

SUN-ENCHANTED ISLAND SERVES UP A TASTY TIME

THE island of Corsica is used to dealing with invaders. From the Greeks to the Romans, to the Genoese merchants who dominated the island for 13 centuries, the locals have seen them all come and go with little more than a Gallic shrug.

Today's invaders, however, do not come looking for mineral resources or a strategic Mediterranean naval base, but to soak up the sun, the charm, the fine wines, fabulous food and the beauty of one of the Med's least developed islands.

Our four-day race around the island took us from Bonifacio in the south, up the east coast via Bastia and over the spectacular Cap Corse to the beautiful bay of Calvi.

Situated south of France and west of Italy, the Corsicans have been keeping a close eye on their nearest neighbour, the Italian island of Sardinia.

Only a 14km ferry ride across the Gulf of Bonifacio, Italian entrepreneurs have made the most of cheap air fares to welcome thousands of Scots to their beautiful beaches. Now the Corsicans want to get in on the action.

After an easyJet shuttle hop from Glasgow to London, I flew to Bonifacio from Stansted with Ryanair. We left Glasgow in the rain (what's new?) and arrived to find Corsica bathed in the kind of soft sun Scots can usually only dream of at this time of year.

The drive from the airport to Bastia confirmed we had arrived in another world. The landscape; lush green scrub dotted with bizarre, wind worn limestone pinnacles and

Only a 14km ferry ride across the small bays fringed with pure white sand was mesmerising.

Opening the car window to get a better view, I was assailed by the sweet scent of wild thyme, rosemary, fennel, juniper and lavender. A bit like walking past a Lush shop, but a lot more alluring.

Indeed, Napoleon – a local boy from Ajaccio, since you ask – always said he could smell Corsica long before the island came into sight.

If the scent was heady, it was as nothing compared to the first site of Bonifacio. Perched atop a 230ft limestone promontory, the city is split into two sections – the vieille ville (old town) and the la Haute Ville (the Upper city).

HERE, the cliffs have been undercut by the sea so that the buildings placed on the very lip of the precipice appear to be on the water.

The steep climb from the natural harbour up through the twisting back streets to the top of the citadel is rewarded with astonishing views and equally welcome shady squares where, as the sun sinks, pastis drinking and people watching are the order of the day.

Hugging the east coast and heading north from Bonifacio, the island reveals why so many invaders were keen to settle here. Lush pastures, fed by streams from the towering spine of mountains, run down to the sea in a series of bays and inlets with white sand and water the colour of jade.

Even better, in the spring and autumn, when the French hordes have gone home, you can have a beach or an entire bay to yourself.

Stopping for lunch at A Mandria,

a roadside farm auberge in the village of Pont de Solenzara, we thought we would be back on the road within an hour. But that was before we saw the menu.

As around us French families tucked into steaming plates of bean soup, wild boar, fresh seafood and home cured meats, our faffing over

the menu so frustrated the delightful chef proprietor Marc-Antoine Rocca Serra that he decided to bring us a taste of everything he had to offer.

WHAT followed was a Corsican feast of Biblical proportions. Two and a half hours later, and barely able to walk, we waddled back to the car to drive to our overnight stop, Bastia.

Situated half way up the east coast of the island, and built on another impressive rock formation, the town's walled citadel offers a maze of small streets, each with brilliant views over the Mediterranean.

The town's sheltered inner harbour, the reason why the Genoans set up home here, is the perfect spot to linger over a long lunch or a late dinner.

The next morning, we awoke to

a brilliant sunrise and, for the rest of the day, followed the sun's east west traverse over the Cap Corse, an 'island within an island' of steep mountains, deep valleys and hidden villages.

Heading north out of Bastia, red pantiles gave way blue green slate roofs, which shimmered like fish scales after a shower of rain.

After another luscious lunch in Pietracorbara we were well enough fortified to follow the Chemin de



Lumiere (the path of light) over the spine of the mountainous promontory to the west side of the island.

The next day, we drove down the west coast of the Cap Corse, a breathtaking journey punctuated by sweeping corners, huge, slate gray beaches, and pretty villages perched high above the road to the Balagne,

the green heart of the region's olive oil and wine production.

A quick stop for coffee in Saint Florent, dubbed the St Tropez of Corsica, gave us the caffeine kick we needed to push on down the coast to Ile Rousse, where the sand turns soft and white again.

Our final resting spot was the port city of Calvi, with million pound yachts bobbing in the harbour and well-dressed tourists lining the harbour-side bars and restaurants.

But that's the great thing about the island – it is as sophisticated or as down to earth as you want it to be.

From family hotels to beach-side camp sites, five-star hotels to village B&Bs and farm auberges, it truly offers something to suit all pockets and all types of holiday.

■ In Bonifacio he stayed at the Hotel Santa Teresa (www.hotel-santateresa.com); in Bastia at the Hotel Alivi (www.hotel-alivi.com); in the Cap Corse at Auberge Au Bon Clocher (www.aubonclocher.fr) at Canari, and in Calvi at the Hotel Mariana (www.hotel.mariana.com).

■ See also the websites: www.bastia-tourisme.com www.corsica-saintflorent.com www.balagne-corsica.com

key facts

BEST FOR: Food and culture lovers who like to explore at their own pace.

TIME TO GO: Spring or autumn, when the weather is still hot but the beaches quiet.

DON'T MISS: A blow-out lunch or dinner at A Mandria in Pont de Solenzara.

NEED TO KNOW: Although the island belongs to France, it is best not to remind your Corsican hosts of the fact.

DON'T FORGET: To leave room in your suitcase to bring back some of the island's brilliant wine, fabulous cheeses and delicious cured meats.

travel file

■ Norry Wilson travelled as a guest of the French Tourism Agency, Atout France. See www.franceguide.com and www.visit-corsica.com





■ The old port area of Bastia, far left, is a perfect spot for people watching and lunch

■ The town of Bonifacio, left, is one of the wonders of the island





■ From the citadel of Calvi, above, to the idyllic, herb-scented hills and valleys of the Cap Corse, below, Corsica is a joy for all the senses

