

Corsica – The Scented Isle

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Corsica and transfer to Evisa
Day 2/3	Evisa
Day 4/7	Venaco
Day 8	Fly London

Departs

May

Focus

Plants, birds and walks

Grading

B. Day walks only. Between 300 and 1,830 metres

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code FRA04) or brochure

Highlights

- Wildlife walks amongst spectacular mountains & gorges
- Unique scenery and culture
- Endemic Corsican Nuthatch, Corsican Finch and Crossbill
- A rich flora, including scented maquis and many endemics
- Characterful accommodation & tasty cuisine



Images (from top to bottom)
Corsican Crocus, Golfe de Galeria and Firecrest



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Introduction

This is a two-centre holiday, based in simple but comfortable mountain auberges, each one occupying a unique setting. Our first three nights will usually be spent on the west side of the island amongst the high cliffs and deep gorges of Spelunca. Our last four nights will be close to the high mountains and pine forests of the Corsican Natural Park. From these bases we will look for birds and plants on a variety of walks, taking a hearty picnic lunch with us each day. Should you prefer at any time not to join us on a particular walk or outing, you are free to relax or potter at your own pace in these spectacular areas.



Naturetrek group in Gorge de la Restonica

Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Fly UK to Corsica and transfer to Evisa

We leave London this morning on a direct flight to Bastia*. Arriving mid-morning, we will drive along the north coast to Calvi, a beautiful old Genoese stronghold, with an imposing 13th century citadel and a pretty little harbour. From here we will make our way slowly to Evisa, a 4-hour drive, during which we will stop en route to enjoy the stunning coastal scenery and look for our first birds and flowers. Amongst the plants, we shall look for the endemic Corsican Storksbill *Erodium corsicum*, the endemic Sea Lavender *Limonium corsicum*, Tree Spurge *Euphorbia dendroides* and a variety of the pungent plants that punctuate the maquis. Those who look skywards, may be rewarded with sightings of Common Buzzard, Red Kite or other raptors and perhaps Alpine or Pallid Swifts, while on the cliffs and in the maquis we will hope to see Blue Rock Thrush and the secretive Sardinian and Dartford Warblers.



Cyrtus hypocistis

We follow a spectacular road that winds high above the dramatic coastline through wild, maquis-covered hills. Far below us lies a turquoise sea, and awe-inspiring cliff scenery. This is the most wild and unpopulated of all Corsica's landscapes, and we are sure to find time to stop and enjoy the fine views and roadside displays of wild flowers, before we head for our hotel in the idyllically-situated village of Evisa.



Spelunca Gorge

Positioned on a hillside and surrounded by chestnut trees, Evisa must be one of Corsica's most beautiful mountain villages, commanding as it does one of the finest views on the island. Above and to the east lies the Forest of Aitone and the Col de Verghio; below lie the spectacular cliffs of the Gorges de Spelunca, the spectacular pink granite towers known as 'Les Calanches', and the serene Golfe de Porto behind which the sun sets each evening. We will stay here for three nights, our base being a simple but comfortable auberge, run by Monsieur Toussaint Ceccaldi, enjoying stunning views from its well-situated restaurant that serves hearty local food – fresh trout, wild boar and Corsican omlette, amongst other regional favourites.

*** Depending on available flights, we may fly to Calvi instead.**

Day 2

Evisa

This morning we will do a 4-hour walk from Evisa to Ota, descending through pine forest and mature maquis into the spectacular Spelunca Gorge. The walk follows an old mule trail that linked the mountain villages with the coast in past times. Here there is a good range of plants, with fine displays of Rock-roses, shady banks of *Cyclamen repandum*, and endemics such as Long-leaved Snowflake *Acis longifolia* and Illyrian Sea Daffodil *Pancratium illyricum*. Jays, Firecrests, and a variety of warblers are the avian possibilities on this walk and Tyrrhenian Wall Lizards scurry over the rocks, as we descend, the most abundant of Corsica's unique and fascinating range of reptiles and amphibians.



Illyrian Sea Daffodil

We will break our walk with a picnic lunch beside the river at the Genoese Zaglia Bridge, where large stands of Royal Fern *Osmunda regalis* line the riverbanks and Dippers are regularly seen, before continuing to the road and the pretty village of Ota, where we relax for while over

refreshments and enjoy the magnificent views from the terrace. If time permits, we may drive down to Porto and enjoy more of the spectacular coastal scenery.

Further walk description: Although not a great distance, the descent down the Spelunca gorge is steep in places and there are loose rocks and uneven ground on the near constant descent to the river. Although we are moving at a very relaxed pace, some experience of walking on rough tracks is desirable to be totally comfortable with this walk. The distance from Evisa to Ota along the trail is 4.1km and as we arrive at the road at the bottom of the gorge, following lunch, we offer a lift from here to the café in Ota for those that would like. This makes the walk a little over 3 Km and is a real highlight of any visit to Corsica.

Day 3

Evisa

We will spend this morning walking in the Forest of Aitone, the largest of Corsica's natural pine forests. Amongst the plants of the forest, we will find Corsican Hellebore *Helleborus argutifolius* and Corsican Mint *Mentha requienii*, whilst bird highlights may include Great Spotted Woodpecker, Wryneck, Treecreeper and the elusive and endemic Corsican Nuthatch, Corsican Finch and Crossbill.

In the afternoon, after a picnic lunch, where we regularly see Golden Eagle and Marmora's Warbler, we drive to the mouth of the Liamone River on the Golfe de Sagone, where the reedbeds, carr



Tyrrhenian Wall Lizard

woodland, maquis and sand-dunes hold an interesting variety of birds, including Little Ringed Plover and a selection of other waders, Marsh Harrier, Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Lark, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrikes, Bee-eaters and a variety of warblers and buntings. Interesting wanderers occasionally turn up here and past highlights have included Purple and Night Herons, Black-winged Stilts, White-winged Tern, Audouin's Gull, and Osprey. Amongst the dunes are Sea Bindweed *Calystegia soldanella*, Cottonweed *Otanthus maritimus*, Sea Medick *Medicago marina*, Three-horned Stock *Matthiola tricuspidata* and Yellow Horned Poppy *Glaucium flavum* and in the meadows, masses of Tongue Orchid and Jersey Orchid.

Day 4

Transfer to Venaco

This morning we leave Evisa behind and drive eastwards along the quiet and spectacular road, winding upwards through chestnut woodland and conifer forest to cross the Col de Verghio. We take a short walk from here looking for mountain birds such as Water Pipit and Woodlark and diurnal migrants that may be passing through if the weather is favourable. The high crags are also the haunt of the elusive Mouflon, the largest of Corsica's relatively few mammals. We then descend through the spectacular Santa Regina Gorge where we shall stop to enjoy our picnic lunch and look

for the endemic Thrift *Armeria leucocephala* and other plants on the cliffs, with Ravens and Crag Martins overhead, and Dippers in the river.

After lunch we proceed slowly to Venaco, stopping en-route to search for orchids and other plants and look for Sardinian, Subalpine and Marmora's Warblers that can often be heard singing in the maquis. We pause for a visit to the historic town of Corte, Corsica's ancient capital, nestling at the foot of the island's highest mountains, before heading for our hotel, which is located in the beautiful maquis-covered valley below Venaco. This will be our base for our remaining four nights where we can explore the maquis, look for Dippers along the river or relax in the pool.

Day 5

Venaco

After an optional early-morning walk, we will set off to explore the Verghello Valley to the south, where Eiffel's dramatic railway bridge spans the ravine. The valley offers a variety of habitats to explore and a good range of plants and birds may be found. The maquis is dominated by Holm-oak, Tree Heather, Strawberry Tree, Juniper and Maritime Pine, whilst higher up we find dense forests of Corsican Pine. On the walk we shall look out for orchids such as Violet Helleborine, Tongue Orchids, Barton's Orchid *Dactylorhiza insularis* and plentiful *Cyclamen repandum*. Birds may include Crag Martin, Corsican Nuthatch, Corsican Finch, Firecrest and Treecreeper and we may encounter columns of Processionary Moth caterpillars - no friend of the forester on account of the ruthless way in which they can strip the needles from pines. This is also a likely place to find the endemic Corsican Fire Salamander, particularly after rain.



Alpine Chough

After a picnic lunch, we head off to explore the forest of Vizzavona, situated beneath the great snow-capped cone of Monte D'Oro, the high mountain that marks the very centre of the island. Botanically, the area's greatest attraction is its extensive coppiced Beech forest that lies at the top of the pass and mixes with Corsican Pine on lower slopes. The ground is carpeted with *Cyclamen hederifolium*, a joy to behold in the autumn. We round off the afternoon with drinks at Vizzavona Station, the highest on Corsica's unique railway, before returning to our hotel for dinner.

Day 6

Venaco (Gorge de la Restonica)

It is a spectacular drive up the valley of the Gorge de la Restonica, the pine forests providing another opportunity to look for Corsican Nuthatch. From the car park at the roadhead, we set out on foot to explore the upper reaches of this high and starkly dramatic glaciated valley (for those less experienced in mountain walking, a walk down the valley provides an easy and rewarding alternative). A short, but steep, rocky ascent takes us to the enchanting Lac de Melo, surrounded by melting snow and soaring granite cliffs. We will usually have our picnic here, sharing the leftovers with Alpine Chough and scanning the skies for Golden Eagle and Lammergeier. Above the treeline,

the vegetation is unique, with large areas of Corsican Alder, carpets of Corsican Crocus *Crocus corsicus*, near to melting snow and other endemics such as Corsican Butterwort *Pinguicula corsica* and the silvery Everlasting *Helichrysum frigidum*. For the adventurous it is possible to continue to the higher Lac de Capitello, usually still frozen at this time of year but a breeding ground for the confiding Alpine Accentor.

Further walk description: The walk up the Restonica Gorge is the most challenging of the week and indeed the most spectacular and rewarding. We drive to the car park at the foot of the main gorge and the walk then climbs steadily up to the two lakes from there. The car park lies at 1370m and Lac de Melo (the first lake) at 1711m. This ascent can be covered, walking at a very steady pace, in around 1hr – 1hr 30minutes but does involve some uneven ground, loose rocks and some challenging sections which involve 2 short ladders and using chains as assistance for a section near the first lake. Some experience and confidence with mountain walking is desirable for this walk. On reaching the first lake, there is the option to walk up to the second lake, Lac de Capitello. This takes a further 45minutes and climbs steeply to the lake which lies at 1930m.



Restonica Valley

It must be remembered that there are options should you be unsure about this walk. Guests have, in the past, walked as far as they would like up towards the lake and then returned to a Café near the carpark to relax there when they wish to. For those that decide not to attempt the walk at all, a very nice alternative is to walk from the car park down the valley along the very scenic road to another Café.



Corte

This is around 4km and on a perfectly flat surface throughout and steadily downhill. The contingent climbing to the lakes can then pick you up on the way past. This has worked well in the past.

Day 7

Venaco

Depending on the interests within the group, we may spend more time exploring Corte, visiting more orchid sites and walking in the adjacent Tavignano Valley. The low maquis here is a regular breeding site for Marmora's Warbler, a rare resident but commoner in Corsica than anywhere else

in its small range. Alternatively, we can head for the east coast, where arable fields and a number of lagoons provide a new range of species. Little and Great Egret, Squacco and Purple Heron are all possible and Nightingale, Kingfisher, Cetti's, Fan-tailed and Moustached Warblers all breed here. A good variety of passage migrants may include such birds as Red-footed Falcon, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Bee-eater and Golden Oriole.

Day 8

Fly Corsica to London

Today we head home after an exploration of the beautiful Mediterranean island of Corsica.

Tour Grading

Our walks will be no more than eight kilometres in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds and plants. They are graded B, but experience of rough mountain terrain would be desirable. Generally we will take breakfast at 8 a.m. and aim to leave at 9 a.m. for each day's excursion. We will break each day with a picnic lunch and will be aim to be back around 6 p.m. Breakfast and dinner will be taken in our hotel. On some days there will be an optional early morning bird walk before breakfast. All walks and excursions are optional, to allow you to take a day or a morning off should you wish, and if we have sufficient numbers for two vehicles and therefore two leaders (a botanist and an ornithologist), there will be scope for some flexibility of the programme.

Weather

This time of year is prime time for migrant birds and many of the spring flowers; it is also an ideal time to visit, as daytime temperatures are usually no more than 75°F, with cool evenings. We can expect plenty of sunshine, but spring weather can be fickle and cloud and occasional rain are possible. At this season Corsica is a lush and green paradise, with plenty of snow still lying on the summits of its highest peaks.

Food & Accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday. Both hotels have a swimming pool.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting flights, at the time of booking.