

Sardinia



By Jim Garland

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A beach scene in the Palau region



A citizen of grouper city



A triple-fin blenny



Corals and sponges encrust Washington Rock

Sardinia is a big, mountainous island, so for divers it makes sense to choose a base and stick to it. I recommend the town of Palau (not to be confused with the Micronesian state of the same name), situated in a strategic position on the northeast coast of the island, in an area known as the Costa Smeralda, or Emerald Coast. The multi-millionaire Prince Karim Aga Khan transformed this region into a holiday paradise in the 1960s.

Palau is a gateway to two first-rate offshore locations: the Maddalena archipelago, just 2km off the coast; and Corsica's Lavezzi marine reserve, a 40-minute boat ride away. The surrounding area has about 40 dive sites to pick from, ensuring a range of spectacular diving opportunities irrespective of weather conditions. The dive sites are suitable for all levels of experience, with depths ranging from 5m to 35m.

The sites consist mainly of walls, swim-throughs, granite pinnacles and boulder gullies with a couple of wrecks thrown in for good measure. While exploring the cracks and crevices, you can be sure to find scorpionfish, moray eels, congers and various other shy creatures - but don't forget to have an occasional look out into the blue, where there is always a chance of spotting eagle rays, barracuda and other pelagics passing by. A short boat trip to the Lavezzi reserve will guarantee a close-up encounter with large Mediterranean groupers - a truly memorable experience.

Palau itself is a relatively small town, with friendly people and accommodation that ranges from campsites to five-star hotels. Restaurants are plentiful and cater for all tastes; most are reasonably priced. For those not diving, there is ample opportunity to simply chill out on one of the many sandy beaches in the area.

San Francisco Cave: A great dive on the eastern side of Caprera Island, taking in walls, caves and boulder gullies. During the dive, you can expect to see overhangs colonised by red gorgonian fans; bright orange, red and yellow sponges; and golden sea daisies. Those with a keen eye will be amazed at the vast array of nudibranch species grazing on the algae-encrusted boulders.

Washington Rock: This is the most spectacular dive in this corner of Sardinia. At depths ranging from 5m to 33m, this awesome granite pinnacle is completely festooned with sea fans. It also provides the diver with the opportunity to observe some of the Mediterranean's larger species including moray eels, schools of barracuda and, if you get lucky, eagle rays.

Grouper City: If you want to get up close with grouper, this is the best dive in the Mediterranean, bar none. The resident fish here used to be fed by divers, but the feeds have been banned and the fish have been left with a no-fear attitude to divers. Expect to have them in your face.

Seasonality

The best time to visit Sardinia is during May, June and September, as the island gets very busy during the peak holiday months. May and June are also the best months to see big specimens of the Mediterranean king crab, eagle ray and large tuna. Water temperature varies from 13-22°C in spring to 23-27°C in summer, with temperatures dropping in autumn to 18-24°C. In summer, there is a thermocline present at about 12m, below which the temperature drops to around 13°C, so a two-piece 5mm wetsuit is the best compromise. Visibility can be up to 30m.

Getting there

The most convenient airport is Olbia, a 35-minute drive from Palau. Meridiana (<http://www.meridiana.it>) and easyJet (<http://www.easyjet.com>) fly to Olbia from Gatwick and Bristol, while Jet2 (<http://www.jet2.com>) flies direct from Leeds Bradford to Olbia. Ryanair (<http://www.ryanair.com>) flies to Olbia from Birmingham and to Alghero from Stansted, Dublin, East Midlands and Liverpool. Transfers can be organised by Nautilus Dive Centre

(<http://www.divesardegna.com>) on request; alternatively, independent travellers can make their own way by bus or hiring a car locally.