

More weekend getaways: Italy

A Sardinian carpet ride

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Alghero, Sardinia

THE ISLAND OF SARDINIA is the Wild West of Italy. Not far inland from the chic luxury beach resorts of the northern coast, the scrubby mountainous interior is mostly the domain of shepherds.

The rough, durable wool from their hardy sheep—waterproof and wiry to help the animals endure the elements of the windswept landscape—has been used for centuries to make colorful patterned carpets and wall hangings. They're still woven by hand on giant looms in traditional designs, and they make timeless accents for contemporary décor. Each village has its own style, and on a weekend shopping trip beginning in the western port town of Alghero and winding south to Cagliari, you can visit several.

The range of motifs and palettes reflects the different cultures that invaded the island over the centuries: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Byzantines, and the Catalans and Aragonese from Spain. The distinct local traditions have been reinforced by the isolation of the mountainous terrain.

In Tonara, for example, you will find carpets in a double-sided weave called "Sa Fressada" with bright multicolor stripes that resemble the simpler Anatolian kilims of southern Turkey. Directly north in Nule, the characteristic motif is "A Fiamma," a flame design wrought in a stunning array of different patterns and vibrant colors dominated by red, pink, orange and yellow. Farther south in Mógoro, they embroider exquisite Renaissance-style tapestries with polychrome floral patterns or quaint pictorial themes accented with gold thread. A cooperative in Villanova Monteleone, not far inland from Alghero, produces flat-weave carpets in a wool-and-cotton mix with finely detailed geometric patterns in subtle combinations of brown, copper and beige, accented with black and white, which bear resemblance to the Jijim kilims of the Bakhtiari tribe in Iran.

The more than 50 official government handicraft shops around the island, called I.S.O.L.A. (Istituto Sardo Organizzazione Lavoro Artigiano), are a guarantee of quality and have wide selections. (See a full list of the shops, with addresses and other information, at www.regione.sardegna.it/isola/inglese/home.html.) Many weavers work from their homes—just ask at the coffee bar in the town center and you will be pointed in the right direction.

Prices, depending on styles and quality, range from about €85 for a bath-size rug to around €3,000 for a six-square-meter rug. At the I.S.O.L.A. shops, carpets may be slightly more expensive than buying from individuals. However, you can politely ask for "uno sconto" (a discount), or simply negotiate a lower price, which is quite acceptable. The weavers will be happy to give you a tour of the workshops, where you can hear the tamping of the warp with the clack of a wooden shuttle, marking the tempo of a rhythmic composition heard throughout the premises.

If you visit individual carpet weavers working out of their homes, you might find less standard, quirky designs. You may offer



what you are willing to pay—as low as half the price—to see how willing they are to negotiate and how outrageous their asking price was.

In Sarule, about 40 kilometers north of Tonara, we visited Alberta Pinna, who works several hours a day at a loom in her garage together with fellow weaver Lucia Roggiu. We were tempted by a carpet with a finely wrought design of roses, birds and goblets in a yellow-and-black theme (1.7 meters by 2.6 meters).

She quoted a price of €2,500 to compensate the two of them for more than a month of labor.

About 200 years ago, the town of Mógoro, for example, counted more than 600 looms—or more than one per family. These days many of the women working out of their homes are fulfilling commissions for private clients. In any case, it is a good idea to visit at least one government shop first to get a general feel for the going prices and quality standards.



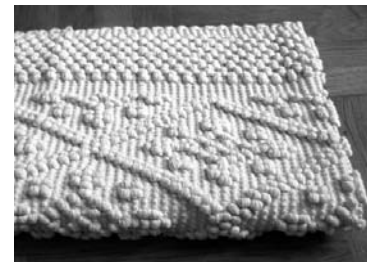
Carpets for sale in **Aggius** (above) and **Villanova Monteleone** (below); left, the fortified coast of **Alghero**; top right, a carpet in a classic **monochrome style**.

Alghero, where you can rent a car at the airport, is a former Aragonese colony where they still speak a Catalan dialect. The old city bastions overlook the sea and the port. Tucked away in a cobbled lane, the trendy Al Refettorio is a lively place to stop for afternoon prosecco and strawberries at tables lining a charming arched passageway.

About a two-hour drive down the coast, Oristano makes a good place to sleep on the first night. The road between Alghero and Bosa—a medieval town guarded by a hillside castle and lined with bridges along the river Temo—snakes among rosy boulders and pinnacles perched above a rugged shoreline. In Oristano's central piazza, the homey Eleonora B&B, with four large rooms in a medieval palazzo, is comfortable and welcoming. In the evening you can take a leisurely stroll with the local families on their daily *passaggiate* through the piazza—deserted in the daytime sun but suddenly full of children playing—and through the streets past the well-kept Baroque palaces to arrive at the cozy little Trattoria Da Gino for a fresh seafood dinner.

On Saturday after breakfast in the garden, head eastward and upward into the Barbàgia Mountains to the village of Tonara for a visit to the I.S.O.L.A. shop, where a women's cooperative produces striking striped rugs on big oak looms in the studio below. The rugs cost about €160 per square meter. We bought two medium-size carpets—one in variegated pinks and the other in blues—and an orange-and-blue striped runner, all for €850.

On the way, along the picturesque meandering route to Tonara on highway 388, you can visit the evocative ruins of the Roman baths at Fordongianus, situated along a shady river across from a modern spa, and then stop in town to see the intricately carved 16th-century Casa Aragonese, constructed of local volcanic rock. There you'll find a shop selling local handicrafts and artisanal mirto, the popular local li-



I.S.O.L.A.

Centro Pilota, Via Karalis, Tonara

Su Trobasciu

Via Gramsci 1, Mógoro
www.sutrobasciu.com

Trattoria Da Gino

Via Tirso 15, Oristano

Terme Romane and Casa Aragonese

Fordongianus
www.forumtraiani.it

Agriturismo Sa Tanca

Montevecchio
www.agrisatanca.com

queur made of myrtle berries.

Once you leave Tonara, you take the winding scenic road south and then west on 442 toward Guspini to arrive at the weaver's cooperative Su Trobasciu, at the I.S.O.L.A. in Mógoro, a workshop of 15 hand looms operated by eight women. There you can choose from an array of embroidered tapestries and see works in progress in the spacious workshop at the back. You will also find excellent examples of rugs and bedspreads in the most classic Sardinian style, "A Pibiones": intricate patterns formed in textural reliefs of tight loops of cotton, linen, or wool, usually in ivory monochrome. We bought a bath-size rug with a pattern of thick cotton balls arranged around a diamond grid that you can sink your toes into (€85). You can find cheaper machine-made versions in shops all over the island, apparent by the weaver's uniformity and lack of depth and density.

After a short drive up the steep mountain road from Guspini, past roofless former mining buildings surrounded by a vista of brush-covered mountains, you arrive in tiny Montevecchio. Just down the road from the quiet central piazza, the Sa Tanca agriturismo is run by the three Chessa sisters, who serve delicious Sardinian cheese and traditional recipes using homemade pasta and other ingredients grown organically on the property.

On Sunday, the best thing to do is take the half-hour drive west through the sparsely inhabited mountains to the coast—and the most spacious and unspoiled beaches in Sardinia—on the Costa Verde. Torre dei Corsari has a spectacular beach with white dunes and Sardinia's famous crystalline sea.