



Top: Bastia.
Bottom: Cap Corse.



Northern Corsica

Maquis, mountains and glorious Mediterranean coastline.

Like an unruly relative, Corsica broods stubbornly a few hours off the French coast. As sweet as the mainland is, this island is the spice that fires the senses. Centuries of strife and emigration have left it gloriously underpopulated, its scenery pristine. Rivers brim with fish while eagles and hawks patrol the hills along the coast, itself a Bahama-blue ribbon lapping on to deserted beaches or crashing against the ochre-coloured shore. Corsicans are justly proud of their environment and do all they can to protect it. The same goes for their culture and language: don't be surprised to see the island's bilingual road signs painted over or peppered with shotgun holes.

The truth is that Corsica has never been truly tamed. Although it was squabbled over by the Greeks and Romans, Arabs and Lombards, then Pisans and Genoese, these invaders never succeeded in occupying more than a few coastal strips. More canny were the British who allied themselves with republican leader Pasquale Paoli in the 18th century. This soldier statesman presided over an Anglo-Corsican republic under George III, Corsica's one true period of independence. But if Paoli's name adorns every avenue, it's the *maquis* who sum up the island's fighting spirit. These irregular World War II troops, named after the thick scented undergrowth which they melted into, ensured that Corsica was France's first liberated province.

Nowadays those *maquis* herbs are used to season sea bass, lamb and brocciu cheese served up to wide-eyed holidaymakers. Fortunately this yearly invasion never becomes a flood. There's always sunbathing space on Northern Corsica's 30 or so beaches, which range from the chi-chi in St-Florent to the hauntingly picturesque in the Désert des Agriates. The region's main towns offer contrasts of a culinary kind. You can dine on sushi with *bobos* in historic Calvi, or tear apart a lobster in Bastia's working port. Algajola, meanwhile, is the ultimate in post-work comedown spots, with beach bars, snorkelling and, if you fancy it, nude bathing. Cap Corse is a jolt back to Corsican reality. This feral spit of terrain punching out into the Mediterranean is a land of butterflies and wildflowers, of ocean panoramas and no-through roads.

Explore

By air or by sea, Bastia and Calvi serve as the twin gateways to Northern Corsica, at once the most varied and accessible part of the island. Fabulous beaches ring both towns and all points in between. A fleet of trains runs between them, touching Algajola but ignoring the wilds of the Désert des Agriates and chic St-Florent. Cap Corse sees plenty of motorcyclists, a fine way to take in the wilderness of the peninsula.

CALVI

Few towns can rival Calvi's aesthetic perfection. The 15th-century citadel dominates the broad bay, looming over the new town. Christopher Columbus was born within its walls, or so claims the proudly displayed plaque marking the foundations of his home. Below, ferries from the mainland glide in and out of the working port, dwarfing traditional fishing boats as they heave their catch on to quai Adolphe Landry. Shouts and raucous laughter permeate the café terraces along this strip, as locals exchange their daily gossip. Set back from the seafront, rue Clémenceau, boulevard Wilson and avenue de la République are lined with traditional brasseries and designer boutiques. Clamber down the crumbling steps round the western side of the citadel and choose one of the sun-bleached boulders: the panoramic seascapes will be yours

alone. Divers can plunge the Med's depths for a peek at the submerged World War II B-17 bomber nearby. Arcing southwards out of town, miles of white sand beaches back on to busy hotels and a rambling, elevated adventure park. Trains depart regularly from Calvi station to the secluded beaches, including Plage de l'Arinella and Plage de la Restitude, further along the bay.

ALGAJOLA

Nothing much happens in Algajola, which is the source of its soothing charm. The five or so simple hotels are set close to the long sandy stretch of Aregno Plage. These are matched by a few simple restaurants inside the walled village centre, a few minutes away. Each dishes up hearty set menus for €20 a throw. Such effortless brilliance is hard to emulate, making Algajola a very attractive base for any Corsican trip. The tiny tourist office inside the equally cute train station (Calvi one way, Bastia the other) dispenses all you need to know about the area, from the artisans' trail up to Pigna to local diving schools. The area's striking coastal paths need no such instruction, although they can be hairy in places. They stretch all the way to Calvi and start from the beach, but with the cheap toes-in-the-sand beach bars and volleyball nets, it's easy to get waylaid. The easternmost part of the beach is reserved for naturists. Go snorkelling here – the water is crystal clear – and you may get more than you bargained for.

Northern Corsica

Historic sites



Art & architecture



Hotels



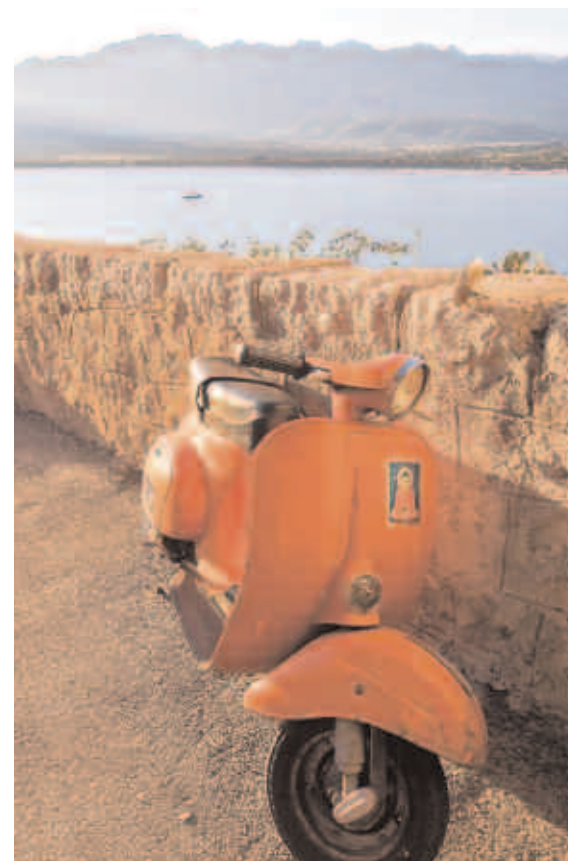
Eating & drinking



Scenery



Outdoor activities



Top: Calvi.
Bottom: St-Florent.



DESERT DES AGRIATES

Spanning the Balagne's *maquis*-covered mountains from Ile-Rousse to St-Florent, the Désert des Agriates is a UNESCO World Heritage site. The 35 kilometres (22 miles) of pristine coastline is backed by craggy cliffs. Inland, the terrain is arid, redolent with lavender and sage; you'd be hard pressed to guess that this shrubland was once the island's most fertile. Towards the end of the 19th century, over-experimentation with slash and burn farming techniques sucked the nutrient-rich soil dry. Thankfully rejected years later as a potential nuclear testing ground, the area was declared a nature reserve by the French government in 1989. Visitors can hop on the ferry from St-Florent to Plage du Lotu and hike the Sentier du Littoral to Ostricioni. The desert hosts just two spots to bed down for the night: Camping U Paradisu (www.camping-uparadis.com), backing on to the stunning Plage de Saleccia and home to the reserve's only water fountain, and the rustic Refuge de Ghignu (book through the St-Florent tourist office, 04.95.37.06.04).

ST-FLORENT

Sexy and showy, this is Corsica's answer to the Côte d'Azur. Like a mini St-Tropez, St-Florent manages to balance a harbour full of Sunseekers and an age-old *pétanque* culture on its main place des Portes. By day, most desert the cobbled lanes around the small town centre, heading off instead on a boat trip to Plage du Lotu in the Désert des Agriates. Much closer to home, and correspondingly popular, is the soft sand and aquamarine water of Plage de la Roya, three kilometres (two miles) around the bay. Come the evening all are back in town and glammed up in a beachy South of France style: suntans, strappy heels and heaps of Lacoste. One of the town's infrequent British visitors was Lord Nelson, who bombarded St-Florent's Genoese citadel in his pre-Trafalgar days. This fortification – the town's only real 'sight' – is five minutes up pretty rue du Centre. The panorama here is sublime, bettered only by the odd swimming spot that you can hike down to. The two or three laid-back seafood restaurants perched over the water are as accomplished as they are informal.

CAP CORSE

Never more than 14 kilometres (nine miles) across, the Cap Corse peninsula pokes 40 kilometres (25 miles) into the Mediterranean, like a giant finger pointing directly at Genoa. A narrow ridge of mountains sweeps down its centre: with a little elevation, panoramic views can take in the island of Elba on a clear day. While Napoleon was exiled on the latter, he claimed to be able to smell his native Corsica. Head north and the villages grow more sporadic. Giant wind turbines

perch on the peninsula's tip, their laboured spinning casting a shadow over Centuri's picturesque fishing port. Nonza, further to the south, is home to a west-facing, black sand beach; at sunset it's one of the island's most stunning. For the adventurous, the best form of transport for exploring Cap Corse is a motorbike, and you can expect to see bikers by the dozen looping the twisting coastal roads.

BASTIA

For centuries Bastia was Corsica's window on the world, trading with, and being battered by, ships from Pisa, Genoa, Britain and France. Nowadays it's still the first port of call for most visitors. Corsica Ferries' canary yellow fleet pours out passengers: some in jeeps, some on Harleys, some shouldering mountain bikes. The wealth of several centuries, combined with a lack of beach, has left Bastia both handsome and authentic, far removed from the island's more southerly seasonal resorts. And as capital of the northern Haute-Corse region, it has all the associated trappings. The first of these is the massive place St-Nicolas, palm-lined and backed with elegant apartments built for the local bourgeoisie. It's a café-strewn parade ground for promenading couples or mobile-wielding *mademoiselles*. A flea market is held here on Sundays. The tourist office on the square has a map of the town's churches. Pick of these are the Ste-Marie cathedral and the Chapelle Ste-Croix – both Baroque gems – and the Eglise St-Jean Baptiste, Corsica's largest.

A block south, place de l'Hôtel de Ville hosts a colourful market every Saturday and Sunday. Miss it and you can still load up on local jams, cheeses, wines and liqueurs, including local Cap Corse firewater, in the surrounding streets. These lanes are a provençal pastiche of ochre apartments, sky-blue shutters and window boxes. Heading south again through the old ramparts is the Vieux Port. This is Bastia at its most majestic, with rows of waterside restaurants serving up the fish, langoustine and crab brought in by the fishing boats bobbing by the quay.

Eat

Corsican dining tends to be a casual affair, even at the island's most elegant tables. From Easter to late September, staff turn out plate after plate to a permanently full house. Opening hours are liable to be elastic: lunch is normally served between noon and 2.30pm, dinner between 7.30pm and 10.30pm. However, you'll find there's more than a spoonful of island attitude: families with children will be served at 6.30pm; a certain venue may not open at all, the owners opting to host a cousin's private birthday party

Castaway Corsica



With some 1,000km (600 miles) of coastline and nearly 200 beaches to choose from, beach bums are spoiled when it comes to spreading out their towel on the island. The best 50 or so beaches have been photographed from the air by local paper *Corse Matin* then compiled into a bilingual glossy, *Plages de Corse*. Available from most of the island's newsagents for €10, it's the ultimate holiday tease to show friends back home.

During the summer months the stretches of sand near the main resorts are a seething mass of umbrellas and deckchairs, but with a little effort it's still easy to escape the sunseekers. Many of the island's beaches are relatively inaccessible, and can only be reached by boat or a stiff hike, which means that visitors can still stumble upon Eden-like stretches of sand.

One of Northern Corsica's most isolated beaches is Plage de Saleccia, a huge sweep of soft white sand and turquoise sea that was used as a location for the invasion sequences in the film *The Longest Day*. It's a windswept spot, punctuated only by lean-tos made out of sarongs, driftwood and other bits of flotsam by the odd passing tourist. Getting here requires some considerable effort – a bumpy 12km (7.5-mile) drive or mountain bike ride down a 4x4-only track off the main D81 highway, or a 45-minute hike through the wilderness of the Désert des Agriates from the similarly stunning Plage du Lotu. In summer, the latter is linked to St-Florent's harbour every hour by Agriate Marittima (06.17.50.65.58/

www.agriate-marittima.com, €14 return) and the good ship *Popeye* (06.62.16.23.76/www.lepopeye.com, €14 return). If you fancy staying on a few nights at Saleccia, then bring a tent – the simple, seasonal U Paradisu campsite (www.camping-uparadis.com) backs right on to the blissful beach.

For the ultimate castaway experience, though, you'll need to ditch the 4x4 and head even further into the wilderness of Corsica's back country on foot. Plage de Ghignu, the seldom-visited little cousin of Lotu and Saleccia, is for hardcore beach bums only. Visit and you will most likely have the beach to yourself – unsurprisingly as it can only be taken in by way of a two- to three-day coastal trail from Ostriconi to St-Florent. A map of this *sentier littoral* route can be downloaded from the St-Florent tourist office website (www.corsica-saintflorent.com). Just remember that this is a 'desert' and the only drinking holes are at Saleccia and Ghignu – in between you need to carry plenty of water with you.

If that all sounds like too much hassle for a decent spot of sand, then two additional beaches between Calvi and Algajola are well worth hunting down. Both are accessible via the coastal train and are just 100m or so long. A hike down from the Ondari-Arinella stop is Plage de l'Arinella, a hip beach backed by the Asian-inspired Matahari restaurant (see p257). Next stop on the line is Ste-Restitude, home of the Plage de la Restitude. This spot is even more laid-back, complete with beach bar and superb snorkelling.

U Lampione

Cap Corse Marina, Macinaggio, 25km N of Bastia (04.95.35.45.55). Open Apr-Sept noon-3pm, 7-10.30pm daily. €€.

Not quite a shack on the beach (but pretty close), U Lampione is a lazy little spot just north of Macinaggio's port. Bypass the town's more upscale eateries, and pick a table on U Lampione's shady terrace, or indoors under one of the wonky ceiling fans. The friendly owners serve up fresh fish – check their daily specials – grilled meats and crispy pizzas, along with *pichets* of local wine. A popular place for hikers to fuel up before setting off on the 19km (12-mile) Sentier des Douaniers around the Cap Corse headland.

Stay

You can count Corsica's business hotels on one hand. Instead of Best Westerns and five-star retreats, the island is blessed with scores of smaller, more homely options, from beachside campsites to boutique guesthouses. Although most shut up shop from October to March, they are jam-packed during high season.

Camping de la Plage

Algajola Aregno Plage (04.95.60.71.76/www.camping-de-la-plage-en-balagne.com). Closed Mid Nov-mid Mar. No credit cards. €.

A beachside campground that does exactly what it says on the tin, only better. Camping de la Plage even has its own train platform, from which you can rattle all the way along the coast to Calvi or Bastia. The tracks separate Algajola's golden sands from the main campsite area. A European union of holidaymakers set up shop here from spring onwards; Germans with ritzy mobile homes, Swedes with electric BBQs, Polish walkers with gas stoves and Brits with vast dome tents. The attraction is obvious: a choice between shady and sunny pitches, a spotless stack of showers and loos, and an open-all-hours shop selling roast chickens. A notch up are the wooden chalets and studios, each with a patio, kitchen and bathroom. The splurge option are the air-conditioned Tonga and Morea beach huts, advertised as *piéd dans l'eau*. They need to be reserved way in advance.

Casa Musicale

5km SE of Algajola Pigna (04.95.61.77.31/www.casa-musicale.org). Closed Dec-Feb. €€.

This hilltop redoubt manages to smash every Corsican stereotype: sun, sea and seafood are deftly replaced with music, mountains and country cooking. Casa Musicale began as a commune in the 1980s, slowly developing into a music school, artists' residency and centre for culinary exploration. Now it's way more highbrow – yet still kooky and friendly – with seven boutique bedrooms. The Bassa (the rooms are all named after Corsican vocal harmonies) boasts vaulted ceilings and a sea view, while petite Mezzana is the most romantic. Bird song (plus the odd rifle crack) awakens guests. Breakfast is dished up on the motley assortment of chairs and tables perched on the terrace.

Castel Brando

Cap Corse Erbalunga, 10km N of Bastia (04.95.30.10.30/www.castelbrando.com). €€.

Hidden by a sandy cove on Cap Corse, the venerable Castel Brando revels in glorious isolation. Its location behind bougainvillea-covered walls was originally for security, not privacy: when it was constructed in the late 19th century, this was one of several *maisons américaines* – palaces built by newly rich Corsicans returning from the Americas. All but the standard rooms have a patio or balcony, while the suites offer a glimpse of the Med. The sea itself is a skip over the road. Masks, snorkels and kayaks are available from the foyer. If taking one of the hotel's bikes, grab a map beforehand: as civilised as Castel Brando is, the surrounding hills are pretty remote.

Clos des Amandiers

Calvi Rte de Pietramaggiore (04.95.65.08.32/www.clos-des-amandiers.com). €€.

Clos des Amandiers is a rambling collection of bungalows set in an orchard, 15 minutes on foot from Calvi's historic centre and beach. Guests could be forgiven for not leaving the tranquil confines of the Clos all day. Semi-organised groups into hiking, birdwatching and the like disappear from dawn until dusk, freeing up the whacking great swimming pool, tennis courts, *pétanque* run and ample grounds. The bar and reception is charmingly haphazard, run as it is by a sturdy octogenarian. This multilingual hostess rules over the muddle of dining areas and anterooms. Accommodation is unfussy, and those yearning for more than a comfy bed with a table and chair underneath an olive tree are advised to look elsewhere.

La Dolce Notte

St-Florent Rte de Bastia (04.95.37.06.65/www.hotel-dolce-notte.com). Closed Nov-Feb. €€.

This well-run, 20-room hotel fills up fast, so turning up on spec is not an option. It's just a ten-minute walk from St-Florent's chic main drag, but many guests don't make it further than the few metres to the sea before aperitif time. (A decent Atlantic roller would flood the place, but St-Florent is blessed with invariably calm turquoise waters.) Guestrooms are a little stuck in the 1990s, overly flowery with heavy tiles, although the pricier *grand terrace* rooms offer more modern provençal chic.

Le Grand Hôtel

Calvi 3 bd Wilson (04.95.65.09.74/www.grand-hotel-calvi.com). €€.

Perched outside the old city walls, the Grand is just above the marina: even if you arrive by ferry rather than yacht, you can still be peeking out of your hotel window five minutes after stepping ashore. Not all of the guestrooms have a sea view – ask for one of the suites if you want to be sure – but fine linen and antique furniture are the norm all round. A few of the staff fall into the antique category too, but they polish and dust the Grand's faded glory relentlessly. It's a five-minute stroll back out to the ramparts, train station or to Calvi's town beach. Both evening cocktails and the €9 continental breakfast can be taken in the sun-dappled garden.



Le Jardin.