'm seeing the real Sardinia, an island with a rich history, ancient rituals and strong superstitions. (Even today, Sardinian men are known to hold their genitals when they think someone is giving them the *malocchio* – the "evil eye.")

I recall something Mik said the first night: "This is not an island of fishermen, it's an island of shepherds." He added that, historically, Sardinians had so little interest in the sea that they didn't even name the beaches, but used one word to refer to all of them. Yet, most tourists visit only Sardinia's coastline. Are they missing the essence of the island, I wonder?

I'm pondering all this over lunch at a local *enoteca* when my mood brightens. Surrounded by cases of Sardinian wine, we enjoy roasted pecorino cheese drizzled with honey on *pane carasau*. A grilled-cheese sandwich at home never tasted so good.

Later, we sample more wine at Giuseppe Sedilesu, where cannonau grapes – the Sardinian version of grenache – are grown organically and fermented naturally. "Everyone produced their wine like that, like their grandfather's," says Elisabetta Gungui-Sedilesu, who married into the second generation of the wine-producing family.

The next day, the rain pummels down even harder, so we climb back into Mik's van, this time to visit one of the largest caves in Europe.

After a dizzying, 800-metre climb on a zigzagging road through the clouds, we arrive at the entrance to the Su Marmuri cave near the town of Ulassai. It's perfect for claustrophobes such as me. A large, bright opening gives way to a dark, cathedral-sized space that burrows under the mountain for almost a kilometre in length. Boardwalks lead between "rooms" as in an art gallery, only this one is filled with otherworldly sculptures still being refined.

In places, enormous stalactites hang from the ceiling and equally impressive stalagmites rise up to meet them, forming huge columns with ridged surfaces that are strangely erotic in the dim artificial light.

Other formations resemble the pipes of an organ, a gigantic mushroom or a fringed curtain.