

The Costa Smeralda, where the races take place, was transformed back in the 1960s by the Aga Khan, whose vision for the twinkling island was that of a millionaire's paradise. Though boutique hotels and the odd golf resort are inevitable results of such development, Sardinia retains a great deal of rugged authenticity, with acres of untouched natural land still very much on show. Sardinia's natural beauty, especially that of the race headquarters, Porto Cervo, makes for the perfect destination to jet off to this autumn.

Leonardo Ferragamo

Proudly sitting at the helm of Nautor Swan Yachts, the company that runs the races, is Leonardo Ferragamo, son of shoe-god Salvatore Ferragamo, the man who brought the world Dorothy's ruby red slippers in the Wizard of Oz and has adorned the heels of stars the world over. Leonardo himself worked as the director of the men's shoe division for his father's company from 1975 to 1980, but boats and sailing were a passion from childhood.

'I have loved sailing since I was a kid,' he reminisces. 'Three areas define it for me: the sense of challenge, the freedom of sailing and the beauty of it.' And he believes that his background in fashion was key in preparing him for his takeover of Nautor Swan in 1998: 'International marketing, leading a product that combines functionality and beauty, managing a leading brand – these aspects of Nautor bear close similarity to the shoe business.'

The Rolex Swan races began in 1980, long before the Ferragamos bought

the company in 1998, and the competitions have always proven spectacular. 'The water, weather, and wind conditions [in Sardinia] are perfect, so the cup has become a point of reference for the sailing world,' he explains. This 15th running of the Rolex Swan regatta, as with previous races, will not be limited to professional sailors; it is open to anyone who owns or charters a Swan yacht.

In 2006, over 110 Swans took part, including four 100' yachts and, being so prestigious, some owners were competitive enough to draft in professional sailors to give them an edge. Swans from 17 countries were expected to race this September in boats as comfortable cruising as they are competing. Glamorous, prestigious and a huge amount of fun, this really is a race worth seeing, even if you can't take part personally. The only disadvantage Leonardo suffers from owning the company? 'I'm not allowed to win the regatta,' he chuckles.

Porto Cervo, home to Nautor Swan, is the very heart of the region – a prominent tourist area in Gallura on the northwest coast. With a village feel, it is built between the natural port and the surrounding, stunning hills. The new harbour is equipped with all modern necessities for international marine traffic while Porto Vecchio, the old port, still sits proudly in the southeast. The port's pinnacle point is the Capo Ferro, a picture-perfect lighthouse atop a 46 metre-high promontory. The Costa Smeralda Yacht Club is known the world over and is a buzzing place for cocktails after a day on the high seas. Wherever you go in Sardinia, however, you'll be in awe of the delicate, unspoiled beaches, wonderful cuisine and delightful people. ■

The Rolex Swan Races in Sardinia are the pinnacle of the global sailing calendar. Swan yachts from around the world compete and the people, the atmosphere, the exquisite boats and the celebrity-hunting paparazzi combine to make for some seriously chic and extremely exciting races.

MILLIONAIRE'S PARADISE

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Pitrizza

Hotel Pitrizza, with its views of the Lisca di Vacca, is luxurious. The seawater swimming pool carved out of natural rock is extremely tranquil but if you want the real thing, you also have a private beach at your disposal. The spa is world famous

and golf, water skiing and boating can be arranged. If you want real privacy and seclusion, the Villa Il Corbezollo will satisfy.

Doubles: from €640 per night.
Villa: from €1360 per night.

Costa Smeralda, Porto Cervo 07020, Italy
Tel: +39 789 9930111
Website: www.starwoodhotels.com

Hotel villa las tronas

Hotel Villa Las Tronas was a holiday home to the Italian Royal family until the 1940s. It is located on its own promontory, making for luxurious seclusion. Perched on jutting rock off Sardinia's northwest coast, the hotel has an intimate, private and gentle atmosphere. The rooms, unsurprisingly, are

more like royal bedrooms. The restaurant is a culinary winner and has panoramic views that can't be beaten – unless you're on a private yacht, of course.

Doubles: from €220 per night.
Lungomare, Valencia 1, 07041 Alghero (Sassari)
Tel: +39 79 981818
Website: www.hotelvillalastronas.com

SARDINIA: WHERE TO BE SEEN

Being a small island, it's unsurprising that fresh fish is on any menu you find. Shellfish is abundant and suckling pig is a Sardinian favorite. Hibiscus in Quartu Sant'Elena may not blow you away with its innovative décor, but the food served within this restored Campidanese house is truly creative, set in a traditional and breathtaking exterior. Scorpion fish and lobster are regulars and there is a range of delicious meats, all delicately prepared by head chef Antonio Figus. The cellar boasts 160 different wines, a glass of which should be enjoyed in the Hibiscus gardens. Alternatively, head inland from Porto Cervo to the charming, quaint Lu Stazzu. The name means 'the stable' and this is a rustic restaurant, located high above the sea. Suckling pigs on spits glow above the fire, while wild boar and goat sausages languish on the menu. Those wanting something slightly more familiar can enjoy an array of spaghetti, sea urchins, ravioli and sardines. The pergola atmosphere is very romantic and the food won't disappoint.

Words by Cass Chapman

