



BONIFACIO

Love on the rocks

Lanie Goodman visits the cliffhanging Mediterranean island paradise and discovers modern luxury, culinary magic and contemporary art

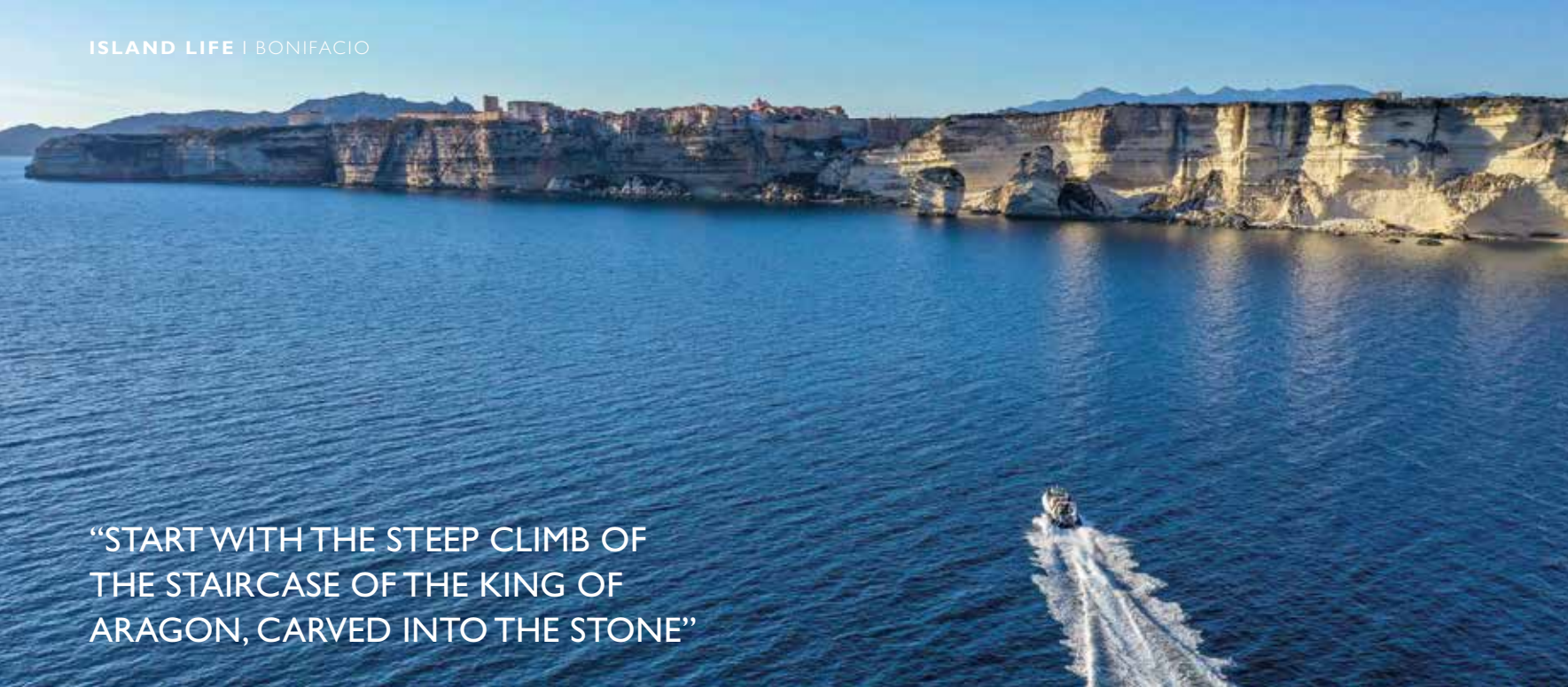
There's something about the sight of an ancient honey-coloured stone Genoese tower and a patch of shimmering sea that has an exhilarating effect on your first waking moments.

Technically, of course, you're in France – after centuries of warring invaders, Corsica was reconquered by the French in 1768 – but the storybook landscape is a jolt of disorienting beauty, a sense of out-of-time *dépaysement*. Viewed from my private

south-facing terrace at Cala di Greco, a stylish contemporary 40-room boutique hotel, Bonifacio is a dramatic sight to behold: even from a distance, the creamy striated limestone cliffs and citadel are unlike anywhere else on the island. It's also the oldest and southernmost city in Corsica, right across from Sardinia.

Once a strategically positioned fortress that fought off the raiding Saracens, the narrow cobblestone streets, pretty squares, churches and ochre stacked houses of the old town are atmospheric reminders of days gone by. »

The clifftop town of Bonifacio gazing out over the Mediterranean



“START WITH THE STEEP CLIMB OF THE STAIRCASE OF THE KING OF ARAGON, CARVED INTO THE STONE”

To explore Bonifacio, put on your walking shoes and start with the steep climb (187 steps) of the Staircase of the King of Aragon, carved into the stone, that links the upper and lower parts of the city and descends directly into the sea. Legends abound about its supposed overnight creation, but its architectural sophistication is indisputable. It was built in 1420 to have access to a spring of drinking water at the bottom of the cliff. The town also boasts an impressive ancient system of ceramic cisterns that gathered rainwater.

“Bonifacio is exceptional because it’s not Corsican, it’s Genoese,” Pierre Casano, a historian and uber-knowledgeable locally-born guide reminds us, as we try to catch our breath. “We’re perched on top of limestone, 60m above sea level and apart from the rest of the island. We have been independent for 600 years.” The panorama – turquoise creeks with patches of jade and the blue-green coastline of Sardinia off in the distance – is nothing short of hypnotic.

RESTAURANT SCENE

Up in the haute ville, there are browse-worthy rows of little shops selling locally crafted items such as straw baskets, ceramics, homewares and jewellery. Down below, at the buzzing marina – a postcard-perfect port of fishing boats and small yachts – stroll along the quay and stop in one the sunlit portside cafés for a pre-lunch aperitif of chilled muscat, the delicious locally produced white wine.

Many years ago, on my first trip to Bonifacio, I sought out a legendary renegade named Mimi, whose chiselled face and slicked-back long black hair were the model for Ocatarinetabellatchitchix, the sabre-rattling outlaw in the comic book, *Asterix in Corsica*. At the time, he worked in a popular restaurant on the port, dishing up paella and uncorking champagne bottles with a single deft swing of a long, extremely sharp knife. The tourists loved it and it was *très folklorique*. These days, the mood has shifted considerably as the city’s effervescent culinary scene has taken on a new cosmopolitan slant. Don’t miss a meal at these three outstanding restaurants on the quay: Da Passano, specialising in authentic Corsican dishes; the recently-opened Italian-inspired d’Amore; and upstairs, stylish gastronomic haunt, Finestra d’Amore, helmed by Michelin three-star chef Italo Bassi (Confusion, Porto Cervo)



and talented rising star, Edoardo Menna. Expect revisited classics that are as tasty as they are authentic. One of the staple Corsican ingredients is fresh brocciu, a delectable creamy ricotta-like cheese made from tangy ewe’s milk that gets thrown into everything from omelettes, sardines and cheese *beignets* to cakes and custards.

“We included dishes from my childhood,” says founder of the Restaurant Zani group and owner of the restaurants, Nicolas Panzani, who recounts how his grandmother would get him to eat vegetables by stuffing the cheese into aubergine croquettes. Other specialities on the menu include sea bass tartare with crumbled nuts and ginger, grilled veal, and a delectable crême brûlée with figs. Panzani considers himself a true blue Bonifacien, who chose to return to his hometown after working

in Bali and travelling the world. Growing up in a family of restaurateurs, as an adolescent he sold soft drinks and sandwiches on the beach and dreamed of opening up his own gastronomic establishment. Last year, when he converted an attic above Da Passano into a luminous glass-windowed space and contacted Italo Bassi, Finestra d’Amore – the city’s first real foodie haven – was born.

“It wasn’t hard to adapt Italian cuisine to Corsica, it’s the same terroir,” says chef Bassi. “But what’s different is using the best ingredients from local farmers and fishermen. We also have a farmer near Ajaccio who supplies us with edible wildflowers.”

Among the exquisitely prepared dishes at Finestra d’Amore is Bassi’s celebrated signature dish, double ravioli, a mouthwatering assemblage of pasta filled with turkey stuffing, Parmigiano Reggiano, wild thyme and burrata. Another highlight is Menna’s creation, *la fleur d’artichaut*. Call it art on a plate: the artichokes, first steamed then fried, are spread like flowers, accompanied by sweetbreads. And when it comes to distinguishing his native turf from other desirable destinations, »



Clockwise from left: Bonifacio’s medieval citadel and marina; the approach by sea; Port de Plaisance; enjoy gastronomic dining at Finestra d’Amore; mouthwatering salad at Da Mare Sea Lounge; Finestra d’Amore in the harbour; enjoy a luxury stay at Cala di Greco’s luxury villa set in a centuries-old olive grove; chef Italo Bassi; relax at Da Mare Sea Lounge



IMAGES © ELSA ROUANEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ZANI GROUP/HÔTEL CALA DI GRECO



“EXPECT JAW-DROPPINGLY BEAUTIFUL PINK ROCKS, TRANSPARENT TURQUOISE SHALLOWS AND FINE QUARTZ SAND”

MANY ATTRACTIONS

Another highlight of Bonifacio is the contemporary art biennale at De Renava, which runs until November 2 this year and features a selection of 20 contemporary international artists.

Or you could take a boat to explore the mysterious sea grottoes hidden below the cliffs, or cruise the coastal view of *les calanques* and the Lavezzi archipelago, rich with marine life. You could even hire your own boat and splurge on lunch at the chic Hôtel des Pêcheurs on the wild but glamorous ‘millionaire island’ of Cavallo.

It’s a short drive to the sprawling, gorgeously landscaped 18-hole Golf de Spérone, 6km outside Bonifacio, which is set back on the edge of the cliffs overlooking the sea and was voted one of Europe’s most beautiful golf courses.

From there, driving east along the coast toward Porto-Vecchio, be sure to take in the beautiful white sands and crystal clear waters of Palombaggia and Santa Giulia beaches, bordered by pine forests.

The best bet for sun-bed lounging or dining is the Da Mare Sea Lounge, hidden away in a bend in the road on a pristine curve of sand. Expect jaw-droppingly beautiful pink rocks, transparent turquoise shallows and fine quartz sand shaded by umbrella pines and tamarisk trees.

It’s this glorious mental image that I often return to on a cold, damp winter’s day when I’m longing for sunshine. In my book, this truly is paradise found. **FT**



Above: Why not take a boat cruise around Corsica’s craggy shoreline?

Panzani aptly sums it up: an island on an island, authentic and wild, Bonifacio also benefits from an unyielding resistance to property tycoons and an immunity to trendiness, a phenomenon that some call *la Corsitude*. Contrary to the age-old image of Corsica as bandit country – proudly flaunted by the ubiquitous national emblem, a black pirate with earrings and a bandana, which is slapped onto everything, from sausage labels to T-shirts to bumper stickers – national pride runs deep. “We have no mass tourism here, no big cruise ships, no hotel chains. And we have a code of honour, we’re very family-oriented.”

Plus there’s a sense of hospitality, he says, and a desire to share the many treasures of the Île de Beauté with visitors. “Corsica is one of the first places in the world to give women the vote,” Panzani reminds me. “My grandmother and great-grandmother spoke Corsican – the language is something we should protect.”

BONIFACIO ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE:

BY AIR

From the UK, several airlines operate direct flights to Figari airport, including **easyJet** from London Gatwick and **British Airways** from London Heathrow.

Air Corsica offers daily direct flights to Figari from Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Nice, www.aircorsica.com

BY FERRY

The **SNCM Corsica Ferries** run from Marseille, Nice or Toulon, www.corsica-ferries.fr

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel Cala di Greco, www.hotel-caladigreco.com

A Cheda Hotel, www.acheda-hotel.com

WHERE TO EAT

Da Passano www.da-passano.com

D’Amore www.d-amore.fr

Finestra d’Amore www.finestra-d-amore.fr

Da Mare Sea Lounge www.sealounge-portovecchio.com

Hôtel des Pêcheurs, Cavallo, www.hoteldespecheurs.com

WHAT TO DO

La Biennale d’Art Contemporain de Bonifacio, ‘Roma Amor’, www.derenava-art.com

Spérone Golf Course, www.golfdesperone.com

Boat excursions to the calanques, grottoes and the natural reserve on the Lavezzi Islands: spmbonifacio.com

INFORMATION

Tourist Office: www.bonifacio.fr

Corsica Tourism: www.visit-corsica.com/en