

TRAVEL

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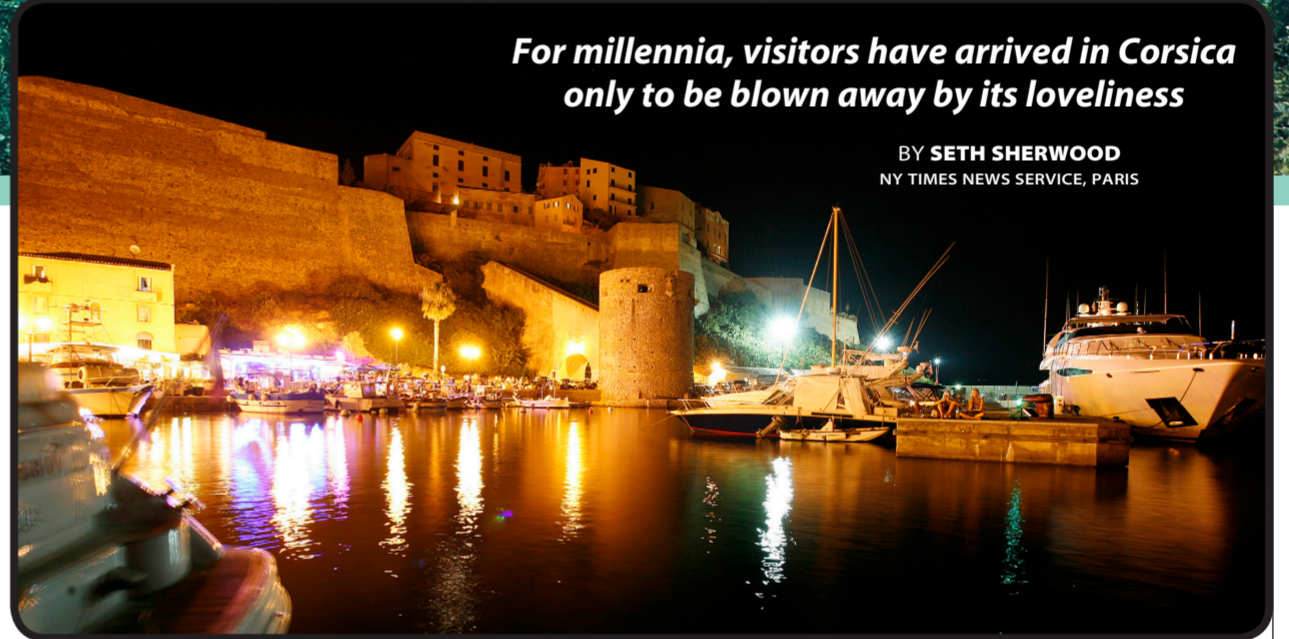
France's isle of

beauty



For millennia, visitors have arrived in Corsica only to be blown away by its loveliness

BY SETH SHERWOOD
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, PARIS



The train is hardly anything to write home about, not with its three rusted and creaky cars and with seats as hard as church pews. But 20 minutes into the journey from Ajaccio, Corsica's largest coastal city, to Corte, in the island's rugged outback, a certain alchemy begins to take place.

The smells of palm trees and Mediterranean winds give way to odors of pine forest and damp vegetation. Twenty minutes more and you're clattering upward past plunging ravines and snow-capped mountain ranges that look transposed from Ansel Adams photos. Red-roofed mountain villages, ruined stone huts and lightning-blasted trees thunder past and vanish behind. All that's missing is a Corsican Wordsworth to distill these natural wonders into verse.

Almost all the passengers — among them Italian cyclists, Dutch trekkers and my own astonished self — press their faces to the dirty glass, muttering superlatives and wondering what will materialize around the next bend. Our words come rushing out in multiple languages — “Bello!” “Mooi!” “Holy crud!” — with each phrase expressing the same sense of awe.

In a way, our band of travelers is just conforming to history's pattern. For millennia, visitors have arrived in Corsica only to be blown away by its loveliness. The ancient Greeks sailed into its dazzling turquoise bays and declared the island Kalliste: the Most Beautiful. Henri Matisse strode down a gangplank many centuries later and found a “marvelous land,” where “all is color, all is light.”

These days, French kiosks from Normandy to Nice glow with magazine covers depicting the crescent-shaped sandy beaches, jagged ranges, Roman ruins and pastel-hued port towns that give Corsica its modern nickname, L'Île de Beauté: the Isle of Beauty.

But while Corsica fires near-religious worship in France and its European neighbors, it remains terra incognita for us Americans. Of the more than 3 million US residents who annually fly into France, barely 6,000 wind up spending a night on this entrancing compact island roughly the size of New Hampshire, according to the Maison de France, the French government's tourism office.



Earlier this summer, I decided to add one more number to that statistic.

The train empties us in the mountain redoubt of Corte (pronounced core-TAY). A palpable Corsican pride suffuses the town. Shop windows beckon with traditional local delicacies — ropes of sausage, wedges of cheese, bottles of

honey, casks of local wine — and the cafes are filled with groups of old men chatting in the native Corsican language. More than a few of the town's walls drip with graffiti shouting slogans for Corsican independence.

“For Corsicans, Corte is symbolic of our identity, the place that was least altered by outsiders,” says Jean-Marc Olivési, the director of Corsica's museums. He's in town to plan a big 2009 exhibition on the island's most famous native, Napoleon Bonaparte, to be held in the town's Musée de la Corse. “The coastal towns” — Calvi, Ajaccio, Bastia, Bonifacio, Porto-Vecchio — “have a history wrapped up with Genoa or with France,” the two powers that successively controlled Corsica for the last several hundred years, Olivési explains.

As a result, Corte was named capital of Corsica during the island's lone flicker of independence from the Genoese republic, from 1755 to 1769. The leader of the independence campaign, Pascal Paoli, is a local deity. His name adorns the university, the main street and even the sweet shop on the main square — as well as the square itself. In its center he lives on in statue form, a well-dressed Enlightenment gentleman with an intense gaze.

If possible, approaching the southern town of Bonifacio by sea is even more staggering than arriving in Corte by rail. Immense chalk-white cliffs, horizontally grooved like a geological millefeuille, dwarf our sightseeing boat as it cuts through water the color of Curacao liqueur. At sea level, enormous grottoes open darkly in the cliff walls, revealing candle-drip stalactites. Wind-eroded rock formations, some as large as Manhattan apartment buildings, sprout mysteriously from the sea.

IF YOU GO GETTING THERE

» Air France offers itineraries to Corsica's four main airports — Ajaccio, Bastia, Calvi and Figari (the closest to Bonifacio and Porto-Vecchio) — with a connection through either Paris, Lyon, Nice or Marseille.

GETTING AROUND

» Renting a car is by far the simplest option in Corsica. Public transportation between towns and regions is scant, and the seaside and mountain views make driving a pleasure (though small, twisting two-lane roads, typically without guardrails, are the norm). All of the above airports have an outlet of Europcar (www.europcar.com).

For nondrivers, the Corsica rail system (www.ter-sncf.com/corse) connects northern towns (Ajaccio, Corte, Calvi and Bastia) but doesn't access the southern part of the island (Bonifacio, Porto Vecchio), and there are only two to four trains a day, depending on the season. The best official online schedule (French only) is at www.trainstouristiques-ter.com. (Note that “TLJ” means “Every Day” in French.) Eurocorse Voyages (33-4-95-71-24 64; www.eurocorse.com) offers a few buses a day between the towns of Porto Vecchio, Bonifacio, Ajaccio and Corte. For schedules, click “Prestations” on the Web site.

WHERE TO STAY, EAT, SHOP AND PARTY

» A number of businesses in Corsica close outside of the main tourist season, which lasts more or less from April until October. It's always best to verify in advance whether hotels, restaurants, shops, etc., will be open.

Calvi — Located in the town center, the three-star Hotel Saint Christophe (Place Bel'Ombra; 33-4-95-65-05-74; www.saintchristophecalvi.com) is a stone's throw from both the citadel and the bustling port. Doubles are 98 euros to 165 euros, about US\$150 to US\$252. For fashionable beachside dining, the white villalike Octopussy restaurant (Pinede Plage; 33-4-95-65-23-16) does jazzy riffs on Corsican ingredients, like Cap Corse mussels in muscat wine and saffron (14 euros) and fois gras with myrtle (16.50 euros). During the wee hours, the old and eternally hip nightclub Chez Tao (33-4-95-65-00-73; www.cheztao.com)

offers drinks, dancing and views from its citadel perch. **Corte** — It's a bit spartan and showing its age, but the venerable 60-room Hotel de la Paix (Avenue du General de Gaulle; 33-4-95-46-06-72; socoget@wanadoo.fr) is still the best deal in town, with doubles from 54 euros. To take a crash course in the history and cultural traditions of Corsica, visit the Musée de la Corse (Citade; 33-4-95-45-25-45; www.musee-corse.com). Admission 5.30 euros. Classic Corsican wines and foods — cured meats, honeys, cheeses — are on sale at La Vieille Cave (2, rue de la Fontaine; 33-4-95-46-33-79), while the terrace restaurant U San Teofalu (3, place Paoli; 33-6-73-06-35-58) does a three-course Corsican menu at 16 euros that includes a charcuterie and cheese plate, grilled trout and dessert.

Bonifacio — Overlooking the town's dramatic harbor and restaurant-filled quays, the simple but clean and cozy hotel La Caravelle (35-37, quai Comparetti; 33-4-95-73-00-03; www.hotel-caravelle-corse.com) offers doubles from 97 euros. To view the spectacular cliffs and grottoes nearby, several sightseeing boats have kiosks along Bonifacio harbor, including Gina (33-4-95-23-24-18) and Corsaire (33-6-23-25-14-60). Most offer one-hour tours with departures throughout the day. Most charge 17.50 euros for adults. For maritime antiques, the cavellike Mer et Découvertes (19, montee Rastello; 33-4-95-73-54-39; www.meretdecouvertes.com) is a trove of centuries-old globes, maps and nautical equipment. Outfitted with white tablecloths and candles, the elegant harborside restaurant Le Voilier (Quai Comparetti; 33-4-95-73-07-06) serves a three-course daily menu (37 euros) that includes fish soup (or fish of the day) followed by lamb or fish, rounded out with sorbet or tiramisu.

Porto-Vecchio — Whether you arrive by helicopter, megayacht or simple automobile, the five-year-old Casa del Mar (Route de Palombaggia; 33-4-95-72-34-34; www.casadelmar.fr) is outfitted to receive you. The white and airy hotel, which has a Carita spa and Michelin-starred restaurant on its lush grounds, offers doubles from 350 euros. Another high-end meal awaits at Le Troubadour (13, rue du General Leclerc; 33-4-95-70-08-62), where Julien Marseault concocts dishes like Mediterranean tuna tartare with lime juice and herb cream (21 euros) and boneless chicken stuffed with spring vegetables in a lemongrass emulsion (22 euros). To sample Porto-Vecchio's noted night life, start the party at Le Patio (2, impasse Ettori; 33-4-95-28-06-99), an outdoor bar with DJ-spun soul and R'n'B, before heading to Corsica's biggest and most famous nightclub, La Via Notte (just south of main village; 33-4-95-72-02-12; www.vianotte.com).

It's said that Ulysses and his men took shelter in Bonifacio's cliff-lined port, encountering a race of giants. Thousands of years later, Bonifacio is again drawing famous folks and larger-than-life characters — mainly celebrities and corporate titans. For the mellower segment of the boldface crowd, southern Corsica has lately emerged as a discreet alternative to the South of France.

“In Corsica, you have none of the artificiality of the Cote d'Azur,” says Patrice Arend, proprietor of a nautical antiques store, Mer et Découvertes, set in the shadow of Bonifacio's centuries-old citadel, who, while praising the authenticity of the area is also quick to mention that Sting has been a customer, and that a few years ago he ran into Bill Gates just outside. “A lot of famous people come here, but they come so that they can be incognito.”

Sail east from Bonifacio and you'll tack past the Golfe de Sperone, a seaside golf course designed by Robert Trent Jones and containing private villas created by

the likes of Norman Foster. It's the kind of place where golfers might actually try deliberately to hit their balls into the water, just for an excuse to plunge into the dazzling sea.

Continuing on, you'll glimpse the Ile de Cavallo, a secluded island community known quaintly in the French press as the Isle of Billionaires. Finally you can pull up directly to the opulent Casa del Mar hotel in the glitzy town of Porto-Vecchio — the only hotel in Corsica with a dedicated yacht mooring. Designed by Jean-Francois Bodin, known for his addition to the Matisse Museum in Nice, the five-year-old hotel has quickly generated big buzz and attracted folks like Giorgio Armani and Marc Jacobs to its Michelin-starred restaurant and lush grounds.

As evening descends on Porto-Vecchio, I slip into the village's old streets and watch the village transform into Corsica's night-life mecca. Bronzed from Santa Giulia and Palombaggia — the area's Tahitiques beaches — crowds in white linen pop into art galleries and gelato parlors. On cafe terraces, glasses fill with rose from the nearby Domaine de Torracchia vineyard and Corsican Pietra beer, flavored with chestnut. Air kisses flutter like fireflies — “Ciao!” “Bon soir!” “Hola!” — as an outdoor DJ spins electro-soul for the dolled-up girls sipping cocktails at Le Patio.

But this is all a mere preamble for La Via Notte, the island's nocturnal temple. The scale is enormous, bombastic, as if Napoleon himself had ordered it. Seven bars and nearly as many restaurants spread over multiple levels and pavilions. Inside the DJ booth, three men operate long flashing control panels as if trying to pilot a spaceship. Go-go dancers grind on platforms as streaks of laser light shoot past. A swimming pool glimmers in the distance.

“We have the largest capacity in Europe,” says the owner, Henry Bastelica, estimating the floor space at around 2,000m². “About 4,000 people can party here.”

To woo them, the club flies in big names from the international DJ circuit, including Roger Sanchez, Dirty Soundssystem and Erick Morillo. (“He flies in a private plane ... and costs 40,000 euros,” says Bastelica of Morillo.) The vast VIP area, he adds, has served the designer Jean-Paul Gaultier, the supermodel Laetitia Casta, the soccer star Zinedine Zidane and “all the biggest French actors.”

But Bastelica is quick to crush any comparisons with France's flashier resorts.

“Celebrities go to St-Tropez and get snapped to death by paparazzi,” he says with a disdainful shake of the head. “Here no one will bother them. Here they don't even need a bodyguard.”

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE