

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Long and winding roads

Corsica is a treasure trove of citadels, coves and beaches with lush, green interiors; but be prepared to never (quite) get into top gear, writes **Laura Millar**

The crunching sound of gears, as I hastily throw my car from third back down into first, echoes harshly across the undulating green landscape around us. My boyfriend and I are undertaking a road trip around the fourth-largest island in the Med, and what an undertaking it is; two thirds of Corsica is made up of a single mountain range, and craggy peaks – the highest rising to just over 2,700m – and dizzyingly steep drops are a common feature. Not to mention the rather narrow roads, which climb, windingly, tortuously and relentlessly, through the maquis – the dense, scented shrubbery which carpets Corsica's topography.

Occasionally, a hairpin bend will rear its ugly, precipitous head, resulting in the kind of aforementioned, swift gear change we never quite get used to.

No-one, however, can say we weren't warned; every former

visitor had the same reaction when I mentioned I was going: 'Ooh, watch out for the roads!'. Well, we are, and they're...challenging. An automatic car will be your best friend, but we're making do with a good old-fashioned manual, and every bend and straight is severely testing my driving competence – that's without even getting started on the always-impatient-to-overtake locals. But, oh my lord, the travails are worth it; this is one of the most beautiful places I've ever been.

Squabbled over for centuries by Italy and France (it sits just north of Sardinia, south of Genoa – who ruled it for several hundred years – and roughly southwest of the Cote d'Azur), it's now firmly French but with its fair share of attributes and influences from both countries,

Tributes to Napoleon Bonaparte abound all over the island



Main, the port city of Ajaccio; The citadel at Bonifacio, above

as well as a few from others. The countryside changes from sprawling and Tuscan, peppered with tall cypress trees, to rolling and English, with fields full of Constable-style hay bales. The cuisine is a mix of Italian – with an emphasis on pasta – and French, embracing ripe cheeses and hearty charcuterie. And, of course, it feels Swiss, with its sheer mountain passes, pretty hilltop towns, ambling brown cows and shaggy-fleeced goats.

After flying into Bastia, one of the island's main towns, we're making our way to its capital, Ajaccio. The most direct route is through the interior, including the Regional

National Park of Corsica, which covers nearly 40 per cent of the land.

There is much to admire along the way, from the tranquillity, as you pass through a sleepy village where the only signs of life might be a dog, dozing in the shade of a church, or a handful of old men enjoying a pre-lunch beer; to the vivid greenery – Corsica has more than 22,500 species of plants, trees and flowers, from olive and eucalyptus trees, to honeysuckle and myrtle, and herbs such as rosemary, mint, thyme and lavender, which all contribute to its nickname, "the scented isle".

Handfuls of tiny villages, clinging on the sides of the mountains, are scattered along the way. As we pass, we take in the saffron-yellow belltower of Vivario, and the pastel-pink buildings of Venaco.

We stop for lunch in Corte, a university town with a citadel perched on a clifftop which leads down to a lively square, the Place D'Armes, and a selection of cafés and restaurants. It's in one of those that I have my first encounter with two of Corsica's most famous delicacies: brocciu, the tangy, local ewe's cheese, and figatellu, a rustic, flavourful

sausage made from pork liver, ham and pig's blood.

Served in a buckwheat crepe, it's so delicious I nearly don't have room for an ice cream made with local honey and chestnut afterwards. Chestnuts grow plentifully here, used to make flour for cakes, bread and biscuits, and even in the local beer, Pietra – which my non-driving boyfriend assures me is pretty good.

When we finally reach Ajaccio, it's a welcome surprise, with a small, picturesque old town backing onto the harbour. And it's here that one of history's most controversial figures – Napoleon Bonaparte – was born, in August, 1769. Tributes to the military strategist abound all over the island, in the form of streets, bars and hotels bearing his name, but his story starts in La Maison Bonaparte, a handsome townhouse just off Ajaccio's main square, Place Foch.

Today, you can see original rooms and furniture used by the Bonaparte family, historical documents, maps, correspondence and more. After we visit, we dive back into the crowded Place Foch, which hosts a food market every day, inhaling the smell of pungent cheeses and meats, and debating whether to buy one litre or more of local olive oil.

Next on our itinerary is another port town, Bonifacio, which sits right at the very southern tip of the island. It attracts crowds in high season, and rightly so; our first glimpse, on approaching, is of a hulking, thick stone fortress looming over the harbour, looking very much like something out of Game of Thrones.

Dating from the 9th century, this citadel houses the "haute ville", or upper town, a maze of narrow, winding, slippery stone streets. Before we explore it, we take an hour-long boat trip which sails around the promontory on which it sits, offering incredible views not just of the citadel, but of the intricate granite and limestone cliffs which have had myriad grottoes and inlets carved into them over the centuries (some of which hid pirates).

Half an hour's drive away is another little seafront town, Porto Vecchio; its citadel's not as dramatic, but the network of lanes and pathways around its old centre is pleasant to stroll around, and its main square is full of cafes just begging for one

to take a table and get down to some serious people-watching.

The Corsican character, it has to be said, is quite feisty; it has had to be, considering the people have been governed by many different rulers in the past. Corsica may be part of France today, but for centuries it was ruled by Genoa, and today it wants nothing more than its independence. Road signs are written both in French, and in the local language, and it's not uncommon to see the French version painted over.

However, to visitors, they are friendliness itself, like the restaurant owner in our next stop, Calvi, who brings out a raised map of the island after we order, to better show us what our onward route looks like.

Calvi is a smart, slick resort town, reminiscent of a miniature St Tropez, with the boutiques, and the prices, to match. Substantially-sized yachts bob up and down in the port across from Quai Landry, lined with bars and restaurants. Our new acquaintance advises us that the coastal road to our last destination, Bastia, is going to be winding – even by locals' standards – but because much of it hugs the coast, it will (obviously) be beautiful.

Bastia doesn't disappoint in terms of looks, either; home to yet another citadel, which contains a well-preserved, medieval old town, it also has a vast main square, the Place St Nicolas, where the ubiquitous Napoleon statue is this time rendered in the dress of a Roman senator, and a charming, horseshoe-shaped harbour, above which the pale beige facade of the 17th Church of Saint John the Baptist looms. We park up, and leave our long-suffering car behind, in search of more local delicacies. There's still so much more to explore here, and we'll definitely have to come back – next time, though, in an automatic. ■

Air Corsica (aircorsica.com) flies direct from London Stansted (fly here from Edinburgh or Glasgow with easyjet.com) to Ajaccio, Bastia, Calvi or Figari from £49 one-way. Air Corsica's 'Drive + ' package, where you can arrange preferential car hire with Hertz, is also bookable through their website.

Double rooms at the 4 star Best Western Plus Ajaccio (bestwestern.co.uk) start from £114 per night.



The citadelle at the coastal town of Calvi on Corsica

SHORT HAUL



Best case of cabin fever

Gaby Soutar discovers the log cabins at Eagle Brae are the perfect destination to decompress

Picture your fantasy log cabin, now put it on a bicep. On our visit to Eagle Brae, near Struy in Invernesshire, another guest has a fresh tattoo of a wilderness lodge underneath a swirling aurora-borealis-esque sky. Apparently, his tattoo artist sourced the image on Pinterest, thinking it was an imaginary Photoshopped creation.

Post-tattoo, one of his friends spotted an advert for Eagle Brae and recognised Parus, one of the cabins at this five-year-old luxury self-catering holiday destination.

After hearing the story, Pawana and Mike Spencer-Nairn, owners of this place, invited him to stay for free.

Very kind, though it's a convoluted way for someone to find their ideal holiday destination.

Unfortunately, on our visit to Eagle Brae, we don't get a good look at the body art. He's a bit far from the vantage point of our cabin, Strix, but that's okay, since we're in the market for a do-nothing, speak-to-no-one sort of decompression weekend.

And this is the ideal spot, on a hillside of birch trees, above Strathglass and the River Glass.

Our one-bedroom, two living room residence is one of seven variously-sized cabins on site, all named after the Latin genera for local bird

species (ours is a type of owl). They're currently offering a discount on stays, as three more – Certhia (treecreeper), Ardea (heron) and Cinclus (dipper), each of which will sleep four and feature their own sauna, are being built.

They'll be ready in November. Until then, there's 20 per cent off a stay. From our perspective, it's fascinating to watch these buildings going up. Made from sturdy Western red cedar logs, they're designed and handmade by Pioneer Log Homes of British Columbia. They're built over in Canada, disassembled, shipped over here, then pieced together again, like Jenga.

This makes for these archetypal pioneer cabin style buildings, which also remind me of Swiss cuckoo clocks, though with grassy wildflower turf roofs. Inside, there's a focus on handcrafts, without mass-produced decor. These include fantastical and quirky carved wood panels that line the staircase, made by Pawana's brother-in-law in the Himalayas.

Along with Celtic knots, animals are a theme, from fierce-looking hares to leaping salmon.

There are deer hoof prints carved into our internal staircase, a huge eagle's head on the front of our cabin, like the figurehead on a ship's prow,

and a pair of taxidermy "jackalopes" on the inside wall (think jack rabbit with antlers).

There are real animals here too. I am besotted with the 10 stone teddy bear that is this place's resident Bernese Mountain Dog, Kyla. She sits on my foot to ensure undivided attention. Apparently, there's a new puppy en route, so future guests will have to perform double tummy rubs.

Beside the reception cabin, where their own tuk-tuk is parked, you'll find a central pond featuring koi carp and ducks, and a pen that houses three goats, Barnaby, Billy and Bhakra. In the evening, we have an encounter with the local deer, who creep around the cabins at dusk.

Designed and handmade by Pioneer Log Homes of British Columbia

There are five stags hanging out together, and about the same number of hinds, all of whom seem unphased by our gawking.

We also make some feathered friends, as the well stocked feeders by Strix's decking are visited by all sorts of birds, including bright yellow headed siskins. My other half spots a woodpecker, but I only hear it.

In the visitors' book, somebody has logged their sightings of a pine marten on the deck at 9:30pm every

The cabins are reminiscent of Swiss cuckoo clocks with their interiors focused on handcrafts. Local deer frequently creep around at dusk

night, so we fire up the wood-burning stove and have a stake out. No luck.

If you must go out (and you don't have to, as Eagle Brae has an intranet, so you can order supplies, including dishes, like venison curry, that Mike and Pawana cook themselves), you can walk up the (very steep) hill to their hydro-dam, which supplies much of the electricity to this eco-friendly resort.

Or, head along to Beaulieu, where there are some good gift shops, plus cafe and deli Corner on the Square. On the road into this town, we found an antique shop selling mid-century furniture, and, another couple of doors along, an intriguing, if slightly creepy, place offering driftwood sculptures.

Although Strix's visitor book is filled with previous guests' descriptions of nearby walks and adventures, we didn't venture much further.

I want to come back as soon as possible, even if that means I have to be tattooed. Prepare the ink. ■

The starting price for Strix is £629.50 for two nights, or a week for £1,259, before the 20 per cent discount applied until the end of November; then back to full price thereafter. For more information, call 01463 761301 or see www.eaglebrae.co.uk

48 HOURS IN

Eigg

Friday, midday

Enjoy Barra-landed haddock aboard CalMac as you steam towards Eigg, an impressively self-sufficient, sustainable and independently-minded community-owned island.

1:30pm

Check into the Eigg Camping Pods (www.eiggcampingpods.com, from £40), basic community-owned abodes with views across the dolphin-rich waters to the mainland.

2:30pm

Ease around the bay looking out for birdlife and take your pick of the white sand beaches.

5:30pm

Enjoy an aperitif at the Galmisdale Bay (www.galmisdale-bay.com) café restaurant that is part of a community hub featuring a shop and craft boutique. An ale from the island brewery (www.laigbaybrewing.com) does the trick.

7pm

Dinner at Galmisdale with Arisaig mussels sourced from across the water and kept fresh by hanging them off the pier in a net. Steamed with a view over the Atlantic.

Saturday, 10am

The Eigg day starts slowly so ease in with breakfast at your pod. If you limit the crackle and pop in your cereal you may share it with an otter.

11:30am

Your CalMac Adventures ticket includes bike hire from Eigg Adventures (www.eiggadventures.co.uk) so strike off to the other side of Eigg where views of neighbouring Rum rear up as you approach the sweeping sands of Laig Bay.

BARGAIN BREAKS

Cruise the Med

Take advantage of Iglu Cruise's seven night fly and cruise Cosmopolitan Classics trip on board Marella Cruises' Marella Explorer from just £1,209pp (all inclusive) with flights from Aberdeen to Palma on 25 August. It includes stop offs in Palermo, Naples, Florence and Pisa, Nice and Palamos.

Call 0203 733 5557 or see www.igluccruise.com

Especially for you

Do the locomotion to see Kylie's new Golden Tour, as Superbreak is offering VIP tickets to see her



12:30pm

Work north towards the famous Singing Sands. Look out for fossils as this is one of the most important paleontological sites in Scotland. Picnic with the dinosaurs.

2pm

The grassy cliffs eventually lead to the Singing Sands. They don't so much sing as squeak, but the views don't disappoint.

4:30pm

Enjoy tea and cake in the Rest and Be Thankful in the wee village of Cleadale. The homebaking couldn't be more homely as you literally sit in a lovely lady's kitchen if it's dreich.

7pm

Call ahead to snare a local produce feast at Lageorna (lageorna.com) if they're not too booked with residents.

Sunday, 9am

Head out for a walking adventure with Eigg Explorers (tel: 01687 315088). Craig Lovatt has extensive knowledge of the eclectic range of Eigg walks and he can cater for budding and experienced paleontologists too. ■

Robin McKelvie

CalMac Adventures ticket, £23 per adult from Mallaig (www.calmac.co.uk). Tourist information, www.visitscotland.com

Five star value

Netflights.com is offering three nights in Abu Dhabi staying at the five star Saadiyat Rotana Resort and Villas on a half board basis. Prices start from £639pp including a free upgrade to half board and flights from Glasgow with Etihad Airways on selected dates in May 2019. Book by 12 August. ■

www.netflights.com