Empirical Analysis for Future Excellence Tourism Policies: The Case of Arzachena (Sardinia, Italy)

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Abstract. Coastal areas have historically served as hubs of human activity. Accordingly, the development of port infrastructure has driven strategies for nautical tourism, which can significantly influence the regional economic landscape and foster synergistic collaborations among tourism-related stakeholders. While research on ports and seaside tourism is well established, studies investigating the connection between coastal and inland areas through port facilities remain limited. In the Mediterranean context, Sardinia (Italy) represents a case of highly seasonal tourism and is a prime destination for nautical tourism. In line with the Regional Strategic Plan, the enhancement of the island's inland heritage has been encouraged to promote deseasonalization strategies. Acknowledging the prominent role of nautical tourism in Sardinia, this study is intended as a contribution to a broader research initiative focused on mapping the island's nautical infrastructure. The analysis centers on the municipality of Arzachena (Province of Sassari), which hosts significant infrastructure for large vessels and luxury tourism. Through field research, cartographic analysis, and the application of isochrones, the study investigated the accessibility between local ports and Arzachena's cultural assets. The results suggested a potential for proximity-based and day tourism, enabling nautical tourists to explore inland historical and cultural sites. Overall, further research could support the integrated valorization of coastal and inland resources, highlighting the potential of a territorial approach to nautical tourism planning beyond the coastline. This integrated perspective may yield long-term governance benefits, employment opportunities, and socio-economic development for inland Sardinia through enhanced use of marina facilities.

Keywords: Nautical Tourism · Marina · Cultural Asset · Isochrone analysis · Governance

1 Introduction

Over 70% of the Earth's surface is covered by oceans and seas [1], underscoring the pivotal role of water for humanity and their settlements. Coastal areas have historically served as hubs of human activity, intricately linked to development and progress, and

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consistently playing a significant economic role [2–4]. Their potential extends beyond the seaside tourism, offering opportunities for recreational and leisure activities [5, 6]. Such pattern is related to nautical activities port infrastructures' development [5].

As primary venues for accommodating boaters and their vessels [4], tourist ports are strongly connected with nautical tourism [5, 7–14]. The expansion of nautical tourism requires the development and availability of appropriate infrastructures [15], which entail substantial investments and synergistic collaboration among involved stakeholders [16–18]. Tourist ports offer a wide array of services [19, 20], including tourism, accommodation, food service, mooring and assistance facilities. These complex structures are fundamental to the reputation of a destination [7] and stimulate various stakeholders, like producers who market their products to boaters [14, 20]. In line with the critical role of investment, construction, and operation in tourist ports, these should be designed and enhanced in accordance with the characteristics of their location [14]. Thus, tourist ports could be related to luxury tourism [21], so they have a role in strengthening and optimizing nautical supply, including the enhancement of specialized services often lacking in existing infrastructures [22].

The notion of ports serving as gateways to inland territories remains a generalized assumption, lacking substantial evidence of concrete interventions [23, 24]. This weakness primarily could be connected with the nautical tourists essence, whose choices are predominantly influenced by a preference for the sea and nature, leading to a strong desire to spend more time at sea rather than on the beach. The aim of this study was to highlight the potential of tourist ports in Sardinia (Italy) by viewing nautical tourism as an opportunity to rediscover the cultural identity of the beyond the coast. Sardinia is, in fact, a Mediterranean island renowned for beach tourism and notable for nautical tourism, retains its unique spirit, or genius loci, particularly in areas beyond the coastal scenery. As part of a broader research project analyzing regional tourist ports, this contribution presents the case of Arzachena territory (in the province of Sassari), identifying tourist ports for large vessels (i.e., yachting) as key elements for integrating offerings that support the cultural identity of the territory.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 The Case Study

Situated in the heart of the Mediterranean, Sardinia boasts over 1,800 km of coastline, making it a prime destination for nautical tourism. This appeal is largely attributed to its territorial features, with beaches, minor islands, marine reserves, and national parks, offering a varied tourist experience. Sardinia actually captivates tourists with a heritage distinct from the Italian Peninsula's one. Such a uniqueness should serve as a significant economic asset, with tourism contributing substantially to revenue and employment.

Located in the northeastern quadrant of the island, the territory of Arzachena (230.85 sq km) encompasses major port facilities situated in its hamlets. The environment includes various protected and ecologically significant areas: the Special Protection Area (SPA) of the La Maddalena Archipelago; sites of phytogeographic interest such as the Cannigione Ponds, Monti della Muvra Coste delle Saline, and the Portisco Petra

Ruja area; coastal wetlands; the Monte Moro site within the Regional Park System; and the permanent wildlife protection oasis of Paduli Saloni (Fig. 1).

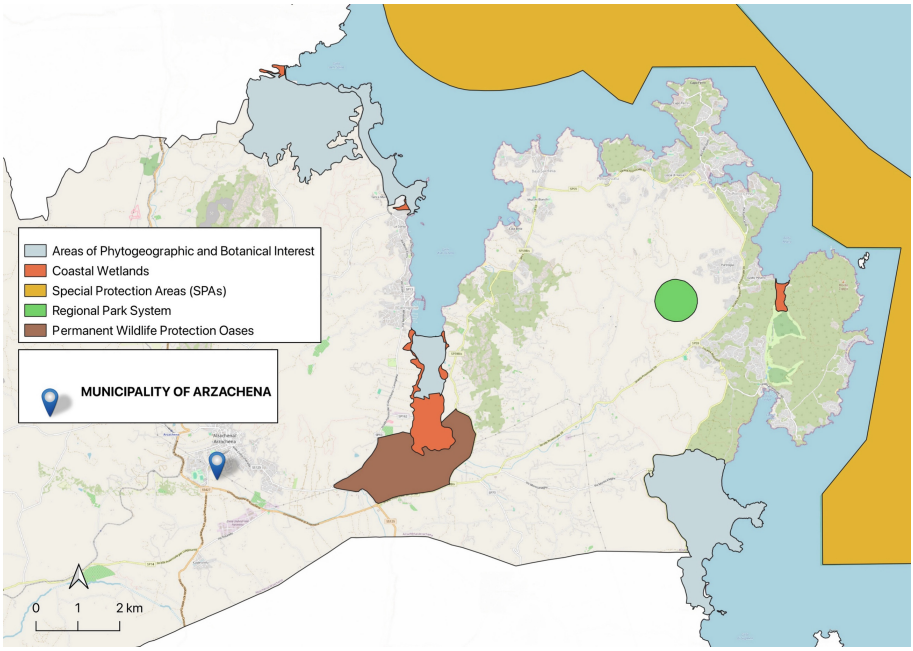

Fig. 1. Arzachena, cartographic representation highlighting key environmental features. Data extracted from [25]. (Authors' elaboration)

Arzachena hosts historical and cultural assets as well [26]. Among its archaeological complexes, approximately 10 km from the Gulf, lies the Necropolis of Li Muri, one of the oldest megalithic burial sites in the region, dating back to the Neolithic period. In the locality of Capichera, the Nuragic Complex of La Prisgiona stands as a testament to Nuragic civilization, with construction phases spanning from the 14th to the 9th century BCE. Further evidence of the area′s prehistoric heritage includes the Temple of Malchittu and the Giants' Tombs of Coddu Ecchju, Li Lolghi, and Moru. These funerary structures underscore the significance of ancestor worship in Nuragic societies. The Nuraghe Albucciu, with artifacts suggesting usage from the late Middle Bronze Age, adds to the archaeological tapestry of the region. Arzachena's historical narrative is further enriched by institutions such as La Scatola del Tempo (i.e., an exhibition center guiding visitors through local history) and the Museum of Science, Earth, and Man, which offers natural and anthropological insights. The cultural landscape is complemented by sites contributing to the region's identity and imagery, including the Church of Stella Maris (i.e., an elegant sacred building overlooking the sea) and the Hotel Cala di Volpe (i.e., a hospitality structure completed in 1963). Both are exemplary of the so-called Mediterranean style architecture characteristic of Porto Cervo and, more broadly, the

Costa Smeralda project, which has significantly transformed the historical-geographical landscape of Gallura (Fig. 2).

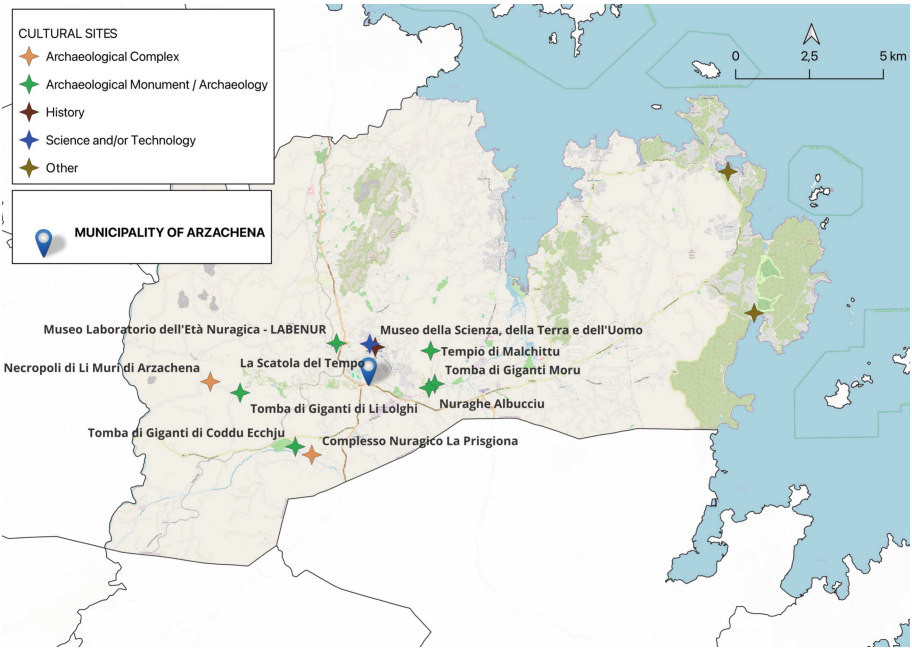

Fig. 2. Arzachena, cultural sites as data extracted from [25]. (Authors' elaboration)

2.2 Field Survey and GIS Analysis

A comprehensive inventory of landing points across the region, with a specific focus on Arzachena, was conducted to identify potential sites of interest for the yachting sector and, more broadly, for recreational boating. In accordance with Legislative Decree No. 171 of 18 July 2005, Article 3, a distinction was made between ports for recreational craft (< 25 m) and ports for large pleasure vessels (≥ 25 m), with the latter considered for coastal-inland integration in Arzachena territory. Among official sources, the focus was to the documents and annexes of the Regional Plan for the Network of Tourist Ports developed by the Autonomous Region of Sardinia [27]. To support the collected data, contacts were established with various stakeholders of the tourist ports.

To verify the accuracy of the gathered data, validations were carried out through: on-site interviews; remote interviews; questionnaires administered to port managers. The identified ports were subsequently analyzed based on the potential advantages of their geographical location. The study aimed to understand the extent to which a potential tourist, once ashore, could benefit from hospitality resources and cultural attractions. To achieve this, in addition to geolocating the reference ports, the research proceeded with

the identification of restaurants and agritourism establishments in Arzachena municipality through field data collection. Finally, using OpenRouteService (ORS) Tools in QGIS software, a cartographic analysis was conducted based on the representation of temporal isochrones to evaluate the distance between the identified ports and Arzachena's cultural assets following a perspective of proximity and/or day tourism. Pedestrian routes (30 min) and vehicular routes (15 min) from the tourist ports were then considered to assess accessibility to cultural points of interest, dining establishments, and agritourism facilities within the territory, in order to understand the spatial reach of the Arzachena's ports for large pleasure vessels as nodes for diverse local tourist experiences.

3 Results and Discussion

3.1 Sardinian Scenario and Arzachena's Ports for Large Pleasure Vessels

Results suggested that the distribution of ports in Sardinia could closely be linked to the diverse nature of its coastlines across the island's provinces. In certain instances, significant distances separate these ports; for example, approximately 40 nautical miles (64 km) lie between the port of Alghero and that of Stintino. This diversity is evident not only in the allure of the rugged coasts and the beauty of the sea but also in the challenges posed by constructing port infrastructures along high cliffs or low-lying shores featuring ponds and lagoons.

A substantial portion of port facilities is concentrated along the northeastern, southeastern, and southwestern coasts, whereas the northwestern coast has fewer such structures. Such an imbalance could be related to distances between port facilities and their concentration in specific coastal areas and geographical disparities. Specifically, the northeastern quadrant (province of Sassari) stands out for its number of berths and its capacity to accommodate larger recreational vessels. Consequently, this area is distinguished by having the most functional port infrastructures for hosting maxi-yachts, while other areas possess only one of these characteristics. Following this, the northwestern quadrant (province of Sassari) ranks next in terms of the number of berths, and the southeastern quadrant (metropolitan city of Cagliari) follows regarding the capacity to accommodate larger recreational vessels. Considering individual port facilities, the port of Alghero (in the northwestern quadrant) holds the record for the number of berths, followed by the Marina of Villasimius (in the southeastern quadrant, province of South Sardinia). These facilities also offer a diverse range of services for recreational boating (Fig. 3).

In the case of Arzachena, the identified ports were Porto Cervo Marina, Poltu Quatu Marina dell'Orso, Cala Bitta Baja Sardinia, and Cannigione. Among the most important port facilities in Sardinia, the Marina of Porto Cervo (in the tourist area of Costa Smeralda) is particularly oriented towards the yachting tourism segment. It is therefore configured as a tourist port, active throughout the year. It is divided into: Old Port, which is located closer to the luxury shopping area; New Port, for accommodating a greater number of boats. Overall, Porto Cervo can host up to 720 boats, including those up to 160 m in length. Also, it has a depth ranging from 1.7 m up to 7 m. Poltu Quatu is located in the homonymous hamlet of the municipality of Arzachena, developing at the edge of a long inlet hidden and protected by rocky reliefs, a condition from which its name

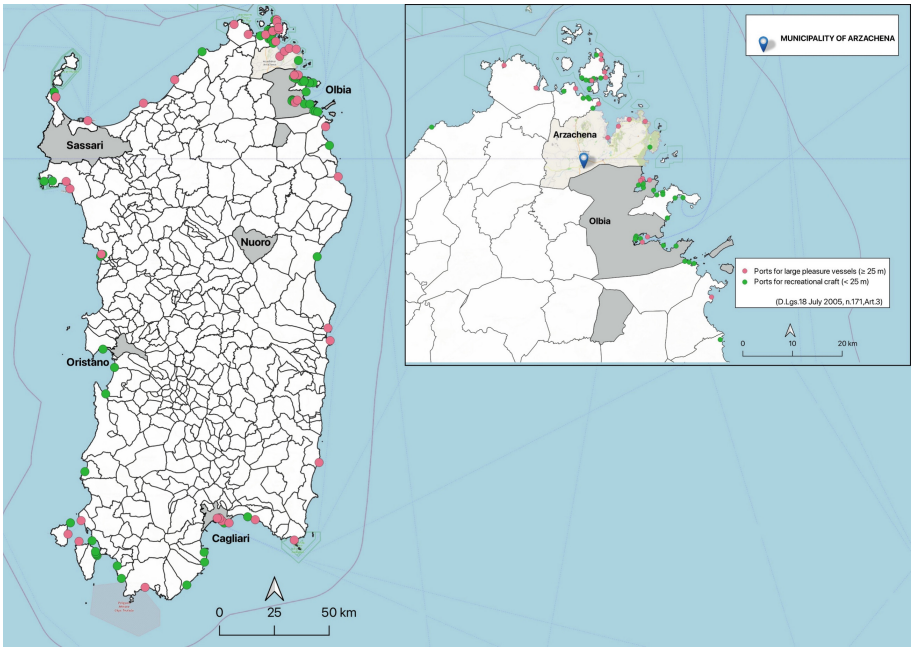

Fig. 3. Distribution of maritime ports in Sardinia, categorized by vessel accommodation capacity. The municipality of Arzachena, located in the northeastern area, is highlighted. (Authors' elaboration)

derives. The location of the port and the distinctive features of the village of Poltu Quatu confer an exclusive character to the port facility. This tourist landing, whose activity takes place throughout the year, has 305 berths and is capable of hosting boats up to 50 m. Finally, it has a minimum depth of 2 m and a maximum of 3 m. The port of Cala Bitta - Baja Sardinia is in the hamlet of Cala Bitta and is configured as a modestly sized facility consisting of a few piers. It has 183 berths and can accommodate boats with a maximum length of 27 m. This port facility falls into the category of tourist ports, with seasonally activity and a seabed that varies from 1.5 to 3 m. Finally, the port of Cannigione is located at the end of the Gulf of Arzachena and develops along the coast of the homonymous hamlet with, in addition, an arm that partially shelters much of the port and is configured as a complex of piers managed by multiple companies, some of which have formed the Marina di Cannigione consortium. This port facility is recognized as a tourist landing with year-round use and is mainly used for fishing, tourism, recreational boating, and nautical shipbuilding activities. Despite its extension, its seabed does not have a particularly high depth, as the minimum is 0.5 m, while the maximum is only 3.2 m. However, it is suitable for accommodating boats with a maximum length of 35 m and guarantees a total of about 800 berths. The port also has a buoy field, which can host 34 recreational units and offers the same services as the port (Table 1).

Table 1. Selected nautical infrastructures in the Arzachena area (northeastern Sardinia), including the main categories of port typology, prevailing functions, and patterns of seasonal or year-round use. (Authors' elaboration)

Name	Typology	Fruition time
Porto Cervo Marina	Marina	Annual
Poltu Qualtu Marina dell'Orso	Tourist berth; Multipurpose port	Annual
Cala Bitta – Baja Sardinia	Marina	Seasonal
Cannigione	Tourist berth; Functional port; Buoy field	Annual

3.2 Isochrones Analysis

The accessibility analysis was based on isochrone generated with ORS Tools in the afternoon of April 1st, 2025, then using OpenStreetMap routing data. The spatial pattern of port typologies and functions in the Arzachena area suggested significant implications for both accessibility and territorial integration. The aggregated 30-min foot-walking isochrone (Fig. 4) revealed a distinctly coastal pattern, with limited coverage towards the south and inland areas. As a result, potential tourists on foot are likely to concentrate around services located in the immediate vicinity of the ports, such as restaurants. In

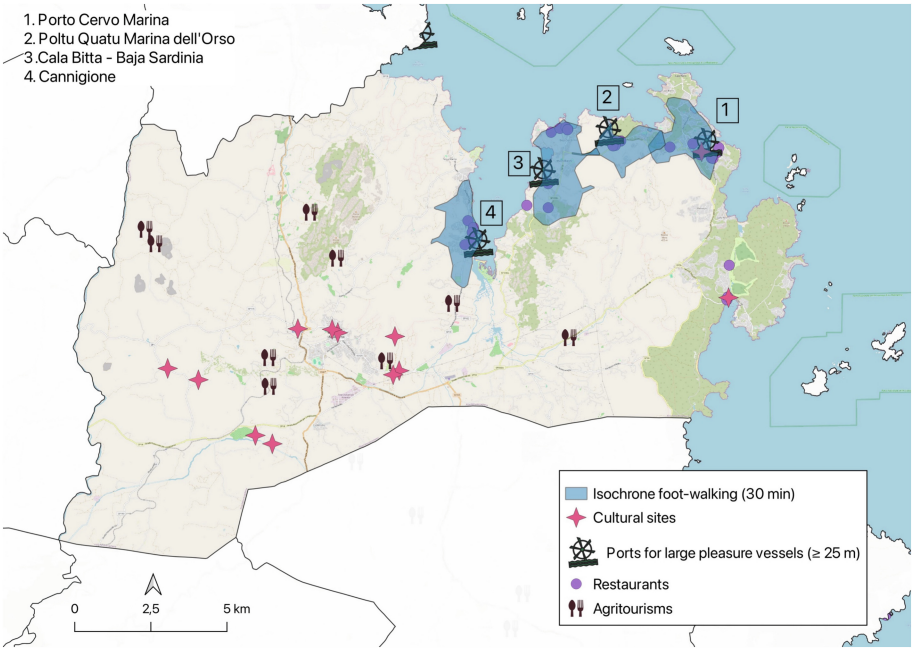

Fig. 4. Arzachena: map showing 30-min foot-walking isochrones from tourist harbors equipped to accommodate yachts with a length overall of 25 m or more. Results may differ over time due to data updates. (Authors' elaboration, April 1st, 2025)

contrast, agritourism facilities and most cultural sites would remain largely inaccessible without additional means of transport. So, it was reported a significant and functionally relevant disconnect between the port network and Arzachena's cultural assets, which are predominantly located in non-coastal areas. It is therefore recommended that the port system be suitably integrated with rental or mobility services that could encourage visitors to move beyond the coastal zone [28–30].

On the contrary, the driving-car isochrone analysis reported a broader spatial coverage for cultural tourism. Porto Cervo (Fig. 5) and Poltu Quatu (Fig. 6) exhibit relatively limited inland reach, serving primarily the northeastern coastal zone. In comparison, the isochrones from Cala Bitta (Fig. 7) and Cannigione (Fig. 8) demonstrated a significant capacity to extend toward the hinterland. Accordingly, Cannigione could be considered as a strategic node in terms of widespread accessibility to rural and cultural assets. Its broader and more articulated spatial coverage includes areas with the highest concentration of agritourism establishments and heritage sites. For this reason, the selected port could be a key access point for enhancing the integration of the coastal port system with inland tourism resources [31].

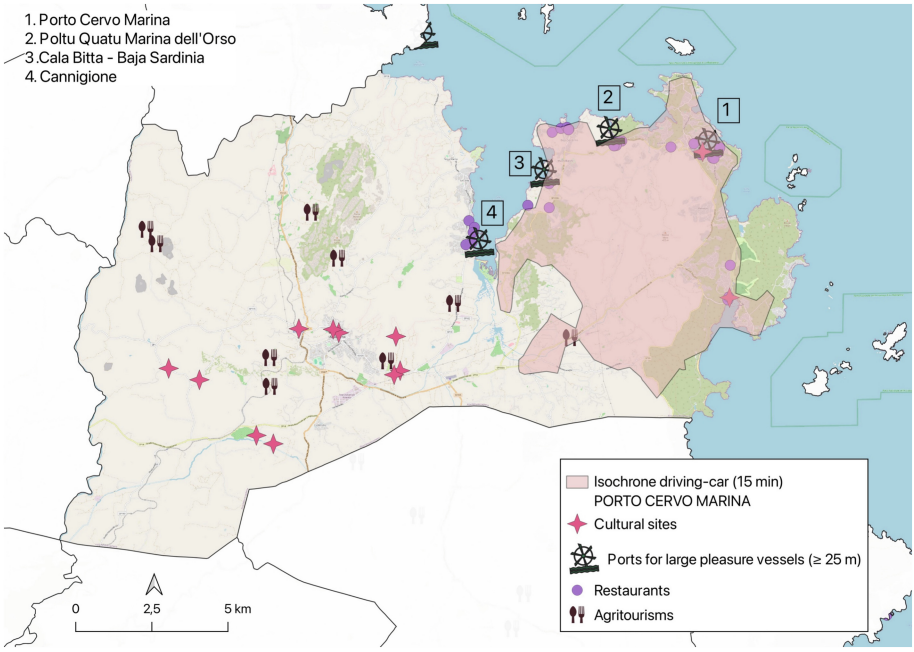

Fig. 5. Arzachena, map showing the 15-min car-driving isochrone from Porto Cervo Marina, which is equipped to accommodate yachts with a length overall of 25 m or more. Results may differ over time due to data updates. (Authors' elaboration, April 1st, 2025)

In sum, results suggested that on-foot tourist flows are likely to concentrate around port-adjacent services (e.g., restaurants), whereas inland facilities and cultural sites remain largely undiscovered. Such a spatial mismatch is especially relevant in the case

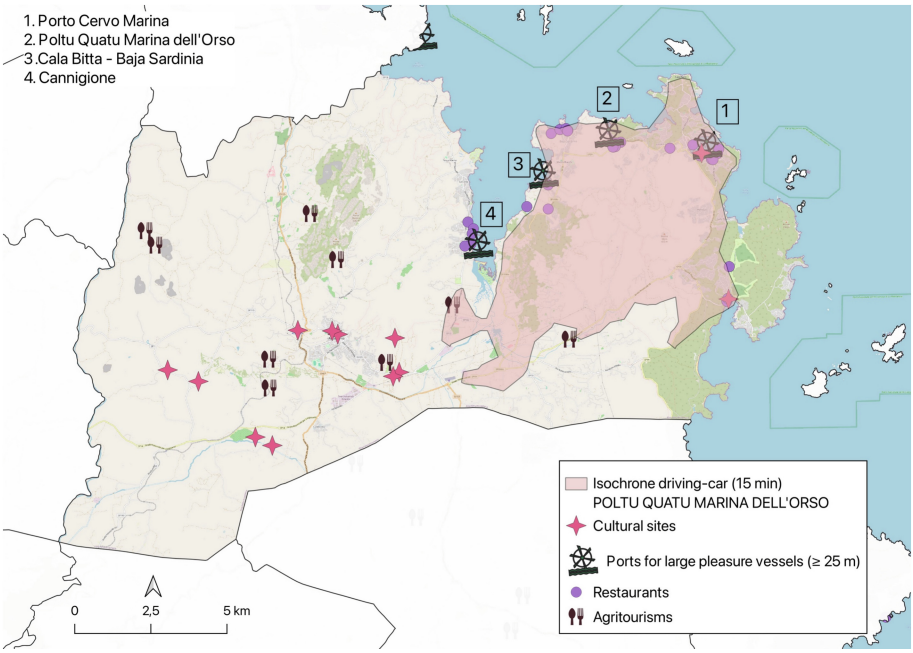

Fig. 6. Arzachena, map showing the 15-min car-driving isochrone from Poltu Qualtu Marina dell'Orso, which is equipped to accommodate yachts with a length overall of 25 m or more. Results may differ over time due to data updates. (Authors' elaboration, April 1st, 2025)

of Porto Cervo and Poltu Quatu, which, despite operating year-round, showed short inland coverage. Cala Bitta, despite showing a meaningful connection with the inland territory, operates on a seasonal basis, thus limiting its role as a year-round territorial access point. Conversely, Cannigione (classified as a multipurpose node with functional and buoy infrastructure) emerged as a strategic port due to its broader inland connectivity. Its catchment area potentially includes the highest density of rural and cultural assets, positioning it as a key hub for integrated tourism development. In addition, its year-round activity and the presence of a mooring field further strengthen its profile as a reference point for integrated nautical tourism. So, whilst Porto Cervo and Poltu Quatu are clearly oriented toward high-end yachting and luxury tourism, Cannigione could offer greater functional versatility and a more articulated infrastructural and socioeconomic role. Although it lacks deep-water berths, it can still accommodate mid-high-sized vessels, confirming its potential adaptability within the regional port network.

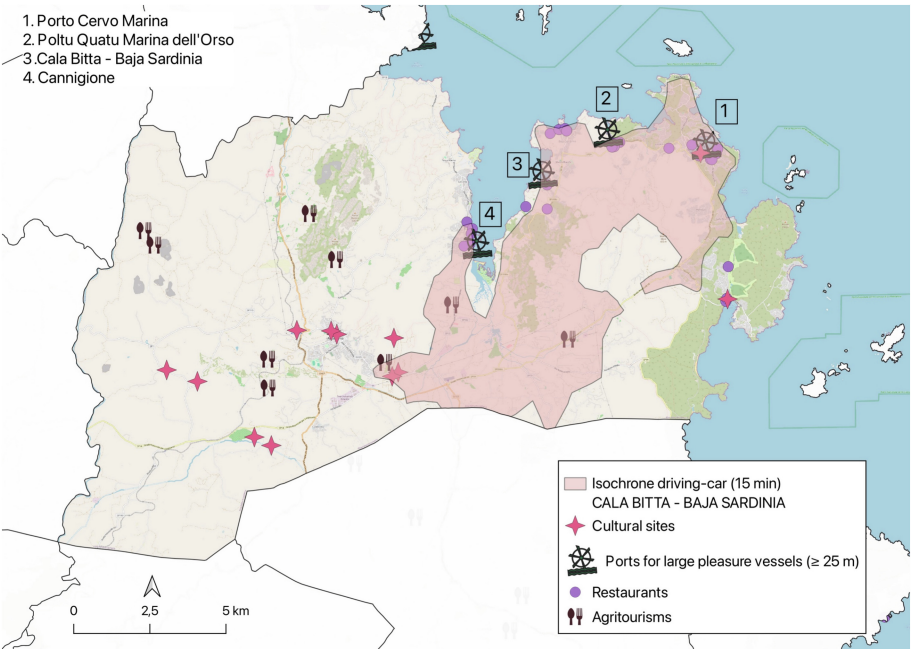

Fig. 7. Arzachena, map showing the 15-min car-driving isochrone from Cala Bitta – Baja Sardinia, which is equipped to accommodate yachts with a length overall of 25 m or more. Results may differ over time due to data updates. (Authors' elaboration, April 1st, 2025)

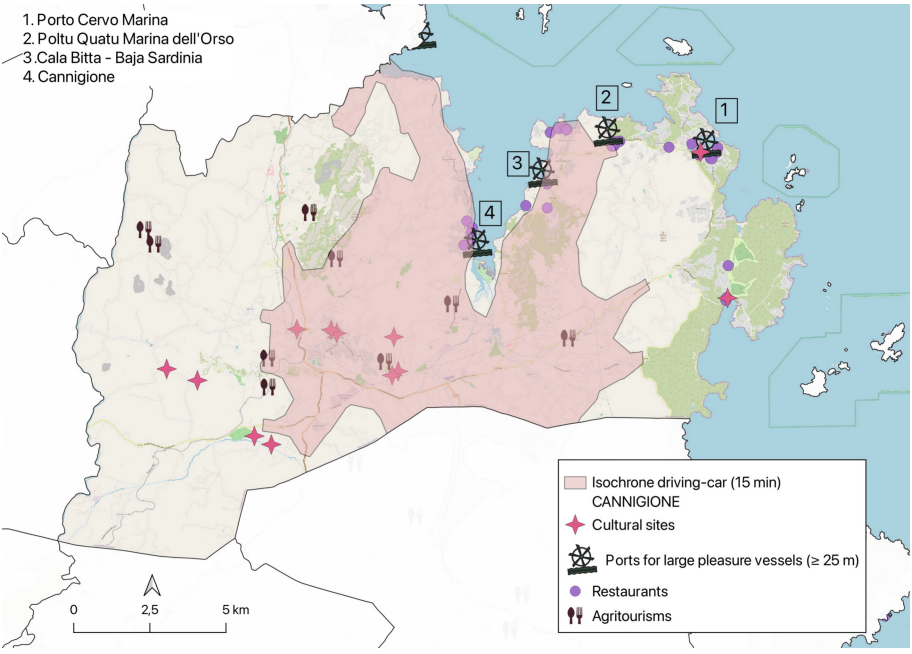

Fig. 8. Arzachena, map showing the 15-min car-driving isochrone from Cannigione, which is equipped to accommodate yachts with a length overall of 25 m or more. Results may differ over time due to data updates. (Authors' elaboration)

4 Conclusion

In an era where even luxury tourism must respond to users' growing sensitivity towards sustainability [32], it is recommended that nautical tourism be linked to the rediscovery of the territory identity. Overall, the present study on Arzachena territory suggested the need for a more structured intermodal approach to tourism infrastructure planning. Integrating the port network with targeted mobility services (e.g., rental vehicles, shuttle connections) could foster spatial integration and encourage tourist flows beyond the immediate coastline. Focusing Cannigione as a multimodal access point could enhance inland heritage resources, aligning port functionality with broader territorial development goals. The analysis of accessibility in Arzachena revealed a dual modality of territorial utilization driven by nautical tourism: (1) a functional coastal proximity, characterized by commercial services that are easily accessible on foot; (2) an access to cultural and rural resources situated inland necessitates private transportation, reflecting a deeper and more meaningful engagement with the territory. This dichotomy underscored critical challenges related to sustainability and modal integration, highlighting the imperative to enhance internal connectivity between the port infrastructure and the hinterland of Gallura. Arzachena's coastal environment offers tangible expressions of Sardinian identity through a diverse array of cultural sites, inviting even seasonal and luxury-oriented tourists to rediscover the island′s essence. This scenario presents an opportunity to develop multi-tiered tourism strategies that valorize widespread rural hospitality. Implementing integrated port governance could facilitate the creation of itineraries that seamlessly combine coastal and inland experiences, promoting a more sustainable and evenly distributed tourist flow.

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the isochrones used to evaluate driving accessibility were performed with QGIS' ORS Tools, so real-time traffic data was not incorporated, considering instead average travel times. This is a significant constraint in the context of coastal Sardinia, where traffic congestion can be intense during the high tourist season. As a result, the actual travel times to inland cultural and rural sites could be longer than those estimated by the model. Then, since isochrones generated are subject to variations due to updates in the underlying data, changes in calculation parameters, time-specific requests, or server-side modifications, the results should be interpreted as indicative and intended for general understanding and exploratory objectives. Future research with integration of dynamic traffic data or time-dependent network analysis during the summer season is then strongly recommended, in order to provide a more accurate and realistic representation of seasonal accessibility patterns for tourist objectives.

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