

TRAVEL

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VIEWS OF THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND

World travel Corsica may only be 160 km off the Cote d'Azur, but it is a thousand miles from the hustle and bustle of the French Riviera. Rob Perkins finds out more.

It's 11.30am and I'm stuck in a traffic jam. An irate Frenchman is gesticulating to another motorist, while a coach driver is attempting to negotiate his way through the mayhem.

But this is no big city experience, this is the D81 between Porto and Piana on Corsica's west coast, which is more suited to the age of the horse and cart than modern transport.

Such is the popularity of this part of the island and the natural wonders found here that tourists are quite happy to put up with the odd delay to take in the sights on offer.

But be warned, you will find yourself having to manoeuvre your way through cars, coaches, motorcyclists and pedestrians who have stopped to get photos of Les Calanches and the Scandola nature reserve as well as the Golfe de Porto.

It may be traffic chaos, but there is no denying that, as far as vistas go, it's very hard to beat.

The drive from Calvi to Piana is not one for the faint-hearted, but the reward in terms of views

is nothing short of spectacular.

From the Col de Croix you get your first breathtaking sight of the Golfe de Porto, dominated by the Scandola on the right and Les Calanches to the left.

But to get the best views of the Scandola national park – a UNESCO site – you have to take to the water. And there are several groups touting for business in Porto harbour.

Be warned: you will get wet, especially if there is any sort of swell, but it's only through being close up that you get an impression of the sheer size of the rocks and their distinctive pink hue. And if you are lucky you may even catch a glimpse of some of the breeding ospreys that have made their home on some of the granite stacks rising out of the sea.

The four-star Capo Rosso Hotel surely has one of the most enviable positions in the whole of the Golfe de Porto.

It makes the most of its lofty position, with a magnificent view from every room, while its restaurant is a magnet for anyone wanting to watch the sun set into the Mediterranean.



Les Calanches

Make no mistake that Corsica, known locally as Ile de Beaute, – Isle of Beauty – lives up to its name.

The first impression as you come into land is that you've been in a timewarp and the flight, which lasts less than two hours, has transported you off to a Caribbean paradise.

The sea changes colour from a deep blue to aquamarine as the waves gently lap the white sand beaches.

This is a stunningly beautiful island, with contoured coastline, pleated mountains and timeless hilltop villages. Corsica has something for everyone.

My journey began in Ile Rousse, a short drive from Calvi airport. Here you can sit on the pristine sandy beaches for the whole of your holiday, but if you want to see the real Corsica you have to head inland to where the real Corsicans live and have done for centuries.

Fearful of raids from pirates of many descriptions over the

years, the Corsicans took to hilltop villages for safety.

Inland from Ile Rousse is a trail of village communities that hasn't changed for centuries – from San Antonio, the oldest inhabited village on the island, to Pigna, where a music box shop will have you nodding in time to the music emanating from everything from an owl to a frog. But be advised that many of the villages have car parks that charge €2 so take plenty of change with you or face an embarrassing U-turn at the barrier.

For another unforgettable experience, you can take possibly one of the most picturesque train rides anywhere in the Mediterranean.

The trip from Ile Rousse to Calvi takes less than 40 minutes but make sure you get to the station early as this is one of the most popular tickets in town.

Pay the €6 for a ride on a traghjellu (the trembler), and grab a sea-side seat for the

spectacular journey, stopping at some of Corsica's most picturesque beaches.

The end of the line is Calvi – the place where the young Horatio Nelson lost an eye after a wayward shot by a French musketeer hit a rock and a splinter ricocheted into his eye during the siege of the town by the British navy in 1794.

The Citadel towers above the port of Calvi and is well worth the climb for the magnificent views over the bay. And when you are done here, the best way to finish off is to take a cool beer or wine and sit alongside the water people watching.

And if people watching is your thing, there is no better place for it than Sainte Florent – the Corsicans think of it as their equivalent of St Tropez. The yachts in the harbour certainly rank alongside those seen on the Cote d'Azur.

And with no traffic jams to contend with, it is the perfect way to round off your holiday.

Factfile

Corsican Places begin a weekly direct flight from Bristol to Bastia with BMI Regional from June 23. Choose between self-catering villas or hotels on a bed and breakfast or half-board basis. Prices start from £399 based on seven nights self-catering at Villa Sirio, a three-bedroom, seaside villa (sleeps up to six), near St Florent with car hire and return flights from Bristol.

Visit the website www.corsica.co.uk for more information.



Overseas breaks The Italian Lakes



Collette Worldwide Holidays has reduced the cost of a number of Royal Horticultural Society Garden Holidays for departures in June.

For example, the Gardens and Villas of the Italian Lakes tour departing on June 23 has been reduced from £2,449 to £2,189 per person. Highlights on this tour include Giusti Giardino in Veneto, with cypress trees dating back to the 15th century, or Lugano in Switzerland, where the Villa Heleneum Gardens boast an amazing array of plants.

Prices are based on two sharing and include international flights, accommodation, most meals, the services of a Collette tour leader throughout and free door-to-door transfers within 100 miles of UK departure airport.

Visit www.rhsgardenholidays.com or call 0800 804 8710 for reservations and further information.

UK breaks Bluestone



September may seem a long way away, but after a summer of excess you might want to get yourself in shape for the autumn and winter.

Which is where Bluestone, the leisure resort in West Wales, comes in. It is running a five-day special in September aimed at improving health, wellbeing and encouraging weight loss.

Created by the best selling author and leading health expert Jason Vale, guests to Bluestone will experience an expertly crafted five-day juice detox, run by Jason's team from September 16-20.

This five-day juice detox midweek break is £469 per person, based on two people sharing a luxury lodge for four nights.

For more details and to book, call 01834 862 400.