

# Corsica

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Rediscovering colour at the cliffs of **E Calanche** (p385) at sunset
- Pondering the architectural ambitions of the ancient Corsicans at **Filitosa** (p393) and **Cucuruzzu** (p394)
- Bracing for a refreshing dip at the **Gorges de la Restonica** (p388)
- Arriving in **Bonifacio** (p399)

## TERRAIN

High mountains tumble down to a rugged, hilly coastline in the west and drop to a narrow coastal plain in the east.

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Kallisté to the Greeks, Corse to the French, and ‘La Montagne en Mer’ (mountain in the sea) to the island’s more poetically minded inhabitants, the mysterious island of Corsica goes under many sobriquets. But there’s one that sums up the island in a nutshell – the *île de beauté* (beautiful island). Crowned by sawtooth peaks, mantled in forest cloaks of green oak, chestnut and pine, and shot through with rushing rivers and tumbling cascades, it’s one of the most dramatic, diverse and downright gorgeous islands in the Mediterranean.

Officially a part of France, and yet still fiercely proud of its own culture, history and language, Corsica has long had a love-hate relationship with the mother mainland: you’ll see plenty of anti-French slogans daubed on the walls, and French-language road signs are an enduring target for nationalist spray-cans. But despite the political posturing and its reputation for aloofness, Corsica has long hosted a hotchpotch of conflicting cultures: everyone from ancient Greeks to Genoese settlers has helped shape the island’s turbulent history, and you can still feel the cultural melting pot at work today.

Although it covers only 8720 sq km, Corsica resembles a miniature continent, offering cyclists an unrivalled variety of terrain and scenery. Dramatic roads wind around the island’s rugged coastline and plunge between soaring granite peaks that stay snowcapped until July. Azure seas and icy mountain streams provide places to cool off, while the *maquis* (dense aromatic scrub) contributes to the sensory overload. The island’s rich history, distinctive food and passionate people make Corsica an unforgettable touring destination.



## HISTORY

Archaeological evidence older than Corsica's scattered menhirs and dolmens places humans on the island since Mesolithic times. The descendants of those earliest nomads have since watched Romans, Moors and the Common Era's European powers clash over their Mediterranean Eden.

From the 11th to 13th centuries Corsica was ruled by the Italian city-state of Pisa, superseded in 1284 by its arch-rival, Genoa. In the 15th century, to prevent seaborne raids, a massive system of coastal citadels and watchtowers was constructed, many of which still ring the coastline.

In 1755, after 25 years of sporadic warfare against the Genoese, Corsicans declared their independence, led by Pascale Paoli (1725–1807). Under Paoli's rule they established a National Assembly and wrote the most democratic constitution in Europe. They also adopted *La Tête de Maure* (the Moor's Head) – a profile of a black head wearing a white bandanna and a hooped earring, which first appeared in Corsica in 1297 – as a national emblem. Corsicans made the inland town of Corte (p402) their capital, outlawed vendettas and established a university.

The island's independence was, however, short-lived: in 1768 the Genoese ceded Corsica to France, of which it has basically been a part ever since.

Corsicans nevertheless remain fiercely independent, some to the point of armed insurgency (see the boxed text below). The majority, though, seems to walk a delicate line. Media attention notwithstanding, recent referenda suggest that although relatively few Corsicans support a separatist agenda, the nationalist issue remains a burning topic.

## ENVIRONMENT

Measuring only 85km at its widest point, and 183km in length, Corsica packs in an incredible variety of landscapes: flatland marshes along the east coast, uninhabited desert in the north, a tortured west coast and the great mountainous spine running down the centre.

Most Corsicans are keen to promote the ecological wellbeing of their island; environmental issues actually figure large in the demands of many nationalist factions. In fact, much of the rugged alpine interior is uninhabited, due in part to the protections of the Parc Naturel Régional de la Corse (PNRC). Its creation in 1972 set aside more than two-thirds (3505 sq km) of the island. A good chunk of the remaining third falls under the safeguards of three other reserves. Just 15% of Corsica is cultivated.

This vast expanse of ecological preserve shelters a rich variety of flora and fauna, including many endemic species. Travelers will come across a menagerie of small,

## CORSICAN NATIONALISM

The spray-painted initials of the Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse (FLNC) and nationalist slogans appear on walls and cliffs all over the island. The groups responsible reflect – at an extreme – Corsicans' long-simmering dissatisfaction with external government.

The FLNC formed in 1976 with at least one bombing a day that year. It was a forceful way to deliver a message, but led to its dissolution in 1983. The movement, however, continued, this time as the 'ex-FLNC'. In 1997, nationalist violence included 290 bombings and 22 murders. (None of this has ever targeted tourists, who should have no reason to fear for their safety.)

In December 1999, four terrorist groups declared an indefinite truce after the French government agreed to talks. By 2001 the French parliament actually granted Corsica limited autonomy in exchange for an end to further separatist carnage. The bill was later overturned by the French high court because it threatened the principle of national unity. Even then, in 2003 a long-awaited referendum, which would have united the island's two *départements* (administrative divisions) and granted greater autonomy, was rejected by the Corsican people.

And yet, the movement's continued existence indicates deep discontent with the 'motherland'. Several FLNC bombs exploded across the island in 2005.