

ARMCHAIR JOURNEY

The Island of the Ancients

By Ben Hills

Pier 9, 248pp, \$34.95

THERE are, according to Ben Hills, four places on the planet where people live to an abnormally old age - "the tropical island of Okinawa in southern Japan, some frigid fishing villages on Canada's wild Atlantic coast, a gentle nut-eating community of Seventh Day Adventists in California ... and Sardinia."

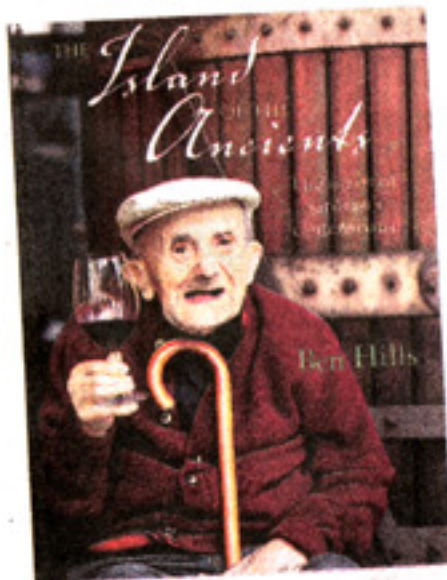
This is the story of the old codgers of Sardinia, as seen through the eyes of an Australian investigative journalist and his Japanese photographer wife. What a great reason to spend some months on the island of Sardinia. Not only do you get to meet a range of fascinating locals and travel from one end of the island to the other but, while trying to explain the unusual longevity of the islanders, Hills and his wife immerse

themselves in the local culture.

They attend birthday parties, wander through local cemeteries, collect recipes (spaghetti with bottarga and fregola incasada are but two), enjoy the silence of the island's three-hour siesta and eat a "traditional shepherd's feast".

Oh, yes, and Hills does not rely on the anecdotal evidence of the centenarians. He researches the subject with enthusiasm and consequently, almost by accident, the book is a primer on current thinking about the eternal mystery of the secret of the fountain of youth.

This is a book full of small wonders. Did you know, for example, that in Sardinia



when you reach 100 you don't get a letter from the Queen - you get one from the Pope? There's a wonderful story of a doctor being called to a woman who was 103. He expected her to be dead. The problem: she had fallen out of a tree while gathering nuts - and not a bone was broken. One of the island's centenarians rode a bicycle and stood on his head for Hills just to show how fit he was.

Why do they all live so long? Well, no one really knows but the local doctor offers the most appealing explanation: "There is a lot of love in their lives and none of them is afraid of death. Get along with everybody and be at peace with everybody."

Reviewed by Bruce Elder