



King Tonino with his wife Pompea and daughter Paola display a photo of his ancestor Carlo I, taken for Britain's Queen Victoria. A copy hangs in Buckingham Palace. IDO LIVEN PHOTO

The island realm of an 'ordinary' king

Tonino, sixth ruler in the Isola Tavolara dynasty, reigns over 15 subjects and runs his restaurant

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 SPECIAL TO THE STAR

PORTO SAN PAOLO, SARDINIA—Somewhere, on a lonely island far out at sea, lives King Tonino. The king has no crown or gown and lives with his family in a modest home with sunset-coloured walls.

But the rocky dolomite mountain, which rise 565 metres from the sea, looks like a huge palace.

Seagulls fly above the small beaches, and goats with golden teeth leap between the trees on the rocky slopes.

Isola Tavolara — six kilometres long and about a kilometre wide — is the world's tiniest kingdom. And since the establishment of the NATO base on the eastern part of the island in the early 1960s, it has shrunk by at least a quarter.

"Now I'm the king of 15 people," says Antonio Bertoleoni, who's actually King Tonino, in his residence in the town of Porto San Paolo, 25 minutes from the island by boat.

The citizens of the kingdom are the family members of both Tonino and his sister.

"There was always only a few people, not more than 40 in the 1950s, when the family was larger," he says.

The family lives on the island mainly between February and November and in summertime the population grows to as many as 30 people, all of them in the tourism business.

Tonino, 74 years old, with greying hair and wrinkled eyes has held the throne since the death of his brother, King Carlo II, 15 years ago. He is the sixth king in the dynasty but insists he's just an ordinary man.

"I have a boat with which I bring tourists from Porto San Paolo to Tavolara and we work like normal people, without a throne," he says.

The boat bears the island's name. He drives it himself and today his son Giuseppe and four technicians are also on board to check the

damage caused by a storm two days earlier.

The crown prince, the youngest of Tonino's three children, apologizes for coming unshaved and in jeans, and begins wiping dew off the boat.

Leaving the little harbour of Porto San Paolo, the boat passes tiny islands, some only rocks poking out of the water on which seagulls and cormorants rest.

As you near Tavolara, the tone of the water changes from deep blue to light turquoise and the roundish granite rocks on the sandy beach look like seals sunbathing.

Side by side, on a long sandy strip, are two restaurants, Da Tonino (at Tonino's) and La Corona (The Crown). One is owned by the king and the other by his sister, Maddalena.

The family has lived on the island for 200 years. Giuseppe Bertoleoni arrived on the uninhabited island in 1807, intending to live there with one of his two wives and their children, after being persecuted by the authorities for bigamy. In the book *Tavolara — Island of the Kings*, Giuseppe is described as a "sympathet-

ic pirate — half shepherd, half smuggler." And while looking for goats with golden teeth, he found a throne.

The rumours about the wild island and the goats reached the King of Sardinia, Carlo Alberto, who came in 1836 to check things out. He was greeted by Paolo, son of Giuseppe.

"You're really the king of Tavolara!" said the king to the pirate's son. Joking or not, a royal scroll arrived a few days later proclaiming Paolo the ruler of Tavolara.

The mini-monarchy was also recognized by Britain's Queen Victoria.

She was collecting photographs of the leaders of the world; the photo with the royal family of Tavolara, Tonino and his wife Pompea say proudly, still hangs in Buckingham Palace.

Nowadays, the island is under Italian sovereignty and the family members are Italian citizens.

"But in the past we were citizens of the Kingdom of Tavolara," says Tonino's granddaughter Geremia, "and we had no commitment to Ita-

ly, like tax-paying or obligatory military service."

The kingdom isn't officially recognized by any country in the world "but my grandfather is working on this."

When NATO established a military base on the eastern part of the island in 1962, the residents there moved out.

Today, the family owns only 50 hectares of the island.

"The most beautiful part is the one inside the military area," he says, pointing to three landscapes hanging on the living room wall. "But we cannot go there."

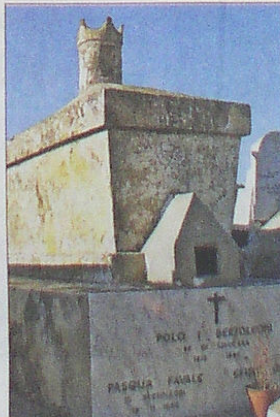
Tavolara itself looks like something from a fairy tale and the royal couple isn't interested in other places in the world.

"Many people who come to Tavolara tell us this is something special, something beautiful. And these people had travelled around the world," says Tonino's wife. "We're not going to any part of the world. We're just going to Porto San Paolo — Tavolara, and back."

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IDO LIVEN PHOTOS



Isola Tavolara is a rocky outcropping just off the coast of Sardinia. It's home to a NATO base and the grave of King Tonino's ancestor Paolo I, who reigned from 1845-1886.