

# Corsica



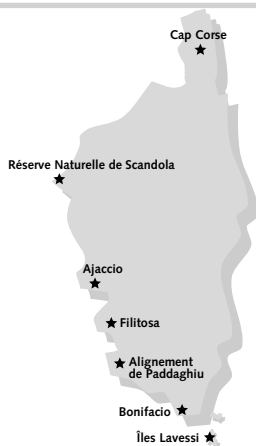
Kallisté to the Greeks, Corse to the French, and 'La Montagne en Mer' (mountain in the sea) to the island's more poetically minded inhabitants, the mysterious island of Corsica goes under many sobriquets. But there's one that sums up the island in a nutshell – the *île de beauté* (beautiful island). 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 fiercely proud of its own culture, history and language, Corsica has long had a love-hate relationship with the mainland: you'll see plenty of anti-French slogans on the walls, and French-language road signs are an enduring target for nationalist spray-cans. Despite the political posturing and its reputation for aloofness, Corsica has long hosted a hotchpotch of cultures: everyone from ancient Greeks to Genoese settlers has helped shape the island's history, and you can still feel the cultural melting pot at work today.

While most people make a beeline for the glittering bays, glitzy ports and bone-white beaches around the 1000km coastline, Corsica's mountainous interior is where you'll find the island's rugged heart and soul. Shrouded in dense shrubs, gnarled trees and unruly scrubland known as the maquis (whose wild herbs flavour the island's cheeses and charcuterie), Corsica's mountains and pastures were traditionally the preserve of bandits and *bergers* (shepherds). But today, the high-altitude trails are more often frequented by trekkers: the GR20 hike cuts down the island's spine through an otherworldly landscape of peaks, forests, waterfalls and shimmering mountain lakes. Prepare to be dazzled by France's diamond in the rough.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Discover your own pocket-sized island paradise for a day on the **Îles Lavezzi** (p934)
- Ponder the architectural ambitions of ancestors at **Filitosa** (p932) and **Alignement de Paddaghiu** (p932)
- Explore the remote peninsula of **Cap Corse** (p914) by way of winding coastal roads
- Cruise the sapphire waters of the **Réserve Naturelle de Scandola** (Scandola Nature Reserve; p922)
- Wander the backstreets and bask on the beaches around **Bonifacio** (p932)
- Bone up on your Bonaparte around Napoléon's hometown, **Ajaccio** (p926)



■ POPULATION: 260,150

■ AREA: 8680 SQ KM

## History

From the 11th to 13th centuries Corsica was ruled by the Italian city-state of Pisa, superseded in 1284 by its arch-rival, Genoa. 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 Pascal Paoli (1725–1807). Under Paoli's rule they established a National Assembly and founded 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. According to legend, the bandanna originally covered the Moor's eyes, and was raised to the forehead to symbolise the island's liberation.

Corsicans made the inland town of Corte their capital, outlawed vendettas and established a university, but the island's independence was short-lived. In 1768 the Genoese ceded Corsica to Louis XV, whose troops crushed Paoli's army in 1769. The island has since been part of France, except for 1794–96, when it was briefly under English domination, and during the Axis occupation of 1940–43.

Corsicans have long cared for their island's ecology. In 1972 the formation of the Parc Naturel Régional de Corse (PNRC) protected more than a third (3505 sq km) of the island.

The 1998 assassination of Corsica's *préfet* (prefect; the State's representative), Claude Erignac, in Ajaccio, rocked Corsica. In 2001, the French parliament granted Corsica limited autonomy in exchange for an end to separatist violence. The bill was later overturned by the French high court because it threatened the principal of national unity.

Despite ongoing media coverage, relatively few Corsicans support the separatist Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse (FLNC). In 2003 a long-awaited referendum, which would have united the island's two *départements* (administrative divisions of France) of Haute-Corse and Corse-du-Sud, and granted the island greater autonomy, was rejected despite a nail-biting electoral race. Nevertheless, the nationalist issue remains a burning topic: several FLNC bombs exploded across the island in 2005, and in December of 2007 the militant nationalist Yvan Colonna was

sentenced to life imprisonment for the assassination of Claude Erignac nine years earlier. Typically for a Corsican, after five years on the run he was discovered hiding out in a shepherd's hut.

## Internet Resources

**Corse Matin** ([www.corsematin.com](http://www.corsematin.com)) The island's daily newspaper.

**Gîtes de France Corse** ([www.gites-corsica.com](http://www.gites-corsica.com)) Rural *gîtes* (cottages for rent) and *chambres d'hôtes* (B&Bs) on the island.

**Parc Naturel Régional de Corse** ([www.parc-naturel-corse.com](http://www.parc-naturel-corse.com), in French) Official site for the natural park.

**Visit Corsica** ([www.visit-corsica.com](http://www.visit-corsica.com)) Main tourism portal, with practical info and accommodation details.

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

Corsica's main airports are at Ajaccio, Bastia, Figari (near Bonifacio) and Calvi.

**Air France** (☎ 08 20 82 08 20; [www.airfrance.com](http://www.airfrance.com)) and **Compagnie Corse Méditerranée** (CCM; ☎ 08 20 82 08 20; [www.aircorsica.com](http://www.aircorsica.com)) collectively provide year-round flights from Paris, Marseille, Lyon and Nice to all of Corsica's airports, with seasonal flights from Bordeaux, Lille, Nantes, Mulhouse, Strasbourg, Clermont-Ferrand and Brest to Bastia, Ajaccio and occasionally Figari.

**British Airways** (☎ in France 08 25 82 54 00, ☎ in UK 0844 493 0 787; [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) has seasonal flights from London to Ajaccio, Bastia and Figari; there are also summer charter flights from other regional airports in the UK.

### BOAT

#### Mainland France

Several companies run between the French mainland and Corsica's main ferry ports (Ajaccio, Bastia, Calvi, Île Rousse, Porto-Vecchio and Propriano):

**Corsica Ferries** (☎ France 08 25 09 50 95; [www.corsicaferries.com](http://www.corsicaferries.com)) Year-round from Nice to Ajaccio, Bastia, Calvi and Île Rousse, and from Toulon to Ajaccio, Bastia and Île Rousse.

**La Méditerranée/CMN** (☎ France 08 10 20 13 20; [www.cmn.fr](http://www.cmn.fr)) This Société Nationale Maritime Corse-Méditerranée subsidiary has year-round sailings between Marseille and Ajaccio, Bastia and Propriano.

**Société Nationale Maritime Corse-Méditerranée** (SNMCM; ☎ 08 91 70 18 01; [www.sncm.fr](http://www.sncm.fr)) Year-round ferries from Nice and Marseille to all of Corsica's ports, plus high-speed *navettes à grandes vitesses* (NGVs) from Nice to Ajaccio and Île Rousse in summer.