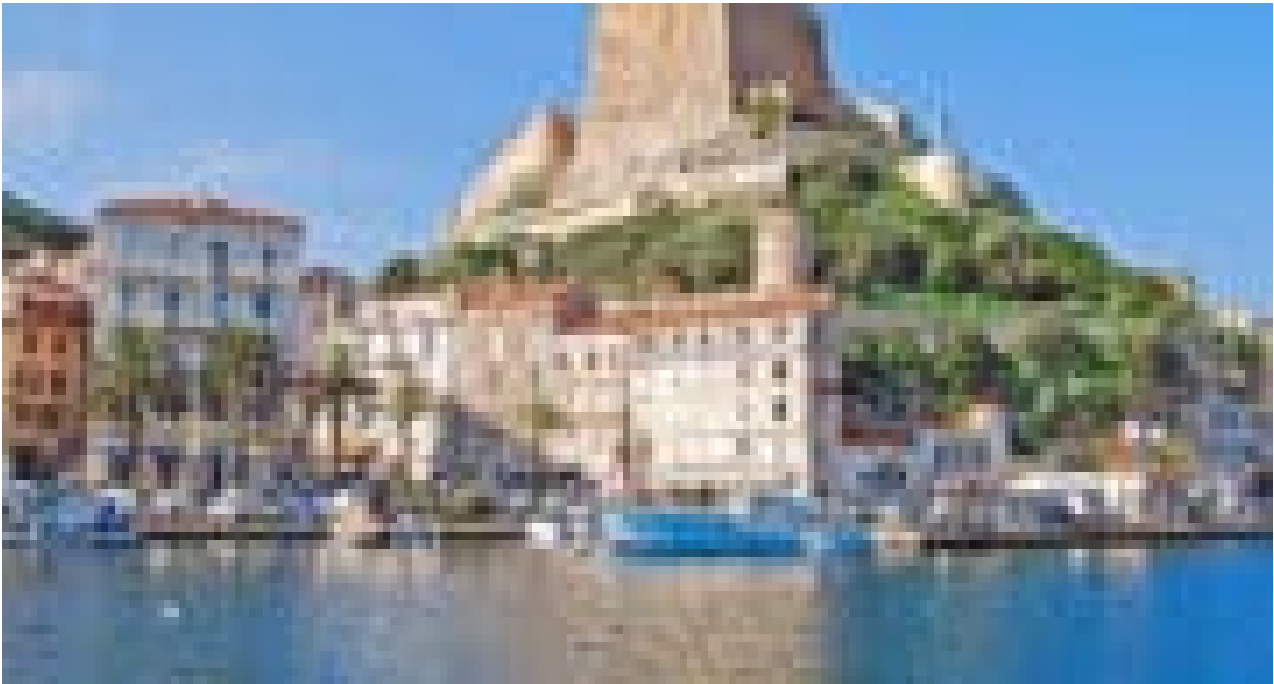


## Corsica: L'Île de Beauté (the Island of Beauty)

Romain Nugou



Corsica owes its existence to the long collision of the African and Eurasian plates, from around 60 million years ago. It lies southeast of France, only separated from the Italian Peninsula by the Ligurian Sea in the north and the Tyrrhenian Sea in the east. Famous as the birthplace of Napoléon Bonaparte, the island offers spectacular landscapes with its dramatic mountain ranges, picturesque coastal villages, and pristine beaches. It is also home to numerous prehistoric remains. Today, Corsica is a French administrative region, albeit with manifest cultural differences from the mainland, but it has a long Mediterranean history.

### The prehistoric vestiges of Corsica

Corsica's rich and important prehistoric heritage is scattered across its granitic environment. The island has been occupied since the Mesolithic era and a permanent human presence on the island, with a population of hunter-gatherers, is documented in the Neolithic period, from the 6th millennium BCE. Agriculture and farming seem to have become established around the 3rd millennium BCE, and the first ceramics also date from this period. The originality on the island compared to the rest of the Mediterranean world is its megalithic period, particularly with the introduction of the menhir.





Most of the archaeological remains can be found in the southern part of the island. The vast citadel of Cucuruzzu is typical from the Bronze Age megalithic Torrean culture found on the island (from the Corsican word torra, meaning tower). This hillfort is built of huge stones that must have required many people, and extraordinary ingenuity, to transport and set them in place; the village of Alò Bisujè is the most important fortified village of the Bronze Age in [Corsica](#). Turra, habitats, rock shelters, and menhirs make up the richness of this place; the megalithic site of Cauria with some of the most significant groups of aligned menhirs in [Europe](#) is the perfect example of development of ancient megaliths: dolmen and menhirs erected over three periods between 3500 and 1000 BCE.

Filitosa, inhabited from approximately 9000 to 3000 BCE, is often regarded as Corsica's most significant prehistoric site. Its archaeological remains span the Mesolithic, Neolithic, and Bronze Ages. However, the site is most renowned for its 16 sculpted granite menhirs (c. 1200 BCE), depicting anthropomorphic figures. The intricate details—swords, daggers, helmets, and breastplates—carved onto these "men of stone" continue to inspire diverse interpretations. The site also comprises three prehistoric towers and an area of stone houses.

#### [Trade in the ancient Mediterranean: The Roman colonial settlement of Mariana](#)

The Mediterranean basin has always been a place of sustained trade activities and Corsica was fully

integrated into this network following Roman colonisation. The ancient port colony of Mariana was founded around 100 BC by veterans of the Roman general Caius Marius (c. 157-86 BCE) and was one of the two colonies in Corsica. Located in one of the largest plains on the island, Mariana prospered thanks to agriculture and trade with the rest of the Romanised world. Its role as a port is fully attested, despite the absence of tangible traces to establish its exact location.

The site covers a total area of nearly 18 hectares, but only the district located on the southern edge of the agglomeration can be visited today. It thrived until the 7th century BCE, when it was destroyed by the Vandals and the Lombards. The buried remains of this ancient city are located around the Romanesque church of La Canonica. Saint Devota, patron saint of Corsica, is said to have been martyred here in 303 AD, and Mariana is one of the first Corsican dioceses. Christianity quickly established itself in Corsica in the 5th century under the impetus of the Catholic bishops of North Africa who were exiled by the Vandals. The first papal visit to the island is happening next month (December 2024).







### Ajaccio, birthplace of Napoléon Bonaparte

In 1755, Pascal Paoli declared Corte the capital of the short-lived Corsican republic, but the town was eventually ravaged by the French just 14 years later, leading to the displacement of many, including Napoléon's mother, pregnant with the future emperor at the time. The Bonaparte family left for Ajaccio

where Napoléon was born on 15 August 1769. They left their mark on the city. Napoléon spent his childhood and part of his youth here. He revisited for one last time in 1799 upon his return from Egypt.







Ajaccio was originally a Genoese city with narrow streets, but it was transformed by Napoléon I and III into the modern city we see today with its prestigious and bourgeois buildings. The family house, the Maison Bonaparte, owned by the Bonapartes from 1682, houses a museum of the family; the baroque, 16th-century Notre-Dame Cathedral, where Napoléon was baptised, contains paintings by Delacroix and Tintoretto; the Palais Fesch, established by Napoléon's uncle, Cardinal Joseph Fesch (1763-1839), houses France's largest collection of Italian paintings outside the Louvre, with works by Botticelli, Veronese and Titian.

The reactions of the insular society relative to the dazzling trajectory of Napoléon varied from boundless admiration, indifference to systematic opposition. On the island, the emperor multiplied the urban projects favouring Ajaccio (Napoléon moved the capital of Corsica from Bastia to Ajaccio in 1811), built roads and developed public works. On the other hand, he did not hesitate to repress the local revolts. Still today, Corsicans, like French people, have an ambiguous relationship with Napoléon, certainly the most famous character of the island but also the most controversial.

### Breathtaking landscapes

Sparsely populated and naturally rich, the island of Corsica amazes with its geographical diversity and cultural complexity. While sharing common features with Sardinia, such as stunning coastlines, hidden coves, pristine white-sand beaches, dramatic cliffs plunging into the turquoise sea and scattered

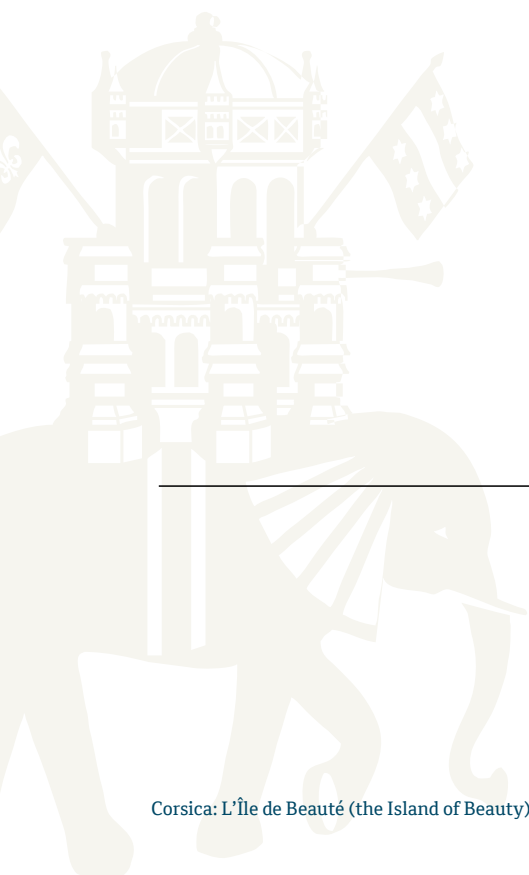
archipelagos, [Corsica](#) is far more mountainous than its neighbour.

The French call it 'L'Île de Beauté' (the Island of Beauty) and its landscape offers striking contrasts. Two-thirds of the island is a rugged expanse of granite peaks and valleys, formed 250 million years ago, traversed by narrow winding roads, such as the extraordinary rock formations of Les Calanches de Piana. Water is also an important element of the island's landscape, exemplified by the Scandola Nature Reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage site and bio-marine reserve famed for its utterly unique flora and fauna that cannot be found elsewhere in the Mediterranean.

This is only a sample of what Corsica can offer. From sublime coastal and mountain landscapes, rich and sometimes mysterious history, to a proud and vibrant local culture, folklore, and cuisine, there is everything you are looking for!









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