

# Getting Started

Corsica is dubbed *L'île de beauté* (the island of beauty), and it's no wonder why. With everything from mountain ranges to idyllic beaches and secluded villages, Corsica offers a kaleidoscopic palette of options in a relatively small area. There's never a dull moment!

For outdoor enthusiasts, the range of scenery and activities is almost countless. From sea kayaking to trekking, canyoning to diving, there is barely a sport or activity, whether on land or on the sea, that isn't catered for here. But Corsica allows for far more than just hot-weather beach holidays and adrenaline rushes – there's a wealth of history, culture and tradition to explore, too. You could also set yourself a gastronomical route full of delectable surprises.

Although there are bus and train systems that cover the island, a rental car is definitely the order of the day for anyone who really wants to explore (delving into hidden valleys or hunting down hard-to-reach beaches). Although tourist trails are well trodden, it's easy to escape the crowds and tailor your itinerary to suit your own tastes.

## WHEN TO GO

Hmmm... When the maquis is in full blossom in May and June, the scents are memorable and the vivid hues unforgettable. This is by far the best season to explore Corsica. The weather is sunny without being stifling, the countryside bursts with spring flowers, the locals are more hospitable and the flood of summer tourists, largely dictated by the French *vacances scolaires* (school holidays), has yet to crash over the island.

Most French people hit the road in July and August, so those two months – in which prices soar, tempers flare and the island boils – are best avoided.

See climate charts (p254) for more information.

## DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Patience – this is island time, after all
- Hiking boots – even if you're not a serious hiker, you won't be able to resist the temptation of a few walks
- Detailed road maps to tackle those nerve-racking hinterland roads
- Your driving licence and car documents if driving, along with appropriate car insurance
- An adaptor plug for electrical appliances (see the boxed text, p251)
- Lonely Planet's *French Phrasebook*
- An appetite for pungent cheese and artery-clogging charcuterie
- Your C-card if you're a diver, as well as a medical examination certificate from a doctor (mandatory for diving in France)
- A sleeping bag if you're planning on camping or staying at *gîtes d'étape*
- Snorkelling gear if you're anticipating heavy beach time
- A set of smart casual clothes: grimy T-shirts, shorts and dusty sandals don't cut the mustard in bars and restaurants in some chic coastal cities
- Maximum-protection sunscreen, sunglasses and a hat
- Some paperback books in English (poor availability in Corsica)

The core of the peak season is from mid-July to mid-August, when Corsica is chock-a-block with visitors. Flights and ferries are full to bursting, too. It's imperative to make reservations well in advance if you're planning to visit the island during this period.

Another good season is autumn, from September to mid-October. It's refreshingly peaceful and the weather is usually warm. Most places are open, without being overwhelmed by the crowds. It's generally comfortable for land-based outdoor activities such as walking, horse riding and canyoning. As for water sports, the water temperature is most favourable from June to October, and can reach 25°C in August.

Between late October and springtime, the island goes into snooze mode and most tourist facilities are closed, which is a bit of a shame since the climate is usually mild and sunny in winter, at least on the coast (it can be downright chilly inland). It's a good season for photographers, with perfect light and enchanting hues. Some *chambres d'hôtes* are open year-round, as are certain hotels in the main cities, which means that with some preplanning and your own wheels you can easily get around the island, and have the whole place to yourself! Winter is also the best season if you're hunting for that perfect charcuterie – believe us!

Walkers on the GR20 and other routes, the elderly and those travelling with children will surely prefer the less sweltering months of May, June and September, when roads and amenities are also less congested. Serious hikers should take note that the snow lingers until as late as mid-June on some sections of the GR20.

You may also prefer to organise your trip to coincide with one of the many festivals that fill the Corsican calendar – Easter is a particular highlight. For more details see p256.

## COSTS & MONEY

Though travelling in Corsica may not be cheap, neither is it prohibitively expensive. As a general rule, you can expect to pay at least €70 to €200 for a decent double room in high season (often more in August). You will have to pay the same minimum rates if you are on your own, as there are very few single rooms. Camping, sleeping in off-the-beaten track *chambres d'hôtes* or renting a *gîte rural* for a week can be good-value accommodation options. Sites charge an average of €6/3/3 per person/tent/car. If you're solo, staying at *gîtes d'étape* can be another well-priced option (about €13 per night); most people think they are geared only to hikers, but all travellers are welcome.

The interior of the island is also significantly cheaper than the coast. While Bonifacio and Porto-Vecchio rank as the most expensive cities in Corsica, the Alta Rocca, about 30km to the north, is much more affordable and can be used as a convenient base.

Another key factor to consider is the wild difference in costs between the high season (July and August) and the rest of the year. During these peak months room prices on the coast can be jacked up by 100% in many cases. The good news though is that even the most popular tourist places, such as Porto-Vecchio and Bonifacio, drop their prices dramatically out of season. You'll find excellent deals, and fewer people, in the shoulder seasons either side of summer: in April, May, June, September and October, which can result in some real bargains in accommodation and transport. Not all tourist facilities are open, but you can easily get by.

The cost of eating out is variable, depending on the location. Most restaurants offer tourist menus for about €15. However, it is often better to choose a good restaurant and have one good course rather than a mediocre complete meal.

### HOW MUCH?

<i>Chambres d'hôtes</i> €50-90
Brocciu €8
Car hire per week €250
Platter of charcuterie €12
An hour's parking in Ajaccio €1.50

### LONELY PLANET INDEX

Litre of petrol €1.20
Litre of water €0.50
Bottle of Pietra beer €2.50
Souvenir T-shirt €18
Pizza €7

**TOP FIVES****Vasques (Natural Pools)**

Beat the heat! Take a refreshing dip in the gin-clear waters of the mountain rivers...

- Vallée du Travo (p233)
- Solenzara River (p234)
- Pont de Noceta (p247)
- Tavignano River (p243)
- Vallée de la Restonica (p241)

**Walks**

Corsica's abundance of well-marked hiking trails makes it a haven for walkers from around the globe. More walking options are detailed in the regional chapters and in the Walking & the GR20 chapter (p54).

- GR20 (p56)
- Sentier des Douaniers (p112)
- Col de la Croix to Girolata (p152)
- Vallée du Tavignano (p243)
- Pertusato Lighthouse (p198)
- Monte Cinto (p244)

**Atmospheric Chambres d'Hôtes**

Find heaven in one of those lovely cocoonlike B&Bs in a grandiose setting...

- La Diligence (p226), in Verdèse
- Littariccia (p211), near Porto-Vecchio
- Villa Clotilde (p232), in the Fiumorbu
- Châtelet de Campo (p177), in the Haut Taravo
- Carpe Diem (p170), near Ajaccio

Bus and train travel (often seasonal as well) is generally quite expensive if you consider the actual distances travelled. Hiring a car will cost you about €250 per week with unlimited mileage and comprehensive insurance.

Don't forget to leave room in your budget for activities such as diving (from €40), horse riding (from €17), canyoning (about €40) or *parc aventure* (about €15).

Realistically, a traveller wanting to stay in comfortable midrange hotels or *chambres d'hôtes*, eat two square meals per day, hire a car and not feel restricted to one or two outdoor activities per week should reckon on a minimum daily average of €100 to €120 per day based on two people sharing a room at €80, plus car hire.

**TRAVEL LITERATURE**

The Corsican visitor's bible, Dorothy Carrington's revered 1971 *Granite Island: a Portrait of Corsica*, also known as *Corsica: Portrait of a Granite Island*, is a travel book only in the sense that it is structured around the author's comings and goings around the island. Its learning and passion for Corsica is immense. Now out of print, you may find it in a library, second-hand bookshop or on the internet.

### Scenic Roads

Clunk your seat belt, hold on to your hat and be prepared for heart-stopping drives along ribbon-thin roads...

- The D80, from Patrimonio to Pino (p109)
- The D81B, from Calvi to Galéria and Porto (p134)
- The D268, from Solenzara to Col de Bavella (p234)
- The D69, from Aullène to Col de la Vaccia (p214)
- The D146, from Piedicroce to Cervione (p226)

### Corsica for Children

Fear not; if you're with the little ones, there are lots of sights and activities to keep them happy.

- The A Cupulatta Centre (p169)
- A donkey ride with Balagn'ane (p142)
- The Petit Train in Ajaccio (p169)
- A picnic by the Vecchio River (p247)
- A boat trip to the Réserve Naturelle de Scandola (p152) or Îles Lavezzi (p201)

### Quintessentially Corsican Village

There are dozens of contenders for that title. Here's a (ruthless) selection:

- Fozzano (p187)
- Sant'Antonino (p143)
- Vescovato (p221)
- Zonza (p212)
- Morosaglia (p227)

How exotic Corsica must have seemed to continental writers when they began to discover it in the 19th century, perfect for the purposes of swash-buckler fiction. If you search hard, you may be able to find an old edition of Alexandre Dumas' *The Corsican Brothers*, Guy de Maupassant's Corsica stories or Honoré de Balzac's story *La Vendetta*. Unsurprisingly, they all deal with honour, murder, implacable hatreds and revenge.

For details on Corsican authors, see p41.

Travellers with a good reading knowledge of French will have access to much richer resources. Nicolas Giudici's *Le Crépuscule des Corses* is a brilliant and pessimistic analysis of Corsica's prospects in the world (*crépuscule* means 'twilight').

*L'Art du Graffiti en Corse* by Pierre Bertoincini is a fully illustrated coffee-table book presenting the history of this illicit art and subculture on the island.

There's something for travellers of all ages to enjoy in *Asterix in Corsica* by R Goscinny, translated into several languages. The subtle historical puns and references may be lost on younger readers, but they will no doubt enjoy this classic romp through the maquis as Asterix and chums fend off the Romans.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

**Aller en Corse** ([www.allerencorse.com](http://www.allerencorse.com)) Accommodation listings and other practical information for visitors (French and English).

**Clique Corse** ([www.cliquecorse.com](http://www.cliquecorse.com), in French) Practical and cultural information site.

**Corse Matin** ([www.corsematin.com](http://www.corsematin.com), in French) Corsica's leading daily newspaper.

**Corse Musique** ([www.corsemusique.com](http://www.corsemusique.com)) A portal dedicated to Corsican music, with links to groups' websites and audio snippets.

**Corsica Bus** ([www.corsicabus.org](http://www.corsicabus.org)) Bus and train timetables.

**Corsica Image Bank** ([www.corsica-imagebank.com](http://www.corsica-imagebank.com)) A photo library dedicated to Corsica, with zoom-in maps and more than 6500 shots – a good site to get a feel of the village, city or beach you're planning to visit.

**Corsica Isula** ([www.corsica-isula.com](http://www.corsica-isula.com)) The most exhaustive English-language website about Corsica, with links to other useful sites.

**Gîtes de Corse** ([www.gites-corsica.com](http://www.gites-corsica.com)) Has a wealth of information on *chambres d'hôtes* and *gîtes ruraux*, with online bookings.

**L'Agence du Tourisme de la Corse** ([www.visit-corsica.com](http://www.visit-corsica.com)) The island's official tourist-board site.

**Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Concise information, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions before you go, or dispense advice when you return.

**Parc Naturel Régional** ([www.parc-naturel-corse.com](http://www.parc-naturel-corse.com)) Here you'll find oodles of information on walking, the environment and microregions.

See also p261, p264 and p250 for other useful websites.

# Snapshot

If there's one island that can be defined as schizoid, it must be Corsica. On the one hand, affable and respectful people, idyllic landscapes, a blossoming tourist industry, a unique culture, an infectious dolce vita, the best charcuterie and the most pungent cheeses in the world, and an unmatched tranquillity. On the other hand, a pervading sense of defiance and rebellion, as testified by the latest trend on the island, T-shirts bearing the words 'Che Corsica', or less light-hearted activities, such as fire-bombing and a host of interecine *règlements de compte* (settling of scores) among separatist groups.

Some of the more striking graffiti you'll find in Corsica points to the ongoing issues of national identity and independence, with 'Terra Corsa ai Corsi' (Corsica for Corsicans) or 'Francesi Fora' (French Go Home) seeming to be the preferred slogans, along with the acronyms of nationalist movements scrawled on many public buildings on the island, like territorial markers. Not to mention the ubiquitous bullet-ridden roadsigns, with the French placename spray-painted out.

In terms of voting at the polls, Corsican nationalism has generally been a fringe phenomenon (pulling in about 10% to 15% of the vote at each election), but it extends far beyond net political results. Virtually all Corsicans recognise that the nationalists have helped protect the culture of the island and its landscape, preventing mass urbanisation of the coastline (there's no Riviera in Corsica) and fostering the revival of Corsu (the Corsican language), which forms the basis of the Corsican identity.

There's no denying that there's a Corsican malaise, which is palpable but hard to define. No French government has ever managed to reach a kind of permanent agreement with Corsican separatists, and all strategies have failed. There's a strong sense of insularity, which is certainly due to centuries of invasion and occupation, and a deep-seated feeling among Corsicans that their cultural identity is threatened by mainland France. For the *pinzutti* (the French mainlanders), the Corsicans are spoiled children who get a lot of funds from the EU and from Paris.

Autonomy and confrontation with the state are not the only issues. The main economic concern is the reliance on subsidies from the mainland and the tourist industry (the island's single biggest provider of employment). Late 2006 some intrepid Corsican politicians said that the very strict Loi Littorale, which prohibits all new building within 100m of the shoreline, should be loosened in order to foster economic growth. As the situation stands, certain elected deputies think that the island is 'frozen' and is unable to develop. The nationalists immediately reacted to this proposal, saying that these politicians should be *abattu et combattu* (literally, shot down and fought). Is this to be understood literally? Probably not, but this gives an idea of the very fervent way the island's future is debated.

Though these political undercurrents are palpable, fear not; tourists are never the target of nationalist activity and will always feel welcome by all Corsicans, who will greet you with a *pace i salute* (best wishes). They are keen to share their unique culture and the treasures of their island – its fabulous land- and seascapes, its unforgettable food, its wealth of activities, its diverse cultural sights and its poignant polyphonic chants.

## FAST FACTS

Population: 262,000

Territory size: 8682 sq km

Brocciu season: November-June

Number of Corsican clubs in the French second-division soccer league: 2

Number of AOC-labelled wines: 9

Highest point: Monte Cinto (2710m)

Number of local beers: 4

Size of the biggest groupers encountered in the Archipel des Lavezzi: 1.50m

Network of waymarked paths: more than 2000km

# On the Road



## JEAN-BERNARD CARILLET **Coordinating Author**

On the west coast, **Girolata** (p151) is a special place: this hamlet can only be reached by boat or on foot. In July and August, it gets very crowded – there's a flotilla of yachts and day-trippers. But I came in September, and I had the whole place to myself. I wandered amid the *ruelles* (lanes), marvelling at the unforgettable vistas over the bay. Then it was time for a *spuntinu* (light meal) at a *paillotte* (beachside restaurant) – something I take very seriously. I can still remember the fabulous *ambrucciata* (tart with *brocciu* cheese), which gave me enough energy to walk back up to the main road, about 1½ hours later.



**MILES RODDIS** The GR20 is a legendary walk through Corsica's high mountains encompassing an incredible diversity of landscapes including dense forests, glacial lakes, snowcapped peaks and rocky gullies. I'd completed the first two hours of the **GR20's Day 13** (p72), walking solo, the way I enjoy it most. It was tough going, a constant series of steep rises and dips, plus lots of four-limbed clambering over slabs of rock. Then I dropped into the deep, still coolness of a beech wood. At its heart was a clearing into which an icy stream gurgled, the perfect spot to rest against a boulder, breathe deeply and bask in the magnificent surrounds.

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