

Days on the Island



Corsica has a special place for history and traditions, but nature prevails, as it has for centuries. **Apeksha Bhateja** discovers a thumb-shaped French island on the cusp of the past and future.

The rays of the sun are slicing through the watercoloured blue skies. It's a warm morning in Corsica and the breakfast table is set on the terrace: Crisp slices of baguette, fresh goat-cheese from a local farm, Corsican fruit jams in tiny jars, strawberries, plums, and cherries, freshly squeezed juice, tea, and coffee. The hilltop villa faces the rugged peaks of Porto Vecchio. A short drive away is the glittering coastline that runs parallel to the hills. The landscape is new to a city-girl like me, especially on the day when Henri plans a picnic along the river and we walk barefoot on slippery stones. But the tales of the island's bloody battles, family feuds, and belonging resound in my mind most of all.

FROM TOP: DIRK RENKHOFF/ALAMY; IMAGEBROKER/ALAMY



CORTE

Corsica is the birthplace of Napoleon, who admired the unforgettable hero of the island, Pasquale Paoli. Interestingly, Corsica reflects more Italian culture than French and the main reason is that since the 11th century, the Mediterranean island was ruled by Italy. Paoli, who led the independence movement in the 18th century, gained liberation for the island and Corte became the capital (until it was annexed again). Even today, the national symbol of the independent nation, The Moor's Head (a black head with a white bandana) appears everywhere—souvenirs, flags, and clothes.

We begin our discovery in this wrinkled, old town at a cosy French restaurant, La Riviere des Vins, with chicken bruschetta, omelette with cheese, grilled chicken, a platter of ham and sausages, and tomato salad. "The bullet holes on Maison Gaffory are from a battle of independence," Henri tells us as he leads us on an uphill climb. Steps with streetside restaurants and shops, a grocery store with hams hanging from the ceiling, a potter quietly working on his wheel, and a standalone wall where once stood a house—the town has a lived-in feel, and the stories of its past are whispered in its squares.

FROM LEFT: IAIN BAGWELL/GETTYIMAGES; ERIC JAMES/ALAMY; DEAN V. PIROZZI/GETTYIMAGES



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PORTO VECCHIO

Mother Nature is Corsica's greatest weapon. This becomes apparent when the three-day itinerary unfolds into a walk into the jungle to see cork trees, a short trek in the mountains for a breath of fresh air, a picnic along a gentle stream with feet dipped in the water, a climb to see cave houses, and an open-air market with local producers and sellers.

And while I am doing all this, our base is a two-storey, luxury villa in Porto Vecchio. I have my own room (en suite bathroom and balcony) in the hilltop villa, which also features a swimming pool, living and dining room, and a well-equipped kitchen, where Henri whips up elaborate meals singlehandedly. One night with all the lights in the house switched off, I gaze at the stars, and I am surprised with the shiny dots painted on the black screen. It's been so long, I think as I try to spot constellations that we once learned to draw in school.

The second night here, a Corsican music band is playing at a church in the neighbourhood and we drive down to attend the concert. Corsican language is close to Italian, but it differs as you move from north to south. The locals also speak French. Since I don't speak either, I am just listening to



Clockwise: Chicken and roast tomato bruschetta; St Jean Baptiste church in the old town centre, Porto Vecchio; the unforgettable hero, Pasquale Paoli. Opposite, from above: The 187 steps on the cliffside staircase of Escalier du Roi d'Aragon in Bonifacio; sit on the rocks and dip your feet in the River Solenzara.

the melodies. For the finale, the band sings *Bella Ciao*, an Italian song of revolution, and everyone chimes in. Henri explains that a group of Corsicans still dream about independence from France.

BONIFACIO

At the southern tip of the island, is the coastal town of Bonifacio, just 12 kilometres from Sardinia. The vibe is *La Dolce Vita*, thanks to its proximity to Italy. On a boat tour in the waters of the Mediterranean, you can discover little coves and caves, and see the waters in different shades of blue.

The marina is dotted with restaurants and shops, and it's worth the wait to stop here for lunch. We later go to a sweet shop, La Caverne D'Ali Bonbon, which is built inside a limestone cliff, and munch on candies.

We enter the fortified city through the medieval gate and bridge, and the Old Town that lives inside is a stage. A stage for pretty boutiques, streetside cafés

in the narrow alleyways, shops selling bread of the dead, and medieval buildings connected through arches that were used as waterways. All the way up is a cemetery that looks anything but—the whitewashed, cliff-facing graveyard has house-like tombs with the remains of the dead.

I am huffing and puffing on my way up the Steps of Aragon. The 187 steps that make the stony staircase on the cliffside are a legend: It is said that they were carved out of the hill in one night in the 15th century to attack the city. That's not true though; the stairs existed before that time and locals used them to carry water to the fortified city, but the legend is more colourful. It goes beyond sun tanning and bar hopping in Corsica—and that's the charm. So, tune into Radio Nostalgia and hit the accelerator—the Corsica of the past, present, and future will unfold before you. ■

Clockwise: Ham feta cheese and olive omelette; take a boat ride at Plage de Palombaggia beach; an aerial view of the hilltop church in Corsica.



THE DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Air France offers flights from Delhi to Paris. You can then take a short flight to Bastia or Ajaccio. You will need to apply for a Schengen visa at least 15 days in advance at vfs-france.co.in.

TOUR OPERATOR

Corsica Napoleonica Henri de Rocca-Serra knows the island like the back of his hand and is happy to curate an itinerary based on your preferences. corsica-napoleonica-india.com

NOTE

You can't exchange money in Corsica, so make sure you bring extra cash.

