



Sounds of the Sea

*A birthday at sea was what **Sunshine Lichauco de Leon** wanted; she got not just her wish, but so much more than what she expected*

A few weeks before my 45th birthday, I woke up with one thought: I wanted to wake up by the sea! Making this happen, however, was a challenge. It was late August, the busiest month in the Mediterranean. My travelling companion and I had only four nights to spare, knew nothing about boats, and were pretty sure we could not afford our own yacht!

And then, I accidentally clicked a link for intersailclub.com and the fog of my search began to clear. Via online chat, company founder Captain Luca Lienza answered in a charmingly thick Italian accent: "What you are asking is...very difficult." I took a deep

breath: "Difficult, but not impossible, right?" His answer was our guiding light: "On a boat, nothing is impossible."

As it turned out, this travel booking platform was everything we needed. With 380 boats (10-48 metres long), it offers 400 itineraries worldwide. It has a unique yacht-sharing option: to be able to book a trip by cabin and share the cost with other travellers, making the luxury of a sailing holiday more affordable.

Trip planning is also made easier as you can choose and filter your trip by destination, boat type, date, price, number of guests, and itinerary. For shared group trips, like the one we joined, you can see who are on board and learn a bit about them. Although the four-cabin sailboat around the archipelago of Sardinia that we chose included an on-board chef and meals,

MEDITERRANEAN MEMORIES

Rocky Sardinian shores; (inset) Sunshine de Leon listens to the wind around her



LIFE AT SEA
 (Clockwise from top left)
 The crew with all sails out;
 Miaplacidus on the water;
 The pink beaches of Budelli

we could also choose a boat where we would do the cooking. I was lucky to travel with a friend but had I been alone, one of their sections could have helped me find my ideal travel mate.

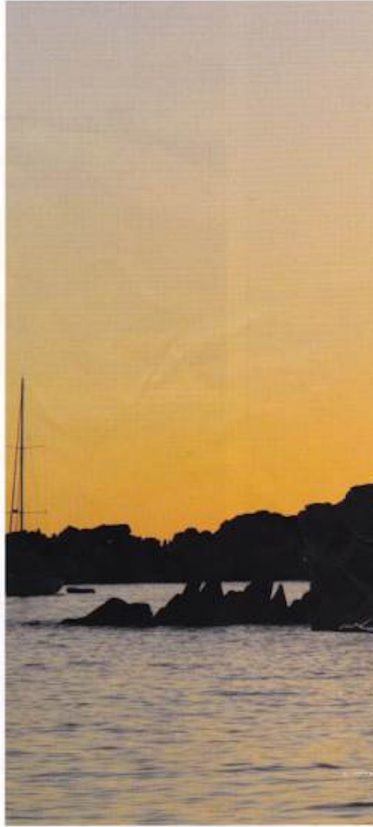
SHIP AHOY!

At the marina of La Maddalena Island, I broke into a giant smile when I saw *Miaplacidus*, the name of both a star and the 20-metre sailing ketch that would be our home on the sea. Walking barefoot on her perfectly designed, wide open deck, we were warmly welcomed with a sunset *aperitivo* and introduced to our new shipmates: an American nurse travelling alone, two Australians, a Milanese fashion retailer, a professional tango teacher, and an accountant who danced flamenco in her spare time. Our small but efficient crew were from Sicily and Argentina.

Over a feast of fresh seafood in the port town that evening, any concerns about travelling with complete strangers were soon a memory. Dinner conversation was sometimes exchanged or translated into four different languages, yet we all spoke one tongue—that of adventure and love for the sea.

The next day, as the first sails went up, and our boat started to glide lightly and gently along the cobalt blue sea, I found myself exhaling every thought of life on land and each breath I inhaled brought a new world of possibility.

Our first destination was Lavezzi, a small group of giant rocks behind the French island of Corsica, a favourite of our Captain because, “It feels like the lunar surface.” Our late afternoon arrival meant we experienced *la bella luce* or “beautiful light.” The sun became a kaleidoscope as it set over the rocks and sea, causing us to



gasp each time we looked up at the dramatic ever-changing colours before us. Dinner on deck was followed by Mirto, a local digestif, singing along to our chef playing the ukulele, and late night conversations discussing black holes and the mysteries of the solar system.

Between Corsica and Sardinia, within the La Maddalena archipelago, lay our next playground: Budelli, a tiny atoll with clear turquoise waters and a beach with pink sand. The sunset-coloured sand of this protected desert island comes from crushed corals, crystals, and fossils; but like many works of art, it can only be admired from a distance.

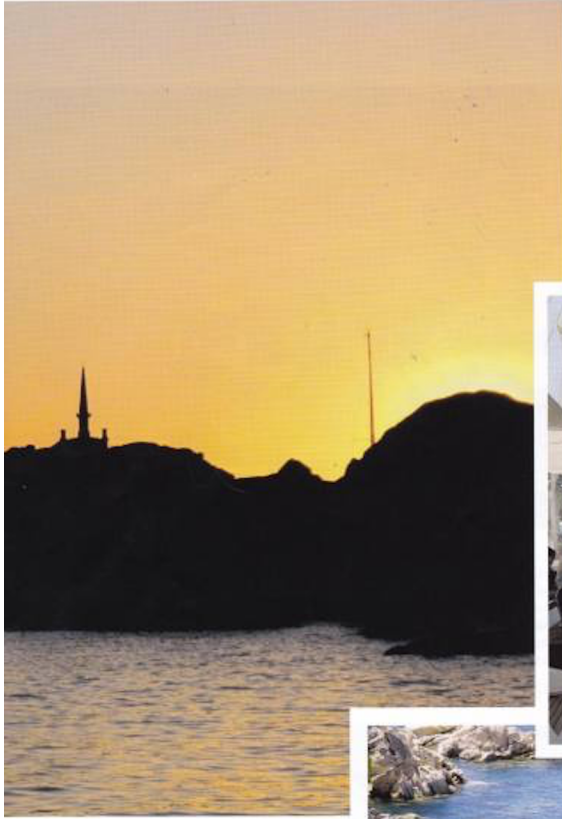
MY SPECIAL DAY

Our last day at sea was my birthday. I had fallen asleep on deck the night before, revelling in the

stillness of the sea, the only sound being water gently lapping at the dinghy—and feeling like a baby in a womb. Waking up to view the vastness all around me was life-affirming. Standing on a sailboat and looking at land in the distance reminded me of the importance of looking at things from a different perspective.

My day continued with both a new kind of wandering and wonder—jumping onto an inflatable raft and letting myself float out to sea, drifting where the wind and water sent me, but unworried about getting lost as the rope tying me to *Miaplacidus* was my anchor.

Our final destination was the secluded beach of Cala Coticcio, or “Tahiti beach,” located on the nature reserve of Caprera. While swimming to the cove 200 meters away, we paused to stand on an underwater



ISLAND HOPPING

(Clockwise from left)
 Sunset over Lavezzi; Taking
 a dip; Cala Cotliccio on
 Caprera Island; (opposite)
 The town of La Maddalena;
 The author finds the perfect
 rock to sit on



rope and Melissa asked me “Was this what I dreamt of?” My soul could only smile.

If living on a sailboat fills me with serenity and possibility, sailing fills me with the ultimate sense of freedom. That afternoon the wind was strong; *Miaplacidus* grew wings and we flew through the ocean.

During past sailing trips, I recall debating what was more beautiful: the sound of the flapping of powerful sails as the wind moves in drawing them tight, or the sound of the wind at your back as your boat picks up speed. On this day, I found my answer. What is truly enchanting is hearing the whistling of the wind. Standing carefully on the front deck that day with wind all around me, the unexpected whistle came softly and briefly, but hearing it was the greatest gift. 🌊