

Hammering straight down the valley framed on my left side by vertiginous cliffs, our pilot executed a smart 180 degree turn to avoid the looming mountain ahead and we touched down on Ajaccio's boiling hot runway. Quite some start to my Corsican day, enlivened by exiting the airport's arrivals hall stared at by a bust of Ajaccio's favourite son – **Napoléon** Bonaparte – replete with trademark bicorn.

Driving out of Ajaccio – think: 'Ah-Jacques-see-oh' – past the vast port with ferries bound for Nice and Marseilles – our car powered up 20 minutes of non-stop hair-pin bends whose summit delivered a vista of horizon-filling mountains under a duck-egg blue sky.

Reluctantly starting our top of descent we wound down to sea-level and the tiny beachside destination of Alata, which appeared to be entirely populated by large groups of middle-aged plus ladies uttering the time-honoured mantra beloved of French matrons everywhere: “Mais c'est comme ca, hein” (“But that's how it is, isn't it”). Whenever one or two male companions – there were only two – bravely tried to raise an opposing view – they were met with a withering “Ah, oui!” and the matter was deemed closed.

Organised hiking is immensely popular here – even for the more elderly visitors. One such grande dame of late-70s vintage eagerly showed me her itinerary by resting her bare arm on my bare leg – quite the culture shock for a boy from Northern climes.

Every evening, as the curtain fell on the nightly sunset production, the ladies would enthusiastically gather to ruminate on the day's events and observe the plunge into rapid twilight. The venerable *mesdames* toasted the extinguishing of the light with an island rosé sundowner, while I savoured a Corsican beer, given a dark intensity by the ubiquitous local chestnuts.

Autumn is a sensational time to visit Corsica with mid-20C temperatures warming almost deserted beaches. But my first day was accompanied by fiercely high winds making the sea roil and buck, triggering a fine, salt-pungent tangy spray which hung like gossamer over the shoreline.

Waves can be dangerous beasts in this weather – I was sucked out by a gripping undertow of immense power before being spun over and over and contemptuously spat back out on to the beach. A weather-beaten Corsican eyed me suspiciously. “*Il faut faire attention,*” (You have to be careful) he said. Determined not to be beaten by the sea – or the Corsican – I strode back in King Canute-like. Same sea, same result and I retreated, wiping stinging salt from my eyes.

I'd heard dark mutterings about simmering trouble from the independence movement to detach Corsica from “Le Continent” as the local paper calls France, but I hardly heard a squeak of it while I was on the “*l'île de Beauté*.” That independence comes more in the way of a local cuisine drenched in island produce: cuttlefish, octopus, asparagus, strong cheeses, all plucked from a countryside replete with myriad lizards, huge butterflies and pairs of black eagles on the wing, lasering in on prey below.

Above all, this is an elemental island. Don't expect places packed with Europop-blasting nightclubs. Do expect nature in the raw; fierce sun, pounding waves, vast beaches, abundant wildlife and gloriously individual cuisine. Compared to Le Continent, it's not even overly-expensive.

Do call them Corsican. Just don't call them French.