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CORSICA'S ISOLATED, RAMSHACKLE CHARM

BY GIULIA PINES

WE PULLED OVER IN A TINY VILLAGE AND
FOLLOWING A SIGN THAT, SIMPLY AND WITHOUT
FANFARE, POINTED UP



“BONIFACIO IS A TANGLE OF PEACH AND WHITE HOUSES,
COBBLESTONE STREETS AND ERODING TRAILS BUILT
ATOP DRAMATIC LIMESTONE CLIFFS.”



You only need to look at a map to

understand how difficult it is to reach **Corsica**, but even that doesn't truly get at the heart of its isolated charm. Only once you're on a tiny plane, bearing down on a narrow valley between rocky slopes, eyeing a paper-thin runway as the plane bucks wildly to get into position, do you appreciate just how unlikely it is that you would end up here.

When a friend and I zeroed in on the island last summer, it seemed about as remote as the South Pacific. As it turns out, that's the best thing about Corsica, which may belong to France, but probably wouldn't call itself French. It's been happily existing in unofficial semi-autonomy, with its own dialect and written language, since long before its most famous son Napoleon Bonaparte was born.

It's worth a day trip to check out one of the diminutive French leader's old haunts: the dramatic city of *Bonifacio*, its tangle of peach and white houses, cobblestone streets and eroding trails built atop limestone cliffs. But if you want to see the best of Corsica, better stay out of town.

Luckily, a growing list of rental websites has made it easier for small-time property owners to connect with visitors looking for privacy, the thrill of driving up a twisting gravel road to your very own secluded stone cottage. (*Gites de France* is ideal if you understand French; for everyone else, there's *Boutique Homes*.)

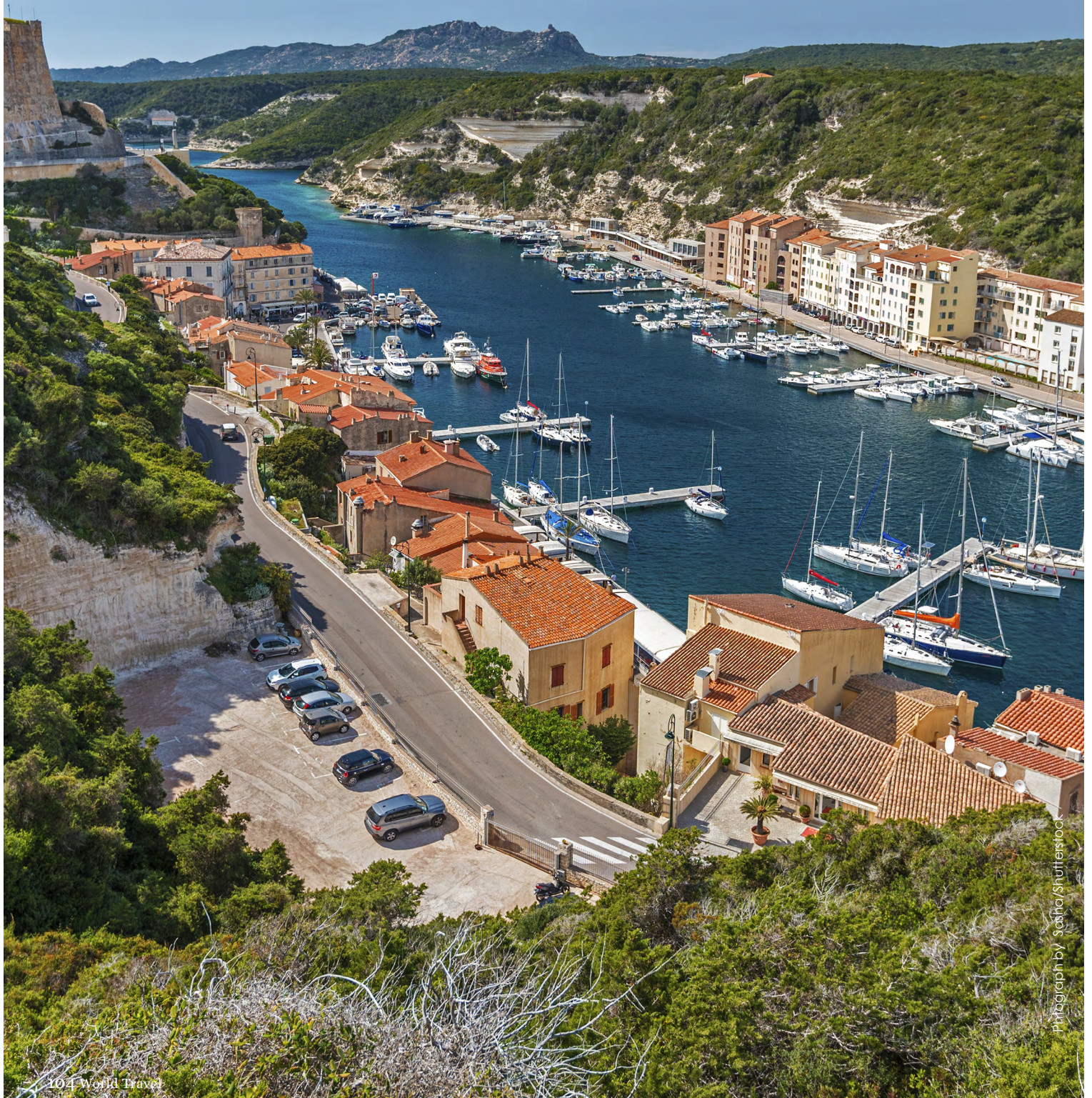
We found our own slice of rugged paradise 15-minutes' drive from the nearest town – a bi-level, three-bedroom cottage clinging to the hillside in a village so small it barely had a name. Stone steps led up to a swimming pool with panoramic views of what appeared to be three separate mountain ranges, layered like volumes on a bookshelf, each mistier and more mysterious as it receded into the distance.

We arrived just in time for Sunday's open-air market in **Porto-Vecchio**. Vendors fanned out from the town's main square, hawking locally pressed olive oil and home-distilled liqueurs, jars of luscious preserved lemons in golden brine, jams and chutneys and heaps of produce.

Weighed down with our finds, we found ourselves hungry, and begged one of the vendors for a tip. He informed us that he was about to make a delivery of lemons to a local restaurant, and we were more than welcome to follow. A short while later, a tiny procession formed: we three with our bags of produce, and he at the front, balancing a crate of citrus on one shoulder as he

From top, Dried sausages; aperitifs and flavored sea salts at the market in Porto-Vecchio; the view from our cottage. **Opposite page, from top**, a classic facade in Bonifacio's old town; wild onions on the promontory just outside Bonifacio's old town. **Previous Pages from left**, sunset over the Old Town of Bonifacio, South Coast of Corsica; aerial view of Santa Giulia beach in Corsica





Photograph by Sascha/Shutterstock

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guided us away from the market’s bustle. He led us to the courtyard of a tiny establishment, where cartons of delicate squash blossoms rested on a table, awaiting their chef. That day, we dined on calf’s liver in rich tomato sauce and grilled summer vegetables with sea salt.

This was only a small hint of what we would enjoy at home. Corsican cuisine is comfort food – homey versions of French and Italian classics with freshly caught seafood and semi-feral local pork. Our nearest supermarket – described as “somewhat sparse” by our villa owner was, in fact, overflowing with a bounty of richness we’d be hard pressed to find on the mainland. Adding to our greenmarket haul, we came away with steaks, charcuterie and bottles of Corsican wine. With its unique mix of soils and climates, the grapes grown on this sunny Mediterranean isle are like nothing else in the world.

The days became a blur of cooking, swimming and hiking – ploughing through our island delicacies while inventing new ways of working off the calorie count. One afternoon we navigated hairpin turns into the nearby mountains, pulling over in a tiny village and following a sign that, simply and without fanfare, pointed up. Two hours later we sat overlooking those misty peaks we had admired from our own terrace, sharing a sandwich of pâté on crusty bread, exchanging satisfied looks with other day-trippers a few boulders over.

Another morning we parked by the side of the road when a glimpse of azure called to us through flowering shrubs, marching down nubby stone steps to a beach where we were the only non-Europeans, our English piercing the chatter of French and Italian but appearing to bother nobody. Many had been coming to Corsica for years, unable to resist the island’s firm hold on their imagination. But they were more than happy to welcome newcomers to their semi-kept secret.

And that’s the thing about Corsica, with its quiet contemplation, its beauty unglamorous but unrestrained. Once there, you often find yourself exchanging sly, knowing looks with other travellers - tacit acknowledgements that you’ve discovered something quite special. 🍷



Clockwise from top, Traditional food shop in Corsica; the roiling waters off Corsica’s southern tip; mausoleums in the Cimetière Marin or Marine Cemetery of Bonifacio; a stone cottage in the mountains. **Opposite page**, landscape of Bonifacio with the Harbor and The Citadel at left