



A slow eco-escape in Corsica

With the island's popularity soaring during the summer months, Anna Richards looks at how visitors can lessen their impact while still savouring Corsica's culture, trails and history



With mountains that swell up from the sea, powder-soft beaches and maquis-covered headlands, Corsica has a timeless appeal. It's as if nature took a pump and inflated all the best bits of this craggy island wedged in the Mediterranean between France and Italy. Its natural gifts make it easy for visitors to slow down. At the same time, however, a wave of new initiatives promoting greener travel are making it all the more rewarding to do so.

Corsica's history is no tamer than its landscape, having been tussled over by the French, Genoans, Moors and Pisans, as well as the Corsicans themselves. Greek settlers in 565 BC named the island Kallisté (meaning beautiful), although it feels too slight a description for an often unforgiving topography, home to 'desert', the 2,706m-high Monte Cinto and Europe's toughest hike.

More than two millennia on, Corsica hasn't stopped drawing crowds. Some 3 million descend annually – almost ten times the island's permanent population. Life here is ever more reliant on tourism as its main industry, but this can be a double-edged sword. Many people just skim the surface, arriving for the day on cruise ships that dock in Ajaccio, the island capital. These visitors invest very little in the local economy but make their presence felt on the streets.

For those staying on the island, Corsica's Rispetto (Respect) project promotes not just hotels that have committed to sustainability goals, but tourism initiatives that invest in the local community too, aiming to help preserve Corsica's cultural identity. There are also

58 hotels that have received the European Union Ecolabel, the official EU-recognised accreditation for stays that have achieved tangible sustainability targets. Both are a good place to start when looking for accommodation. However, don't overlook the smaller, family-run places, which may not have 'official' recognition but are often largely self-sufficient. Search sites such as Greengo (greengo.voyage) to help you find a list of more eco-friendly properties.

This is an island that rewards slow travel. But even trekking Europe's 'toughest' long-distance hiking trail, the 180km-long GR20, isn't without impact. There are now so many people on this route that it makes it all the more vital to stick to the marked paths, thus protecting the island's fragile biodiversity. However, there are other walks just as appealing. The multi-day Mare à Mare (coast to coast) and Mare à Monti (sea and summit) hikes are less busy but no less dramatic.

Along the coast, kayaking is a guaranteed way to escape the crowds and, at the same time, reach hidden coves inaccessible by car or on foot. For local knowledge, book with Corsica Adventure (corsica-aventure.com), which runs multi-day kayaking and camping trips, including odysseys that dip in and out of the UNESCO-listed scarlet calanques (rocky inlets) of Piana and Scandola Nature Reserve, a maritime conservation area of rust-coloured caves, creeks and coral reefs.

Travelling by car is by far the most practical way to get around the island, and many rental outlets now hire electric vehicles. Offering spare seats on ride-sharing sites such as Blablacar minimises your impact even further.



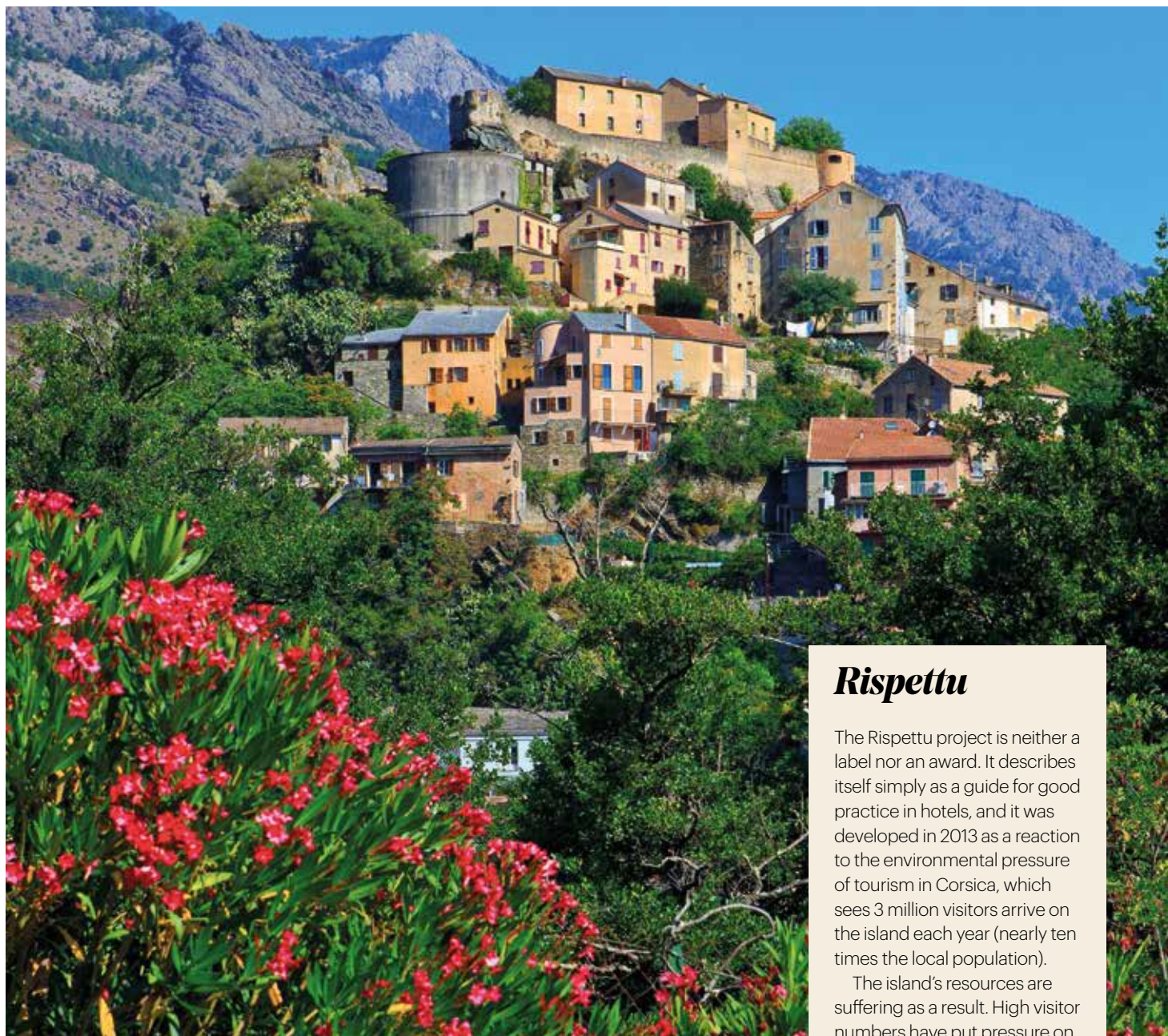
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Ask a local

"My favourite thing to do is brunch on the final Sunday of each month at Chez Zella, an hour from Ajaccio. The Corsican family that own the place spoils us with an all-you-can-eat buffet of homemade produce, the base of which comes largely from their own garden. To digest afterwards, I like to walk up to the neighbouring village, Guitera-les-Bains, to soak up the view."

Roxane Braud is a teacher, photographer and hiker from Ajaccio





Rispettu

The Rispettu project is neither a label nor an award. It describes itself simply as a guide for good practice in hotels, and it was developed in 2013 as a reaction to the environmental pressure of tourism in Corsica, which sees 3 million visitors arrive on the island each year (nearly ten times the local population).

The island's resources are suffering as a result. High visitor numbers have put pressure on a water supply already badly affected by droughts. There is a similar strain on energy usage, while local services increasingly struggle with the extra rubbish caused by so many visitors. In partnership with Corsica's Environment Agency, 30 hotel owners have now signed up to the scheme ([rispettu.green](#)), agreeing to...

- Reduce water and energy consumption.
- Promote journeys on foot or by bike.
- Educate guests on the need for sustainable travel.
- Recycle and minimise waste in hotels.

This is especially useful given that public transport on the island can be a challenge – although it is not without its highlights. A ride on the U Trinichellu, a narrow-gauge railway line built in the 19th century, which connects Ajaccio, Bastia and Calvi, is a particular delight.

The best way to minimise your impact is to consume local food and drink produced on the island, including seasonal fruits and vegetables and Corsican wines. Not only are the food miles lower, but you're investing in the local economy. It's also fresher and tastier. Island specialities such as its violently green olive oil, *brocciu* sheep's cheese and signature charcuterie (try the *figatellu* pork liver sausage) shouldn't be ignored anyway.

Respect for the environment, local culture, and language in particular is key to enjoying Corsica. In spite of a rise in bilingual schools, the number of people speaking Corsican is declining year on year. A few spoken words in the local tongue can mean a lot to those who understand them.

The slower you travel through Corsica, the more time there is to admire its maquis-covered hills, the wild boars that roam freely and its caves with skylights to the heavens. Most still arrive by air, but ferries from France and Italy offer a slower, greener starting point. In any case, on an island where the roads are all hairpin bends and the hiking trails weigh heavy on the limbs, you'll soon adopt a gentler, more local pace. ►

Walls, trails and nature (*this page*) The 18th-century citadel of Corte was the only one of the island's walled cities to be built inland and rose up over a 350-year period; (*opposite page*) Corsica is a hiker's paradise, with the busy GR20 known as one of the toughest walks in Europe, although there are plenty of other multi-day treks that are less crowded; (*previous spread*) Scandola Nature Reserve is part of Corsica's only World Heritage site



Explore Corsica in six days

Day 1: Bastia

Immerse yourself in local history on a walking tour from the tourist office. Bastia was Corsica's capital until the late 18th century, and it has a colourful history of plague and pestilence. Don't miss the San Roccu Oratory, where locals leave bread for Saint Roccu, the patron saint of invalids.

Day 2: Ghisonaccia

Wander sand the consistency of flour at Pinia beach, framed by Corsica's



last major pine forest. There are no amenities, just uninterrupted sea views and glassy water. Ten minutes south, Arinella Bianca beach has restaurants and watersports for hire.

Day 3: Corte

Home to the island's only university as well as a museum on Corsican history and a plethora of hiking trails, there's nowhere that feels more quintessentially Corsican. Pay your respects to the statue of Pascal Paoli, leader of a short-lived independent Corsica in the 18th century, before donning a helmet and sliding into the Verghellu Valley on a canyoning trip.

Day 4: Porto

Book a boat trip to explore Scandola Nature Reserve, part of Corsica's only World Heritage site. Swimming and snorkelling are permitted but do use reef-safe sunscreen, as this is a hotspot for marine diversity, home

to corals, posidonia meadows and more than 240 species of fish.

Day 5: Calvi

Potter around Calvi's sandcastle-like 19th-century fort, which looks rather weathered but was built more recently than the Genoese towers you'll find littering the coastline. Dip into the boutiques to support the work of local glassblowers and knife makers. Calvi is a town of artisans.

Day 6: Désert des Agriates

More of a scrubland than a 'desert', the Désert des Agriates has some of Corsica's finest beaches. The best known, Saleccia and Lotu, can be reached by boat from Saint-Florent, but these are increasingly victims of overtourism. If you have more time to play with, hike to Ghignu beach from Ostriconi (six hours), where you can spend the night in an unmanned shepherd's hut (no running water).

Behind the walls (this page; top to bottom) The fortified city of Calvi was where the British admiral Horatio Nelson lost his eye, when besieging the city on behalf of Pascal Paoli, who went on to lead Corsica during its brief period of independence; Bastia was the capital of Corsica until 1791

Don't miss...

A historic sight (this page; top to bottom) A statue of Pascal Paoli, who was at the forefront of the resistance movement against Genoese control of the island in the 18th century; you can explore the islands off Corsica by kayak



OUTDOORS

The 'other' islands

Not far off the coast of Ajaccio lie the Îles Sanguinaires (Bloody Isles), which turn as red as their name suggests in the evening light. Boat trips (with rather dull commentary) leave from Ajaccio, or you can walk to Pointe de la Parata to watch the sun set behind them from dry land. Some of the Lavezzi Islands between Sardinia and Corsica are privately owned, others are protected areas for birdlife. Hire a kayak in Piantarella to get great views of them from the water.

Coast to coast

While the GR20 grabs the spotlight, Corsica's coast-to-coast hiking trails are much quieter. Three different routes cut the island from east to west. These are better suited to (comparatively) time-poor visitors than the two weeks required for the GR20. The shortest is the southern route, which can be tackled in five days, whereas the wilder northern trail takes about eight days.

Donkey trekking

Let a four-legged friend help navigate by walking with a donkey. La Promenâne's trips range

from half a day to five days, leaving from a chestnut farm in the heart of the Corsican mountains. Many routes feature stops on the GR20 (randonnee-ane-corse.com).

Organic wineries

The bulk of the wine produced on Corsica stays here. This is not a slight on its quality, but rather because it's VAT free. Sciaccarellu, niellucciu and vermentinu grapes dominate local wines. Organic vineyard Terra di Catoni (terraticatoni.com) has four wine bars on Cap Corse that you can visit.

INDOORS

Museum of Corsica

To understand Corsica's complex identity, head to Corte to visit the island's museum on culture and history (museudiacorsica.corsica). With artefacts dating from ancient times, there are exhibits on Corsican music, language and craft, and what it means to be Corsican today.

U Trinichellu

It's not the fastest way to get around, but it may be the most scenic. Corsica's 'little train' runs from Ajaccio and Bastia, with a coastal line branching off between Ponte-Leccia and Calvi. Its route takes it over more than 50 bridges and viaducts, offering superb views. ▶

Need to know



When to go:

Avoid the **French school holidays** (Jul–Aug), which see occupancy and rates swell.

June and **September** are far quieter. Much is closed in the shoulder seasons of **April**, **May** and **October** when the weather can fluctuate between bright sunshine and sudden, violent storms. Be careful if you're up in the mountains at this time.



Getting there & around

Easyjet (easyjet.com) flies direct from London Gatwick to Bastia and Figari. Flights cost from £70 return and take two hours and 15 minutes. A **car** and a **stout pair of walking boots** are vital in Corsica. Be wary of Google Maps; many of the 'roads' it suggests should only be tackled in a **4WD**. For shorter distances, consider an e-bike.



Carbon offset

A return flight from **London** to **Figari** emits 270kg of CO2 per passenger. *Wanderlust* encourages you to offset your travel footprint through a reputable provider. For advice on finding one, visit wanderlustmagazine.com/inspiration/sustainable-travel.



Further information

Go to visit-corsica.com





Blood and sand (*this page; above*) A view of the red-tinged Îles Sanguinaires at sunset; (*opposite page; clockwise from top right*) the GT20 is the cycling equivalent of the famous GR20 hiking route, although unless you've got thighs of steel, it's worth hiring an e-bike; the prehistoric site of Filitosa was occupied from 6000 BC until the Roman era; beautiful Nonza, one of the oldest villages in Corsica, teeters on a cliff over the beach below; the Désert des Agriates, which extends across 15,000 hectares, is a wilderness of barren scrubland scattered with deserted coves and white sandy beaches that can often be reached by boat

Stay here...

South

Domaine de Piscia, near Figari

This family-run organic winery is encircled by mountains. Best of all, the resident goats supply the cheese for the (largely self-sufficient) on-site restaurant. domainedepiscia.com

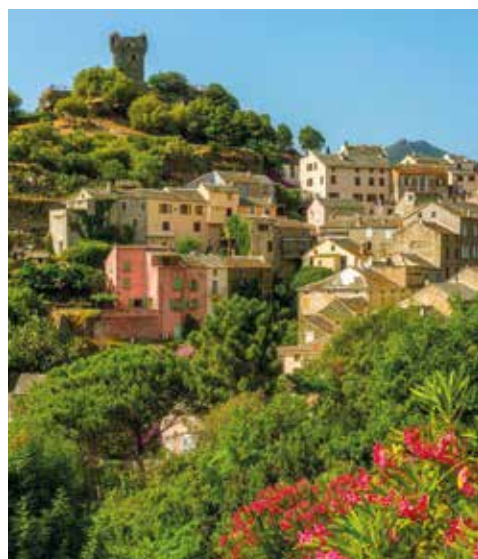
Domaine de Sonia, near Porto-Vecchio

A glamping site where guests can admire the stars from bed in a transparent dome tent – which is heated and air-conditioned using renewable energy. domainedesonia.com

Central

Auberge Sole e Monti, Quenza

A true institution. This hotel has been in the same family for more than 50 years, and it is an excellent place to try Corsican specialities while rubbing shoulders with thirsty locals. solemonti.com



North

Hotel l'Acquale, Calvi

One of the hotels to have signed up to the Rispetto project, Hotel l'Acquale's wow factor is its vast rooftop, which looks out over Calvi fort and bay. hotellacquale.com

Aethos Corsica, Oletta

These chic, minimalistic suites are pitched between the mountains and the sea. The restaurant is one of the few places in carnivorous Corsica that readily caters to vegans. aethos.com/destinations/corsica

West

Les Roches Rouges, Piana

There's plenty of old-world charm in this grand building, which dates from 1912. The owner of the past 30 years started out as a local chambermaid before buying and fixing up this gem. lesrochesrouges.com



4 TOP THINGS TO DO

Ride the GT20. This route is the cycling equivalent of the GR20 and runs for more than 600km along the spine of the island, taking in Cap Corse, the north coast and Piana. It takes about 12 days to complete, and several companies rent electric mountain bikes to make the going easier. gt20-corsica.com

Indulge at Corsica's only two-Michelin-starred restaurant in the luxurious Casadelmar hotel in Porto-Vecchio. It fuses Italian and French inspiration with Corsica's unique cuisine. The views aren't bad, either. casadelmar.fr

Discover a village balanced on a clifftop like a basketball on a finger. Nonza village is a true spectacle. The rocky, soot-coloured beach below is a steep 15-minute descent, but it's best viewed from above to see the stone art created by local artists on the sands below.

Learn about the long history of the islands. Humans have been on Corsica since Neolithic times, and Filitosa is one of its best-preserved prehistoric sites. There are 13 menhirs to take in, plus a rather welcome on-site organic microbrasserie. sitemap.filitosa.fr 