

Cavalcata Sarda – Sardinia's most beautiful festival

... and what it has to do with walking upright

by Marita Brune-Koch*

(CH-S) The Cavalcata Sarda takes place every year in May in the Sardinian town of Sassari. The author of this article went there to see it.

Nine o'clock in the morning in the city centre of Sassari, Sardinia. People are slowly arriving from all directions. We're right on time, so we have another coffee in one of the many bars. Then we take a leisurely stroll to the venue of the announced event. A large grandstand has been erected. There are only a few people sitting there at first. The grandstand is presumably for guests of honour, but you can also buy a ticket. We're happy with a standing spot opposite the grandstand; that way we're right in the middle of the crowd and can soak up the atmosphere. Numerous onlookers are slowly gathering in front of the barriers lining the sides of the streets.



(All pictures mbk)

Beauty, pride, dignity, joy

At last, it begins. Mounted police officers in their smart uniforms ride ahead. A music group starts to play. Then the first group comes into view: women in beautiful traditional costumes, carrying baskets filled with their town's traditional bread, walk past us at a leisurely pace. Group after group arrives, each presenting their village's traditional costume and proudly displaying their region's produce: bread, sweets, grapes and oils. The youngest are carried in their parents' arms,

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Official symbol of the Cavalcata Sarda 2026.

already dressed in traditional costume themselves. As soon as they can, they run along proudly. Families with children, groups of young men or young women, groups of children, elderly couples, and young lads proudly escorting a girl.

Mixed in among them are young lads who look as though they've stepped straight out of our own carnival: clad in animal skins and wearing terrifying masks, they perform wild dances, swinging lassos to capture the young girls watching from the sidelines. Time and again, bands play *organettos* – button accordions, guitars, and also the *launedda*, the typical Sardinian flute.

By now, the grandstand has filled to capacity, and there are also huge crowds watching from the roadside where we are standing.

Diversity in tradition: the traditional costumes

There are a few constants in the design of the traditional costumes: women and girls wear long



skirts and a headscarf that leaves the face uncovered, and for the men white trousers, and short black skirt-like overgarments worn over them. Yet the variety of styles, colours and designs is vast. Our photos give a small glimpse of this.



There is so much pride and dignity in the bearing of the men and women – indeed, even the young people – as they pass by us. Pride in the beauty of their traditions, in their children and families, and in their local produce. And we also see joy – open, unfeigned joy.

Daring equestrian acrobatics

For two and a half hours, the procession of over 3,000 participants from numerous towns across Sardinia passes by us. By now, the whole town is out and about. All the cafés and restaurants are packed, loud music is blaring from everywhere, and the atmosphere is exuberant and festive. After a quick bite to eat, we make our way to the “Ippodromo Pinna”, the racecourse. A horse-riding display awaits us there. Majestic horses with lavishly decorated saddles and bridles parade past us. Then young women and men perform daring feats at a breakneck gallop. A breathtaking spectacle.

Dance: Not for Show – but demanding

In the evening, the *Ballo Sardu*, a Sardinian dance, is performed to the music of the launeddas and the organetto. The dancers join hands and form a circle. During the dance, the upper body remains graceful and motionless, whilst



the legs execute fast, precise, rhythmic steps. To us, it looks as though not much is happening at all, as though it were very easy to perform this dance. I heard from a visitor to Sardinia from Germany who tried to join in. He said he immediately tripped over his own legs; it had been impossible to keep up with the movements. This dance is clearly not intended as a show dance for the audience but serves to bring joy and foster a sense of community amongst the dancers – and no doubt to reinforce their identity as well.



Luigi Lai playing the launedda. (Picture gk)

Luigi Lai: “The Launeddas are my life”

Finally, a man who is clearly very old takes to the stage, greeted with rapturous applause from the audience. He is carefully supported; he is obviously quite advanced in years. It is *Luigi Lai*, a Sardinian musician of international renown. He plays the launeddas, an instrument consisting of three thin tubes – or so it appears to us. When he puts the launeddas to his lips, we are not prepared for what we then hear: an incredibly rich sound; it sounds like an entire orchestra. He puffs out his cheeks powerfully and delivers a resounding concert of considerable length. He doesn’t appear aged anymore. We had no idea about this oldest wind instrument in the Mediterranean region. Luigi Lai has performed on all the world’s major stages alongside great virtuosos of contemporary music, and he has passed on his art to the next generation at a music school he founded.

Tradition and modernity: they go hand in hand!

In front of us in the audience, listening to the 94-year-old maestro’s performance, stands a group of young girls: black leather jackets, miniskirts,

perfectly made up for a night out. They'll no doubt be listening to modern music later this evening, perhaps even dancing to it, but here they're applauding the maestro of their homeland with enthusiasm. One doesn't rule out the other. Tradition can be lived and loved without excluding modernity.

Authentic or just for tourists?

Various friends to whom we'd told about the *Cavalcata Sarda* voiced their suspicions. "Isn't that just for tourists?", I must admit, I had the same thought when we decided to attend this festival. It turned out that it was mainly locals celebrating; at any rate, we didn't hear any languages other than Italian and Sardinian at any of the events. Has it really become so alien to us that people identify with their traditions, that they love and celebrate them?

Of course, many tourists also enjoy the Carnival of Basel. Just as they do at the Cologne Carnival or the Cow Parade in Appenzell. But all these events would take place even without a single tourist: because people love their tradi-

tions, they love their homeland, they identify with the customs and festivals, and they experience a sense of community, togetherness and joy through them. And when we're there as tourists, we're allowed to share in it a little too.

Strength – to say “no” to war

Time and again, there are voices that disparage such traditions. Evidently, some people feel uneasy about the fact that people feel connected to their homeland and its customs and choose to uphold them.

But it is important to bear in mind: these identity-forming traditions strengthen people, filling them with pride in their own heritage. Strong people who are conscious of their identity and their connection to their fellow human beings – even across potential differences of opinion – are able to listen to their own inner voice, develop their own thoughts and live by them. This is no guarantee that people will say “no” to injustice and war, but it significantly increases their ability to do so.

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)