



Pictures: DAMIEN McFADDEN

The day I became a mermaid!

Fishing for guests at this swish Sardinian resort has taken on a whole new meaning — as our writer discovers

Making a splash: Olivia enjoys the mermaid experience at Hotel Abi d'Oru, inset

by OLIVIA DEAN

HOTELS are constantly looking for ingenious ways to attract guests. Nowadays, it's all about 'experiences' — and this one takes some beating.

Check in to the Hotel Abi d'Oru on Sardinia's swanky Costa Smeralda and you can be transformed into a mermaid.

It was this very stretch of coast that Disney chose to film its live-action version of The

Little Mermaid, starring Halle Bailey, which premiered earlier this year.

This remake of the childhood-favourite cartoon seems to have reawakened an interest in these fantastical creatures. It all harks back to Odysseus, who was so entranced by the sirens that he lashed himself to the mast of his ship, knowing that if he was not restrained he would be unable to resist them, and would perish as a result.

Then, of course, there was Daryl Hannah arriving naked at the Statue of Liberty in the 1984 movie, *Splash*.

And so, here I am, being manhandled onto a yacht by two Italian stallions, en route to Cala Moresca, a sandy beach on the northern part of the island. It's where mermaid Ariel comes ashore to her Prince Eric in the film.

Earlier, as we sped out from the hotel's marina, I was kitted out in mermaid regalia. A tail is proffered — it's somewhere between a too-tight skirt and a pillowcase — and a natty bikini top. I feel like a sausage.

First, I am placed atop one of the rocks, so that... well, it's not entirely clear. Except that one attraction of the 'mermaid experience' is the wacky photo opportunities.

OUR antics begin to draw attention. Superyachts pull up beside us, their occupants gawping, waving, laughing. A kayak instructor beckons his class to come see 'la ragazza'. I'm grateful my Italian doesn't stretch to understanding the rest of what he has to say.

Next, it's time to road-test the tail. I'm given little instruction. Perhaps it's a case of sink or swim.

I can't move enough to get off the rocks unaided, but once in the water I mainly use my arms, bringing both knees up and thrusting backwards.

I'm reminded of getting my swimming badge for doing two lengths in my pyjamas aged eight, although this is rather more idyllic than a South London leisure centre. It's a good workout, too.

Once underwater, I see shoals of sea bream following me, accustomed to scavenging breadcrumbs from the superyachts. Urchins and algae carpet the ocean floor, testament to the water's cleanliness that even

the oil-belchers can't tamper with.

Back on the yacht, over lunch, I'm told that the hotel runs these tours every day, catering to any guest's wildest fantasy. My session lasts

around four hours and it's not cheap — but can one put a price on this kind of *dolce vita*?

The Abi d'Oru attracts a chic sort of crowd. It has a private beach club, outdoor pool, spa, tennis courts, landscaped gardens and three excellent restaurants.

The tiny nearby port village of Porto Rotondo is a joy, with quaint piazzas covered with flowers and Aperol drinkers — and not an English voice in earshot. There's stiff competition for custom along this stretch of glitzy coast.

Luxury resorts — and their pricey cabanas — jostle for space on the beach. But Abi d'Oru is the only one offering the chance to become a mermaid. At the moment, that is.

TRAVEL FACTS

Abi d'Oru's (hotelabidoru.it) three-night Mermaiding Package costs from £868 per night, half-board, based on two adults and one child sharing. Includes a boat excursion to Cala Moresca. London to Cagliari flights start at £76 return (easyjet.com).

