

holidays



The French secret worth spilling



■ Kath Freer goes for an island fling off the coast of France



THE woman behind the counter beamed slyly, announced we'd been upgraded, and slid the keys to a 4x4 across the counter.

Our smugness, however, evaporated as quickly as the car's exhaust fumes when we hit the road – bigger is not necessarily better when it comes to driving in Corsica. With roads barely wide enough for one car, never mind two, the island's narrow, winding routes test your nerves (and the brakes).

The slow development of its road infrastructure is perhaps one of the reasons why this French island, nestled between southern France and Italy's west coast, has remained relatively unspoiled for so long.

Known as L'île de Beauté (the island of beauty), Corsica blends contoured coastline, timeless hilltop villages and pleated mountains, with tantalising food and surprisingly good wine. It's almost as though the island has been created to showcase all that's great about France.

I lost count of the times we spotted locals armed with fresh baguettes on the streets of some quaint village, as if the French tourist board had planted actors to meet the expectations of keen Francophiles.

Our road trip began with four days in the northern region of La Balagne. This 'Garden of Corsica' features wildly-beautiful hinterland, with maquis-covered hills dropping down into lush valleys.

Clinging to those hills are clusters of cream houses; ancient villages that look close, but turn out to be remote when approached by car along those switchback roads.

We based ourselves in Feliceto, where the Renucci family has transformed a 19th-century palatial home into the 16-room Monte e Mare hotel. From the bedroom windows, poolside loungers and terrace restaurant, you can admire the surrounding hills.

Corsica is one of the most mountainous islands in the Med and its rugged terrain draws keen walkers, bikers and climbers. Home to the iconic GR20, a challenging

200km hike from north to south, the island is criss-crossed with walking trails.

We contented ourselves with a short but steep amble near the hotel, up cobbled steps, under low stone archways and past ivy-clad houses. It was a wonderful way to watch the village wake up.

Returning to the hotel for breakfast, we dined on warm croissants, homemade yoghurt, fresh figs from the garden and grapes straight off the vines. Those vines supply the raw materials for Bernard Renucci, one of a growing number of talented vignerons producing great wine on the island. Corsican wine has enjoyed a renaissance over recent years, and buying direct from the 'caves' of its makers proves fantastically good value.

Corsica's wine is the perfect accompaniment to its cuisine, which, like the island itself, is a blend of French and Italian. Not for the faint-hearted, much of it is 'of the land' – hearty, rustic fare made from locally-grown, raised or caught produce. From robust meat dishes from the interior to the freshest seafood by the coast, it's a deliciously waist-expanding experience.

Charcuterie, in particular, has been elevated to an art form. We ordered platters of flavoured porcine nustrale (meat from pigs fed on acorns and chestnuts), prisuttu (dry ham) and salamu (salami-style sausage). Served with chunky bread, gherkins and a large glass of wine, it became our staple lunch.

For a taste of true Corsican cooking, there's no better place than a ferme auberge. At these farm inns, you surrender the freedom of choice and tuck into whatever's fresh. On an exploration of the winding roads around Feliceto, we stumbled upon the enticingly remote L'Aghiale, which was bustling with locals. Much of its four-course menu proved a showcase for another of Corsica's specialties: cheese.

A goat's cheese tart came with a pear reduction so good I dreamt about it for days. My creamy wild boar lasagne was followed by a cheese platter so potent its smell preceded

its arrival. The finale was a Fiadone tart made with Corsican Brocciu cheese and flavoured with lemon.

Declaring a temporary cheese fast, we headed east through the Desert des Agriates, past landscapes plucked straight from old Stella Artois adverts. We passed ramshackled villages oozing charm and wild areas of scrubland, scented with herbs and berries, caci and fresh figs.

Those aromas followed us south, where we based ourselves in Porto Vecchio. Founded in 1539 by the Genoese, it has grown to become Corsica's third largest town, and after the comparative remoteness of the north, suddenly felt very lively.

Hotel Le Goeland is positioned right on the waterfront and a short stroll from the marina. After admiring the yachts over pre-dinner sundowners, we took the steep climb into the old walled citadel, seductive with its labyrinth of narrow cobbled streets, stylish boutiques and restaurant tables spilling out on to the piazzas.

Porto Vecchio is an excellent base from which to explore the island's stunning southeast coast, where there's an abundance of fabulous beaches within an hour's drive.

The most famous is Palombaggia, a beautifully curved strip of white sand flanked by pine trees. Further south, we surrendered ourselves to the charms of the crescent-shaped Rondinara, with water so clear you can see the fish investigating your toes.

The beaches get crowded in Corsica's peak season of July and August, but when we visited in early September there was plenty of space to throw our towels.

Also worth a visit is Bonifacio, an enchanting citadel built on a narrow peninsula of white limestone at the island's southern tip. The old

town sits majestically atop cliffs overlooking a natural harbour.

We took the toy train ride up to the Haute-Ville, where you can walk along the old ramparts and through the quietly atmospheric cemetery. From the top, the panoramas are of crumbling white cliffs, eroding to create a series of enclosed bays. On a clear day you can see right across the turquoise waters to Sardinia.

Strolling back down we passed numerous abandoned buildings, all sharing these magnificent views. In many Mediterranean towns they would have been renovated into modern hotels or bars by now, but there doesn't seem too much of a rush to follow suit here.

Corsica is laid back, secure in its sense of divided self, and confident of its own beguiling charm. Perhaps the French are keen to keep it quiet too, so they can have the place all to themselves. My advice: don't let them.

THE DETAILS

UK Corsica specialist Corsican Places (0845 330 2113 / www.corsica.co.uk) offers a two-centre holiday with four nights at the 3* Grand Hotel Mare e Monti and three nights at the 4* Hotel Le Goeland, from £1,144 per person (bed & breakfast) inclusive of return flights from London Stansted and a week's car hire. Hilton London Stansted offers a Park and Fly scheme, including 4,8 or 15 days' parking with overnight accommodation the night before the flight, from £84 per night (www.hilton.com). Corsican Places also offers flights from Bristol, Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester.

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