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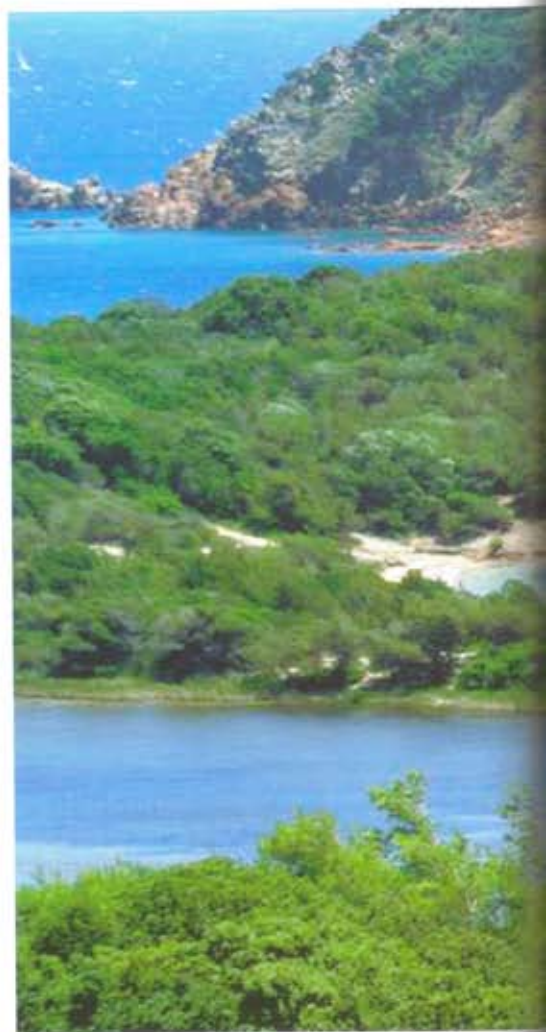


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**COMPACT
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One of a dozen or so yachting ports along this coast is Palau, tucked around a natural inlet featuring quaint villas of terracotta roof tiles and pastel facades. Palau is situated just opposite the Archipelago di La Maddalena, a series of islets steeped in legend, history and natural beauty. The archipelago of seven small rocky islets are said to have been described in Homer's *Odyssey*, one of which coincidentally became the home of Italy's greatest national hero, Giuseppe Garibaldi, the revolutionary who fought for the establishment of a united Italy in the nineteenth century. These islets, together with another just a few kilometres to the north called Lavezzi, are within a protected marine sanctuary and are, as a result, out of bounds to any form of commercial fishing. This emphasises one of the advantages of the region being the semi-private playground of the rich and famous. The rampant coastal development that inflicts other coastal havens of the Med has been somewhat checked by the consortium of Italy's mega-wealthy, leaving the Costa Smeralda, and in particular the dozens of islets like those of La Maddalena and Lavezzi relatively unspoilt and jealously protected. This is not to say that the area is completely closed to the public, in fact Italians flock here in droves in August to share this prime, well-managed slice of Mediterranean heaven and consequently Palau has become the quintessential Mediterranean resort marina. Dozens of yachts and boats moored side by side form a foreground against the white rocky hills that are interspersed with ancient dark green olive and chestnut trees and burnt orange walls and tiles of holiday villas. The yacht basin is lined with a dozen or so restaurants, each exhibiting the usual Italian gastronomic dishes with flair but with a slightly distinct Sardinian flavour and great locally produced wines, grown and manufactured by weather-beaten farmers in some stony valley behind. The Sardinians, in particular, are a warm-hearted, open people and although Sardinia forms part of Italy, they do not really regard themselves as Italian. They are proudly Sardinian and are typical laid-back island folk and it is not uncommon for the owner of a restaurant to greet first-time



The underwater clarity of Sardinia is phenomenal. Image by Vincenzo Apuzzo.





A typically turquoise cove in Sardinia



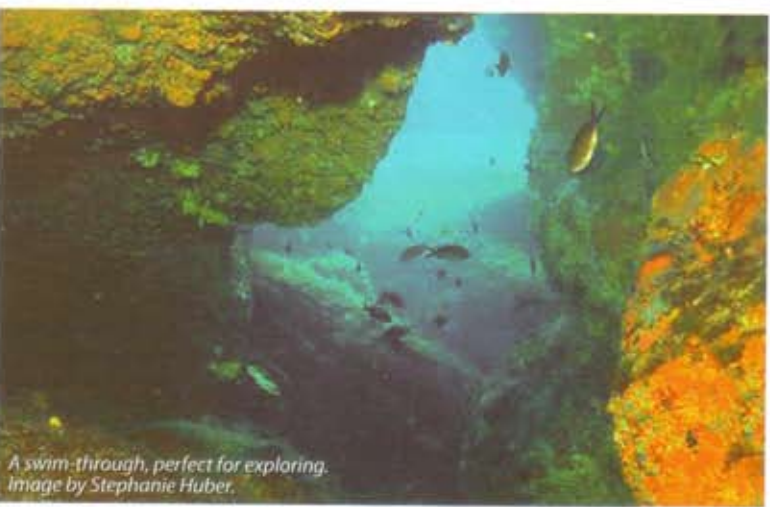
patrons like a long-lost friend. Palau is a place where visitors can unwind, sit back and enjoy warm summer nights under a starry Sardinian sky – no wonder mainland Italians flock here, this is the ultimate in sheer Mediterranean bliss. Yet it's during the daytime that this region becomes especially alluring. Palau is a great base to explore the waters beneath the rugged topography of the archipelago. Beyond the marina, a short distance away and only accessible by boat, the bright white sandy beaches and turquoise bays of the Archipelago di La Maddalena and Lavezzi are renowned for having some of the best scuba diving in the Med. These islets break up a strikingly cobalt sea. The contrast between the colour of the sea and the land emphasises the intense blue of the water. For a scuba diver seeing a blue like this is like holding a flame to a moth. This is the colour that sub-aquatic junkies go gaga for since it can only mean one thing – unsurpassed underwater visibility.

On submerging, divers will not be disappointed – the visibility surpasses the unsurpassed. Crystal clear water exposes a fantastic underwater topography. The granite and limestone rocks create an undulating environment with dozens of caves, overhangs, swim-throughs and gullies, perfect for underwater exploration. As a result, depth range can vary considerably between a few centimetres below the surface to 30 or 40m and more, providing a contrasting marine life environment in one small area. Being the Mediterranean, the marine life is not that abundant but the variety is noticeable as there is a delicate mix of tropical and subtropical fish. In shallow depths swirl the schools of seabream, blennies and damselfish while deeper down or further out there are groupers, barracuda and tuna. Nudibranchs, starfish and rays are common while scorpionfish are regularly spotted. The giant groupers are the stars of the show here. Around the uninhabitable Lavezzi Isles and protected by law, the groupers congregate by the dozen. Hovering in their deep blue environment, they lord over the other species like giant gunships. The crustaceans are also interesting. The strange-looking slipper lobster squeezes its flattered bulk into crevices while cuttlefish dance under ledges. Often if one looks heavenward, a school of barracuda or tuna fly past and dolphins are not an uncommon sight

Giant groupers are everywhere in the protected waters of the Lavezzi Isles. Image by Vincenzo Apuzzo.



The view below the water is as spectacular as above.
Image by Stephanie Huber.



A swim-through, perfect for exploring.
Image by Stephanie Huber.



The colours underwater are breathtaking.
Image by Stephanie Huber.

either. But perhaps the most striking animal of all, perched on the ledges around the 20m mark, is the odd seahorse. These delicate Syngnathiformes cling perilously to the wispy vegetation with their coiled tails. They are hard to find and it takes a trained eye to spot them but once found they do, without doubt, fascinate the observer with their equine faces moving steadily and slowly as they search for tasty morsels drifting past in the current. Seahorses belong to that elite club of creatures that make every diver's Bucket List and often result in a big bold tick in the logbook – especially since they are also one of the most endangered marine species in the world.

The dive sites are only accessible by boat, which is operated by the expert team of the Nautilus Diving Centre. Owners Vincenzo and Stephanie are meticulous and professional in all aspects, from booking to the dive briefing, of which both traits are only surpassed by their friendliness and willingness to please. The scuba gear is new and the specifically-designed boat is big, roomy and can accommodate a dozen or so divers comfortably. The atmosphere on board is naturally lively and jovial with the team collectively able to converse easily in a multitude of languages. The dive team are passionate and enthusiastic about every dive despite being incredibly busy during summer. Why wouldn't they be? After all, this is the best diving in the Mediterranean.

The underwater world is amazing, but in unison with what is on offer above the surface, a trip to this region becomes truly memorable.

The underwater world is amazing, but in unison with what is on offer above the surface, a trip to this region becomes truly memorable. Apart from soaking up the sun on an idyllic beach or hiring a Vespa to explore the countryside or taking a ferry to the old town of La Maddalena, a great way to cap off the perfect diving holiday is to take a short boat trip to the medieval town of Bonifacio, perched high up on a crumbling cliff. Bonifacio is situated on a rocky peninsula on the southern-most tip of Corsica, the large island belonging to France which lies 15 kilometres to the north of Sardinia. The site of this ancient fortress town from the sea is one of the greatest spectacles in the whole Mediterranean. The citadel perches dangerously 100m or so vertically up from the water and the whole edifice appears as if it's about to topple down at any minute. The fact that Bonifacio has been around like this for almost a thousand years is incomprehensible but it's testament to the ingenuity of the folk of the distant past. The view on a boat from below is simply breathtaking. Going on holiday to the Costa Smeralda in Sardinia must rank as one of the best summer holidays on the planet. The beaches are so white and the turquoise water so intense that one can be forgiven for thinking this was the Seychelles. The long summer days are ideal for exploring the rugged landscape on a scooter or bicycle. The locals are helpful and prices are surprisingly good compared to the rest of Europe. Getting to the Costa Smeralda is also easy. Daily flights from all Europe's major airports and ferries from mainland Italy terminate at the main port of Olbia. Be warned though, Italy's inland cities completely empty out during their summer holiday in August, disgorging millions of Italians into the Med. Sardinia is no different, so unless one has a penchant for mass tourism rather visit the Costa Smeralda in June, early July or September.

This is a beautiful rugged land that has been inspirational to travellers since ancient times. The likes of Homer, Garibaldi, the Aga Khan and hundreds of visitors then and now have all fallen under the spell of the Emerald Coast. Perhaps the founders of the great Italian-based scuba brands drew inspiration from here too. The deep, cobalt sea surrounding Sardinia must have prodded them into creating the means to go below and explore this most impressive of Mediterranean aquatic havens. **S**