

CORSICA



Insider's Guide:
CORSICA

A Marvel in the Med

Text by *Ondine Cohane*

Photographs by *Michel Figuet*

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CONDÉ NAST TRAVELER



THE GOLD COAST Corsica's southern coast, perforated with isolated coves, is a summer magnet for A-list yachts, while beaches like this one, at Palombaggia, are family friendly.

DON'T MENTION FRANCE. Corsica's citizens don't think much of being part of its domain, and after you visit this "mountain in the sea," you may well understand why. From its culture to its cuisine to its wild white sand beaches and formidable interior, Corsica feels a world apart. Endowed with quiet fishing villages, a clear Caribbean-like sea, Roman ruins, and distinctive hotels, the island remains free of the overdeveloped coastlines that mar other parts of the Med. Throughout history, different interlopers have tried to lay claim to Corsica's considerable assets and strategically important Mediterranean position: Ionian Greeks, Etruscans, Carthaginians, Romans, and, recently, the Italians and the French have all tried to tame it, to no avail. (The island's most famous son, Napoleon, epitomizes defiance in a small package.) The once violent movement for independence from France has calmed down, although you will see signs with the French words spray painted over, and the Corsican language—a Latin derivative similar to Italian—is invoked for privacy when nosy outsiders are around. Best of all is the diversity that's contained within a 620-mile coast. Visit all four regions or hunker down in one secluded hideaway—regardless, you'll see why this was the seductive spot where Odysseus almost looked up forever.

Active Adventure/Natural Beauty

The North

The main entry point is the fortified port of Bastia, once the showpiece of the Genovese empire. Head immediately into the wild and beautiful Cap Corse and its fishing villages. The Cap—a dramatic 20-mile-long peninsula, the crown jewel in the island's network of nature reserves—is dotted with the type of undeveloped white sand coves that are a rarity in Europe now. Lonely seventeenth-century watchtowers stand guard over the coastline. Serious climbers may head to the interior to attack the mountains, but the hikes around this part of the island, combining dramatic coastline, secluded beaches, and small fishing villages, are suited to all levels of walker, especially those seeking epicurean diversions to seafood restaurants and small hotels.

BEDS

The new model for low-key luxury on the island, **U Palazzu Serenu** sits above fashionable St-Florent, and is an easy drive from Cap Corse, with nine large rooms—five of which have panoramic views of the Désert des Agriates and the gulf. There's a lap pool, a small spa, and an impressive modern art collection from Anish Kapoor to Paul de Pignol that is part of the personal collection of the owner—who made his fortune selling roses in Paris (33-4-95-38-39-39; doubles from \$250).

Close to Bastia, the small, atmospheric coastal town of Erbalunga has an idyllic palm-shaded piazza. At **Castel Brando** there are rooms in both the main villa and a more modern annex, but the main building is far more charming (33-4-95-30-10-30; doubles from \$125).

TABLES

The Michelin-starred **Le Pirate**, also in Erbalunga, has a fine view over the sea and serves up lobster tortellini, hearty fish soup, and grilled John Dory straight off the boat. Ask for one of the three tables over-

looking the water—there are few more romantic spots on the island (The Port; 33-4-95-33-24-20; entrées from \$35). In the inland hills, **La Ferme de Campo di Monte**, outside Murato, draws foodie pilgrims from all over France—and throws them together in a raucous dining room presided over by the chef's family. The set menu always includes some kind of charcuterie from the farm (you can taste the acorns and grass in the sausages), vegetables from the orchard, and fresh cheeses, including an unbelievably pungent

cow-milk cheese served with grappa and fresh fig preserves from the garden (Campo di Monte; 33-4-95-37-64-39; prix fixe, \$65 per person, including wine).

BARS

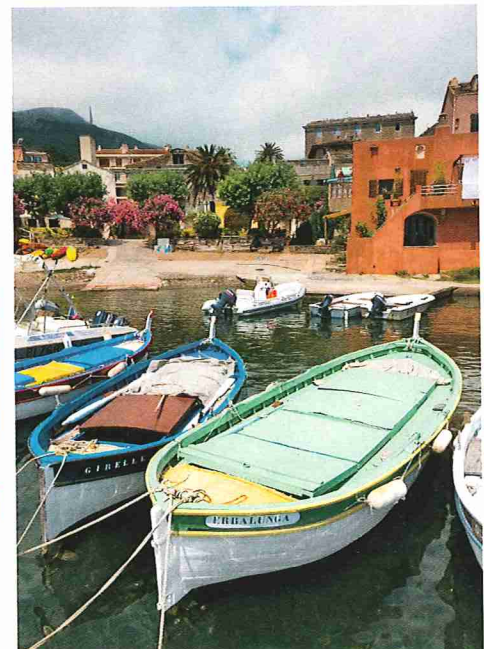
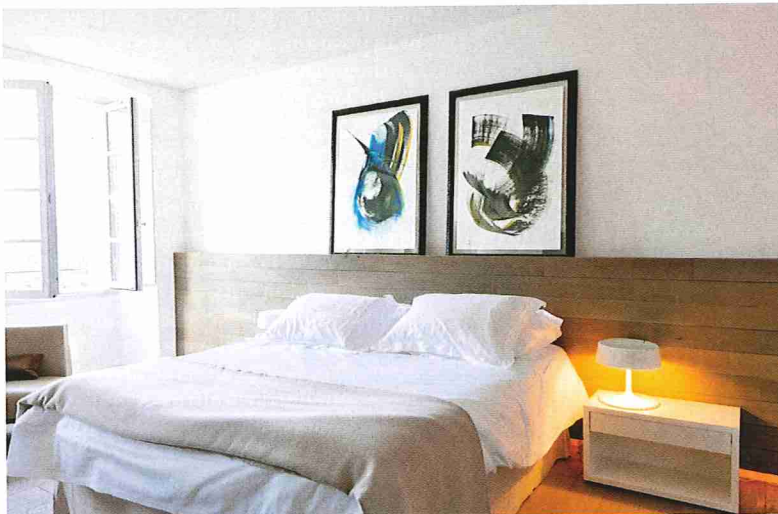
Liccioli hangs over the cliffs west of Saleccia and has a tiny terrace with spectacular views (off the N197), while **Le Petit Caporal**, on St-Florent's quayside, is good for a sunset aperitif (Port de Plaisance).

BEACHES

Don't miss Saleccia, outside St-Florent, a long white stretch with, bizarrely, cows wandering along the edge of the aqua water. It's quite hard to get to—you can either take a boat from St-Florent, hike four and a half miles, or rent a four-wheel-drive vehicle, but the visual payoff is memorable (think something plucked out of the American West, with sculptural rock formations and a brilliant sky).

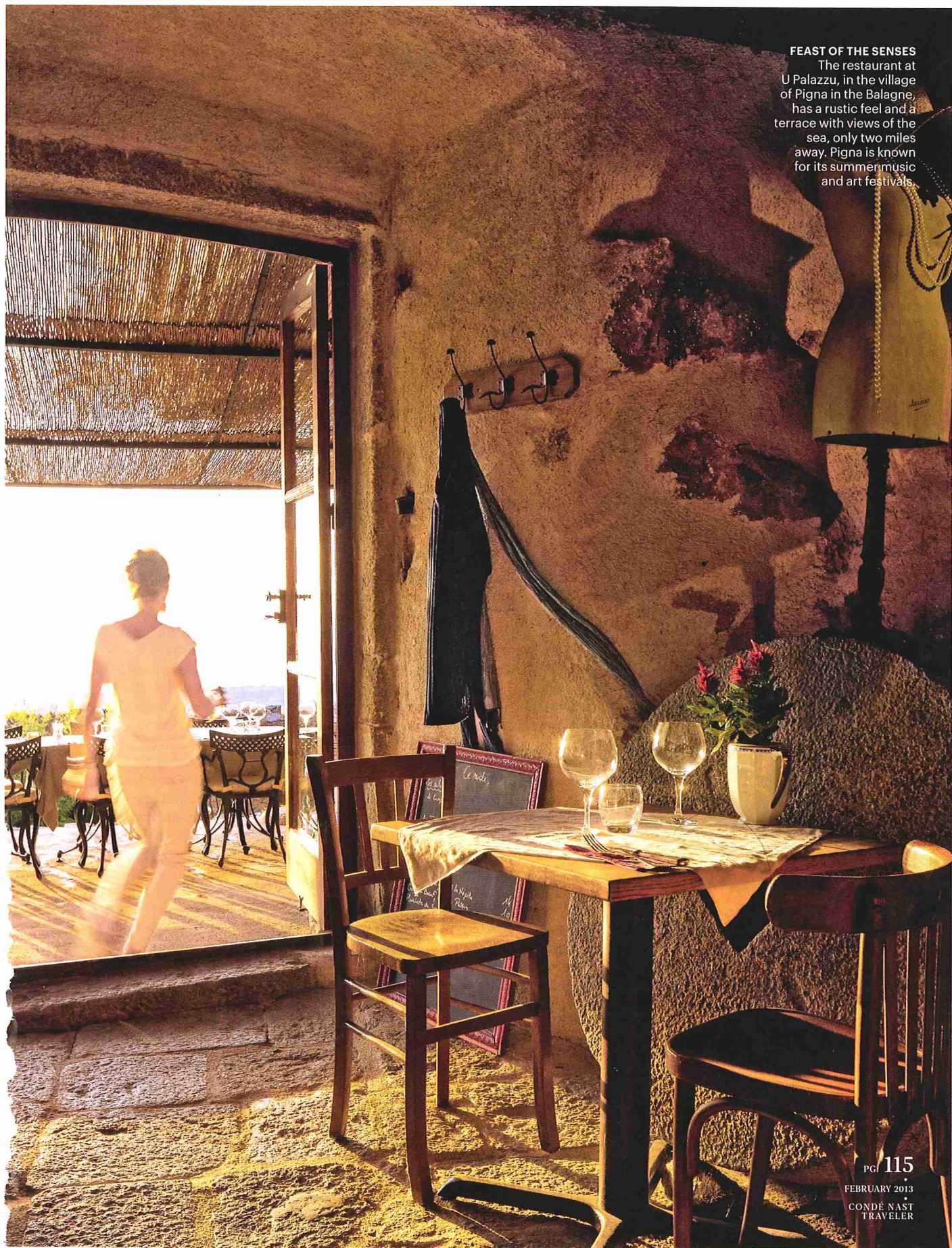
THE HIDEAWAY

Bedrooms at the small, stylish **U Palazzu Serenu** have sweeping views. Right: The port of Erbalunga.



FEAST OF THE SENSES

The restaurant at U Palazzu, in the village of Pigna in the Balagne, has a rustic feel and a terrace with views of the sea, only two miles away. Pigna is known for its summer music and art festivals.



Culture

The Haute Balagne

The small fortified villages like Pigna and Feliceto that dot the winding roads east of Calvi were the domain of some of France's most proficient craftsmen until well into the 1950s. Luckily, the Strada di l'Artigiani ("Road of the Artisans") has been revitalized in the last decade and is again producing the ceramics, music boxes, and wood carvings the island is famous for. Even if you're not a crafts fan, a wander in the stone towns that date from about A.D. 800 is a must. And world music lovers will enjoy the island's unique polyphonic music—a kind of haunting yodeling—with several summer festivals and more intimate concerts in smaller twelfth-century churches. Add restaurants and hotels, Romanesque abbeys, and some outstanding beaches, and it's easy to see why the Haute Balagne has new cachet with culture hounds and history buffs.

If You Go

When: July and August are crush time in Corsica; April, May, June, September, and October are best.

How: Fly from either Paris or Nice—or go by ferry from Nice or Livorno, Italy (corsica-ferries.co.uk or mobylines.com).

Wheels: Once there, rent a car from Hertz or Avis (some roads are not for the faint-hearted).

BEDS

In Pigna, the perfectly preserved village that is the centerpiece of the new cultural renaissance, **U Palazzu** has five bedrooms in a former eighteenth-

cent Corsican-weighted wine list (try the Clos Canarelli). The best rooms are on the second floor and have private terraces; those on the top floor have a *Les Misérables*-garret feel (33-4-95-47-32-78; doubles from \$180; entrées from \$40). Calvi, dominated by an imposing fortress above the port, becomes a major hub in high season. An oasis of luxury just a ten-minute walk from town, **La Villa** and its restaurant, **La Table de Bastien**, are pricey for Corsica but a relative bargain compared with European equivalents (33-4-95-65-10-10; doubles from \$155; entrées from \$25). **Unique Properties & Events** has a stock of fine villas to rent throughout the island,

including a restored monastery outside Calvi with a series of private gardens, a pool that sits at the foot of a mountain, private beach access, and a vintage Renault for guests' use (44-20-7788-7815).

TABLES

Ile de Beauté, in the port, is a place to sit with the paper and a coffee or lunch during the day or for a cocktail and people watching at night (quai Adolphe Landry). Stylish beachside **Octopussy** has mussels and local foie gras on the menu, and internationally ranked DJs when things heat up in the summer (Rte. de la Pinède; 33-4-95-

65-23-16; entrées from \$18).

BARS

Founded in the 1930s by a former Russian military officer who obviously knew how to have fun off duty, **Chez Tao** remains Calvi's go-to nightclub (rue St-Antoine, in the Citadel).

BEACH

Ostriconi is a great arc of white sand between Calvi and St-Florent on the N1197. Stop for picnic supplies (spicy sausages, baguettes, rosés from the Corse) at the nearby **Domaine d'Ostriconi** farm stand, where the owner speaks English.



INNER CALM

The Baroque Church of St-Nicolas in Feliceto. Right: The beach swings at Octopussy, in Calvi.

century palazzo, and one of Corsica's best restaurants in a former olive press. Highlights include grilled langoustines, pork with risotto and artichokes, and the excel-

Bonus: Music and Crafts

Entertainment in Calvi ranges from the **Festival of Polyphonic Song** in September (afiletta.com/recontres-chants-polyphoniques-calvi.php) to **Calvi on the Rocks**, the hot summer dance-music party with indie stars (calviontherocks.com; July 5-10). In Pigna look for traditional crafts workshops—like Jacky Quilichini's **Ceramica di Pigna**, specializing in cerulean ceramics (33-4-95-61-77-25), and **Scatt'à Musica**, for handcrafted music boxes (33-4-95-61-77-33).





THE HEARTLAND

In the village of Murato, the Ferme de Campo di Monte was, in another life, a fortified fifteenth-century farmhouse. Under chef Pauline Julliard, the restaurant is noted for its *storzapretti*—a local dumpling of baked cheese, Swiss chard, and eggs.

Cuisine

Central Corsica

Bonus: The Food Guy

Cantina di Matteu, in Venaco, just south of Corte, is the temple to all the great artisanal food from the interior—mountain sausages, wild honeys, local country wines, olive oil, and nectarine jams, just for a start. Genial Mathieu Lionelli patiently explains the provenance of this bounty, and you can easily visit many of the producers from his shop (N193). **La Vieille Cave**, in Corte, also has a good selection but not Mathieu's guidance (2 Ruelle de la Fontaine).

ON THE ROCKS

Far from the crowds, respite by a mountain stream in the Vallée de la Restonica. Right: Mussels as served at the Auberge de la Restonica.

Driving into the remote Niolo Valley on a road that snakes through ravines, practically your only company will be the packs of pigs and piglets that trot through the countryside, a hint of the charcuterie to come. This wild area produces the meat (including wild boar sausages) and cheese that Corsica is known for, along with wildflower-scented honeys, casks of robust local wine, and mountain mushrooms. The infrastructure is still unpolished and locals are more interested in independence from France (Corte is the birthplace of the movement) than in tourism, but a visit to the small family-owned restaurants and local producers makes the perfect counterpoint to a seaside experience. Hotel and restaurant prices here are a fraction of those elsewhere on the island, making this perfect for gourmets on a budget. And while intrepid hikers tackle the multi-day G20 (a kind of Tour de France route for muscular walkers), mere mortals can take walks around areas like Monte d'Oro, a striking 7,500-foot-peak, or in the primordial Vizzavona Forest.

BEDS

The eccentric **Monte d'Oro** is a fin-de-siècle haven where Miss Havisham would feel at home and the ski lodge-style rooms

are a steal (33-4-95-47-21-06; doubles from \$111). Venaco's **U Palazzu** is a little less eccentric and makes a nice jumping-off point for

the rest of the countryside (33-4-95-60-01-01; doubles from \$90).

TABLES

Restaurant du Lac, in Sidossi, has quintessential rustic food—like goat cheese and gutsy stews (D218; 33-4-95-48-02-73; entrées from \$14). On the outskirts of Corte, **Auberge de la Restonica** has a beautiful setting by the river, local boar stew, and outstanding apple tarts (D623; 33-4-95-46-09-58; entrées from \$17).

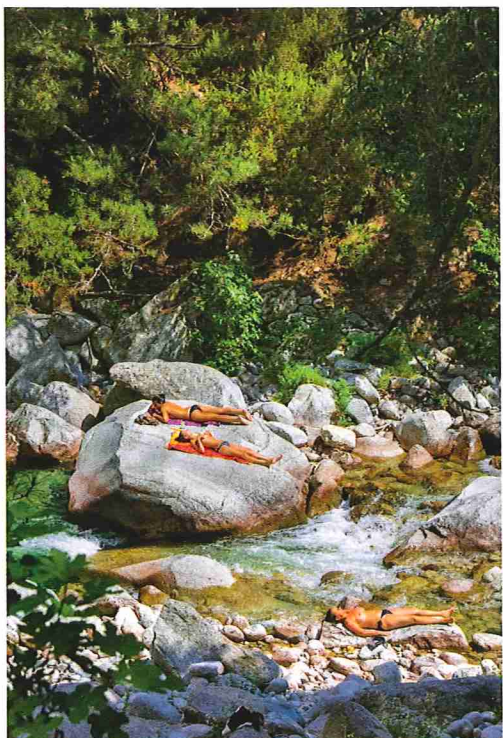


Corsican Wine

The island's varied and excellent vintages are still a well-kept secret, which also means good value. The nine designated appellations and grape varieties are drawn from Italy, France, and North Africa. Arguably the most delicious—and ambitious—are the red Patrimoniales originating not far from Bastia, where the chalky soil is mixed with clay and the surrounding mountains protect the vines from strong wind. The island also has excellent rosés, sweet muscats, and dry whites.

RECOMMENDED

- Domaine Fiumicicoli, a rosé from Sartène.
- Oriu Rouge from Domaine de Torraccia, a red that blends grenache, syrah, and local varieties sciacarello and nielluccio, from just outside Porto-Vecchio.
- Petra Bianca from Domaine Leccia, one of Patrimoniales's most impressive cuvées, from a family-owned estate dating to 1850.
- Muscat from Napoléon Brizi, in Patrimoniales, a sweeter wine that makes a popular island aperitif.



HIGH POINT
Hidden away in the granite mountains, near the confluence of two rivers, the Auberge de la Restonica is a good base for rafting, mountain biking, or horse riding—then cooling off with a dip in the pool.



The Glamour Quotient

The South

Bonus: If by Sea

If you want to take to the water, the family-owned **Santarelli Marine** rents sleek yachts that come with captains, chefs, and concierges; it can also arrange day-trips or weekly rentals (33-4-95-22-64-21; from \$1,500 per day). For a quick, less expensive tour, a number of kiosks along Bonifacio's harbor offer excursions every hour—try **Corsaire** (33-6-23-25-14-60; one-hour tour, \$25).

LOCALLY SAUCED

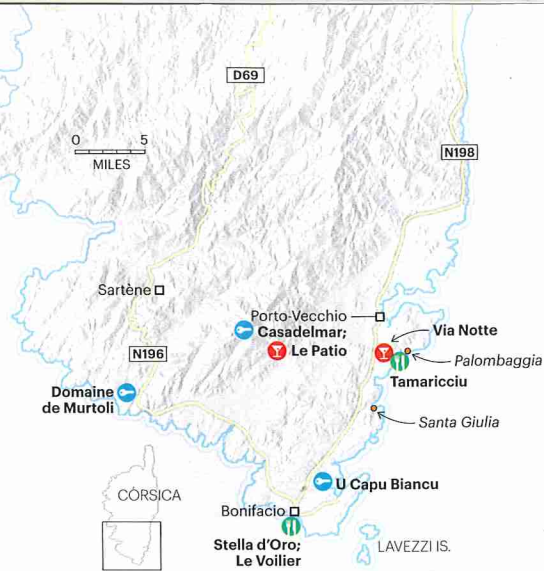
Davide Bisetto is executive chef at the Hotel Casadelmar, in Porto-Vecchio, where his specials have included *seiche a l'encre et vitelotte poire* (squid in blue ink with vitelotte purée).

Protected coves on the southern coast, in the region that includes Bonifacio and Porto-Vecchio, are the preferred mooring spot for celebrity yachts in August, when their owners shuttle between Corsica and Sardinia. In fact, the best way to see this part of the island is by boat, and it's easy to find rentals that range from a day-trip to a weeklong excursion (see "Bonus," left). Don't miss natural wonders like the islands of Lavezzi and the white-chalk cliffs of Palombaggia. Bonifacio, one of the world's most beautiful ports, is where Ulysses purportedly took refuge from a huge storm only to find that he had holed up in a colony of giants. This may be the Corsica of boldface names, Michelin-starred restaurants, and glitzy villas, but outside the high season it is easy to find a quiet beachside hideaway.

BEDS

Between Bonifacio and Sartène, the **Domaine de Murtoli** is arguably one of the most spectacular and well-guarded secrets in Europe. A mile-long private beach is

impressive: They raise their own meat, bottle their own rosés, grow their own vegetables and fruit, and have a fishing boat for the vast estate's two restaurants. The style is an



\$1,700 a week). The island's first boutique hotel, **Casadelmar**, which exemplifies a new generation of chic with its glass-and-wood structure facing the bay of Porto-Vecchio, has an infinity pool where you can watch boats and the occasional dolphin arriving in the harbor. It also has a Michelin-starred restaurant (dishes include osso buco tortellini with winter squash passata, and monkfish with black nori seaweed) and a Carita spa. Beware, though: The prices are more in line with the south of France (33-4-95-72-34-34; doubles from \$520; entrées from \$50). Less expensive is **U Capu Biancu**, near Bonifacio, a refurbished resort on a quiet cove with a little beach, a Boston Whaler for rent, and a very helpful staff (33-4-95-73-05-58; doubles from \$255).

TABLES

In Bonifacio, at **Stella d'Oro**—also known as Chez Jules—a grandmother does all the cooking and a daughter and granddaughters run the front of the house.

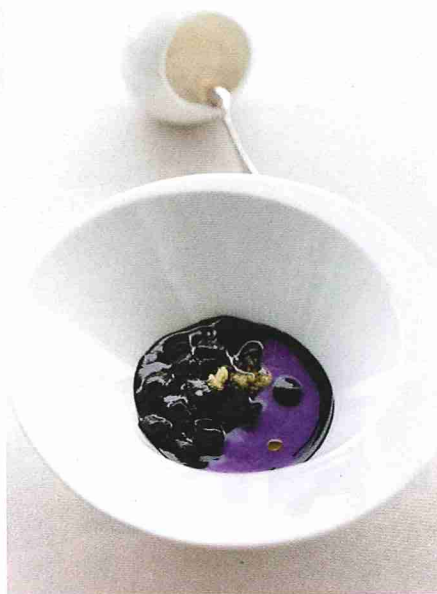
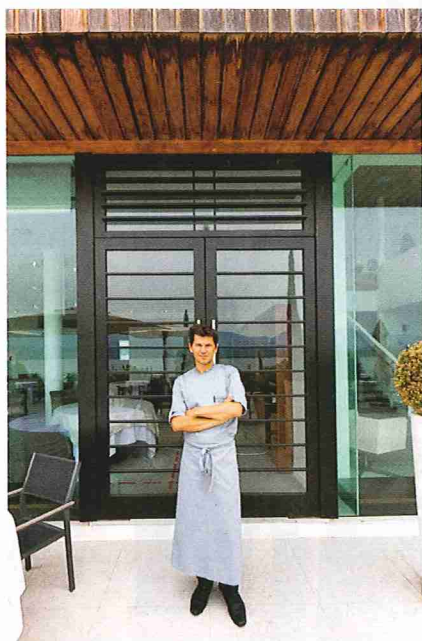
Specialties include stuffed mussels, ravioli with brocciu cheese, and spaghetti with lobster—only order this last dish if you are on an expense account or recently got a bonus (7 rue Doria; 33-4-95-71-59-09; entrées from \$27). Another good option in Bonifacio's port is **Le Voilier** (81 quai Jérôme Comparetti; 33-4-95-73-07-06; entrées from \$30).

BARs

Porto-Vecchio's **Le Patio** has great views and DJs to entertain the well-heeled clientele (6 Impasse Ettori), while **Via Notte** is a nightlife complex of Vegas proportions, with go-go dancers, an indoor pool, and seven bars (Route de Porra).

BEACHES

Among the standout beaches between Bonifacio and Porto-Vecchio that you can reach by boat or by car are Palombaggia—also notable for its beachside restaurant **Tamaricciu** (Plage de la Palombaggia; 33-4-95-70-49-89; entrées from \$30)—and Santa Giulia, with its powdery sand:



backed by thousands of acres of forest and farmland, and there are just 13 residences, ranging from cozy one-bedroom cottages to a seven-bedroom compound. The farm-to-table ethos

unstudied beachside glamour that still feels luxurious, and high-season weeks often sell out years in advance to repeat (and often celeb) clients (33-4-95-71-69-24; villas from



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SUMMER AWAITS

In a break with the local vernacular, the Casadelmar is a modern riff of gray stone and cedar cladding with views over Porto-Vecchio's bay. Besides the heated infinity pool, you'll find a hammam, a gym, and a private beach.

