

On the straight and narrow path with Saint Efsio

The Bed and Breakfast Charm Sardinia you want to live sceneries and charms along the pilgrimage of the Saint. "I pray you Lord, to defend Cagliari from the invasion of its enemies, and I pray you so that the people in Cagliari abandon the cult of idols and demons, and so that they recognize you as the only true God. May those who will be hit by illness and who come where my body will lay, be in good health again. If in danger of shipwreck, oppression by the barbarian invaders, in famine and plague, may they, through my intercession, be freed from harm". This is the formula which the Roman soldier Efsio pronounced as he was dying before he endured martyrdom, and it is right from that very moment that the cult and devotion of the Cagliariitani people began, and of all the Sardinians towards the Saint, who up this day can be considered the most worshiped Saint of the island, celebrated every year on occasion of the festival of the first of May dedicated to him.

To visit Cagliari for that occasion, can be another good reason to be immersed in a reality full of sun and colour. The festival of Saint Efsio is celebrated in the city since 1656. Almost four-hundred centuries of traditions and emotions to celebrate the Roman soldier who converted to Christianity saved the city of Cagliari from pestilence and enemy attacks for several times. This intercession was felt and experienced with an immense devotion not only by the Cagliariitani people but also by all the Sardinians who keep their vow taking the image of the Saint up to Nora, along his martyrdom, every year. Since 1652, the year in which Saint Efsio saved the city from pestilence, the counsellors of Cagliari solemnly promised to celebrate a procession in his honour, taking the image of the Saint towards the place of his martyrdom, from Cagliari to Nora. This year the procession is repeated with the same atmosphere, and for those who are in the city to see this spectacle and experience it is a bliss and a strong emotion for the spirit. Mild weather and a warm generous sun, wagons, horsemen and groups of people dressed in their costumes coming from all over the island parade along the historical streets of the city, each wearing their traditional costumes and celebrating the renewal of the vow to Saint Efsio with joy. It's a feast, thousands of colours are the surrounding scenography of a morning lived intensely, animated by a profound faith but also by pure carefree moments of feast and music. The sound of "Launeddas" (Sardinian bagpipes) accompany the way, and petals of roses, called "Sa ramadura" (in Sardinian), cover the grey paving slabs of Via Roma like carpets. The festival starts just before midday and the image of the Saint leaves the church after a solemn mass celebrated in the "Stampacina" church dedicated to him to start the walk towards the place of martyrdom. Three trumpet calls played by armed pickets accompany him. The "Alter Nos" representative of the municipality of Cagliari, ensures the correct course of the feast and when the carriage reaches Via Roma, in front of the town hall, the sirens of the ships hoot and a roaring and continuous applause honour the Saint. The reliquary of the carriage is opened for a few instants and the faithful can leave an ex-voto or invoke the Saint for a new intercession. It is a moment of great and heartfelt emotion, with the unmistakable background music of the "Launeddas". A display of sounds and colours greets the Saint who prepares himself to leave the city after the stop in front of the Town Hall to set off towards the place of his martyrdom. But what happens to the image of the Saint when he leaves the city towards two o'clock? His journey continues for three days till he reaches Nora, the place of his presumptive martyrdom. During three days the faithful accompany the Saint among welcome feasts and celebrations in his honour which are officiated in the called the Scafa, it takes five minutes to reach the complex which hosts the first stop of the Saint. Here the Saint is undressed and his feast clothes are taken off to be replaced with more modest clothes and less precious jewels. The carriage which is pulled by oxen is hosted in the chapel of the Ballero family and here a brief celebration is officiated. This little chapel, together with the court dedicated to the Saint date back to the seventeenth century. In the chapel, the octagonal dome is decorated and presents a simple facade with a crown steeple. The inner flooring is hand painted while the altar goes back to seventeenth century lines. Once the Villaggio dei Pescatori has been left, the carriage continues its way towards the village of Capoterra. The landscape here reserves a very important environment, the lagoon of Santa Gilla, the largest coastal humid zone of the island which hugs the highway 195 for quite a long part of its route. Extended for four thousand hectares, it's an important crossroads for the migrations of volatiles of various species between Europe and Africa and it constitutes a complex ecosystem characterized by the presence of salty, brackish and sweet waters. The lagoon is a daily destination for numerous enthusiasts who armed with binoculars and cameras stop to observe with prying eyes the beautiful species which animate the waters in the winter season. There are over 30/40.000 inhabitants belonging to 65 different species. Pink flamingos paint the waters with their colours but so do coots, royal seagulls, stilt-plovers, redshanks, purple gallinules, duck-hawks and the fish-hawk. Of great impact is the panoramic horizon which displays itself before our eyes, the southern mountains of the Basso Sulcis with their flexuous and powerful shapes, and a crystal clear sea full of history and charms creating a picture of impressive charm. In this breathtaking panorama, a peak which definitely deserves major attention is that of Monte Arcosu with its rich forest of three thousand hectares acquired by WWF Italy. One of the last habitats of the Sardinian deer belongs to this reserve. It is possible to see them at dawn while they fearfully approach the pastures or at the sunset, when they gather together. The deer is in good company in the oasis, wild boars, wild cats, griffons, rollers, woodpeckers, ravens, peregrine falcons and buzzards. The woods, the macchia, the trees, the torrents, the blossom of the wild lavender, of the cysts, of the strawberry trees, of the heathers, of the myrtles explode in spring to alternate in the following seasons in a whirl of colours and perfumes. There are also paths which can lead the visitor across the beauties of the Oasis. Contacting the cooperative which takes care of the sanctuary it is possible to program nature days or green weeks with the possibility of accommodation, organization of lunches and stays at the guest quarters. Continuing southwards, the municipal territory of Capoterra is reached, a village of Roman age which today has a very high population density. When the Saint reaches Capoterra, village of which he is also the Patron Saint, a mass is officiated in his honours in the small Saint, a mass is officiated in his honour in the small church of Su Loi. What is of great historical and cultural value in the territory of Capoterra are the numerous witnessing dating back to the Nuragic

period, other than those of Roman age and Middle-age. A monument which deserves great attention is certainly the church of Santa Barbara situated on the eastern side of the mountains of Capoterra and easily reachable following the directions after having left the highway 195 at the turning for Poggio dei Pini. A church dating back to the Romanic period, completed in 1280, is situated in an area which was destination of hermitage since remote times. It is here in this place, where the presence of a convent is also attested, that the only witnessing of the Basilian monks in Sardinia can be found and they were probably the ones who built the chapel situated at fifty metres from the church. According to the legend this should be the place where Barbara, Cagliarian martyr and virgin, lived for thirty years and found death. Seemingly she was beheaded during the persecution against Christians. Seemingly as the head of the Saint fell to the ground it made water flow out from a spring which is still present to the this day. The peculiarity of the church is constituted by the numerous lodgements for ceramic basins of the façade, witnessing of contacts with Islamic and Hispanic/Moresque elements. The festival in honour of Saint Barbara is held every year on the last Sunday of June. A long and tiring pilgrimage takes the image of the Saint from the patronal church of Sant'Efisio in Capoterra to the "Campestre" church where the religious and civil rites are celebrated. As the territory of Capoterra is left, the landscape changes, the sea disappears and the mountains become protagonists with bare rocks carved by the wind, dense cork forests, oleasters and junipers and a varied and colourful macchia, rich of strawberry trees, lentisks. Leaving landscapes of enchanting beauty the carriage of the Saint reaches the territory of Sarroch. Here, continuing along the Sulcitana, extensive valleys assume different colours according to the season, from the dark soil just turned by the plough to stretches of the greenest lawns, to the bright yellows of the flowers during the springs of the island. Among the beauties of the territory, along the old artery is the Villa and farm Orri, property of the marquises of Villahermosa. It was the marquis Stefano Manca di Villahermosa himself who took care of the construction and made it into an important cultural and familiar centre and it also became the summer residence of the Savoia family. As it continues its way till late at night the carriage of the Saint reaches the entrance of the village of Sarroch where it is greeted by devoted and by the town band and it is accompanied to the church of Santa Vittoria where, after a celebration in his honour, it rests for a night. The municipal territory of Sarroch was inhabited since the Nuraghe called "Sa Domu e Orku" and the Nuragic complex of "Antigori", inside of which fragments of Mycenaean ceramics have been found datable between the end of the XIII century and the beginning of the XI century B.C. The patron saint of the village is Saint Vittoria virgin and martyr, the celebrations in her honour are held every third Sunday of September. Inside the parish church of Santa Vittoria, an aspersorium can be found with a tetramorfo realized in the first half of the XII century and the symbols of the four evangelists are carved on it, the bull of Luca, the lion of Mark, the angel of Matthew and the eagle of John. Once the carriage leaves the second of May, the carriage pulled by the oxen continues towards Villa San Pietro where a mass is officiated in his honour in the Romanic church of San Pietro. Villa San Pietro is situated at the foot of Mount Punta Cresia and it is situated along the route of the highway Sulcitana 195. The village is of Roman origin and during the Middle Ages it was annexed to the Ruling of Cagliari with the name of San Pietro. Of great interest inside the village, at little distance from the "Sulcitana", is the Romanic church of San Pietro Apostolo. Built around the last quarter of the XIII century it is a mono-roomed hall with an orientated apse and wooden roofing. A steeple and a large oculus are over the entrance portal. The celebrations in honour of the Saint patron are held on the last Sunday of June with popular entertainments, stalls with local cakes, poem competitions and fireworks. After leaving Villa San Pietro, the yoke of the oxen with the image of the Saint reaches Pula, known as Su Rondò, are the main municipalities from Cagliari and the representatives of the brotherhood. Here the "Alter Nos" with an official ceremony gives the feast and the Saint to the mayor of the village. The carriage, accompanied by a crowd with horsemen and women dressed in traditional costumes, reaches the church of San Giovanni Battista where a mass is celebrated. Towards the sunset, after the last mass is celebrated. Towards the sunset, after the last mass is celebrated the image continues its procession towards Nora. The territory of the council of Pula was inhabited since the Nuragic age as proved by several archaeological witnessing. Travelling along the road which leads to the sea, a visit to the archaeological area of Nora is compulsory, at the foot of a point from which two arms fork towards the sea, the point of Coltellazzo and the point of Serpenti. The most ancient documentation for the city of Nora is the stele in sandstone dating back to the IX century B.C. where the name of Sardinia is mentioned for the first time in the Phoenician alphabet. The Phoenicians established themselves in the land choosing it for its easy landing and for the closeness to the African coasts. Therefore, the city became the centre of the commercial trades in the Mediterranean. Once it became Punic, Nora gained splendour and richness. When the Romans conquered it in 238 B.C. at first the city experienced a continuation of the parameters of Punic life and only in the Imperial age a complete urban and architectural reconstruction was provided building thermal structures, the forum, the amphitheatre, which here that the remains of Saint Efisio would have found their place. It is the church of Sant'Efisio in Nora which is the last stop of the Saint towards the place of his martyrdom. In fact, the tradition says that the soldier along the littoral. The arrival of Sant Efisio in Nora is received with great joy. Stalls with cakes, petals of roses on the streets and crowds of devoted raise homage to the Saint. Here the image is taken off the carriage and taken inside the church which takes his name and where late at night a mass is officiated. After passing a night in the church which hosted his remains from the following morning and for the whole of the third of May, many are the celebrations which come one after another. At eleven o'clock a very suggestive mass is officiated among the remains of the ancient city of Nora, while as it grows dark the Saint is taken on shoulder in procession along the beach to the tower of Coltellazzo. An almost unnatural silence accompanied by continuous prayers makes this moment full of charm. Late in the evening the Saint proceeds backwards towards Pula where it stops for the last night. The city of Cagliari is about to take its most venerated Saint back. As the sun sets, on the fourth of May, in a rhythmical silence and with a more intimate religiousness compared to the one on the first of May, the Saint enters the city, among applauses, launch of flowers and commotion. Efisio, everyone's Saint, has come back home.