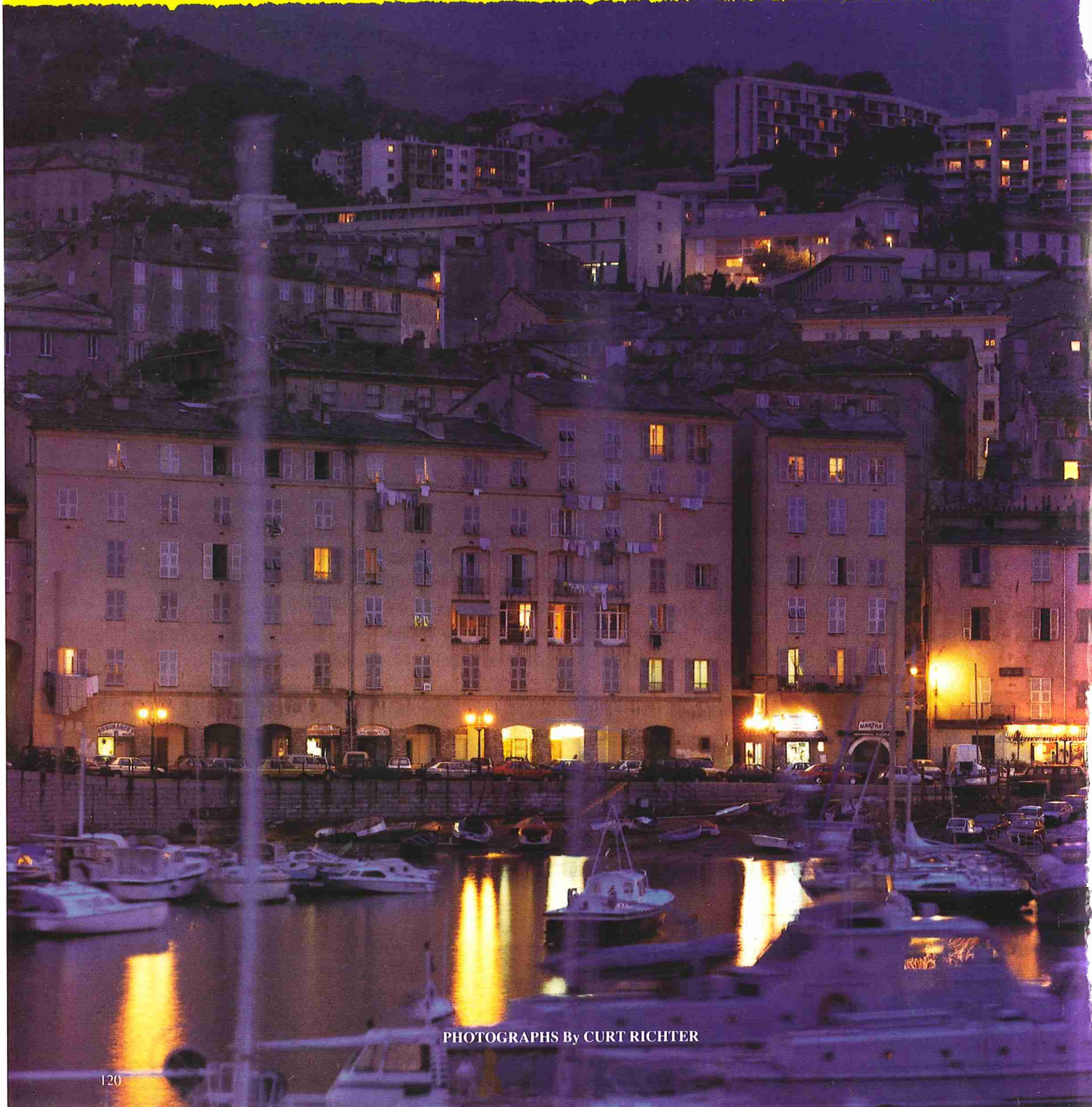


THE LAST

Long ago, most of the Mediterranean

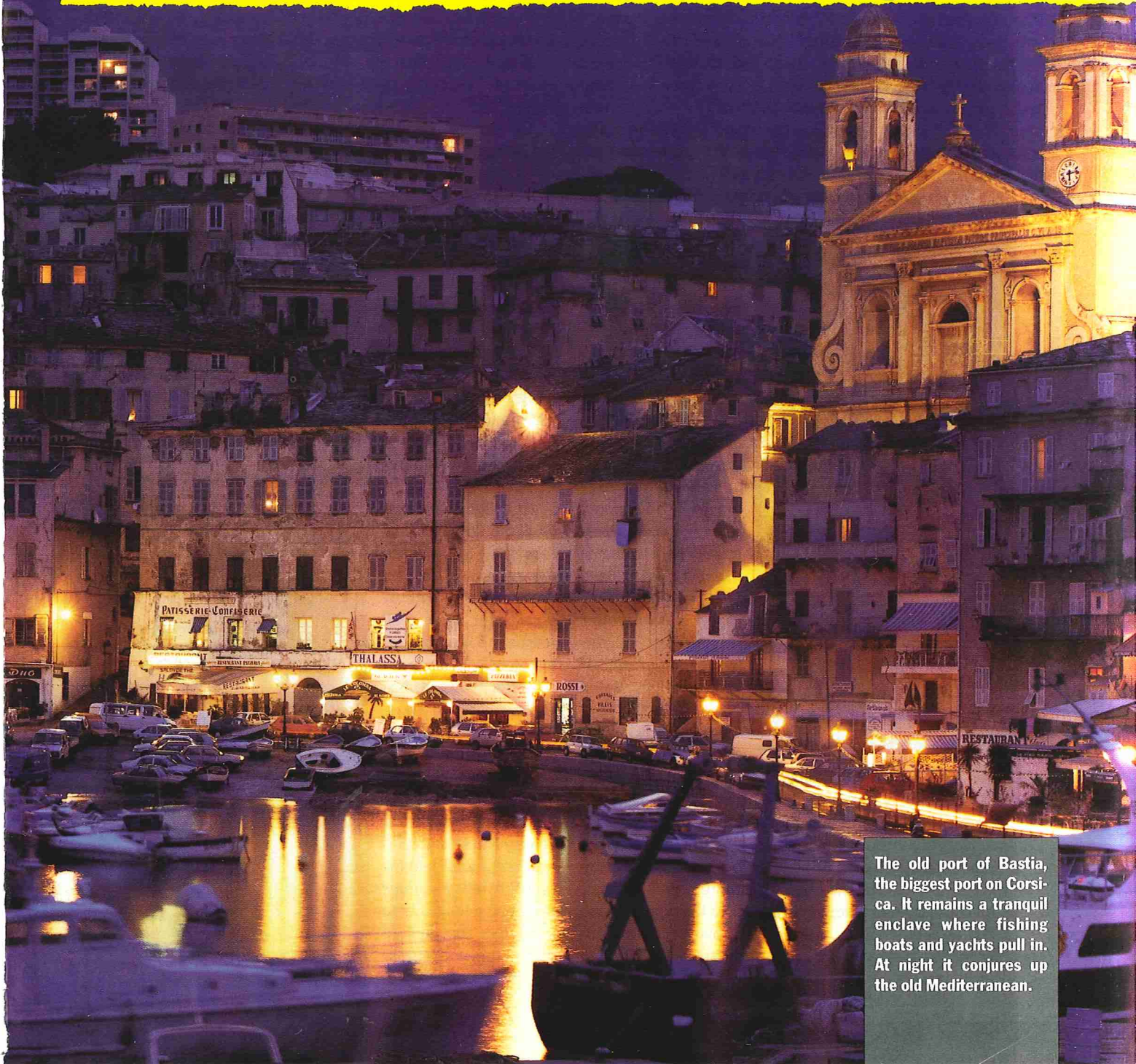


PHOTOGRAPHS By CURT RICHTER

OF EDEN

was like this.

What has kept Corsica unspoiled?



The old port of Bastia, the biggest port on Corsica. It remains a tranquil enclave where fishing boats and yachts pull in. At night it conjures up the old Mediterranean.

The western coast of Cap Corse contains some of the wildest and most beautiful seafont in all of Europe.

SUNRISE IN THE port of Ajaccio is the strangest thing. It's as if the boat from Marseilles has sailed through the night from a real sea into this gouache you wake up to. In the books that talk about Corsica's microclimate, there is no mention of a micro-

distortion of light and space, substance twisted in the direction of chimera. For the few minutes of daybreak, dimensions are askew, the buildings in the port smears of red and gray, the mountains beyond insubstantial layers of mauve. I was going back to the amazingly beautiful island of Corsica for the first time in sixteen years, and though there were planes all day from Paris that could get you there in an hour and a quarter, I was happy to take the boat, for the very first time. Planes make the point that the world is shrinking. The boat, and the mysterious dawn it treats you to, dramatize the fact that Corsica, in many ways, is far away from anywhere.

I didn't know how much this trip might derail me from the time track of my daily life in Paris. But I knew I would step out of sync in Corsica. This mountain in the middle of the sea, as Maupassant called it, is a prominent piece of maverick geography in the evolution of Western Europe.

Maverick: retrograde or precursory? Rousseau had a premonition that "some day this little island will astonish Europe." He was referring to the Enlightenment's ephemeral first republic, with a constitution that would be a model for the revolutionaries

of France and the United States. But the week I arrived, extreme nationalists were exploding bombs on Corsica, "plasticating," as the French put it, while other Western Europeans were moving in peace toward a fraternal homogenization. Toward a world in which *plastique* did not mean first of all a tool of violence but something commonplace, more mildly nasty, considered necessary to the way we live.

Looked at another way, little Corsica had become a microcosm for two of the world's looming issues: ecology and ethnocentricity.

I had met fervent young Corsican nationalists and heard their point of view. The question arose, Was nature worth defending to the point of doing violence to people? On this passionate island, as you might expect, the issues were not being addressed halfheartedly.

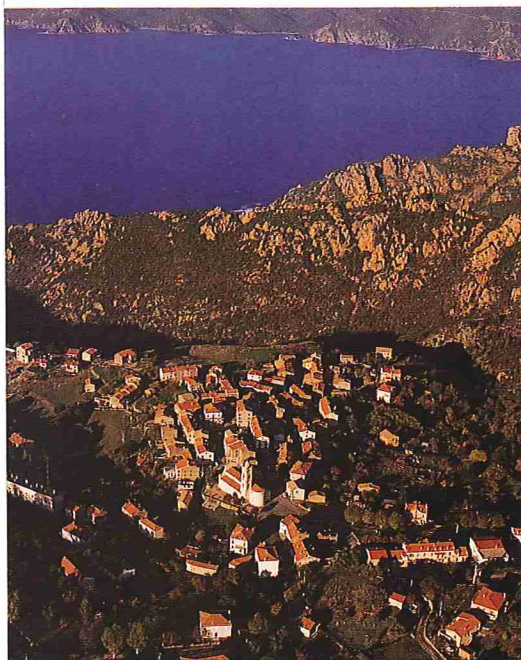
Near Bonifacio, in a holiday camp recklessly called the Village of the Italians, gunmen had evacuated some guests, tied them up, and destroyed their bungalows. The villa of a prominent French banker was blown up as a warning against the presence of "international capital." Just as the French government had drafted a proposal offering Corsica greater control over its destiny, new, more radical splinter groups emerged from among the nationalists, making clear with more than a dozen explosions that paper proclamations, even ones favored by a majority of Corsicans, do not settle things on an island where just about every man owns a gun.

Nonetheless, for the discerning unpackaged traveler, most of Corsica is right now the Eden that the coasts of France and Italy were forty years ago.

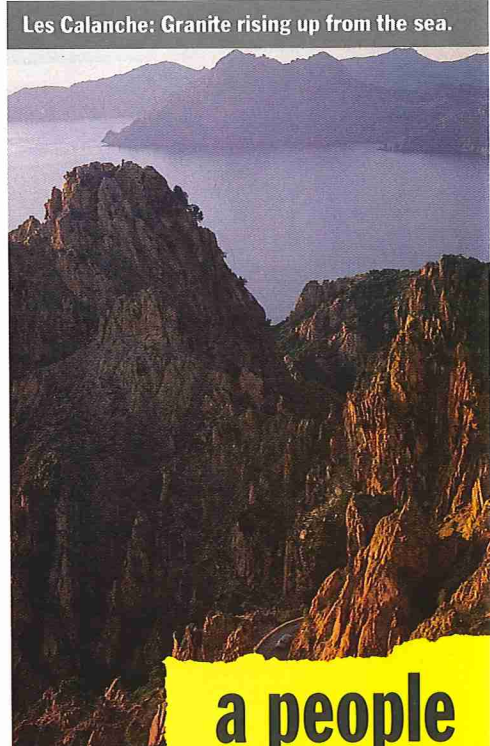
The nationalists wanted independence and would not settle for autonomy; they wanted to be part of Europe on Corsican terms. The thematic mood of Europe was horizontal, leveling, transforming the continent into a vast dominion of programmed appetites. Be like . . . be alike. Buy alike.

The Corsicans I'd met lived not by allusion to anyone else's life-style but by what might be an illusion: that they were a distinct people, and that *their* thematic mood, like a mountain rising from a sea, was narrowly vertical, extending in time from a way of life in which a man raised his own sustenance—his goats, his pigs, his vines and orchards—bought just what he needed, and, until only decades ago, bartered more than he bought. It was a life that taught that men should not struggle for money but might kill for honor. The Michelin Green Guide lists *vendetta* second after *traditions religieuses* in its page on important Corsican folkways.

Although it was misty about the future, I thought I'd fathomed the militant Corsican nationalist point of view, and against all reason my heart has often gone out to it, if only for what it had achieved to save the island from becoming another concrete-covered, marina-clustered vacation land. I was told that Corsica had changed little since I'd left, and soon I had the proof. A little *plastique* had gone a long way to calm the appetites of over-hungry developers. From pride in pre-



Piana: The best spot to view the coast.



Les Calanche: Granite rising up from the sea.

a people

A photograph of a coastal landscape. In the foreground, a stone ruin, possibly a castle or fortification, sits atop a steep, rocky cliffside. The cliff is covered in dense, dark green vegetation. The ocean stretches out to the horizon under a clear, bright sky. The overall scene is dramatic and scenic.

**G. Y. DRYANSKY returns to an island of stubborn
independence and meets**

who keep their own laws

servicing everything Corsican, a spirit of ecology had evolved and spread. Even the Francophile establishment politicians who favor development were sworn proponents of keeping Corsica from becoming like nearly every other shoreland and island in the Med—a sewer of mass tourism.

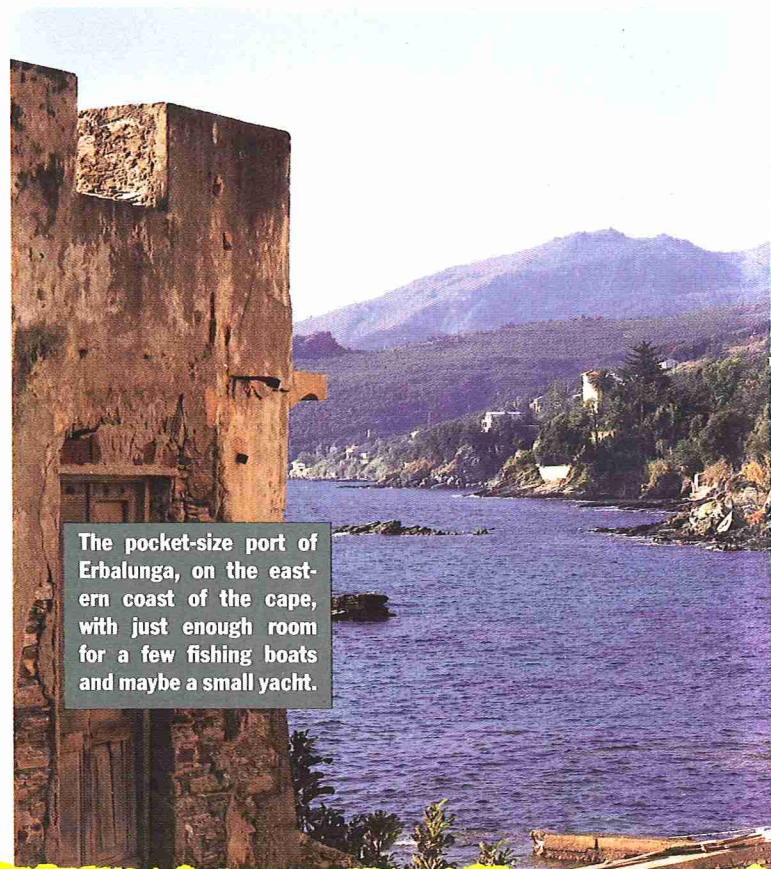
My heart had gone out. . . . Still, Europe and the world had had enough of gun rule, hadn't they? And fervent nationalism too often comes down to persecuting others.

Anyway, there was more to the Corsican question than nationalism, autonomy, or the firm allegiance of Corsica's two departments to France. Corsican politics was a basket of crabs, to use a French metaphor. Electoral fraud was embedded in the folkways. The dead were not only ever present in the Corsican mind, they were also frequently known to vote. Two political clans, dividing the island between north and south, operated a time-honored system of patronage. There were also local clans and splinter groups among the militants. Businessmen paying the "revolutionary tax" did not always know whether they were supporting the extreme nationalists or being shaken down by hoods. In addition, a war was on between a local mafia and Sicilians. There was even, I was told, an association of gangsters called La Brise de la Mer—the Seabreeze—named without poetic intention, as I learned to my disappointment, after a bar in Bastia they hung out in. All in all, my mind told me at the beginning of this trip, as it had at a key moment in the past: Do not get involved. But watching a summer sun in late September at last define the real port—the white houses with bright roofs, the rows of cafés invoking indolence, the bent palms, and a market gaudy with produce—I remembered what a passion I'd had for this place.

WHO COULD help but be taken by Corsica? Violence had implanted itself in a realm of viciousness: The most seductive and varied nature flourished on a rock of granite. Napoleon wrote

that he could tell his native island by its odors alone, and in spring, when the maquis—the brush—is in flower, Corsica still smells the way it did in the emigrant emperor's memory. Smells of thyme, savory, mint, cane apple, myrtle, rosemary, lavender, evergreen . . . The perfume changes as you drive past thick vegetation that swipes your car on the narrow roads. It changes as the landscape keeps changing.

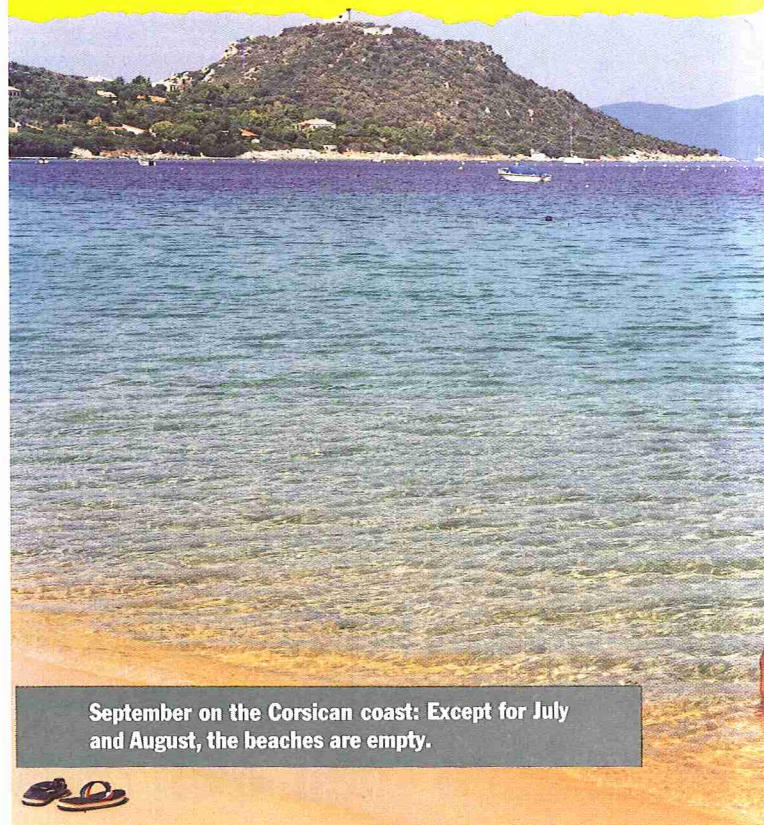
Maupassant's definition, a mountain in the sea, was minimalist. Corsica is Colorado when you're among the towering pines of the central forests. It is Tuscany in the valleys of the region called La Balagne. It's Portugal in the foothills of La



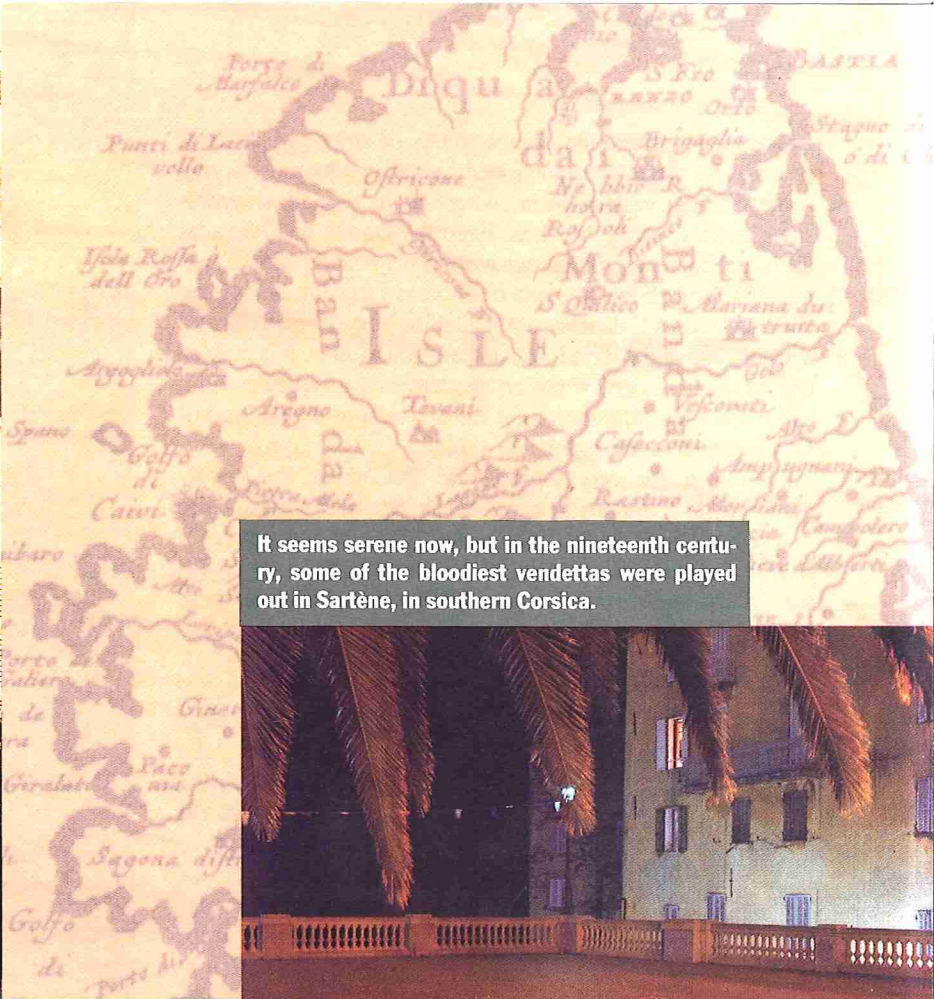
The pocket-size port of Erbalunga, on the eastern coast of the cape, with just enough room for a few fishing boats and maybe a small yacht.

To Greeks it was “the most beautiful”:

Seductive nature on a



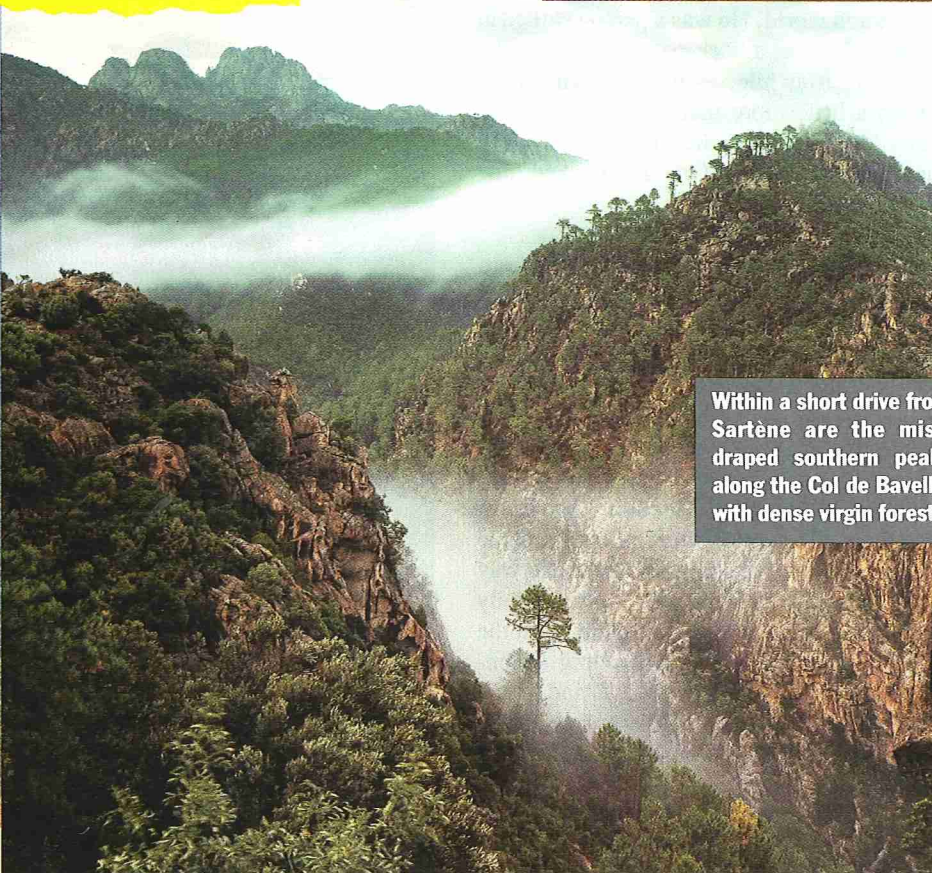
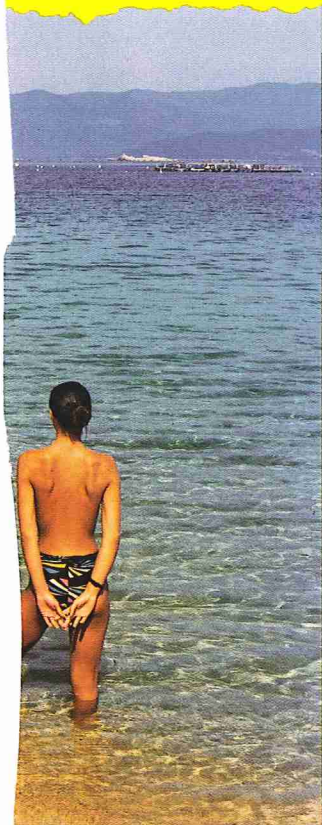
September on the Corsican coast: Except for July and August, the beaches are empty.



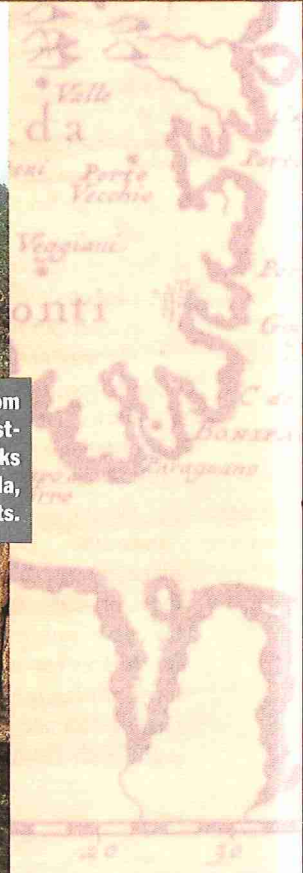
It seems serene now, but in the nineteenth century, some of the bloodiest vendettas were played out in Sartène, in southern Corsica.



rock of granite



Within a short drive from Sartène are the mist-draped southern peaks along the Col de Bavella, with dense virgin forests.



Castagniccia, where the orange trunks of stripped cork trees precede the dense chestnut forest higher up. Its most boring scenery is the eastern plain, where orchards and vineyards slope down to white beaches. Even the granite that pervades the island becomes voluptuous with color. It shifts with changing light through every shade from orange to vermilion on the cliffs called Les Calanche, at the Gulf of Porto, which UNESCO declared one of the world's cherished natural sites. It is pink on one mountain range, white on another, and green elsewhere; and when early afternoon light catches mist in the hollows of La Castagniccia, the granite turns blue.

Finally, at the very southern tip of Corsica, the granite gives way to chalk cliffs, impacted skeletons of a marine life that teemed here aeons ago. In the white fortress town of Bonifacio, perched airily on all that chalk, and in the chalk-walled channel that is the port below, you are somewhere like nowhere else on earth.

THE ANCIENT Greeks called Corsica Kallisté, "the most beautiful." And they knew the risks of falling for the place. All of Odysseus' fleet, except his own ship, rowed into harbor at what was undoubtedly the site of Bonifacio. The sailors

were taken by the splendid natural shelter. Those ships never came out. The Greeks were lapidated from above, harpooned, and carried off to be eaten.

I knew another man who loved Corsica, a Parisian in the business end of the fashion world. He was a person skilled at giving speeches, a cuff-shooter, a back-patter; and when he shook your hand he held it awhile, as if in any encounter he'd come away with a little more than the next guy. He loved the Corsicans, he'd say, and they loved him. He'd built a vacation house on the island. One day I asked how things were with his house on Corsica.

"*Plastiquée*," he said bleakly. Blown away.

Before I left Paris, I asked a neighbor, Jean-Noël Santoni, one of those diaspora Corsicans who get wind of every story about their beloved island, what the man had done wrong.

"He was getting involved." The man couldn't keep out of local politics. He treated his neighbors as if they were neighbors. But on this island, where people from neighboring villages are referred to as *étrangers*, he was more radically alien—a "*pinzut*"—and should have known it.

"*Pinzut*." The first time I heard it, I thought I had heard "pink suit." It struck me as a wonderful term for someone glaringly out of place, one more example of the poetic way the Corsicans think. Actually, it illustrates how naturally they live both now and in history at the same time (with the future forever unplotted—an anxiety or a pending adventure). *Pinzuttu* in Corsican means "peaked," and it's a nasty reference to the hats the French soldiers wore in the eighteenth century, when they (Continued on page 170)

A little plastique had developers'

Violence in the blood

How safe is Corsica for the traveler? Violence has long been a way of life on the island, but discriminating visitors should not be at risk. Nationalist targets are usually the kind of holiday camps and developments that disfigured the Balearic Islands. Foreign-owned private villas are also vulnerable.

Since my visit, there have been more political assassinations, and several explosions have wrecked tourist housing, vacation properties, and a closed café; but as I write, no one so far has been injured. The nationalists make a point of avoiding casualties among foreigners. An incident involving German nudists and gunmen who intended to blow up their bungalows was inflated in the international press as a hostage-taking. It wasn't. The nudists had never been threatened. Violence is an extreme method of environmental campaigning, but Corsica's natural beauty drew me back—and will again.

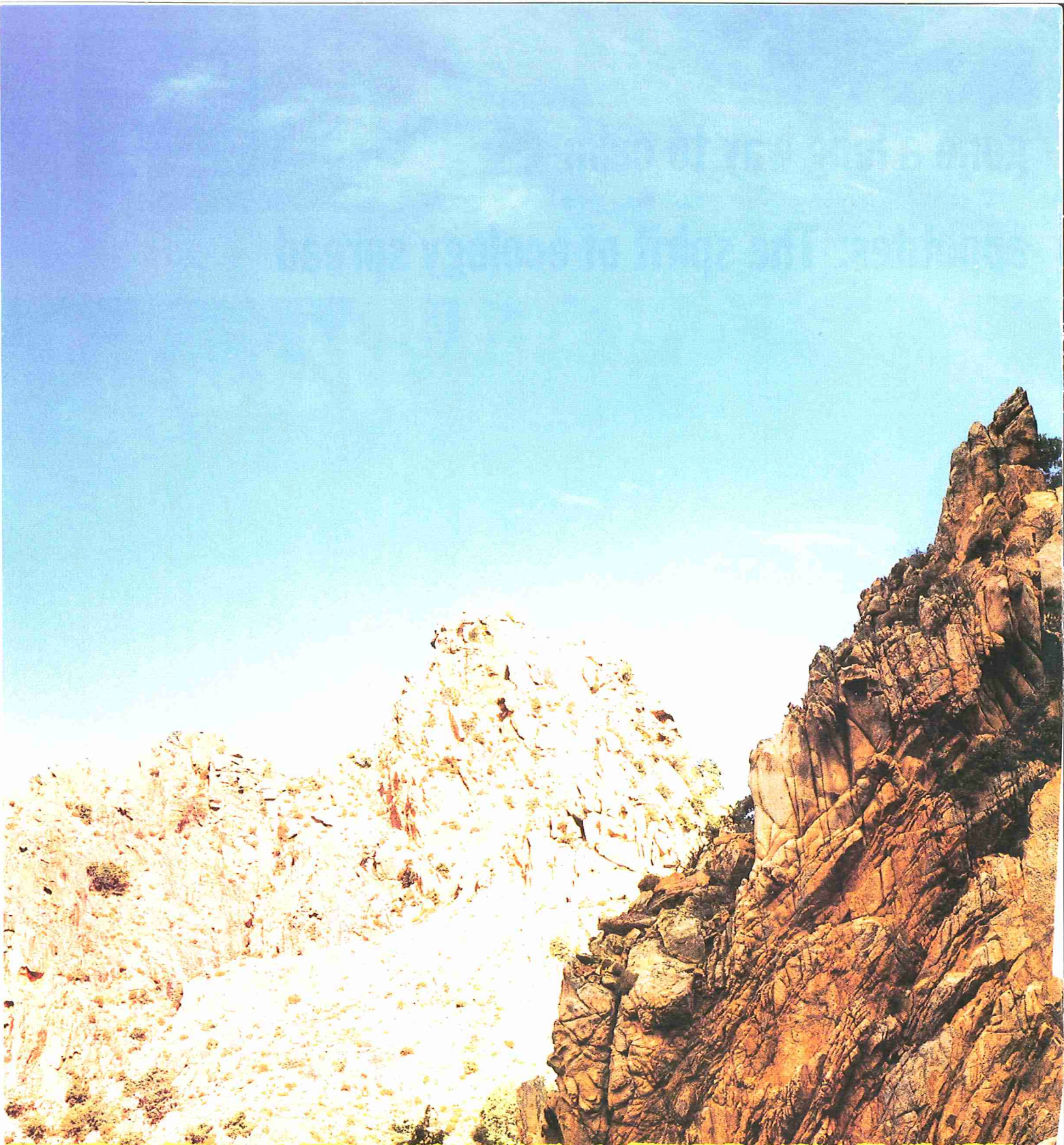
—G.Y.D.

Corsica has belonged to Pisa, Genoa, and France, but there's always been a strong and passionate nationalist current on the island. In recent years, frustration has erupted into violence.

gone a long way to calm

appetites: The spirit of ecology spread





The perfume changes as the landscape keeps

changing: It's Corsica,



Colorado, Tuscany, Portugal

The road past Les Calanche, pink-granite formations that stick out into the azure Gulf of Porto in northwestern Corsica. Less treacherous than some, this road passes for a main route on the western side of the island.