

SECRET SARDINIA: Foreign Correspondent

Tuesday January 29 at 8pm



It's touted as Europe's most beautiful island - but the people of Sardinia are getting sick and dying mysteriously. Fingers are pointing at secret bomb tests and war games by the world's armies, as Emma Alberici reports.

Sardinia is an island cut in two. Along the white beach-studded Costa Smeralda, a magnet for the rich and famous, a villa can fetch close to \$150 million.

"That house is owned by the head of Volkswagen," says realtor Lorenzo Camillo as he takes reporter Emma Alberici for a sail on his yacht. "Ah there we are - there's the famous Berlusconi villa."

But more than a third of Sardinia – including much of its waters – is off limits to locals and visitors, whatever their celebrity. This area is controlled by the Italian military, rented out for some of the world's biggest war games and home to Europe's biggest bomb test site.

This has many locals riled. *"Islands, little islands have disappeared, erased by missiles shot from the land, the sky and the sea,"* says former Sardinian president Mauro Pili.



Pili has also recorded the destruction of some of Sardinia's unique nuraghe - turret-like stone Bronze Age structures built some 3500 years ago – by test bombs.

But it's not cultural vandalism or restricted movement that most concerns Sardinians. In areas near the test sites, there have been high rates of cancers, birth defects and early death.

Giancarlo Piras recalls what the doctor said when his son Francesco, who had served as a soldier at a bombing range, got pancreatic cancer at age 27: *“By any chance has your son been in contact with radioactive material?”*

Children were born with deformities including missing limbs. In one village in one year, one in four new born babies had some kind of defect. Sheep grazing on the test sites gave birth to grotesquely twisted lambs. Their shepherds too had phenomenally high rates of cancer.

Tissue samples from man and beast showed high levels of highly toxic materials used in many bomb tests. *“The longer they lived in the area, the higher the quantity,”* a nuclear physicist tells Alberici.

As public pressure grew for a full accounting, the military pushed back.

“If they didn't want us to see something they wouldn't show it to us. They feared we could find something unusual,” says an MP who headed a parliamentary inquiry.

Generals went on the front foot, blaming people's illnesses on close inbreeding. With much fanfare, they announced a scientific inquiry. But as Alberici reports, evidence shows they nobbled it.

Secret Sardinia – a story of sickness, secrecy and cover-up – airs on **Foreign Correspondent** on ABC TV at 8 pm Tuesday January 29 and on the ABC News Channel at 7.30 pm AEDT Saturday February 2 and 5.30 pm AEDT Sunday February 3. Also on iview.

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