

Corsica in Autumn

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

September

Focus

Walking & natural history

Grading

B. Day walks only. Between 300 and 1,830 metres. Please see walk descriptions on page 2 and 6

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code FRA22) 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



From top to bottom: Mount Etna Barberry, Golfe de Galeria, Firecrest



Naturetrek Mingledown Barn Wolf's Lane Chawton Alton Hampshire GU34 3HJ UK

T: +44 (0)1962 733051

E: info@naturetrek.co.uk

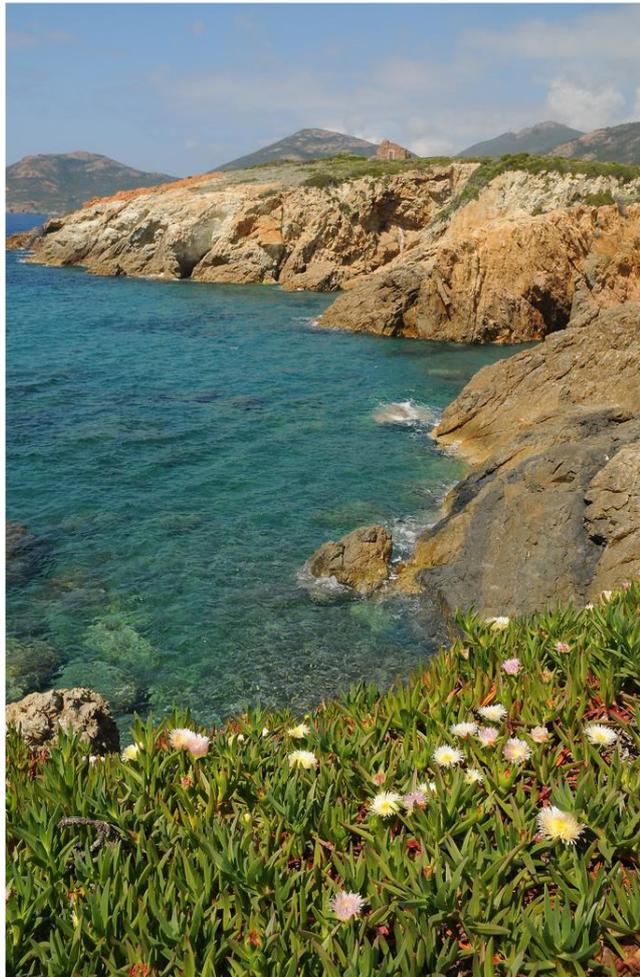
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Introduction

This is a two-centre holiday, based in comfortable mountain auberges, each one occupying a unique setting. Our first three nights will 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, plants, butterflies, dragonflies and other wildlife on gentle and varied morning and afternoon 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.

You should note that, whilst the end of September is a delightful time at which to travel in Corsica, with the weather more reliable, the island is often dry after the long hot summer and flowering plants and singing birds are not abundant as they are in May (when we run our spring tour). It is, however, a better time for insects, with butterflies, dragonflies and grasshoppers much more abundant. There are also some special autumn flowering plants, whilst the birds in evidence are as much autumn passage migrants as residents.

Without birdsong to alert us to the presence of the more skulking species, these will be harder to see, but such specialities as Corsican Nuthatch, Corsican Finch and Crossbill should be seen as they move in active feeding parties at this season. Thus, this is very much an all-round natural history holiday, hopefully with the advantage of pleasant, warm and sunny weather at a time when the British summer is usually at an end.



Golfe de Galeria



Audouin's Gull

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, transfer to Evisa

We leave from London this morning on a scheduled flight to Bastia*. Arriving around midday, we will take a leisurely 4-hour drive during which we will stop en route to look for our first birds, flowers and butterflies. On the coast, 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. Birders may be rewarded with sightings of Common Buzzard, Red Kite or perhaps a migrant Hobby, as it hawks for dragonflies and other insects on its journey southwards and on the cliffs and in the maquis, we will hope to see Blue Rock Thrush and the secretive Sardinian and Dartford Warblers.



Corsican Wall Brown

We follow a spectacular road that winds high above the dramatic north-western coastline, and 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 plants, before we head inland to our hotel in the idyllically-situated village of Evisa.

Positioned on a hillside and surrounded by chestnut trees, Evisa must be one of Corsica's most beautiful mountain villages, commanding one of the finest views on the island. Above and to the west stands the Forest of Aitone and the Col de Verghio; below lie the spectacular cliffs of the Gorges de Spelunca, the pink granite towers known as 'Les Calanches', and the serene Golfe de Porto behind which the sun sets each evening. We shall 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 omelette, amongst other regional favourites.

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

Day 2

Evisa

This morning we will do the 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 maquis shrubs that include Holm Oak *Quercus ilex*, Tree Heath *Erica arborea*, Prickly Juniper *Juniperus oxycedrus*, and Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo*, which will by now be laden with its strawberry red fruits. Whilst colourful flowering plants are less in evidence at this season, we expect to see the bright-red berries of Smilax and fruit of Old Man's Beard that festoon the trees and the beautiful flowers of *Cyclamen hederifolium*, which thrives in the semi-shade of the open woodland. Jays, Firecrests and a variety of warblers are amongst 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.

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. The variety and numbers of butterflies in this sunny valley will keep us well entertained, with Cardinal, Swallowtail, Clouded Yellow and Corsican Wall Brown. The spectacular Two-tailed Pasha (that would look more at home in a tropical rain forest!) will be a highlight of this holiday, its larval food plant being the Strawberry Tree. We finish our walk in the pretty village of Ota, where we relax for a while over refreshments and enjoy the magnificent views from the terrace. In the late afternoon we visit the spectacular red granite cliffs of the Calanche de Piana a little way down the coast and look for Blue Rock Thrush and the little endemic Pink Snowflake *Acis rosea*, before the long, tortuous drive back to Evisa.

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.



Brown Argus on Willow-leaved Gentian

We will spend this morning walking in the Forest of Aitone, one of the largest of Corsica's natural pine forests. The very aromatic endemic Corsican Mint *Mentha requienii* grows here with masses of Willow-leaved Gentian *Gentiana asclepiadea* and resident birds may include Great Spotted Woodpecker, Firecrest, the elusive endemic Corsican Nuthatch and Crossbill, feeding on the pine cones.

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 woodland, maquis and sand-dunes hold an interesting variety of birds, including Little Ringed Plover, Kingfisher, Great Crested and Little Grebe and herons. Summer visitors such as Tawny Pipit, Short-toed Lark, Red-backed and Woodchat Shrike may still be present, along with Cirl and Corn Bunting, whilst the rare Audouin's Gull and migrant Ospreys are sometimes seen.

Plants of the dunes include Cottonweed *Otanthus maritimus*, Sea Kale *Cakile maritima*, Sea Spurge *Euphorbia paralias* and Yellow Horned Poppy, which may still have a few late flowers. This can also be an excellent site for insects, with the endemic Blue-tailed Damselfly *Ischnura generi*, Scarlet Darter *Crocothemis erythraea*, Lesser Emperor *Anax parthenope* and a variety of grasshoppers, in the maquis, behind the shoreline.



Nosed Grasshopper (*Acrida ungarica*)

Day 4

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, with Ravens and Crag Martins overhead, and Dippers in the river. After lunch we



Corte

Transfer to Venaco

stop in an area of maquis, where Sardinian and Marmora's Warblers are often encountered. 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 near 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



Corsican Fire Salamander

This morning, we will explore the Verghello Valley, which offers a range of altitudes and vegetation zones, from maquis to mountain forest, with their respective plants and birds. At the bottom of the valley we find maquis, with Maritime Pine, Holm-oak, Tree Heather, Strawberry Tree, and Juniper, while higher up we enter forest of Corsican Pine. On our walk, we will look out for Autumn Lady's-Tresses *Spiranthes spiralis*, and *Colchicum neapolitanum*, together with birds of prey, Blue

Rock Thrush, Corsican Nuthatch, Crossbill, Cirl Bunting and others. This is also a likely place to find the endemic Corsican Fire Salamander, particularly after rain.

We will stop for a picnic lunch before heading on this afternoon to explore the forest of Vizzavona, situated beneath the great 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 here and towards the nearby Cascades des Anglais is carpeted with *Cyclamen hederifolium*. 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 (Restonica Gorge)

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 road-head, 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 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, Mt Etna Barberr *Berberis aetnensis* and the endemic

Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* subsp. *praemorsa*, the latter two with showy red fruit. Corsican Butterwort *Pinguicula corsica*, the silvery Everlasting *Helichrysum frigidum* and the lemon-scented *Thymus herba-barona* are just a few of the many endemic plants likely to be encountered. For the adventurous it is possible to continue to the higher Lac de Capitello, the best place to find the confiding Alpine Accentor.

We will carefully retrace our steps and enjoy refreshments back at the car-park, before returning to our hotel.

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 Gorge



A Naturetrek group walking near Lac de Melo (left) and *Cyclamen hederifolium* (right)

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. 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, and walking in the 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, Great Crested and Little Grebe are possibilities and Kingfisher, Cetti's and Fan-tailed Warblers all breed here. A good variety of passage migrants may include such birds as Honey Buzzard, Red-footed Falcon, Osprey, Marsh Harrier, Montagu's Harrier and Bee-eater. We finish with a visit to the hill-top Roman site, overlooking modern-day Aleria.

Day 8

Fly Corsica to UK

Regrettably, we must leave our hotel early this morning for the 90-minute drive to Bastia (or two-hour drive to Calvi, depending on flight route). We should arrive back in London by mid-afternoon.

Tour Grading

Our walks will be no more than 8km in length and at a slow pace so that we can enjoy the birds, plants, butterflies etc. 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 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 because we sometimes have two vehicles and therefore two leaders (a botanist and an ornithologist), there will be scope for some flexibility of the programme.

Weather

September is a good time for migrant birds and autumn flowering plants; 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 cloud and occasional rain are of course possible. At this season the wonderful smell of Corsica's extensive maquis has earned it the title of 'The Scented Isle'.

Food & Accommodation included in the price

All food and accommodation is included in the price of this holiday, except lunch on days 1 and 8. Both hotels have a swimming pool.

Regional Departures

The limited flights between the UK and the island of Corsica mean that we are currently only able to offer flights from London Gatwick, with the flights between Gatwick and Bastia only currently running on a Sunday. We are able to offer connecting flights between Gatwick and other UK airport, please request these at the time of booking if they may be of interest.

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.

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