

# Corsica Bulltinu

September 2008

## In This Issue

Granite Island republished in Penguin Classics  
The wines of Corsica - a revelation  
E R Whitwell and Corsica - 100 years on  
A Visit to Cap Corse

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## Dear Reader,

*Lisette Palazzi's scary photo reminds us why the wines and roads of Cap Corse don't go too well together.*



Welcome to the September Corsica Bulltinu! Since the last edition, I have had my car broken into both in France and Britain, but on neither occasion did the thieves help themselves to my collection of Corsican Polyphony CDs, so I must be grateful for small mercies.

But these thefts aren't my main excuse for why this edition is late. I try to get the Bulltinu out on the 15th of September, December, March and June. On 15th September this year however, my wife and I were stranded in Nice following the demise of XL Airways and the cancellation of its flights from Bastia.

This did not stop us enjoying a wonderful time on our favourite island this summer and we thoroughly enjoyed this year's Polyphony Festival in Calvi. I bet one or two of you were amongst the crowds.

There's a lot about Corsica's wines in this edition. I have included a brief introduction to them below, and in her article all about Cap Corse, Lisette Palazzi tells us more about the wines of Patrimonio and the Cap.

Robert Sharp follows in the footsteps of ER Whitwell: it's exactly 100 years since the publication of her book *Through Corsica with a Paint Brush*. But I'm starting off with something I promised six months ago - a brief note about the eagerly anticipated Penguin Classics Edition of Dorothy Carrington's *Granite Island*.

Enjoy September's *Bulltinu*, and don't forget to drop me a line if you have an idea for a future edition.

Mac

## Granite Island republished in Penguin Classics



Dorothy Carrington's magical and atmospheric book about Corsica - Granite Island - has been republished as a Penguin Classic edition. For those of you who purchased (or have read) the original, there is one important reason why you should acquire this new edition: the book contains a full and brightly written introduction by Rolli Lucarotti. This introduction gives a full and interesting account of the author's colourful life and career.

To my great regret, I never met Dorothy Carrington, though I have met a number of people who knew her personally as a friend or acquaintance. Without exception, all speak warmly of her and some of this warmth radiates from the pages containing Rolli's introductory words. Without giving too much away, she tells us of Dorothy's dramatic early life, leaving university because of "the way English was taught" and also because of "the restrictions placed on women who were not expected to do much more than read". So she eloped with an Austrian aristocrat and went to live in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). It was here that she began writing articles for magazines and where the foundations of her writing career were established.

However, the annexation of Austria by Germany as World War II approached caused her to rethink: finding herself with a German Passport, she divorced her husband and hurried back to England. Her first visit to Corsica did not happen until 1948.

Although Dorothy Carrington's research for *Granite Island* took place in the years between 1948 and the 1960s, the book is still gripping, still relevant and most important of all, still highly readable (despite being used as a textbook in social anthropology studies, according to Rolli's introduction!) Unlike conventional travel books that give a dry potted history and travelogue as separate sections, the author weaves present-day characters, historical perspective and her own experiences into her account of the island.

One of the great achievements of this work is that it forms a literary bridge between the Corsica that we know today and the dark, brooding Corsica of Prosper Merimée's *Colomba* - traces of which were still there in 1948. I don't know if there are any mazzeri (harbingers of death) or voceratrici (singers who perform improvised verses at funerals) still practising in Corsica's remote mountain villages now, but Dorothy Carrington made it her business to meet both and put their activities into perspective. And it's this perspective that's so fascinating, for it includes Corsica's Neolithic past, its bandits and vendettas, its Genoese overlords and the island's peculiar relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. It seems that until recently Mass-going Corsicans still harboured primeval superstitions and, in executing their "duties" in a vendetta, sometimes tried to kill their victims while they were known to be in a state of mortal sin, thus ensuring their consignment to the eternal flames.

But it's not all darkness and gloom. *Granite Island* is witty in places and the author paints wonderful word pictures of all the places she visited. Some of these are places we know so well. If you love Corsica and haven't yet read *Granite Island*, here's your opportunity. If you have, it's still worth getting this new low-cost edition (you can order it from [Corsicaholiday's books page](#)) just for the introduction.

Has *Granite Island* changed your life? This is what Lisette Palazzi has to say about it: *Warning! This book may change your life. Read it at your own peril. Dorothy Carrington's vivid narration and stories will haunt you and stay with you forever. I read this book from cover to cover in 1999. Before that I knew nothing about the island, except for the fact that my grandfather had originated from it. After reading Granite Island, I tracked down my distant relatives in Corsica, learned basic French in twelve weeks and visited the island for the first time in 2003. Corsica turned out to be as magical and captivating as Ms. Carrington's book described and even more. The vast encyclopaedic knowledge contained in this book will greatly enhance your travel experience and make you love and appreciate this enchanting place and its people even more - and yes, this book is "still relevant and highly readable".*

## The wines of Corsica - a revelation



by Mac McKeone

*A pale rosé from Clos Culombu, AOC Calvi. Try it served very cold after a hike through the mountains or a hot day on the beach - immensely refreshing.*

Whether you are an experienced wine connoisseur or a complete beginner, the wines of Corsica will come as a big surprise.

Go into the supermarkets of Calvi or Bastia and you'll find the usual selection of wines from the Loire, Bordeaux and Burgundy, but there will probably be another aisle devoted exclusively to local wines. Unless you've done careful research before you come, most of the names on the bottles there will be unfamiliar to you. A surprisingly high proportion of the aisle will be devoted to rosé wines. And the worst thing you can do is look around for a grape variety you recognise from the French mainland - you may find one or two but if you



stick to these you'll be missing a real treat - and an opportunity to expand your wine experience.

The first thing to note about Corsican wines is the geography of the island. As we all know from travelling around this beautiful place, Corsica is dominated by mountains, so the little valleys of the west coast and the coastal plain of the east are more or less cut off from each other. Each little hillside boasts its own microclimate, and the geology of the south, with its granitic soils differs subtly from the clay/limestone terroir further north.

Corsican vineyards are tiny when compared with some. The whole of Corsica could fit many times into the vast coastal zone that comprises California's wine growing region - and it is only possible to grow wine in a very small part of Corsica's mostly rocky surface.

The little hillsides that produce Corsica's best wines, so very different from each other, are like jewels.

### The grapes

According to the Comité Intersyndical des Vins de Corse, six local grape varieties or cépages are grown in Corsica, though three main ones dominate\*. These are *Vermentinu* (for white wine), *Sciaccarellu* (red and rosé wine, mainly grown in the south west on granite soils) and *Niellucciu* (for red and rosé wine, tending to be grown further north).

It's a fruitless task trying to compare these unique wines with the big French wines. If comparisons are to be made, they are probably closer to those found on the Italian mainland. Vermentino, to use its Italian name, is grown in mainland Italy and in the vineyards of our near neighbour Sardinia as well as in some parts of southern France. Niellucciu is genetically identical to Italy's Sangiovese grape, though I understand its wines are produced in a different way here. Some commentators (such as the excellent Oxford Companion to Wine) suggest that Niellucciu was introduced to Corsica by the Genoese.

But mystery surrounds Sciaccarellu, the grape used to produce Corsica's most ancient, most interesting and strangest red and rosé wines. It is grown nowhere else in the world and nobody knows where it came from. I like to think it might have been brought over to Corsica by the Romans, and that the variety has now been lost to the mainland. It is the main red wine grape variety of the Ajaccio region, but is, intriguingly, also grown around the island's old Roman capital of Aleria.

### Tasting Corsica's wines

Corsica's wine industry went through a difficult patch in the post war years when it over-expanded using imported grape varieties, losing quality as the volume increased. These days, Corsica's wines are hugely improved and its boutique vineyards receive a shower of gold medals each year from Paris.

So what are they like? Because of Corsica's rugged geography, even wines of the same cépage differ markedly between different regions, so the words that follow will only give a general indication.

Corsica's white wines, made using the Vermentinu grape, are light, dry and aromatic - some people describing them as "floral". Southern Corsica's spicy, light-coloured Sciaccarellu-based red wines undoubtedly take some of their unique flavours from the maquis surrounding the areas where they are grown. In contrast, the very deeply coloured, more northern red wines based on the Niellucciu grape are fuller in flavour and are described as having "structured tannins" and "balanced acidity". Many of the wines from Corsica's most celebrated wine region - Patrimonio (near St Florent in northern Corsica) - are based on the Niellucciu grape.

Most visitors to Corsica discover the island's magnificent rosé wines at some stage during their stay. Both the main red wine grape varieties produce excellent rosés, either individually or blended together: served very cold, they seem to go perfectly with a warm Corsican sunset. A huge amount of rosé is drunk on the island each year and Corsican rosés are becoming increasingly popular in mainland France - even as far north as the channel ports where it can be bought by shoppers from Southern England. My favourite at the moment is a rosé gris - so pale it is almost white - made with Sciaccarellu, Grenache and (please cover your eyes now, wine purists) Vermentinu.

### The regions

Despite its small size, Corsica boasts no fewer than nine AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée) regions - a reflection, no doubt, of the island's geographical and climatic diversity. These are: Patrimonio, Calvi, Ajaccio, Sartene, Figari, Porto Vecchio and AOC Corse. The largest, with 1,456 hectares is AOC Corse which occupies a large swathe of the eastern coastal plain

and a smaller area round Ponte Leccia; the smallest is Porto Vecchio with just 90 hectares.

There were 102 vineyards in Corsica the last time I counted. There are 32 in the Patrimonio and Cap Corse area, including those specialising in the region's famous Muscat (More about this in Lisette's excellent article below). There are 21 in the sprawling AOC Corse area and just four in Porto Vecchio. Some vineyards are very small indeed and many are difficult to find. But most will offer you a dégustation if you call on them - why not try it next time you're here?

### And finally

I think Corsica's wines have a great future. But don't expect to see them on the shelves of your local UK or US supermarket any time soon. The best are craft wines, produced lovingly in vineyards that can be as small as 10-15 hectares, and one big order from Tesco, LeClerc or Walmart would use up a year's output in one go.

There are co-operatives producing wine in much larger quantities, and it is only wines from companies like *La Réserve du Président* that export in anything like big volumes. I like their wines - though you're buying a mélange of different products rather than experiencing the spiky individuality of the wines from their smaller neighbours.

But nothing can beat the joy of trying a Corsican wine that's new to you and different from the one you tried last time. So take a good look through the shelves of your local Super U or Casino on your next visit - and even better, go and see the vineyards yourself and try before you buy. Finally, a word of caution: like most southern European wines, the wines of Corsica pack a considerable punch. At 13-14%ABV, they are not to be trifled with and I hardly need add that you should avoid driving after imbibing

*Would you be interested in going on a one-week escorted wine tour of Corsica in 2009? If you've actually read to the end of this article and are still interested, drop me (mac @ corsicaholiday.com) an email and if enough of you are keen, we'll try and organise something.*

\* the other three grape varieties listed are Barbarossa, Bianco Gentile, and Aleatico.

### Further Reading

*The Oxford Companion to Wine*, Oxford University Press

[Guide des Vins Corses](#)

[Vins de Corse](#)

## E R Whitwell and Corsica - 100 years on



by Robert Sharp

*Janet Whitwell visited the Hotel du Torrent in Venaco (pictured left) in 1908 and found it 'most comfortable with an excellent cuisine'*

Those familiar with books in English on Corsica will know that a good number have been written by ladies travelling there, most long before Dorothy 'Granite Island' Carrington [see bibliography at [www.corsica-isula.com](http://www.corsica-isula.com)].

It is interesting to read what Mrs. E.R. Whitwell had to say in her book *Through Corsica with a Paint Brush* published exactly 100 years ago. She was born Mary Janet Leatham in Wakefield in 1853 and married Edward Robson Whitwell (1843-1922) in 1873. He was a colliery manager and later managing director and vice-chairman of Hordern Collieries in the north east of England.

Her book covers two trips she took to Corsica in the spring of both 1907 and 1908 and is nicely illustrated with copies of her own art work, some of which appear to be signed M. Janet Whitwell (so I shall call her Janet). In 1907 she sailed from Les Salins d'Hyères towards the end of March for a ten-day holiday. Straightaway she comments how French rule was still unpopular and that she was often asked 'could not King Edward [VII] take them over again?!' Corsica she finds rich in forests and minerals but that there was little cultivation and no enterprise to open mines, the Corsican being 'too indolent to do more than is absolutely necessary to keep body and soul together'. On a four-day drive into the interior, her coachman 'had a ruffianly appearance ... no razor was applied all the time I was under his care', but he proved to be a 'delightful' and informative companion. She naturally comments on the roads, 'the very best I have ever seen(!), but like all of us found many of them very steep and very narrow, not to mention the sharp bends and precipices to one side or the other. As for the people, 'How they live on apparently doing nothing is not for me to say', adding that 'what work is done falls to the lot of women' and that the Corsican man merely 'adorns the bridges and walls of a village, neatly dressed in brown corduroy'. But as to their character, 'the Corsicans are nice people, I have never met more friendly'.

Her tour took her from Ajaccio to Calcatoggio, Vico, Evisa, Porto, Piana, Cargese and back to the capital. She met a number of other foreign visitors, especially Germans. In Evisa she drove to the Forêt d'Aitone 'as far as the snow', where the way over the col to Corte had only just been opened, presumably after the winter snows. Painting the sunset she notes 'the red sun just dipping into the sea beyond a pale blue, the whole framed by dark fir trees; the effect was gorgeous'. And she could not praise the Calanches highly enough: 'no one should visit Corsica without seeing them'. The outside of places to eat or to stop overnight often did not impress her, but once inside both rooms and food were perfectly fine.

Her second journey took Janet by train to Corte. 'Built high on a rock' it may be, 'but otherwise there is not much to see', although she did meet a young Englishman, there for the fishing. She continued on to Bastia where her holiday ended.

The following year she spent six weeks in Corsica, this time with a lady friend. Three weeks in Ajaccio painting were followed by two driving tours, the first covering much the same ground as the previous year (Piana, Evisa, Vico, Sagone). Again she met other foreign tourists - indeed, 14 of them all sat down to dinner together in Evisa - whose views on accommodation and meals certainly varied, although Janet herself was pretty pragmatic. Some days meant for painting were thwarted by a hailstorm, snow showers and the cold - this was late April in the mountains.

Her friend returned to England to be replaced by an Italian lady friend. They had intended a trip to Bonifacio, via Sartene and returning via Porto Vecchio, but heard that two other ladies had been stopped by fifty armed men. Apparently the election of Deputies was taking place and there was 'a very unpopular Deputy' these men wanted to catch. Instead, the ladies drove to Cap Corse. In Bocognano they heard that Bellegauche, a dangerous brigand for forty years, had recently managed to die a natural death instead of being executed. And there and in Vizzavona they met heavy rain (sound familiar?), at the latter choosing the wrong hotel (by the Col rather than the Station hotel), although there were lovely walks in the beech forest. But the Hôtel du Torrent (which is still there - recent picture above) at S. Pietro di Venaco was 'most comfortable with an excellent cuisine'. Making no reference to Paoli they passed through 'the little dirty town of Corte where the people have not the charming manners to be found elsewhere in Corsica' before pressing on via Ponte Leccia ('a most heaven-forsaken looking place' where 'there was nothing attractive') to Bastia where they merely spent the night, it being 'a comfort to reach civilisation'.

Heading north, Santa Severa she found a 'dismal waste' and a 'melancholy spot'. There's not much there today, but I would call it 'sleepy', and it does have a busy little marina. Although enjoying the coastal scenery they decided to go no further and turned inland through Luri, past Seneca's tower with its views of both sides of Cap Corse, and then south down the coast of Cap Corse to 'picturesque' St. Florent. The following day she painted what was left of the old town gates.

The next day, a Sunday, they drove from St. Florent to Ile Rousse in 5½ hours. It was election day, and crowds of people 'promenaded the streets in total darkness singing the Marseillaise'. Winds spoiled the short stay in Ile Rousse, where 'fleas abound .... the only place I have met them!' After a detour to Muro ('charmingly picturesque') they at last reached Calvi ..... which she failed to describe even though she stayed two days, only saying that 'an artist who wants brilliant sunshine and sunset effects will find them at Calvi'. She did add, though, that Calvi was the only place where we saw men with guns on their backs; at Bonifacio they carry them in the hand ready for use! The journey concluded down the west coast via Galeria ('an interesting village!') and Piana to Ajaccio.

The final quarter of the book consists of notes given to Janet by a lady who did make the drive from Ajaccio to Bonifacio and

who subsequently covered the same ground that Janet had to Evisa but then travelled on through Calacuccia, Corte, Vizzavona, and Ghisoni to Ghisonaccia, thence south via Solenzara to Bonifacio and back to Ajaccio via Sartene. These notes are actually more interesting and descriptive than Janet's; above Ghisoni, for example, amidst the snow showers, 'the views were lovely, but the roads very lonely'. Perhaps her most notable comment concerned the railway which, the writer felt, if extended, 'would no doubt improve the south' for 'cultivation seems growing less and less in some parts. Janet's conclusion was that 'the little inns in the country are primitive, but the food quite eatable, and you may be certain of clean, comfortable beds everywhere'. Travellers should take a Victoria or landau; diligences do run but are 'very uncomfortable'. She ends by expressing her 'intense pleasure' at 'one of the most beautiful spots in Europe'.

Reading these old accounts of travelling in Corsica are entertaining, especially when stacked against what we take for granted from our luxury holidays today. But perhaps what is most interesting is that many aspects remain fairly unchanged. Writers stood in the same spots that we do today and marvelled at the same sights; it was clear to them then as it is to us now just why Corsica was and is so special. Although Janet did find some places a little uninspiring, some inns lacking the creature comforts, some meals 'weird', it was perhaps for her, as it may be for us, the very functioning spartanness in many instances wherein the appeal lies.

We are able to move around the island more easily and the pace of life is so much faster, yet so much would still be so familiar to Janet today. All the more reason why we must play our part in ensuring that Janet Whitwell's 'intense pleasure', which we are still fortunate in being able to experience ourselves, remains unspoilt for future generations. But I wonder what happened to her original sketches?

You can order this book through [Corsicaholiday's books page](#).

## A Visit to Cap Corse



**By Lisette Palazzi**

*The Genoese Tower of Santa Maria, accessible to walkers on the Sentier des Douaniers, in Cap Corse.*

Like much of the island of Corsica, the Cap Corse peninsula is a succession of mountains covered in maquis that abruptly tumble down to the sea. The mountain summits in the Cap also form a dorsal spine, offering hikers and visitors panoramic views of both coasts. Of the 60

Genoese towers remaining in Corsica about 20 of them are found in the Cap. The following article highlights some of the key attractions and sights in this often called "island within an island".

### The West Coast

Approaching the Cap from the seaside resort of Saint Florent on D81 is the wine growing region of Patrimonio (See article on Corsican wines above). The grape vines on this side of Corsica benefit from a calcareous terrain found only in Bonifacio and the slopes of Patrimonio. The landscape also helps funnel the wind that blows from the Mediterranean into the valley, to produce wines that have earned international reputation and numerous awards. This area offers amazing views of the ocean and hills planted with endless rows of vines in every direction. There are numerous producers on both sides of the main road and many of them offer wine tastings to visitors.

In addition to its fine wines, the region of Cap Corse is also famous for its Muscat, a sweet wine usually served as an aperitif

and made with small raisins that are specially bred to achieve a high concentration of sugar. To this day, muscat producers continue the traditional method of placing their harvested grapes over large platforms, where the small grains can absorb plenty of sunlight and develop exquisite tastes and aromas. Excellent wines and muscats are also produced in other communities along the Cap including Rogliano, Morsiglia and Luri. North of Patrimonio on D80 is the village of Nonza. The panoramic view from its square tower covers the beach below with its dark sand, the gulf of Saint Florent and the entire village. Next on the road is the small marina of Albo, which its own Genoese tower, a tiny chapel and a well stocked epicerie. This is a convenient and more secluded spot for walking, stretching and enjoying a cup of coffee before continuing north on D80.

Driving on D80 along the western shoreline of the Cap is truly a journey between mountain and sea. The highway on this side of the Cap is rugged and narrow, with an endless sequence of hairpin turns over rocky cliffs and ancient villages perched high on the opposite hillside. This section of D80 seems to attract bicyclists, probably for the sheer challenge of pedaling through the difficult slopes.

With only a day or two to visit Cap Corse, visitors may want to focus on exploring the northern end of the peninsula with stops at Centuri, Rogliano and perhaps an overnight stay at the seashore village of Macinaggio.

After leaving Morsiglia, a clearly marked winding road (D35) descends to the port of Centuri. This fishermen's village is famous for its lobsters but visitors will find bars, cafes and restaurants to suit every taste and budget. With its pleasant terraces facing the tiny harbor, Centuri is a good choice for a late lunch. From Centuri, you can view the famous Moulin Mattei standing at the top of the hill named Col de la Serra.

After leaving Centuri, visitors can follow the signs to the Moulin Mattei for one of the most spectacular sites in the Cap: A panoramic view of the northern coast of Corsica with the Italian islands of Capraia and Elba on the northeast, the islet of Giraglia at the extreme north, with its modern lighthouse, the port of Centuri below on the northwest side, and to the South, a striking set of modern windmills overlooking the ruins of two ancient ones.

These modern windmills were established in 2000 as part of a green energy project called EOLE 2005 and constitute one of about ten pilot sites installed throughout France. A set of windmills stands in the village of Ersa and is visible on the West coast while another one stands in Rogliano on the East side of the Cap. At the start of the 19th century, there were as many as 14 windmills standing on this remote northern section of the Cap. The Mattei windmill was named after Louis Napoleon Mattei who in 1872 created the renowned aperitif Mattei Cap Corse.

### **The East Coast**

Leaving the Moulin Mattei and descending down to the eastern coast of the Cap to the village of Rogliano. Evidence of Rogliano's glorious past can be seen in the remains of its two castles, one dating from the 12th century, its five Genoese towers, several churches and chapels, and its monumental mausoleums.

Because of its unique landscape and relative isolation from the rest of Corsica, the inhabitants of Cap Corse earned their living primarily as merchants and fishermen, a factor that prompted many of them to leave their homeland in the 18th and 19th centuries and venture into South America and the Caribbean. The high altar made of Carrara marble inside the church of Sant'Agnellu is a gift from the "Roglianians" of Puerto Rico.

The drive from the hillside village of Rogliano down to the sea is very pleasant and offers superb views of the marine of Macinaggio below. Macinaggio, a large fishing village and a strategic port since the time of the Romans, is the starting point to the Sentier des Douaniers trail that leads to the Santa Maria tower. The tourist office in Macinaggio provides free maps and description of the path. Small coves abound along this trail, which at one time were the entry points for smugglers, hence the name "path of the customs officers".

The hike from Macinaggio to the tower is an easy-to-moderate 60 to 90 minute walk, mostly over flat terrain with fantastic views of the ocean at every turn. Midpoint between Macinaggio and the tower is a refreshment stall at the sandy beach of Tamarone, a real oasis in the summer. The Bay of Tamarone is an arc of turquoise water surrounded by green hills where you can often see horses grazing freely. The D80 highway on the eastern coast of Cap Corse is wider and less steep, making it easier to stop and enjoy the marinas and small beach resorts along the way. The village of Sisco is famous for its "Maisons d'Americains" built by earlier emigrants who returned to Corsica after making their fortunes in the Americas. To reach Sisco you must leave the main D80 road and climb up to the village on route D32.

The village of Erbalunga, just 10 km north of Bastia and famous for its well photographed cleft tower, is ideal for strolling through its shaded streets and central square. It also faces the well known Castel Brando hotel, another landmark worth visiting. Whether you begin your exploration of Cap Corse from Saint Florent or from Bastia you will be rewarded with amazing sights

and scenery in one of the most contrasting areas of Corsica.

### Practical Information

The web site [destination-cap-corse](#) offers a wealth of information including an interactive map with photos and detailed practical data on transportation, lodging and activities.

In addition to several hotels, restaurants, bakeries and shops, Macinaggio has a Pharmacy and an ATM machine. The hotel [Stella Marina](#) in Macinaggio offers hotel rooms and villas. If you fancy staying further south, try Hotel [U Pozzu](#) in Sisco managed by the friendly and efficient Caroline Tozza.

Earlier this month, our associated discussion forum [Corsica Lista](#) passed a milestone when the 250th member joined. If you have not yet joined this group, do please visit us and if you have a question or comment to make, we'd love to welcome you on board.

The recent closures of Zoom and XL.com weren't the best news for Corsica or the people who go there. But other providers will surely fill the gaps they leave. I will therefore be writing to all your favourite travel companies this month to try find out more about who will be going where next year, and in whose aeroplanes. As I find the answers, I'll post them on [Corsicaholiday](#) and [Corsica Isula's travel pages](#).

In the meantime if you find out anything about travel to Corsica that you feel would be helpful to Corsica Bulltinu's readers, please let me know!

That's all for now - see you in December.

Kind Regards

Mac

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Corsica Bulltinu

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