



Pigs might fly down these slopes... but humans beware!

Andreas Hofer trots past some porky slope guardians during an eventful tour in the mountains of Corsica

The taxi driver thought it the most natural thing that I'd come to Corsica to ski. "You should have been here last week - we had a metre of fresh snow" he said, with the demeanour of an expert skier. "Our mountains are magnificent." He indicated the landscape through the windscreen with wide-spread arms, not bothered about the hairpin bend we were fast approaching. Nothing seemed to surprise this Corsican. But then, nothing much surprises the average Corsican anyway. Just read the French comic book *Asterix in Corsica* and you'll see what I mean.

Yet, still in mid February, it was not certain if my skiing expedition to Napoleon's homeland would take place at all. As in the southern Alps, it had not snowed - not even rained - for many months, and all my plans for traversing the island on touring skis along the famous

GR20 trail way seemed fanciful. And then it snowed all over the Mediterranean. Even Rome was covered by 20 centimetres of fresh snow. And Corsica was white right down to its aquamarine beaches.

There were surely more expert skiers in Corte, the old town perched on a rock in front of yet more rocks, where I had based myself. Not all were willing to identify themselves as such though, as we were foreigners. When they're not hunting, half of all the young Corsicans in Corte are dressed in black, drive small Peugeotts at break-neck speed, smoke one Marlboro after another, outside and inside the café, and ignore girls who do the same. The other half dress in black too, but smoke only one pack of Marlboro a day, and go ski touring or snowshoeing as long as the snow lasts. Only when it finally melts do they go hunting. Girls and the English language are known to exist, but that's all. ▣





Both groups do what they do and what they don't do with little regard for the law - but with considerable pride. Bilingual place-names on road signs are spray-corrected into the Corse language, and traffic signs are shot at with what must be heavy artillery and rocket-launchers, as they are shredded to pieces. 'Corsica libera' is graffiti-painted on bridges and bus stations, but during my entire stay, the National Liberation Front didn't explode a single bomb. I had to assume that the unrepentant troublemakers were all out skiing.

The fathers of these young rebels, with shaved, greying heads, dressed in black too, were more approachable. Having acquired wisdom, humour and a world view which makes Le Pen look like a left-leaning liberal, they were willing to converse in a foreign language with me. "Do you speak Italian?" they would ask, to then swiftly switch into *lingua corsa*, emphasising their point with the vivid facial expressions and the swift gestures of a seasoned Genovese politician.

The first ski resort my Italian mountain guide from the Abruzzi, Marco Zaffiri, was heading for - Castellu di

Vergio - had been taken over by a couple of savage, black pigs. They'd dug a hole in the attendant's hut to take up their duties, letting their pig-buddies roam the pistes for free - a typically Corsican approach, thus effectively preventing all non-pigs from skiing.

So we glued on our touring skins, and climbed in mystic fog through the Valdu Niellu forest to the 'Ciuttulu i Mori' refuge, along the Col des Maures saddle to Paglia Orba (2552m). Only for a split second could we see the Mediterranean - then we had to grope our way back through dense clouds. We almost crashed into a family of majestic moufflons, fleeing from us in wild leaps.

The 'Ancienne Station de Ski du Haut Asco' (1422m), which we tried the next day, was not hijacked by pigs, but by a wildly sprouting pine forest, which had overgrown the pistes and even the lift pylons. To reach it, one had to drive through the Asco Valley, along rocky escarpments, with the road winding

over abysmal precipices and thundering torrents, never quite wide enough for two passing cars. Marco, who hails from the village of L'Aquila - destroyed last year by a devastating earthquake - was unfazed. He drove with undiminished speed, operating his mobile phone with one hand and hooting with the other at some emaciated, shaggy cattle, which were quite obviously too malnourished to react. "Last year," he pointed into the ravine a thousand feet or so below, "I saw a car down there, which

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must have driven over the cliffs. You have to look - maybe it's still here." He had to have a look himself, hanging out of the window, with no regard for the cows, the oncoming traffic or the rocks littering the tarmac. In fact the car was nowhere to be seen, but Marco did his utmost to put ours in its place.



From the refuge of Asco Stagnu we hiked south towards Punta Minuta (2556m). After skiing two steep couloirs at our right, Punta Culaghia (2034m) and Punta Stranciacone (2151m), we turned south to descend from the Bocca Purtellu saddle (2079m) into a wide, sunny bowl. The snow in the gullies was beautiful, powder in one, and spring snow in the other. This alpine landscape at the foot of Monte Cinto (2706m), Corsica's highest mountain, was like a huge pan surrounded by high mountains, wind-sheltered, with good snow and a ski hut offering hot tea and cold beers, like the Pietà, brewed from sweet chestnuts.

Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th century German landscape painter, is credited with having depicted the most Gothic vistas in art. Barren rocks, sinister crosses on mystic escarpments, wafted through by grey and golden mists, adorned with improbably gnarled conifers, reaching their barren arms over vertiginous heights and bottomless precipices. Fragile, dark garbed human figures are set into this scenery, not quite sure about how nature can ever be mastered. Corsica is just like that - as if painstakingly created by Friedrich himself.

After 10.000 turns, the road - which must have been chiselled out of the sheer rock - passing through fairy forests and open snowscape, finally arrived at Corsica's only active ski resort, Bergeries de Capannelle (1586m). There are three Poma lifts, an École du Ski Français, complete with red-uniformed instructors, and an enthusiastic throng of skiers and snowboarders of all ages - numerous populating the slopes on a weekday and having a good time in the a ski hut with beer, hot drinks, Corsican charcuterie, and more Marlboros.

Behind the resort, we climbed to the frozen Lac de Bastani, to Punta Bacinello (2247m), and to Monte Renoso (2352m). To the west of the cluster of snowy peaks around us we could see the rolling, brown-green hills of the coast and the white-rimmed, sapphire-blue blanket of the Mediterranean. To the east, deep down, the Tyrrhenian Sea, with the Isla de Monte Cristo not more than a guess in the distant haze. We descended



En route for Monte Cinto: Hofer is dwarfed by the northern walls of Capu Barba (2305m).

more than 800 vertical metres in soft spring snow, and then had to find our way through dense alder thickets and over bulbous rock boulders back to the resort's groomed slopes.

It's evening in Corte. Manoeuvring her swaying hips gaily like a sailing boat between the tables of her restaurant, Le Bip's, Madame Brigitte was a delightful hostess, Corsican mama and pagan goddess all in one: encouraging guests to eat up a rich dessert, complimenting others on their choice of wine, greeting newcomers with a sweet smile and twinkling eyes. Her vaulted cellar, off the high street of Corte, was perhaps not the most exclusive restaurant in town, and certainly not as posh as Le 24, or Le Nicoli, but as non-islanders we felt welcome here. ▶



**Above: a Corsican mountain village
Overleaf: The Col Pavella pass, made famous by the Victorian artist Edward Lear; and a Neolithic stone warrior.**



Yet we managed to plunder all her goodwill at once, when we dared to order cheese with our starters (simply not done in Corsica). She stepped back in shock, her head aslant, and with glaring eyes she repeated our order as a question, full of disbelief and contempt, as if we were in utter disgrace: "If you insist?" she said – "Voilà!"

Watching her sailing away, we were sure she would never smile on us again. But we were in the mood to celebrate, regardless. We had bagged the north side of Monte Cinto (2706m) in blazing sunshine, and nothing could cloud our exaltation. Starting from the Asco Stagnu refuge, we'd climbed up the gorge of Tighiettu and then ascended along the northern walls of Capu Barba (2305m). Touching the bottom of the vertical summit rock of Cinto, we had turned left to ski down over the ridge of Bocca Barba (2207m) into a boulder-strewn couloir, with the sharp escarpments of Les Grand Mulets on one side and the stony crown of Capu Barba on the other. The snow was deep and soft. Too soft at times, and our skis sometimes hit hidden rock and ice formations. To find our way back to the road through the dense forest of the Manica valley was testing, but we were in high spirits, proud to have mastered the challenge.

The Restonica Gorge is a dramatic defile hidden right behind Corte. We drove in dense fog along moss-green cliffs as if through a windowless corridor, meandering slowly uphill. At the Timazo

Bridge (943m) we parked our car, and, carrying our skis, walked up a steep footpath through the high forest. Climbing over uprooted trees and erratic boulders, after perhaps an hour, we reached a ruined shepherd's hut. Stepping out of the forest, after a few minutes we found ourselves in blazing sunshine, high-alpine, treeless terrain rising in front of us (1513m).

The Lamento brook, which we now followed, gurgles down through a stony gully. A large, flat plain, formed by the frozen Lavu del'oriente (2061m) extended behind its upper rim. We had to hike up a ravine which loomed on the far side of the lake. When it finally tightened into a chimney too narrow and too steep to continue climbing with touring skis, we tied them on our rucksacks and hacked our way up with the tips of our ski boots. Reaching the summit rock of Monte Rotondo (2622m), a panorama opened up of truly grand dimensions. The world below us was a vast washhouse of white-grey fog. Like the back armour of primordial amphibians, mountain ridges pushed through the milky brine: green newts, pink lizards, spiky stegosauruses, all crowded around our snowy throne of Monte Rotondo. We skied in mushy corn snow, the sun burning my neck and my cheeks; I'd never felt thirstier. It was a relief to reach the unlit forest again.

In spite of its splendid views, we'll remember our ski tour to Lac de Nino (1743m), Capu Curia (2041m) and Punta Artica (2327m) with some difficulty. On our way back we'd stopped at Chez Jojo in Albertacce, where we were plied with Aqua Vita di Petrella. It said on the bottle: "*Distillé en cachette des gendarmes, fabrication frauduleuse garantie – imprimerie clandestine des fraudeurs reunis!*" - Distilled in a police hideaway; fraudulent manufacture guaranteed; printed by clandestine fraudsters' printing works. Or something like that. As the bottle quickly emptied, we became less and less capable of reading the label, never mind translating it.

We were determined to visit Bonaparte's family home in the capital, Ajaccio. The journey proved spectacular. Over the Col Bavella Pass (1218m), depicted

with so much drama in drawings and etchings by the Victorian writer and landscape painter Edward Lear, we drove through woods of beech, chestnut, datura, holly and oak - wild



boar and savage pigs sniffing through the undergrowth. Napoleon III's engineers built a graceful railway through the mountains, gliding on wide-arched viaducts over gorges and torrents, winding through tunnels and dense forest. It must be one of the most romantic railway journeys in Europe. Monte d'Oro (2389m) was glowing in the soft sun of a winter's afternoon. Hidden in dark, oak forests, one of Corsica's ancient monuments waited: a Neolithic stone warrior, standing guard at the old road over the pass. It was almost dark when we passed the gaunt stone houses of San Pietro di Venaco, huddled together in random shapes and sizes, both sturdy and slender, like a group of porcini mushrooms on a pillow of moss.

Napoleon's birthplace turned out to be a dainty - if quite substantial - mansion in the old town, yet without much to look at. All the furniture was acquired at a later stage. The future Emperor, then still an urchin with a habit of troublemaking, left Corsica together with his parents and seven siblings for Toulon during English rule, at the age of nine, never to live in the house again. He saw it one last time en route from his Egyptian campaign in 1799, and only started to remember his carefree childhood with nostalgic longing at the end of his incredible life, as a prisoner on St. Helena. 🇮🇹

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