

## Fact File

- Chris was a guest of the French Tourist Office (0906 824 4123 — calls cost 60p per minute).
- For more information on Corsica, visit [www.franceguide.com](http://www.franceguide.com) and [www.visit-corsica.com](http://www.visit-corsica.com)



Bonifacio: Star attraction of the southern tip of Corsica

# The Isle Of Beauty

Anchored in the heart of the Mediterranean, the French island of Corsica is at its best in spring or autumn, says Chris Parker

Henri Matisse called Corsica the Isle of Beauty and it's hard to disagree with the great artist when you first encounter the astonishingly diverse landscape — snow-capped mountains, historic, fortified towns and some of the finest beaches in the world. Corsica is set 170km off the

French coast and 80km from Italy and attracts around two million visitors a year. The canny traveller knows that most tourists tend to arrive in the hot summer months of July and August, when the beaches and restaurants are crammed. If you choose to travel in spring or autumn, you'll find hotel prices have fallen, the beaches are empty and the locals less frazzled.

I was there last September, when the turquoise water glistened under a constant warm sun and I was left with the classic Corsican dilemma — whether to head for beach or mountains.

I chose the spectacular port of Bonifacio, situated along the southern tip of the island. Rated as the star attraction of Corsica, my first impression was one of wonder at the sheer beauty of the location. Sea on one side and a fjord on the other, the old town of Bonifacio seems to defy gravity by teetering over a 200ft limestone ledge. By sunset, the whole town was ablaze with the most intense golden light and it was

wonderful to stroll among the ramshackle medieval houses and boutiques selling handicrafts, jewellery and curiosities.

By morning, I made my way down to the trendy marina and booked an excursion boat to tour the various grottoes and caves that dot the coastline. Most are only accessible by water and the view of Bonifacio from the sea as you round the mouth of the harbour is simply amazing. Don't forget your camera.

## Family feast

I had read many favourable reports about the Corsican cuisine. Some describe it as a mixture of Italian and French with a flavouring of the thyme, basil, fennel, marjoram and rosemary that grow in abundance throughout the island. Everyone seems to have their own favourite restaurant and mine was discovered quite by chance as we made our way up from Bonifacio along the eastern side of the island to the city of Bastia. A Mandria is a family-run affair situated north of the town of Pont de Solenzara, in a handsomely

restored farm building, although we chose to dine in the delightfully shady garden, where we enjoyed one of those truly memorable gastronomic experiences. It wasn't just the food — meats from their own smokery or grilled over a wood fire, aubergines stuffed with local cheese and the tastiest omelette, topped with fresh mint, I've ever eaten — but the enthusiasm and friendliness of the two generations of family that made our visit so special.

Reluctantly, we had to move on to our next port of call, the impressive citadel in Bastia. Inside, we found the 14th-century Grand Palais des Gouverneurs had recently been refurbished to show the art and history of the city. To be honest, I found it rather dull, so I decided to explore the rest of the town on foot, stopping first at an old Clarissian convent that later became a prison in the 19th century. I'm not sure whether the nuns would have approved of the conversion, yet I couldn't help wondering if the religious atmosphere of the building had ever encouraged the prisoners to repent of their lawless ways and

seek a more spiritual life.

Perhaps some of them helped to maintain the various Roman and baroque chapels that we encountered on our "way of light" walking trail in the Cap Corse region of northern Corsica. Starting at dawn along the eastern coast in Pietracorbara, we'd hoped to finish the 12km trail at Barrettali on the west coast just as the sun was setting. Unfortunately, low rain clouds shrouded the small mountain crossing during our hike and we gladly accepted the offer of a lift to the outskirts of Barrettali, where we watched dusk settle from the wooden viewing gallery at the restaurant, U Mulinu.

The final leg of our whistle-stop tour took us deep into the Nebbiu region, where some of Corsica's best vineyards are located, thanks to the shelter provided by the surrounding mountains from the prevailing winds. Much of what they produce is served at the waterfront cafés and restaurants at the nearby coastal resort of St Florent, where every yacht in the marina screams millionaire luxury. This has led some people to label the town as Corsica's

answer to St Tropez, which is a little unfair as St Florent is much less pretentious and far friendlier than its mainland cousin.

For 1950s-style glamour, nothing can top the romantic port of Calvi, where Princess Grace and Prince Rainier of Monaco honeymooned. The locals claim Calvi is the birthplace of Christopher Columbus and the remnants of his house can be seen inside the colossal citadel, which dominates the skyline.

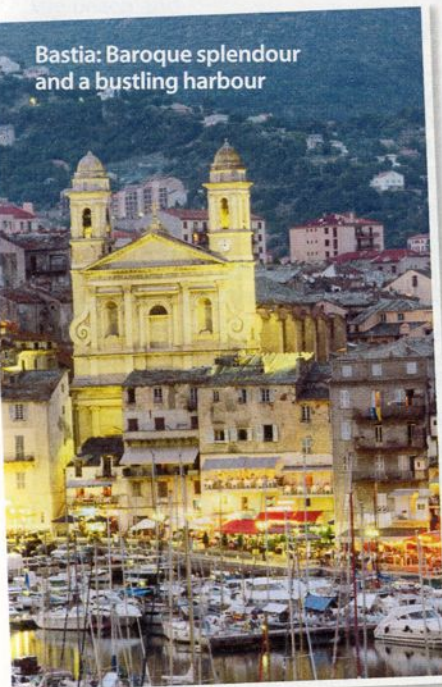
## Getting there

Corsica is a two-hour flight from London. It has four international airports with regular scheduled and charter flights from European capitals and French cities. Direct flights from the UK are available with EasyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)), Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)), and Titan Airways (visit [www.corsica.co.uk](http://www.corsica.co.uk)).

Alternatively, why not drive to Corsica or take the sleeper train down to the South of France and hop over on a ferry? The UK-based Southern Ferries (0844 815 7785; [www.southernferries.co.uk](http://www.southernferries.co.uk)) provides

a booking service for individual passengers and groups from a wide selection of Corsican car-ferry companies.

Bastia: Baroque splendour and a bustling harbour



Calvi: Fifties-style glamour



Stroll through vineyards, then sample the local wines

