

## World

# Sardinia's carrion cafés save griffon from slim pickings

## Italy

Tom Kington Rome

The menu of rotting carcasses at Sardinia's latest restaurant is proving a smash hit, serving a range of meats to save one of Europe's rarest birds of prey.

More than 30 cattle farmers have fenced off small dining areas in fields where they dump their dead livestock to the delight of local griffon vultures.

"These vulture restaurants have proved a great success and there are plans for 30 more openings across Sardinia," Fiammetta Berlinguer, a veterinarian at Sassari University who helped launch the scheme, said.

The griffon vulture, a native of southern Europe, was a common sight in Italy but its number dropped from 1,000 in 1950 to a colony of 100 near Bosa in Sardinia by 2015. The raptors

died after eating the corpses of foxes and other animals illegally poisoned by farmers. Two decades ago the option of eating abandoned cow carcasses vanished when mad cow disease forced farmers to burn the bodies.

In 2014, Sardinia copied an idea from France and Spain for vulture restaurants, where carcasses are left for them inside electrified fences that keep out dogs and wild boar. "Attracted by carcasses, boar stick around to eat crops while dogs eat the sheep and pick up a parasite from the innards they can pass on to humans," Berlinguer said. "Vultures don't transmit it."

Farmers love the scheme because they save on the cost of transporting carcasses to incinerators. They also plan to make money from the bird-watchers lining up to see the vultures, with wingspans of up to 9ft. "The pens



The griffon vulture, with a 9ft wingspan, was once a common feature across southern Europe but many were poisoned

have to be put at the far corner of farms because of the smell," Berlinguer said.

She explained that 15 vultures can polish off a sheep carcass in an hour while a cow takes them up to a week.

Cow carcasses left in the Sardinian pens must be drug-free after countless vultures in Asia were poisoned by carcasses with the veterinary drug diclo-

fenac. The number of local Griffon vultures has risen to up to 270, including 63 brought from Spain and Holland.

Kites, eagles, buzzards and harriers are turning up for a bite too.

Egyptian vultures, of which there are only about 13 pairs left in Italy, have also been seen in the area, raising hopes that their numbers will rise. "Vultures pro-

vide a vital service by getting rid of carcasses and stopping the spread of disease," Berlinguer said. "The carcasses release nutrients into the ground.

"These birds have a bad reputation but they do an important job by creating a circular ecology, reminding us that in nature, nothing gets thrown away."

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## FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT

Once bustling with passengers, the railway station that time forgot stands testament to the harsh reality of life in Arctic Russia

### Marc Bennetts

#### KIROVSK



The colossal Soviet railway station stood abandoned, if not quite forgotten, in the harsh Arctic landscape. I clambered over a snowbank to get closer, almost twisting my ankle. A wind whipped through the deserted waiting rooms.

This grand station on the outskirts of Kirovsk, a tiny mining town in Russia's far north at the foot of the imposing Khibiny mountains, was built in the 1930s. It is a genuine Soviet ruin, an architectural legacy of more than 70 years of communist rule that juddered to a halt three decades ago.

It's hard to imagine now but the station once teemed as locals queued to buy tickets for connecting trains to take them as far as Moscow, more than 1,100 miles away. There was a small hotel, shops and a restaurant famed for its meat dumplings.

The station was a classic example of early Stalinist architecture, with spacious halls, marble columns and bronze chandeliers. Its central hall was dominated by a reproduction of Ivan Aivazovsky's painting, *The*

*Ninth Wave*. Time has not been kind. The station has been ravaged by two fires since it closed in 1996, when officials deemed it surplus to needs. Plans to turn it into a brewery collapsed in the early 2000s.

It's unclear why the Soviet officials built such a gigantic railway station this far north. Historians suggest that its opening was planned to coincide with an "international miners' congress" due to take place in Kirovsk. One popular but untrue myth has it that officials misheard Stalin's order to build it in Kirov, central Russia.

The first time I visited the station, in 2017, its walls were daubed with graffiti. It has had a makeover since then. Last year artists from across Russia decorated its façade with huge figures at its entrance and massive eyes in its abandoned halls. If the crumbling railway station were once a monument to Soviet rule, it is a reminder today of declining populations. The Soviet Union sought to populate the country's most inhospitable regions, from the cities-on-stilts raised in the

Snowbanks fringe Kirovsk station, a deserted relic of the communist era

permafrost of Siberia to the sunlight-starved towns of the far north. Workers were lured by the high wages.

As Soviet pay bonuses vanished after the collapse of communism, people left in search of warmer climes. The trend has been further encouraged by a Russian government scheme to relocate pensioners who wish to move further south.

In 1989 the Murmansk region, of which Kirovsk is a part, had a population of 1.2 million people. Today it is about 750,000. The population of Murmansk, the regional capital, has fallen from 473,000 during the Soviet period to fewer than 300,000 people today. Despite this, it remains the largest city in the Arctic.

Norway's Tromsø, the biggest Arctic town outside Russia, is home to only 75,000 people.

After decades of decline, however, the far north could be rising again, as climate change eases access to the region's oil and gas deposits. In November President Putin announced the start of an £83 billion oil project that will create more than a dozen towns and villages for the hundreds of thousands of workers

who will be needed. The Vostok Oil project is part of Kremlin plans to develop the Arctic. The government said last week that Russians could get one hectare (2.5 acres) of land in the Arctic if they built a home or opened a business. There are also attempts to encourage tourism.

Kirovsk, which has a ski resort, doesn't seem keen to promote the railway station.

Olga, a local, said: "Some say the station should be demolished, while others are in favour of leaving it as a monument to the past. I'd miss it if it were gone. It's beautiful, in its own way."

