

## Birth of tourism in southern Sardinia Santa Margherita di Pula

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**Citation:** Locci E. (2022) Birth of tourism in southern Sardinia Santa Margherita di Pula, European Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, Vol.10, No.2, pp., 13-22

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**ABSTRACT:** *The topic of tourism is gaining more and more importance from the scientific point of view, there are now several papers dealing with it, so it seemed appropriate to present an essay on the history of tourism in Sardinia. Therefore, this contribution aims to describe the phenomenon of tourism, its birth and development in the south of the island particularly in the southwest coast, that of Santa Margherita di Pula. The study has been carried out through the analysis of existing literature, trade, custom and society newspapers – which offer a glimpse of life on the Island between 1960 and 1980 – documents preserved in the few historical archives of the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, and also through the use of oral sources, used to make up for the dearth of certain sources.*

**KEYWORDS:** Tourism, Sardinia, Santa Margherita di Pula, environment.

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### INTRODUCTION

Today Sardinia is a well-known and coveted tourist destination, but this was not always the case; in fact, the island has only for the past few decades become a major player in the trend. If we look at the past we readily notice that it has not been part of the destination circuit linked to the social phenomenon known as the Grand Tour, which consisted of a long journey to main European cities of artistic and cultural interest. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it was considered an essential part of the education of young aristocrats or bourgeois. The fundamental destination was continental Italy, with Florence, Rome, Naples, Venice, etc. as essential stops, but Sardinia in point of fact was outside these routes that we could call pre-tourist, apart from a few travelers who visited Alghero and appreciated its natural landscapes.

The tourism phenomenon with its thousand facets – social, economic, custom, environmental, anthropological – and consequent lines of study has been of interest to the Island recently, exactly since the second post-war period. World War II left a legacy of destruction and death that did not spare even the Sardinian tourism. None of the island's lodges were destructed; out of 31 hotels in Sardinia, 6 had suffered serious damage, 14 had been damaged, but none had been completely destroyed. By the end of the conflict there were 21 efficient hotels. Although Sardinia was in a sort of "starting point". A few timid initiatives had been carried out but had had minimal impact, both socially and economically. In the interwar period there was no shortage of attempts to make the Island known: it was then that the need to create new accommodations able to get the sector off the ground began to be envisaged, and the creation of "Foreigner's Chambers" in the small towns of the interior was tried. But these projects, promoted by Enit (Ente nazionale italiano per il turismo | Italian National Tourist Board), remained largely on paper and even the effects of the so-called "Sardinian Spring," conceived in the 1930s in the wake of similar initiatives launched in Florence and Sicily, were somewhat disappointing.

This led to the post-World War II period when Sardinian accommodation facilities, located mainly in the three main centers – as well as provincial capitals – represented a scant 1 percent of the national supply. Despite the remarkable natural and cultural peculiarities, these were still neither known nor valued. Sardinia was severely lagging behind the sector, which, on the other hand, had already been able to bring in considerable national revenue and which, if cared for and updated, could become an inexhaustible source of income and economic growth.

But Sardinia was suffering from atavistic shortcomings; nodal issues remained unresolved, such as the issue of transportation to the Island and the internal road system and the poor reception facilities, so basically structural kinds. One of the nodal concerns was, as mentioned, the qualitative and quantitative insufficiency of accommodation services. In 1949 there were 30 hotels and 7 pensions in the whole region, with substandard services, with a total of 2,221 beds, a derisory figure, if only to try to pursue an idea of tourism.

### **THE FIRST TOURIST FLOWS IN NORTHERN SARDINIA**

The earliest tourist flows came timidly to Sardinia in the mid-1950s; the city of Alghero, the "golden gateway" of island tourism however benefited from the proximity of the Fertilia airport and began to receive tourists from England, also thanks to the action of the Horizon Holiday company, whose charter flights directed substantial flows of vacationers to the Coral Riviera. The nearness of the airport led to the overcoming of the barrier represented in many centers of the Mezzogiorno by the remoteness of the landing point to the holiday resort. The young generation of tourists was attracted by the Mediterranean and a paradise-like image of places. The English company launched Sardinia on the international market, and the region approached the English pitch and made slogans calling for the sea and freedom its own, in an intense advertising campaign that began in the mid-1950s.

The picture in southern Sardinia was completely different; tourism had not yet come to its seashores. From only the 1960s the situation changed and investors, especially foreigners, decided to venture into the tourism sector on the island that lies in the center of the Mediterranean. Accomplice also to the challenge launched by Karim Aga Khan who, in 1962, founded – along with a number of partners, Prince Sadruddin, lawyer André Ardoin, John Duncan Miller, the heirs of Patrick Guinness, Count Renè Podbielski and Giuseppe Mentasti – the Costa Smeralda consortium, which would later be called upon to manage all the facilities in the area, tourism also began to take its first steps in the south of the Island. The key figure in this movement that we may call revolutionary (at least as far as the northern end of the Island is concerned) is Prince Karim Aga Khan Shah Karīm al-Husaynī, better known as the Aga Khan, who, according to Islamic tradition, became Muslim Imam of the Ismaili Imami Shiite community on July 11, 1957, when he was only 20 years old, succeeding his grandfather Mahomed Shah Aga Khan. He is part of the line of hereditary Imams, a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin Ali.

### **THE BELGIANS: FROM THE CONGO TO SARDINIA**

The first investors to take an interest in the south coast were a group of Belgian real estate developers, a small group of families who owned agencies and played a special role in the history of tourism in Sardinia. Their presence in the southern part of the island was preeminent compared to other

investors. The Belgians used capital that came from the Belgian Congo and could no longer be plowed back into the African country that had become independent in 1960. These investors were looking for pristine places in which to create the ideal environment for what we might call using the words Johan Huizinga, the *Homo Ludens*, the playful man who seeks a «secondary reality that can greatly influence the everyday». In the collective imagination, the Island is playful par excellence, and the Mediterranean only supports this feature.

With a peculiar market strategy, the Belgians first purchased land, most of it coastal, wild and without major roads, as was the case with the resort of Torre delle Stelle, and then increased the value of the land and resold it. The Torre delle Stelle resort was in an uncharted but promising location, on the road leading from Cagliari to Villasimius, peopled only in summer by a few small landowners, who often used the sand on the beach to build their homes or do a small trade.

Belgian investors in some cases proceeded to build residential villages, not strictly tourist-oriented. The company built seven settlements; Paradiso, San Marco, San Luca, Cala Fiamminga, Santa Luria, Maria Lucrita and Capo Boi, all located in the coastal strip or just upstream between Capo Boi and Flumini di Quartu.

Another case study is the tourist development, again carried out by Belgian investors in the Costa Rei area, again the Belgians won over by the beauty of the island and eager to invest profitably purchased land and started an extensive tourist development program there.

## **FIRST STEPS OF TOURISM IN SANTA MARGHERITA DI PULA**

On the southwest coast we find another type of investment and tourism, and above all the paradigm represented by the allotments carried out from the 1960s onward in the territory of Santa Margherita di Pula, which is part of the municipality of Pula. The locality of Santa Margherita di Pula is located in the southern part of the island west of Cagliari, on the opposite side from Torre delle Stelle. Its territory, consists of a long coastal strip, which starts from the sea and climbs into the granite hills opposite. Santa Margherita is a set of allotments that have altered the face of this coast. But let's look specifically at how the tourism phenomenon took root and developed.

Before the arrival of tourism, in part island, in large part, especially in the last decade's mass, then external, this territory was almost completely uninhabited, there were only forests and Mediterranean scrub. Communication routes were simple mule tracks; only in the 1950s the road was first unpaved and later asphalted.

In modern times the area was owned by a number of influential Cagliari families who began to buy land in Pula and set up large land holdings, among them the Grondona family, who were "podatari", that is, feud administrators, in this case of the Marquis of Quirra; other emblazoned lines followed, Asquer, Aymerich and lastly the Conti Nieddu, which has in Don Pietro Nieddu the greatest exponent and last "podatario".

Today, the area is also renowned for its pine forest, which was the result of reforestation that began in 1888 and ended in 1926; instead, in the area where Forte Village now stands, there was tobacco cultivation. The area was also affected by the establishment of a good number of farms, which came into being after the agrarian reform of the 1950s by Etfas (Ente Trasformazione Fondiaria Agraria in

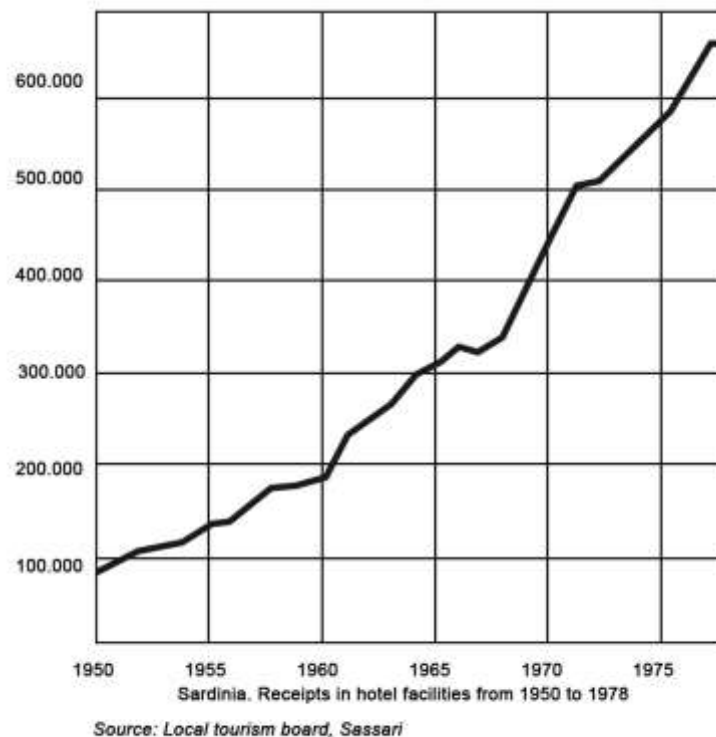
Sardegna | Agrarian Land Transformation Authority in Sardinia). This entity had promoted a whole series of initiatives that had also had some success at the agricultural level, enabling the development of a very important sector for the area's economy. In the mid-1950s, for example, there were not a few Italians who left Tunisia because of the country's Independence and moved to the Pula area to undertake agricultural activities, but this is only a small part of a larger story.

The area of Pula then was quite organized, not very populated but certainly not backward as other parts of the island might have been, this also due to its proximity to Cagliari and its port. The vocation was agricultural and this was the basis of the economy, a vocation that persists to this day even if in a lesser tone with respect to a hitherto unknown sector: tourism, both domestic and international.

The first step in exploitation for the coastal and marshy areas was mosquito disinfection, an intervention promoted by the Rockefeller Foundation between 1946 and 1950, enacted by the Regional Anti Anopheles Struggle in Sardinia. The suppression of mosquitoes in the coastal strip ended a centuries-old plague that impeded its social and economic development and greatly affected the lives of its citizens. As living conditions improved, the real estate value of the land also increased, and it was during this period that the first allotments began; we are around the 1960s. 1962, the year in which the Rebirth Plan was approved, marked the start of Sardinia's tourism boom: «We are living – proclaimed Finance Councilor Nino Costa emphatically, introducing the first exhibition of landscape plans in Sassari – a historic moment. The Island's coasts, after centuries of despoliation and vandalism, are now a source of lively attention from Italian and foreign operators, all intelligent and courageous. A beneficial assault is therefore under way toward these our coastlines that were once troubled and are now open to progress, enhancement and international appeal». It can be said that Sardinia was the first region in southern Italy to set up tourism planning. Within this framework the Esit (Ente Sardo Industrie Turistiche | Sardinian Tourism Industries Board) was founded first, this entity would also build some lodges and, afterwards, an industrial credit section within the Banco di Sardegna (Bank of Sardinia). The policy line in reference to the tourist industry included several points:

- Adequate accommodations
- Transportation
- Good value for money
- Agency tourism
- Mass tourism.

These points comprised the need to give the tourism sector a place in respect to other economic sectors and make it a backbone sector of the entire island economy.



With regard to the Santa Margherita area there were two tourist movements animated by different approaches to the area. One was identifiable with the phenomenon of second homes owned by wealthy families in Cagliari, who used them for summer vacations. These houses were not rented; just inhabited during the summer months and afterwards unused in wintertime. One of the peculiarities of these allotments is that they had and still have a professional feel: engineers, doctors, and freelancers. This feature is being lost over time, but it is still remembered and partly still experienced. The first allotment, the largest one, is the one known as the SAIA, named after the company that formed it; Bastogi later acquired the company. The company was in the hands of Lombard entrepreneurs who decided to invest in Sardinia in part to seek a place away from the turmoil of the time, chief among them the war in Korea and the fear of a possible third world war also atomic. SAIA proposed an allotment plan and once all building permits were obtained, the construction of roads and underground utilities. In addition to those of good stock, foreign persons began to arrive, linked to the island by business relations or by simple pleasure of residing there. Despite these presences, it must be stressed that there was not yet mass tourism, but a tourism that we could define as residential and to some extent slow, compared to the whirlwind of presences characterizing mass tourism, when by this definition we mean both to the high number of tourist flows and also to the standardization of the tourist product, through the offer of large-scale packages. Along with family cottages, it was also decided to proceed with the construction of small and medium-sized accommodation facilities, hotels with or without restaurants that offered some lodging capacity, but always on a small scale. In 1968 the CITAS project for the real estate development of the Santa Margherita pine forest took shape; this company envisioned a five-year plan that would see an investment of 21 billion of the old lire and would see the construction of receptive facilities that would result in 600 beds, in addition to extra services such as Market, sports facilities, swimming pools, etc. by 1975 a golf course will also be built in the locality of Is Molas, just in front of Pula, a place where

according to the plans a residential settlement will also be built, in addition a small marina will be built in the Is Morus allotment. All these actions aimed at the construction of infrastructure from a tourist point of view show that the Island having overcome the start-up phase of the tourist sector is moving toward the desired structuring of the sector.

On the coastal road from Cagliari to Chia, another well-known tourist resort, major initiatives were carried out from the late 1960s, which – combined with the historical, archaeological (Nora), and scenic attractions – would make the area one of the pillars of Sardinian tourism. At kilometer 25 the residential center called Perd'e Sali was built at the turn of 1965-1966, originally consisting of thirty Mediterranean-style villas; the dwellings then grew in number in later years.

At kilometer 39 in March 1969 construction began on Forte Village – actually called Holiday Village – with its 1595 beds, a significant number by the standards of traditional Sardinian facilities, divided into 436 bungalows. Built by Mediterranea Iniziative Turistiche Alberghiere (MITA, spa), based on the idea of the SAIA Company, it was later granted to the British hotel group Forte's Limited for management. The London firm Garnett, Cloughly, Blakemore, who were inspired by the Mediterranean style, designed the buildings arranged in a horseshoe shape. Architects Luciano Deplano, Carlo Aymerich, and engineer Andrea Mulas, foreman, attended the construction of the facility. The actual annex of the work was entrusted to two large construction companies, Di Pente and Visconti, which completed the work in the record time of only one year. The history of Forte Village began in 1970 and is firmly tied to the figure of Lord Charles Fort, a legend in the international world of *hôtellerie*. Sir Charles Carmine Forte was born in Casalattico a small town located in the province of Frosinone in the Lazio region of Italy; moved to England at a very young age and there honed his entrepreneurial skills, which in 1981 earned him the appointment of Baron by the Crown of Britain.

The first guests were 300 Frenchmen who stayed in the newly opened facility; it was the begin of a story that endures to this very day. The facility between the 1980s and 1990s was enriched with the creation of the swimming pool, the Villa del Parco and Pineta hotels, and above all with the thermal facility with the thalassotherapy center, unique in the sector thanks to six different pools distinguished with varying salt density and temperature. A milestone in the transition from a simple vacation village to a luxury tourist facility is the appointment in 1995 of Lorenzo Giannuzzi as general manager, who starts a constant and unceasing process of improving the structure.

All these efforts are rewarded in 1998 when, for the first time, Forte Village joins the international hotel elite, receiving "for its extraordinary attention to the needs and desires of its guests," the award for Best Hotel in the World, an award it still holds today, extending its unchallenged mastery year after year.

But there is not only Forte Village, continuing the discussion of Communion on Highway 195, Sulcitana, other Communion have been built over the years in addition to the aforementioned SAIA and Is Morus, among which it is essential to mention Comunione Cala Verde, Condominio Stella Marina, Comunione Viale delle Sirene, Comunione Riva dei Pini, Pinus Village and Comunione Perla Marina.

Cala Verde consists of about three hundred dwellings, the initial construction site was inaugurated in January 1980 and the houses delivered in March 1982, while the communal use facilities and the

marina in the summer of 1983, for a total expenditure of about ten billion of the old liras. This commune is located 38 km from Cagliari and 8 km from Pula. The area on which it was built is thickly wooded with maritime pines and Mediterranean scrub. One of the early assumptions and later deemed essential during the planning stages was the care and preservation of the existing greenery. The first step pursued was a survey and census of all tree essences, in cooperation with the Forest Guard and the Superintendent of Cultural Heritage. The contracting firms – Bastogi of Rome and Visconti of Cagliari – worked in the belief that they had not done any damage to the coastal territory.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY AND THE AESTHETICS OF TOURISM**

In the short span of twenty years, Forte Village has put Sardinia on the circuit of mass, high-quality tourism. There is a simultaneous need to defend the environment, also as a prerequisite for tourism development. Here the raw material – the land with all its parts – cannot be consumed, the outcome would be the loss of its very value, and the Sardinian decision makers were well aware of this.

Observing the pictures capturing today the stretch of land that falls within the Forte Village estate, a detail comes out: the buildings are not in sight on the coast, at least not in such an overt way as happened in other locations of Italy, where an intensive exploitation of the territory and a defacing of it occurred. The Fort, but in general the entire area under the authority of Pula, is almost not perceived from the outside. Over the years it has been enriched with different types of accommodations, from bungalows to hotels, which, however, are almost not visible either thanks to the architectural choices or due to the Mediterranean flora and scrub.

Resuming the discourse, in the 1970s in Sardinia there was already a need to defend the natural environment, not only as an end in itself but precisely as an element for the development of tourism. A vision that will allow the Autonomous region of Sardinia not to deface its landscapes by building in an unorthodox way, a vision at the forefront – at least in Italy – of environmental sustainability in tourism. For example, at the time of the creation of the Costa Smeralda, two priorities were affirmed from many quarters; to supervise the development of buildings (volume, aesthetic impact, compatibility with the surrounding environment, materials), and at the same time to encourage all initiatives aimed at attracting the flow of travellers. Same mainstays are also used in the coast of Santa Margherita di Pula, where, again by the work of SAIA, the Is Morus allotment was born, with individual cottages well set in the territory and vast vegetation of the native Mediterranean scrub. About seventy cottages were built in 1971, in individual lots of about 2,000 square meters each.

Budgets were not long in coming and fully demonstrate that the tourism sector is beginning to be an area that can affect the island's economy and society. The first balance sheet for 1970 is more than positive, beyond the rosier forecasts of Italian and foreign tour operators. In that year there were 2,243,914 presences of which 738,957 were foreigners. These results fall on the increase in accommodation capacity, which has about 23,000 beds for 1970. The province of Cagliari experienced the greatest increases, in addition – among the major tourist resorts – are Pula, which, especially thanks to Forte Village with its 1595 beds, recorded 173,437 presences of which almost 30,000 Italians and 144,000 foreigners.

In 1971, the second tourist season results even better than the previous year so much so that the gap with other tourist resorts on the Mediterranean seashore – Morocco, Greece, Spain, Yugoslavia – was significantly reduced.

The tourist seasons quickly followed one another and the need was felt, after a promising start, to equip the Island and its accommodation facilities with adequate infrastructure to provide a better welcome for the tourist, also with a view to customer loyalty. Based on these considerations, a *Coordinated Text Of Laws On Tourism in Sardinia* was drafted and periodically updated.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology in writing this essay falls within the strictly historical sphere; unfortunately, archival sources were not found, because the institutions in charge, Autonomous region, Provinces, towns do not have properly accessible archives. For example, the Autonomous region of Sardinia owns the ESIT archive but does not make it available for researchers and scholars. This represents a major problem in the development of a discipline that intends to deal with the history of tourism. Indeed, it is not possible to refer only to sources found from private organizations or individuals. The lack of cooperation from institutions prevents serious historical scientific research from being carried out and will certainly be the focus of wider debate among academics. However, an attempt has been made here to make up for the lack of sources by analyzing the publicity of the period, "La sagra di maggio" is a bulletin that sends back a great deal of helpful news to reconstruct the tourism phenomenon and set it in the framework of broader events, both nationally and internationally. Unfortunately, bibliographical works are not very numerous and focus on the economic impact of the tourism sector, not on a historical perspective. The scarcity of sources has been mended by using oral sources, which play the fundamental role of supporting the theories and reconstructed events.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Conclusions can only be biased, as is appropriate for a historical essay, for history is not a dead subject, but is in constant flux. As we have seen the tourism phenomenon has been involving Sardinia for only a few decades, this undeniable fact can produce certain effects that can be positive or negative depending on the course of action that has been and is being followed. It is now undeniable that the tourism sector has taken hold and is one of the leading sectors of the entire Sardinian economy. It is essential to set all those actions to develop without affecting the integrity and beauty of the territory and the natural environment, which is unique in the world. This is a very delicate and important objective to pursue and has been a goal since the very beginning of the advent of the tourist phenomenon in Sardinia, especially with the onset of mass tourism, which has mainly affected the coasts, symbolic of the example of Santa Margherita di Pula, which until sixty years ago had none of the features required to become the coveted tourist destination that it is today. From an uninhabited, under-developed land, partly because of mosquitoes and the resulting malaria, it has seen the birth and development in the course of a very few years of a sector that was hitherto unknown: tourism. The area has been and still is affected by mass tourism, mainly represented by foreign tourists staying in large hotel centers, and by tourism of domestic origin, with the enduring trend of second homes. In conclusion, it is emphasized that the history of tourism in Sardinia is yet to be written, in fact despite its importance, including from a social and economic point of view, there is still little scientific literature on the subject.



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