

Sun, sea, sand & kitties



They have their own retreats and shelters all around the house, and take a stroll down to the beach when they feel like it.



The cats are well looked after.



This beautiful and historic Sardinia beach is a cat lover's paradise. Sabrina Fusari writes.

Nestled on the shores of Western Sardinia is one of Italy's most ancient beaches, set against the backdrop of a Nuragic site — a Late Bronze Age deposit of pottery dating over 3,000 years ago. It is a fascinating place, tucked away from the glamour of the island's more famous seaside hotspots.

Being relatively isolated, and off the tourist-trodden track, Su Pallosu is a beach where you can still see the Sardinian coast at its most authentic — rugged, golden sand dunes and pebbles, with crystal-clear emerald-blue water.

But what has made Su Pallosu famous, winning it a TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence, and many

enthusiastic reviews in the international media, is the fact that it is home to a colony of around 50 cats. Many of them are tame, and quite willing to play and share a cuddle with visitors, bestowing pure bliss on the heart of any cat-loving holidaymaker.

Cats have been known to live here for at least 100 years, probably because of tuna-fishing activities which initially encouraged strays to cluster around the area, and fishermen to strike an allegiance with them against the scourge of mice. The area is now a cat sanctuary, tended to by a charity — Associazione Culturale Amici di Su Pallosu — that safeguards the site's historical and naturalistic heritage, and, of course,

its feline inhabitants.

Lello is one of the most iconic colony members, who likes to bid farewell to visitors by sitting near (or on!) the sanctuary's guestbook, and there's silky, long-haired Bionda — so stunning she could easily pass for a Norwegian Forest Cat. If you're lucky, you can also witness moments of affection as Gina and Milena exchange a kitty kiss on the rooftops. Many believe the cats live only on the beach, but they actually have their own retreats and shelters all around the house, and just take a stroll down to the beach when they feel like it.

CATS COME FIRST

The charity's relentless commitment to its animals' well-being has led to a steady decrease in the number of cats over the years, as a comprehensive neutering programme is continuously enforced to control the population and prevent the spread of disease.

This fact alone places Su Pallosu among the best-managed cat colonies in Italy, as neutering programmes involving all cats are, sadly, far from the norm, especially in the south of the country where public funds

allocated to animal welfare are typically scarce or non-existent. Thus, it is even more admirable that Associazione Amici di Su Pallosu runs entirely on private donations, without any economic support from either local or national Government authorities, as the colony's caregivers, Andrea Atzori and Irina Albu, are proud to emphasise.

It is not always a bed of roses, Andrea and Irina explain. There are people — “criminals, a shameful plague” — who do not neuter their own family cats, and then dump the kittens, but many are simply too young to survive.

The charity makes an enormous effort to save and rehome these kittens, and to have the people who abandon them legally prosecuted. If an adoptive family is not found within six months, these newcomers are integrated into the colony, after microchipping and neutering. But this is not

the only obstacle Andrea and Irina have faced over the years. One of the most serious was a legal case with local authorities refusing to recognise the sanctuary's official status and trying to move the colony away from the site. Eventually, Andrea and Irina won their case but, in what they describe as “an act of legitimate self-defence”, they have decided to register all the cats' microchips in their names. This means that Andrea and Irina are the legal owners of all

the cats, and therefore not entitled to any of the public funds available for other Italian cat colonies, such as to pay for neutering.

The couple runs the colony with the utmost devotion, giving their all to what is — to all intents and purposes — their family home. Andrea and Irina live on the premises, in the Casa Museo Gianni Atzori — a house-museum dedicated to the memory of Andrea's father who bought the strip of land in 1961 to set up his craft shop for the forging of coral, obsidian, trachyte, and other local gemstones. Cats

were already settled in the area when Gianni arrived. Andrea treasures memories of his father, and Irina has followed in Gianni's footsteps with her own art manufacturing of painted stones and tiles, whose sale also supports the sanctuary.

GUIDED TOURS

A visit to Su Pallosu is not only an opportunity to see some genuinely sea-loving felines — proving the ‘cats hate water’ adage all wrong — but a wide-ranging cultural experience. Visitors can discover Sardinia's heritage from various angles explored in the Casa Museo's displays, ranging from history and archaeology to wildlife and fishing. Guided tours of the sanctuary take 30 minutes, and are open to a maximum of 10 visitors per tour.

Around 3,000 people visit Su Pallosu annually, and 40 per cent come from foreign countries, including Australia, Belgium, the UK, Croatia, France, Japan, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Turkey, Slovenia, Spain, and the USA. Guided tours are offered in Italian, English, French, and Spanish.

Groups are often escorted by Emmy and House, Andrea and Irina's family dogs, who are also the colony's guard dogs. “We adopted House, the male retriever, about 11 years ago when he was still a puppy, while Emmy, eight, is a rescue dog — she had been poisoned and abandoned when we took her home,” says Andrea. “Living with so many cats, Emmy and House have acquired some ‘cattitude’ of their own, and sometimes, when visitors come, they're a little bit jealous.”

Did you know?
In 2016, travellers voted Su Pallosu the fifth most beautiful beach in Sardinia.

“If you're lucky, you can also witness moments of affection as Gina and Milena exchange a kitty kiss on the rooftops.”



The dogs guard the kitties.

SUPPORT SU PALLOSU

Guided tours are free of charge, but there are many other ways to support Su Pallosu, either on-site or by donating. Gifts of money to pay for the cats' health, neutering, and feeding expenses can be made to Associazione Culturale Amici di Su Pallosu; gifts in kind are also accepted, including kibble, beds, scratching posts, and toys. Finally, distance adoptions are encouraged and promoted on the association's Facebook profile, where photos of cats seeking adoption are regularly posted.

● For more information, visit www.gattisupallosu.org find them on Facebook (Oasi Felina Privata di Su Pallosu) or email amicisupallosu@libero.it