

Sea Change

Jenny Oldaker dives in for a transformative wellness sailing adventure around the islands of northern Sardinia


Despite my previous sailing experience extending to little more than a gentle pedalo around the lake of a local park, I've long been a keen believer in the healing powers of being out on the water. This idea is also at the heart of Sailing2Wellness, (www.sailing2wellness.com), a company founded by Vincent Braakman and Vallery Melcher to offer wellness sailing holidays around the Mediterranean. When I discovered their eight-day trip around the northern coast of Sardinia I knew I'd found a perfect incentive to step outside my pedalo comfort zone, while testing

my notion of water-based wellness – with the chance to explore the bucket-list beauty of the Maddalena archipelago thrown in. “Sharing the love for sailing and living a healthy and active lifestyle are the core values of Sailing2Wellness,” says Vincent. His carefully curated adventures encompass these elements, including daily breathwork, yoga and meditation, healthy meals cooked by nutritionist and on-board chef Vallery and, of course, the experience of being out at sea in the comfort of a luxury catamaran (during which seasoned sailors can get stuck in, and novices like me can learn the ropes as they go). It's time to set sail! ➤



Slow
Travel

The harbour at Cannigione, where we arrived at the end of our third day

 [jen_writes_things](#)



DAY 1

OLBIA TO TAVOLARA ISLAND

A delayed landing at Olbia 1 airport means my arrival at the city's marina isn't the leisurely business I'd planned. A swift taxi ride later, however, and I embark in the nick of time. My stressful arrival is immediately soothed with a glass of prosecco, a platter of snacks and a warm welcome from my fellow travellers. There's time for a brief talk from the crew and some introductions before we set sail – our gang of eight is a friendly mix of American, Dutch, German and British (me), including Vincent, Vallery and our on-board yoga guru Rebecca.

As we leave the marina behind, a gentle sea breeze picks up, the hills of northern Sardinia begin to recede and I get my first taste of life at sea: the sparkle of sun on water, languid gulls flapping alongside us and constantly changing panoramas of ocean and sky.



We moor up beside one of the smallest kingdoms in the world – the island of Tavolara 2 – just in time to watch its rugged peak of Monte Cannone turn rose gold in the sunset. We hop ashore and eat by the water's edge at Ristorante da Tonino, then it's time to head to bed in my cosy, comfortable cabin to fall asleep to the gentle lapping of water outside.

DAY 2

TAVOLARA ISLAND TO GOLFO PEVERO

Our wellness journey starts in earnest today with a beach yoga session (not compulsory for those who don't fancy bending and stretching), followed by what I can only describe as a breakfast of kings from Vallery, which sets the tone for the week's incredible roster of food. Weighing anchor afterwards, we head for Spiaggia di Mortorio, a sheltered bay on Isola di Mortorio 3. I take a paddleboard to shore, have a swim and watch tiny fish dart around my feet in the crystal-clear shallows. As the morning wears on, the cove fills up with boats of all sizes, and by lunchtime a party atmosphere has ramped up. It signals a perfect time to paddle back to the boat for lunch (a sensational heart-healthy chicken dish with quinoa and roasted veg).

Swanky Golfo Pevero 4 is our next stop and overnight mooring. Even arriving in a rain shower can't dampen the area's beauty – in fact, we are treated to a spectacular rainbow over the bay while we shelter with *aperitivi* on deck before taking our dinghy ashore for pizza at Ristorante Il Pulcino.



Images on this page, top to bottom:

Lunch stop at a sheltered bay off Isola di Mortorio

Our boat moored for the night at swanky Golfo Pevero

A little welcome gift for the guests

Flying the Sailing2Wellness flag

Blue Zones cooking menu

On-board nutritionist and chef Vallery employed the 'Blue Zones' approach to the week's menu. The term 'Blue Zone' was coined by Dan Buettner, an explorer and *National Geographic* journalist who identified and researched five regions of the world that have exceptionally high longevity, and then examined the diets enjoyed at the heart of each of these cultures.

PLANT-BASED FOODS

"Blue Zone cooking emphasises whole, plant-based foods like vegetables, legumes, wholegrains, and healthy fats, with moderate fish and dairy and minimal processed foods," Vallery explains. "Sardinia holds a special place as the first European Blue Zone, where the locals' Mediterranean diet and active lifestyles contribute to their remarkable longevity and vitality."

"For our Sailing2Wellness trips, I plan menus with a flexible, seasonal approach, taking inspiration from the Mediterranean and the Blue Zones philosophy of Sardinia. I prepare the ideas in advance but am often guided by local, fresh ingredients, adapting them according to availability and creating meals on the spot. The emphasis is on nutritious, balanced dishes that are possible to prepare in a small galley, ready to be shared between everyone."



Breakfast is packed with goodness



The focus is on natural ingredients



Meat is eaten very sparingly



Sautéed fennel and orange salad



Gilt-head bream with orange and sage



At Golfo Pevero we went ashore for pizza

DAY 3

GOLFO PEVERO TO MARINA CANNIGIONE

I awake on my third day to the sparkle of sun on the water outside my cabin window, and the day begins in tranquil style: heading ashore we perch on a clutch of sun-warmed rocks as Rebecca guides us in some pre-breakfast stretches and breathwork, then there's time for an idyllic swim in the crystalline water before moving on to our next stop, Capo d'Orso 5, just an hour away around the coast.

The promontory is so named for the dramatic bear-shaped rock formation that dominates the skyline, and we're here to experience the luxurious Thalasso and Spa of the area's eponymous hotel (www.hotelcapodorso.com). It's impossible to imagine a more perfect setting: butterflies flit around the mass of sculptural Mediterranean plants and vivid flowers, while beyond sits the eye-scorching blue of the ocean. Between the four heated seawater Thalasso pools, a massage treatment and the chance to simply loll in a hammock, by the time I return to the boat I am practically floating.

Landing next at Cannigione Marina 6 it's time to dock the vessel. It's fascinating to watch the crew in action but I am far too nervous to get involved myself and therefore take very much a spectator role in the proceedings. On our arrival, Cannigione's night market is just getting going and there's a chance to shop, dine and explore this lively, picturesque town before bed.



Peace and beauty at Hotel Capo d'Orso

Golfo Pevero in the morning sunshine



Tavolara Island, a self-proclaimed kingdom



Vincent at the helm en route to Corsica

DAY 4

CANNIGIONE TO BONIFACIO

Each morning Vincent sends a group What's App message with details of the day ahead, route, destination/s and sailing time. Most days don't involve more than a couple of hours of actual sailing time. Even today, which takes us from Cannigione to the Corsican leg of our trip, is no more than three hours. We stop first at Budelli 7 in the Maddalena archipelago. There's restricted access to the beach here, to help protect its fragile ecosystem, but swimming in the surrounding waters is unsurprisingly wonderful.

Being out on the open sea en route to Bonifacio 8 in Corsica is invigorating. I sit with Vincent to learn more about the catamaran's navigation and the ins and outs of sailing – though I'm still too intimidated to help out when we arrive at Bonifacio Harbour, especially with the watchful eyes from neighbouring boats eagerly monitoring our progress and adding to the pressure. Thankfully, our crew takes us in with expert precision. Bonifacio itself is utterly spectacular, characterised by a precipitous white limestone coastline, imposing citadel and winding medieval streets. As well as ample opportunity to explore the town, there's time for a trip to local vineyard Domaine Zuria to explore and taste the local wines.



The dramatic Corsica coastline



DAY 5

BONIFACIO TO LA MADDALENA

Île Piana 9 is our first port of call after waving farewell to Corsica. Set in the Bouches de Bonifacio nature reserve, the island is surrounded by shallow, turquoise waters – so shallow, in fact, that it's almost possible to wade from the boat to shore. The snorkelling around Piana is great too; the rocks that encrust its shores are teeming with underwater life and the activity puts me in a zen state, ready for an on-board meditation with Rebecca and another top-notch lunch from Vallery.

Back in the Maddalena islands we're bound for the archipelago's capital, the elegant town of La Maddalena 10. We arrive with plenty of time to enjoy *aperitivi* on board – it's amazing how quickly we've bonded as a group and our time together is packed with laughter and warmth. Yet another exquisite sunset provides a golden glow for wandering the town and its picturesque port as the sky turns from rose to dusky blue over the masts in the harbour and neighbouring island of Santo Stefano.

DAY 6

LA MADDALENA TO CAPRERA

It's an early departure today as our first stop is Cala Granara on Isola Spargi 11, a popular destination that Vincent warns can become crowded. However, we're early enough to arrive in absolute peace and it's ripe for a spot of beach yoga. A curious wild boar trots out to watch us stretch, but soon retreats to a shady spot when he realises we're not packing any grub.

The cove does gradually fill up, but this doesn't detract from its striking beauty, and it's yet another joyous spot to swim. There's even more glorious swimming, snorkelling and paddleboarding to be enjoyed at our next stop, Spiaggia Testa di Pulpo 12 (another name coined for a rock formation – this one reminiscent of a bulbous octopus head) before sailing to Caprera 13, our final stop of the day and our mooring for the night. It's a rugged, wildly beautiful island named for the wild goats that still call it home – one of which I startle on my hike to Poggio Baccà, a ruined fort and high point on the island from which there are almost 360-degree views.

Tonight, Vallery hosts a cookery lesson on board. Helped by a little local wine, music and Vallery's expert tuition, we pull together to create a feast of local fare –



Images on this page, top to bottom:

The harbour at La Maddalena

Paddleboarding at Testa del Polpo

Old boat at Caprera

The wild boar who came to watch us do yoga



sautéed fennel and orange salad with ricotta cheese to start and gilt-head bream (*orata*) with orange and sage for our main. We may have been out at sea for almost a week by now, but I'm still blown away by every view, and it's hard to imagine anything more blissful than this convivial sunset meal, surrounded as far as the eye can see by calm blue ocean and the gently rugged undulations of the surrounding land.

DAY 7

CAPRERA TO OLBIA MARINA

Our final full day dawns hot and after the obligatory swim and an invigorating Yin yoga session on board there's time for one last stop just off the island of La Figarolo. Not only is this a top spot for snorkelling, with a colourful array of marine life to admire beneath the water, it's also a great place for dolphin spotting and our collective eyes are constantly peeled for cetacean action. As we set off to leave our watchfulness is rewarded as a pair of dolphins appears right beside our boat and swims around us, a magical final sight to send us back to Olbia, where we'll spend our evening. This sophisticated, historic city is a brilliant place for end-of-trip shopping, and after some exploration of its elegant streets and atmospheric alleyways it's time to reconvene with my fellow travellers for a final meal and *gelato* in Piazza Matteotti.

DAY 8

FAREWELL TO SARDINIA!

Disembarkation is around 8am, giving the crew chance to prepare for the next group of holidaymakers. There are fond farewells all round – a week living in close quarters is a wonderful way to foster a strong bond, and I feel lucky to have had such a lovely bunch of fellow travellers to share this experience, and for the warm, vibrant energy of Vincent and Vallery at the helm, who curated this incredible adventure. It's no exaggeration to say I'm going home transformed. Between the diet of tasty, wholesome local dishes, gentle yoga in the Mediterranean's most beautiful places and endless sea swimming, I have never before found a trip to be quite so beneficial for both body and soul. Most of all, being on the water for the week has been powerfully restorative, both relaxing and invigorating in equal measure – from gazing at the vastness of the ocean and giving in to the inherently meditative quality of watching land and sea go by, to basking in the sun and fresh ocean air from dawn till nightfall. Thanks to this trip I've come a long way since my pedalo days and am already raring to get back out into the wild blue yonder. ■

GETTING THERE

► Jenny organised her trip with Venturesail (see right), and flew to Olbia Costa Smeralda airport (www.geasar.it), which has direct connections with UK airports including Bristol and various London airports.



Buon appetito!



Dolphin visitors at La Figarolo

Packing tips for a sailing holiday

- There is limited space for possessions so travel as light as possible – ideally into a soft bag or rucksack rather than a rigid case.
- The crew advises lots of lightweight, easy-drying layers, including warm and waterproof clothing (it can be breezy out at sea, even on a warm week!)
- For footwear, light shoes or trainers with good grip are best, while flip-flops or sandals will also prove invaluable.
- Suncream is absolutely essential. For this and other toiletries, choose 'reef-safe' products that won't do any damage to the delicate ecosystem of this protected area.
- Catamarans are very stable and this trip doesn't venture into any particularly choppy waters, but motion sickness remedies are worth packing as a precaution. I brought some tablets, but the sailing was so smooth there wasn't even a flicker of nausea.



Our gang on board on our last day

More sailing adventures

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