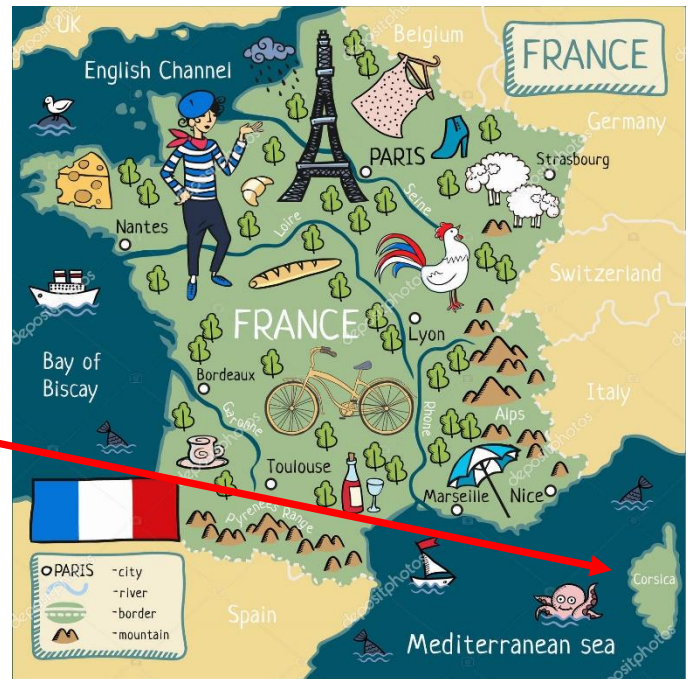


Hiking in Corsica and a Visit to Paris, September 2018

Corsica ... hmmm ... from some friends we received blank stares when Corsica was mentioned as our upcoming hiking destination; from others the name Napoleon tumbled out. Yes, Napoleon Bonaparte was indeed born on the island of Corsica in the city of Ajaccio in 1769. What makes the timing particularly interesting is that France had acquired Corsica from the Italian city-state of Genoa only the year before (1768) ... what impact on history, especially the history of France, would there have been if Napoleon had been born an Italian?

The island of Corsica sits in the Mediterranean Sea south-east of France's southern coastline and the city of Nice (it is actually closer to the coastline of Italy than France). At roughly 3,351 square miles in size, it is about 30% smaller than the state of Connecticut. Corsica's population is approximately 330,000.



MTS Trip Day 1 – Arrival in Ajaccio, Corsica: We flew into Corsica's capital city, Ajaccio, located on its western coast, on a sunny Saturday afternoon (a quick flight from

Paris where we had overnighted at an airport hotel to begin the process of adjusting to a local time 8 hours ahead of Denver time). We were met at the airport by Alex, the lead guide of the Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) hiking trip, *Corsica: Hiking the Island of Beauty*, scheduled to start that evening. After a short drive, we settled into our seaside hotel before meeting up with the rest of the group for a welcome dinner at a nearby restaurant. An excellent meal was topped off by a choice of desserts ... one look at the fresh green fig topped vanilla custard tart and I was instantly transported back to my childhood in El Segundo, California, where we had both a green and black fig tree in our yard and would greedily eat the ripe figs right off the trees.

Our MTS group consisted of Steve and myself plus 13 other hikers from around the US:

- Vicky and Mario from just down the road in Parker, Colorado
- Laurie and Steve from Richmond, Virginia (friends with Vicky & Steve and their former neighbors in Colorado)
- Carolyn and Bill from Albany, New York
- Terry from Santa Barbara
- Julia (Terry's daughter) from San Francisco, California
- Scott from Greenbrae, California (friends with Terry since their high school days)
- Jim from Chicago, Illinois
- Alan from Simsbury, Connecticut
- Marla from just up the road in Denver, Colorado
- Tzong from Los Altos, California



Looking across the Bay of Ajaccio from our hotel

With the exception of Julia who was in her mid-late 20's, we ranged in age from mid-40's to 75 years young ☺. For several in the group, this was their first MTS trip; others, such as ourselves, were veterans of one or more MTS trips. Our guides for the trip were:

- Alex, 41, our lead guide who grew up visiting Corsica every summer as his parents are both Corsican by birth (he grew up in Paris). He's lived fulltime in Corsica for years now and is a certified mountain guide.
- Cinzia (pronounced chin-zee-ah or just 'chin' for short) happens to be both Alex's business partner and girlfriend. She graduated university in Corsica and is working to become Corsica's first female certified mountain guide.



Lead Guide Alex and our MTS group: (back row L-R) Steve, Mario, Bill, Carolyn, Marla, Terry, Jim, Tzong, Scott, and Alan (front row L-R) Laurie, Vicky, myself and husband Steve (missing, Julia and Cinzia)

Besides being called the "Island of Beauty," Corsica is sometimes called "the Mountain in the Sea" and for good reason. A single chain of mountains makes up two-thirds of the island; the highest peak, Monte Cinto, stands proudly at 8,891' (yes, there are ski resorts). Twenty other mountains stand at over 6,560 feet. Corsica boasts the highest mountains and the most rivers of any Mediterranean island. The mountains effectively cut the island in half with no road between the two main towns of Bastia in the north and Ajaccio in the south.

The GR 20 is a long distance trail that traverses Corsica diagonally from north to south. At 112 miles long and with over 40,000' of altitude gain along the way it is considered to be the *most* difficult of all the European GR routes (grande randonnées or big treks) and one of the most beautiful mountain trails in Europe. Fortunately, we were NOT planning to do the entire GR 20, only a small portion of it. Instead, as Alex pointed out to us, we would be getting a hiking "taste" of Corsica over the next week by sampling its coastlines, its hills, and its alpine region. We also spent the week "sampling" our way through the cuisine of the island ... definitely a great combination!



MTS Day 2 – Hike to Watchtower & Move to Porto:

We depart Ajaccio and drive north in two vans for about 90 minutes, passing through a few villages including Piana. The scenery is very reminiscent of Southern California coastal areas with a mix of eucalyptus trees (native to Australia), various cacti, junipers, lavender, etc. Our first trailhead of the trip is a dusty parking lot on a bluff overlooking the sea. Our hiking destination is a stone watchtower built by the Genoese, the *Tour de Turchiu*. Nearly 100 of these towers were built by the Republic of Genoa between 1530 and 1620 as a series of coastal defenses to stem attacks by Barbary pirates (Ottoman pirates and privateers who operated from North Africa which sits just south of Europe).



On the trail to Genoese Watchtower atop rock formation in background



The 3 mile hike to the watchtower is mostly down, then up on a dusty then rocky trail – all under sunny, warm conditions. We climb to the top of the watchtower, first by an external rock stairway and then by an internal one which has purposely uneven riser sizes to better slow down an attacking enemy ... fires lit were atop a watchtower to signal trouble. The view from the top of the watchtower is a gorgeous 360 degrees ... nearly 1000 feet down the cliff to the turquoise sea in one direction, to the craggy peaks of the island's interior, to an osprey riding the thermals above the water. We gladly tuck into a picnic lunch of wild boar sausage (from Alex & Cinzia's personal stock), cheese, bread, spreads, sweet melon, and more while enjoying the views!

By the time we reverse our tracks and return to the trailhead, we are more than ready to enjoy a cold beverage at the nearby hut ... even with only 3 ice cubes provided in the glass (yep, Corsica follows the European way of providing ice in the glass – barely any for us ice-loving folks!).

View from inside watchtower looking north/northeast



These lucky folks were spotted as we hiked uphill in the sun



The road north into Porto, our home for the next three nights, roughly follows the coastline and takes us into the heart of the *Calanches de Piana*, an UNESCO World Heritage site. A “calanche” is defined as a narrow, steep-walled inlet that is developed in limestone, dolomite, or other carbonate strata and found along the Mediterranean coast. With the distinctive pink-red rock of western Corsica, the jagged pinnacles are quite impressive, some rising 1,300 feet. Also impressive are the large tourist buses navigating the narrow, curvy road!



The tiny port village of *Porto* is not a traditional Corsican village – it was actually created as a tourist town, a jumping off point for both the *Calanches de Piana* and the *Reserve Naturelle de Scandola* (see Day 4). Being an island, I assumed Corsica was traditionally a fishing economy with villages scattered along the coastline ... an incorrect assumption. Villages in Corsica were traditionally built both inland and up into the hills – both of which assisted in defending them from arriving enemies. As a result, traditional Corsican cuisine does not involve a lot of seafood. Instead, charcuterie, cheeses, and chestnuts are among its staples. *Charcuterie* comes from chair, 'meat', and cuit, 'cooked' and is the branch of cooking devoted to prepared meat products, such as bacon, ham, sausage, terrines, pâtés, and confit, primarily from pork. Corsican charcuterie is considered one of the world's best due to the traditional production processes used, and due to the fact that Corsican pigs, which live partly in the wild, are crossbred with Corsican wild boar and are mainly fed with chestnuts and chestnut flour which gives the meat a wonderful flavor. We can certainly attest to the delicious nature of Corsican charcuterie which we enjoyed daily throughout the trip!



Sunset in the Golfe de Porto

MTS Day 3: Hiking through the Chestnut Forest down to the Spelunca Gorge

A windy road (there is no other kind in Corsica) takes us up into the hills east of Porto where we encounter a herd of goats making their way up the road unattended (no shepherds in sight). Once our vans work our way past the goats, we instead face numerous pigs standing in the road, sleeping in the road, etc. They rightly assumed we would carefully go around them, ensuring their future as yummy charcuterie safe from our menacing vehicles.

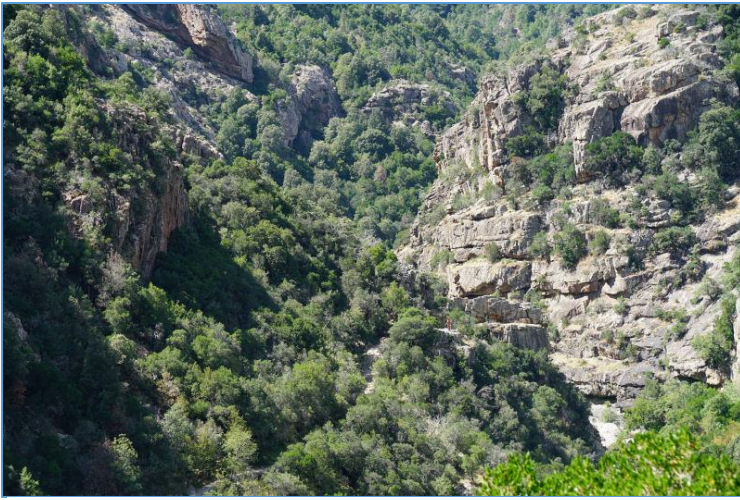


Pig rooting for chestnuts

Today's hike is all downhill ... starting in a beautiful forest of chestnut and pine trees. Like olive trees, chestnut trees only grow in a fairly narrow elevation band – olive trees are found in a lower altitude band while chestnut trees are in a higher band. The path we are following is a Genoese built trading path from the 1600s which allowed the lower village of *Ota* which produced olive oil to trade with the upper village of *Evisa* which produced chestnut/chestnut flour. The forest floor in many areas is completely rampaged by the strong snouts of the local wild pigs rooting for fallen chestnuts ... we watched several pigs easily turn over/push away large rocks and downed limbs using only their snouts.

Our hike started above and then through the charming village of *Evisa* and continued downward via a rocky trail. A couple of folks in the group were unfortunately victims of the rocky conditions gaining unwanted scrapes and bruises (quickly attended to by Alex and his trusty first aid supplies). We picnic in a shady grove and enjoy a sumptuous repast of pizzas from the local boulangerie (think flat bread with toppings), fresh avocado halves filled with aubergine caviar (eggplant purée), chestnut cake, and much more. Cinzia certainly earned her lunch and dinner that day – she had van ferrying duty which involved driving one van down from our trailhead to our eventual hike's endpoint and then hiking back up (i.e., nearly trail running) to the trailhead to drive the second van down.

We continued downward after lunch with the trail hugging one side of a canyon with a river running through it – we eventually got down to the river of the *Spelunca Gorge*. We marveled at the engineering of two old Genoese built stone bridges and the beauty of deep pools along the river, stopping at one to spend some time getting as wet as we wanted. While neither Steve nor I donned our swimsuits to take a very brisk plunge into the depths as some of the group did, the cold water felt really good on our hot and sweaty feet.



Spelunca Gorge



Genoese bridge in Spelunca Gorge

Late in the afternoon back in Porto, Steve and I explored the town a bit, including the local tourist office which resides in one of the few buildings original to the area. What looks like a nondescript stone building on the outside reveals a stunning stone barrel ceiling on the inside, supported by massive stone columns. An exhibit of historical photos from 1897 to 1960 were fascinating to view. There is no group dinner tonight so, along with fellow hiker Jim, we enjoy a sunset Aperol Spritz cocktail followed by a crepe dinner at one of Porto's many restaurants below the hulking presence of the *Torra di Portu*. This tower stands atop a rocky outcrop 148 ft. above the sea. It is one of the earliest Genoese towers built in Corsica (begun in 1551) and is unusual with its square rather than round shape.



The Torre di Portu above Porto is lit at night with a rotation of colors

MTS Day 4: Hiking the Postman's Path to village of Girolata and exploring the *Reserve Naturelle de Scandola* by Boat

The group splits into 2 this morning – one half of us will, from a trailhead, hike down to the village of *Girolata*, have lunch and then take a boat tour; the other half take the boat tour first, have lunch in the village and then hike up to the trailhead. Steve and I are in the first group -- self-named "Team Gelato" (softies given that we'll be doing the mostly downhill hike); the other group is therefore christened "Team Granite" (the hardcore hikers as they'll be mostly hiking uphill).

We, Team Gelato, have a 45min van ride to the trailhead for today's hike. We descend via the *Sentier du Facteur* trail (literally "the mailman's path"), used by the same mailman for 30 years to deliver mail to the small village of *Girolata* which is only accessible by walking in or by boat. As we descend, we are treated to the sight of two bright yellow and red firefighting planes practicing landing on the sea and scooping up water into their bellies – quite the sight.

The trail through the *maquis* (group of fragrant wild herbs) eventually takes us down to the sea to a pebble beach known locally as the "Queen's Beach" as Queen Elizabeth once visited it (she arrived via boat, not on foot). We don't spot any royals but we do see several cows enjoying a day at the beach. With the weather turning a bit rainy, we hurry up and over the final coastal bump to meet up with Team Granite in the village of *Girolata* for a picnic lunch.



Firefighting planes in Golfe de Girolata



Seaside cow near village of Girolata



Tower and Golfe of Girolata under gray skies



The rain mostly holds off while we eat a quick seaside picnic lunch but then arrives quite forcefully so Cinzia finds us a tarp-sheltered spot in one of the local restaurants where we enjoy a hot coffee or hot chocolate while waiting for the squall to pass. While less than 20 folks live in *Girolata* year-round, during the tourist season it swells daily with hundreds of tourists who arrive, mostly by boat, from Ajaccio and Porto to the south and Calvi to the north – all with the intent of visiting the *Reserve Naturelle de Scandola*. Established in 1975 and recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, the *Reserve Naturelle de Scandola* covers 7.4 square miles of which approximately 48% is land and 52% is sea. Despite some light rain, we and the rest of Team Gelato

board a small pontoon boat skippered by Captain Sergio while Team Granite heads up the trail.

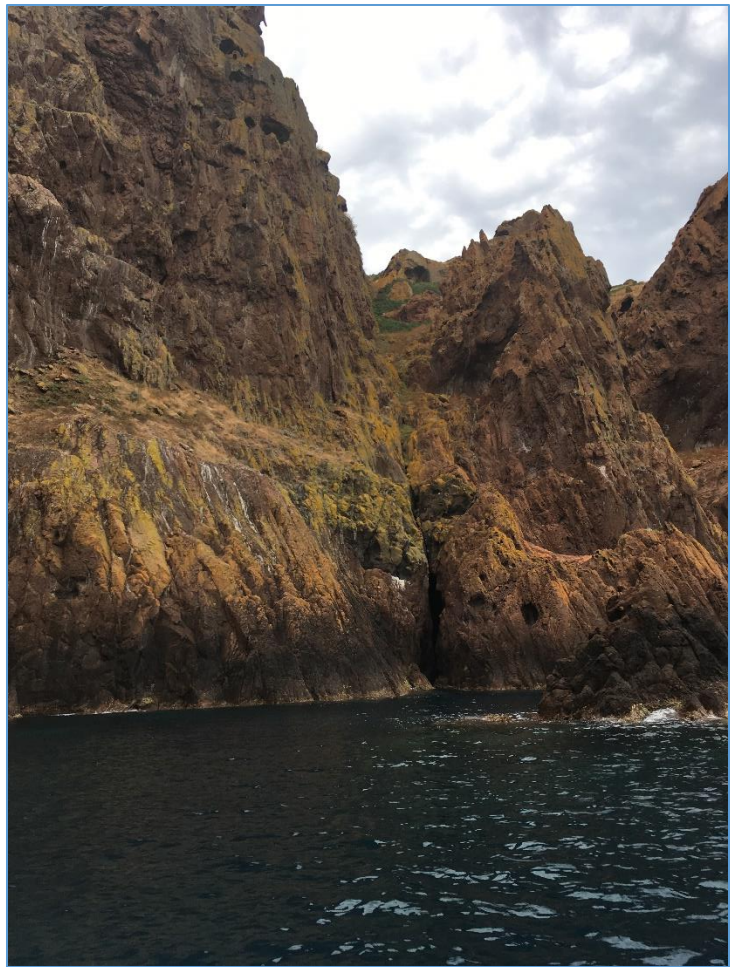


Fortunately the rain stops before too long and the sky begins to clear as we head towards the *Reserve Naturelle de Scandola* where strange rock formations emerge from the crystal clear sea and the coastline is peppered with jagged inlets and caves. It is hard to describe the beauty of the colors and shapes of the rocks and the amazing ways that many of them have been “scooped” out leaving only a thin shell (sculpted by a combination of wind, salt, water and sun). We spot some wild goats high up as well as several ospreys in flight as well as several osprey nests atop the seaside cliff (Cinzia tells us that there are now 20 nesting pairs in Corsica, up from only 3 such pairs in the 1970’s).

Our pictures just don't do justice to the area and the cloudy conditions didn't help. The colors of the sea ranged from navy to teal to turquoise and everything in between. The lichen showed itself in a range of goldenrods to deep greens. Where the sea met the rock, the limestone showed white to pale pink, punctuated by an occasional bright red "sea tomato." We are thankful the weather cooperated so that we could experience this special place.



Reserve Naturelle de Scandola



That evening the entire group took a short drive up to the village of *Ota* where we enjoyed a family style Corsican meal overlooking the beautiful hillsides below and across from us. We were also treated to a dazzling night sky and Milky Way once we left the lights of the village.



MTS Day 5: Hike on the GR20 to *Lac de Nino* and move to *Corte*

A 6am departure from *Porto* is not ideal but we understand the reason for it ... we've got a 90 min drive to a mountain lodge/refuge where we'll have a hot breakfast before tackling our longest hike of the trip: 12 miles round trip. We drive over the *Col de Vergio*, a mountain pass at 4,849' before reaching the *Castellu di Vergio* lodge which is overflowing with backpackers who are doing some or all of the GR20 trail. As we tuck into omelets and toast to fuel up for our hike, I believe most, if not all, of our group is happy to be hiking with just a day pack and not carrying a fully-laden backpack. We notice that we are now in Corsica's ski country as evidenced by a very low angle ski lift across the road from the lodge.

Our hike begins in a lush and shaded beech forest with an immediate elevation loss which means we get to look forward to an end of the hike elevation gain! After about 3 miles of trail through the forest where we see and hear cows grazing, the trail climbs above tree-line in gentle switchbacks up to a grassy pass known as *St. Peter's Pass* (there is a stone monument). From the pass we can see Corsica's western coast and the sea beyond. The trail then climbs a bit more along the crest-line and through some rocky areas. We encounter a couple of horse-riding sheep shepherds that are taking a straight path downward following their flock. After a bit we spot an official GR20 sign and take photos to document our brief but real visit to the famed trail. Before long we've reached our day's destination, a spot overlooking *Lac de Nino* nestled below.



Looking west towards the sea from St. Peter's Pass

A rocky spot serves as our lunch café where we enjoy a picnic of charcuterie, bread, cheeses and more. As we have a few loaves of French bread left over, we gladly offer them to some very grateful GR20 through hikers, as fresh bread on the trail is a rarity. After lunch we reverse our course for the 6-mile return hike. Above *St. Peter's Pass*, we enjoy the antics of some young male mountain goats "playing" at head-butting one another. By the time we finish the trail's ending climb up to the refuge, we are most grateful for the opportunity to purchase and enjoy a cold beverage of choice at the refuge's convenience store.



Picnicking above Lac de Nino



D84 road along the Gola River

Next up: van ride to the town of *Corte*, and what a ride it is – an "E ticket" for sure (Disneyland reference for all of those of a certain age)! The D84 road leads northeast through the middle of the island and follows the *Gola* river as it snakes its way down a beautiful rock canyon ... where the road (two lanes but narrow) is often built right into the sides of the canyon cliffs. The civil engineering and rock work on the D84 roadway are indeed marvels.

We arrive in *Corte* late in the afternoon and the town's citadel is immediately front and center as it sits high atop a rock formation. The oldest part of the citadel was built in 1420 – the current citadel building now houses the *Museum of Corsica* and the Office of Tourism.

Front (l) and back (below) sides of Corte Citadel



Our hotel, the *Dominique Colonna* is built alongside a small river (definitely the nicest hotel of our stay). After a quick clean-up and settling in drill, we enjoy an Aperol Spritz on the hotel's spacious deck overlooking the river and its granite boulder lined banks. For dinner that evening I tried the *Wild Boar Stew* and decide it is a bit gamey in taste for me.

MTS Day 6: Hike to Shepherd's Hut

After piling into the vans, we have about a 45min drive south, routing through several small villages where the road splits the village in half though the closeness of the road doesn't seem to bother the folks sitting outside at cafes just beyond the road's edge. From a trailhead just beyond the very small village of *Canaglia*, the trail winds through a pine forest and

Manganello River



roughly follows the *Manganello River* upward. After an easy 3 miles, we arrive at our destination, an isolated shepherd's hut. This shepherd is quite young, 34, "hunky" and apparently has quite the reputation for beguiling young women. We are just there to enjoy a lunch of his homemade cheese, locally made charcuterie, bread, zucchinis stuffed with pork sausage and cheese, chicken drumsticks, and fresh peaches and apricots ... yum.

Sign to Tolla's Sheepfold (Hut)



Assortment of Corsican Charcuterie



After thoroughly enjoying our lunch, we take a different trail back for just a bit before hooking back into the one we came up on. As we stroll back through the village of *Canaglia*, we spot several cats enjoying the nice afternoon. We are back to the hotel in *Corte* in plenty of time for me to get cleaned up, do our daily laundry, and still make a 5pm massage. The massage takes place in a tent along the river – the sound of the rushing water is an added level of soothing!



Dinner that evening is in the area atop *Corte's Citadel* at one of the many restaurants there. The evening's chestnut and pork belly soup was an outstanding and delicious start to the meal and the caramel ice cream was a "to-die for" end of the meal (tasted like an extremely rich caramel sauce). We obviously ate extremely well on the trip ☺.

MTS Day 7: Hike to *Lac Melo* and *Lac de Capitello*

Breakfast is at 5:30AM this morning with a 6AM departure in the vans for a drive up into the mountain while it is still dark. Alex informs us that we need to get on the trail *early* to avoid the large numbers of hikers which will arrive later. Dawn is just barely arriving when we park at the *Bergeries de Grotelle* (Grotelle's sheepfold/hut). The shepherd greets Alex with familiarity and directs the vans into prime parking spots. Wearing an extra layer to ward off the chill of the early morning, we begin the hike up to *Lac Melo* on a rocky path. The rockiness of the path never diminishes and at times requires a 4-point attack given its steepness (i.e., use of both hands and both feet). *Lac Melo*, a glacial lake, sits at an altitude of 5,576.' The sun has risen and we've shed our extra layers by the time we reach the lake, enjoying some beautiful waterfalls along the way. So far we've had the trail all to ourselves, just as Alex planned. *Lac Melo* is the lower lake in the glacier-carved valley we are in; *Lac de Capitello* sits some 650' above it and is our final destination so we push on. The trail between the two lakes becomes even steeper and there are a few fixed chains and a couple metal ladders to assist with the climb. One ambitious female trail runner passes us but otherwise we remain alone on the trail. Alex tells us of hiking this trail with his parents when he was 8 – he remembers wearing flip-flops!



Lac de Capitello

Lac de Capitello sits at the base of a rocky cirque with granite pinnacles soaring above. We can see GR20 hikers high above us crossing the *Capitello Breach* -- at 7,540' it is the highest and one of the trickiest portions of the GR20.

Cinzia taking the high road for a photo



Me, Scott, Julia, Terry, Tzong, Marla, Steve, Laurie, Alan, Alex, Carolyn, Jim, Bill, and husband Steve

After admiring the view and fortifying ourselves with donuts and other healthy snacks, we descend back down to *Lac Melo*. The steep trail down sometimes requires the 5-point method (i.e., both hands, both feet, and one's backside). At the second ladder, we begin to encounter an increasingly steady stream of hikers coming up – often having to jockey for space on the narrow, steep trail. We all thank Alex for his insistence on our early start. Just before 11AM and a bit below *Lac Melo* we stop for a well-deserved picnic lunch before continuing the rest of the way back to the hut and the parked vans. There, we discover scads of folks enjoying lunch or a snack at the hut's picnic tables – we quickly join them for a cold beverage. The parking lot is crammed with cars, motorcycles, and bicycles and the overflow of parked cars continues down “the road” for quite some distance.

Ah “the road,” named D523, is the one we came up in that morning and as it was dark and Steve and I were sitting in the back of the van we didn't have a clue what it was like other than “curvy” like all the other roads in Corsica. For the drive back to *Corte* we snagged the front shotgun seats and thus had a great view of our journey back down the D523. From that perch, the road looks like a paved bicycle path – a narrow strip of blacktop with a faded striped white line down the middle. What makes the trip particularly interesting is that the road runs along the edge of the *Gorges del Restonica*, thereby creating several areas of sheer drop-off on the right side of the road. As folks were still heading up the road as we were heading down, finding areas wide enough for 2 vehicles to pass wasn't always so easy. At times, Steve had his head out the window telling Alex how far away the right tire was from the edge ... a ride to remember!





We were back to *Corte* and our hotel by early afternoon and enjoyed some quiet time on its riverside deck. For dinner we once again drove up to the *Citadel* area but before eating enjoyed a short walk/tour of the area.

Jim, Terry, Mario, Tzong, Vicky, Marla, Scott, Laurie, Steve, Alan, husband Steve, me, Alex, Bill and Carolyn atop the Corte Citadel

MTS Day 8: Train Ride to Calvi

After a leisurely start to the day, we are taken to the *Corte* train station and given tickets for the ride to the city of *Calvi*, our final destination of the MTS trip. While we are enjoying travel by train, Alex and Cinzia will drive the vans with our luggage to meet us there via a not very exciting motorway. We board the train at *Corte* and after just a couple of stops, switch to a different train, one which will take us the rest of the way. From the vineyards near *Corte*,

the train snakes its way past numerous villages perched high on the hillsides. We see sturdy stone walls apparently separating rugged tracks of property, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. The train makes its way down from the mountains to the hills and eventually to the sandy beaches of Corsica's northern coast. Along the turquoise sea's coastline we spot an eagle keeping pace with the train and beaches stuffed with private "beach clubs" where chaise lounges and umbrellas are in tightly packed neat rows. A group of colorful paragliders catch our attention out the windows of the inland side of the train. We arrive at the *Calvi* station just after noon where we say goodbye to Julia as she is heading back to the states. While Julia is being taken to the airport, we have about 45min hour to do some initial exploration of *Calvi's* harbor area, which is towered over by the *Calvi Citadel*. Built in the 13th century, the Citadel sits on a promontory

Calvi, Corsica



at the west end of the harbor. Steve and I grab a cold drink and enjoy a stroll along the harbor's pedestrian waterfront, ogling some of the expensive yachts moored there. We see a group of scuba divers getting ready to head out for an afternoon dive -- with Mediterranean Sea water temperatures only in the mid-to-high 70's we are not sad to be enjoying a very pleasant warm day on shore instead of joining in the diving.

We have a short van ride to the shoreline trail we'll hike for 10 minutes on to our lunch spot -- a beachside restaurant in a beautiful turquoise cove. Our lunch starts with full plates of charcuterie, followed by fresh salad, choice of entrée and then choice of dessert. Apparently our relatively inactive morning hadn't diminished our appetites, we eat with abandon.



View from our lunch table



Unfortunately, the local yellow jackets are attracted to the food as well and are numerous ... the restaurant places small dishes of burning coffee grounds on our tables and the resulting smoke works quite well in chasing them away.

After lunch we pile into the vans for a short drive up to the hilltop *Notre Dame de la Serra* chapel with its gorgeous views of *Calvi* and the sea beyond.

Burning coffee grounds keep the yellow jackets away



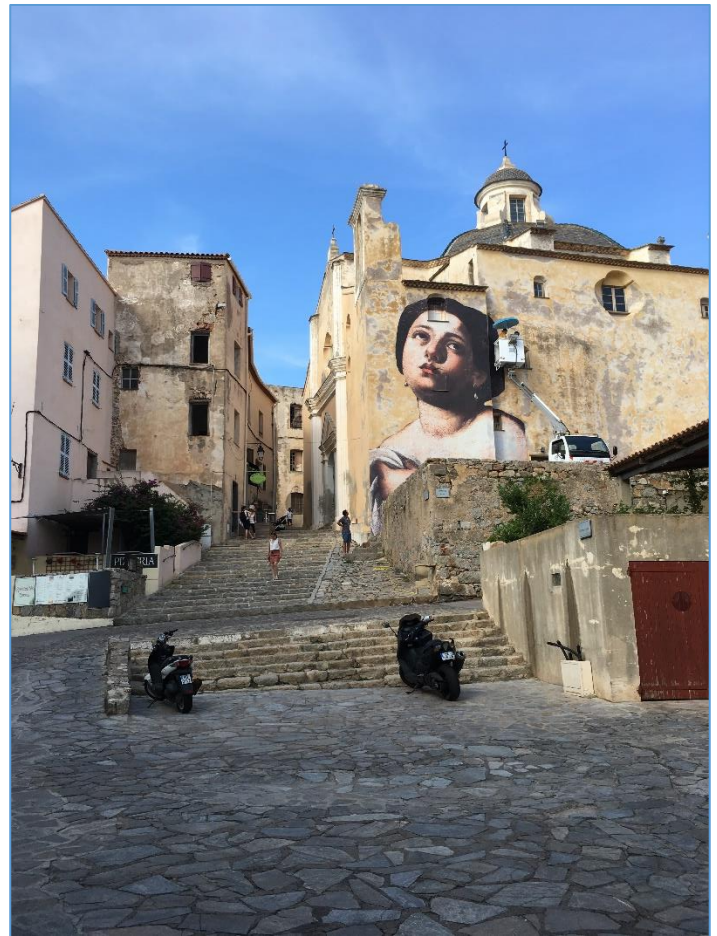
Tzong, Steve, Jim, Alan, Cinzia, Mario, Bill, Caroline, Terry, Marla, Laurie, Terry, Vicky, me and husband Steve in the courtyard of Notre Dame de la Serra overlooking Calvi

Back in town we check into our hotel and are then free to explore as we wish. Steve decides in favor of some downtime while I head back to the harbor and citadel area for some sightseeing and shopping. I find a thimble decorated with the Corsican “Moors Head” which is the flag of Corsica to add to my collection. Besides buying a jar of local fig jam and Corsica’s version of Nutella (made with chestnuts instead of hazelnuts), I’m not tempted by the other souvenir items.



Flag of Corsica - Moor's Head

That evening we have our farewell dinner at a harbor-side restaurant ... the place is a bit short staffed and so the dinner runs way too late as we wish our fellow hikers safe travels as we'll be splitting up and heading out at various times and directions in the morning.



Within the walls of Calvi's Citadel

MTS Day 9/Paris Day 1: Exploring the city on foot

We flew out of Calvi and into Orly, Paris on a midmorning flight. Steve had arranged for us to be picked up for the drive into Paris which we enjoyed as passengers in a Tesla S Model (no cup-holders in the back seat but a very quiet ride) – it definitely pays to let someone else do the driving in the Paris area. Once at our hotel, the *Buddha Bar Hotel* (a funky boutique hotel), we had a delicious lunch while waiting for our room to be ready (their Asian chicken salad was outstanding and when I looked online to see if I could find a recipe for it I discovered it has quite a following). After getting our luggage settled in our room, we headed out on foot towards the *Seine River*, just a short walk away.

It was a sunny and warm Sunday afternoon in early September and the banks of the *Seine River* were filled with tourists and locals of all ages out enjoying the pleasant conditions via foot, scooter, rollerblades, bike, etc. We crossed the gold-decorated *Alexander III Bridge* (complete with an Asian bride and groom taking pre-wedding photos there) and then walked along the left bank of the river down to the *Eiffel Tower*. Our return trip was via street level along the same left bank with stops at the *Holy Trinity Cathedral/Russian Orthodox Spiritual and Cultural Center*, and the *American Church* where we listened to a harpiscord concert of Bach music being performed by a young Japanese musician. At a sidewalk café we enjoyed a cool beverage and salads for dinner while doing lots of people watching. As this was a return visit to Paris for both Steve and I, our plan was to refresh our acquaintance with the city and do a few things one or both of us missed during our first visits (mine in 1977 and his in 1992). As our hotel was close to so many of the Paris sights, we could walk to most of them.



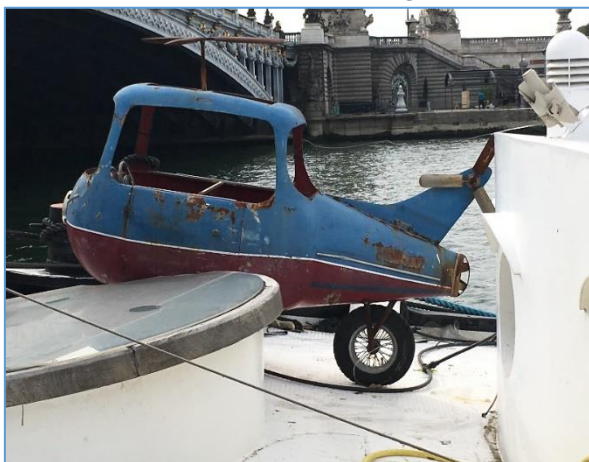
Alexander III Bridge



Paris Day 2: Cruise on the Seine, exploring and food tour

We partook of the hotel's very nice breakfast buffet (with eggs made to order) and then once again headed out on foot. This morning we walked along the right bank of the Seine to catch the first *Bateaux Mouches* cruise of the day. We, along with many other tourists from around the world, boarded our boat and took a seat on the open-air

Houseboat deck "décor" along Seine



top deck. We cruised first east up past the *Ile de la Cite Notre Dame*, turned around, then cruised west down to

the Eiffel Tower, turned around again, and then returned to our starting point ... an hour and ¼ of continual magnificent architecture and moments. During both cruise and several riverside walks we also enjoyed checking out the many unique and eclectic houseboats docked along the banks.



Aboard the Bateaux Mouches cruise

After the cruise, we walked back up along the river to the *Jardin des Tulleries* to enjoy its flowers and statues – the gardens were created by Catherine de' Medici in 1564. From there we headed to view the exterior of the *Palais Royal* (built for Cardinal Richelieu in 1634) and its gardens. We grabbed a sandwich and drink to eat at a corner store as we strolled back to our hotel along the *Rue Saint Honore* which is home to many high-end boutiques and shops. A quick refresh in our room and we headed back out, this time to the nearest *Metro* station to take the subway to the *Montmartre* area for the start of our 3pm "Secret Food Tour."

We met our food tour guide, Christophe, and the other 8 members of the tour at *Montmartre's Metro* station. For the next hour or so, Christophe led us around the area giving us tidbits of the area's history interspersed with various food shop stops. We learn that there was once a Roman temple dedicated to the god *Mars* on the hill and thus the area's name: Mont (mountain) of Mars. First up ...*Georges Larnicol's* Chocolate shop (he as a *Meilleur Ouvrier de France* winner, so a "master chocolatier") ... we marveled at his intricate chocolate sculptures of the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, etc. before selecting a couple of chocolates for ourselves. Macarons (not macaroons which contain coconut) at *Christophe Roussel's* shop were up next ... choosing just two was a difficult choice 😊. A small local grocery shop yielded bunches of fresh green grapes. The *Alexine Boulangerie* was our source for baguettes, chouquettes, crepes and eclairs au chocolat. To this bounty Christophe added 5 cheeses, 6 meats, gherkins, organic sea-salt butter (absolutely addicting and unlike any butter we'd ever eaten), and 4 wines (including champagne) ... all which he had pre-purchased. We enjoyed this overwhelming bounty of riches in the upstairs room of a petite neighborhood tavern that was closed (this being a Monday). While we sampled and sampled some more, Christophe explained all about what we were sampling and what made it so special. After nearly 4 hours, we bid our fellow eaters



Colorful and delicious macarons at Christophe Roussel's Shop

Secret Food Tour group in Montmartre



goodbye and continued to explore the *Montmartre* area on our own. We visited the *Sacre-Coeur Basilica* (Basilica of the Sacred Heart) and took in the view of Paris from its commanding hilltop location. The 1 ½ minute funicular ride transported us down the hill on our way back to the metro station and the return trip back to our hotel via the *La Madeleine* metro stop.



Sacre-Coeur Basilica

Paris Day 3: Versailles and Giverny

Today we head out of the city, first to *Versailles* and then the village of *Giverny* via a group tour via van (total of 8 plus tour guide/driver). While Steve had visited the garden of *Versailles* during this last visit, he had not had the opportunity to see the inside of this beautiful *chateau* with its over-the-top “hall of mirrors” and more. Today, we had time for some exploration of both the gardens and a tour of the interior.

On our way to *Giverny*, we stopped for an al fresco lunch at a charming restaurant, *Moulin de Fourges* (Mill of Fourges), located along the *Epte* River (built originally in 1790).

Ceramic tile at Moulin de Fourges



The village of *Giverny* was just a short drive after lunch and is located in the *Normandy* region of France. We were there to celebrate the Impressionist painter *Claude Monet* who lived and worked in *Giverny* from 1883 until his death in 1926.

Monet's former home/studio and the elaborate gardens, where he produced his famed water lily series, are now *the Fondation Claude Monet* museum. The nearby *Musée des impressionnismes Giverny* highlights the Impressionist art movement. On a warm and sunny September afternoon the gardens were still awash in colorful blooms and bees buzzed about happily as did we. Upon our return to Paris, we finished the day by enjoying a yummy pizza dinner ... there are lots of pizza places in the city.

Gardens at Fondation Claude Monet, Giverny



Hall of Mirrors in Versailles1

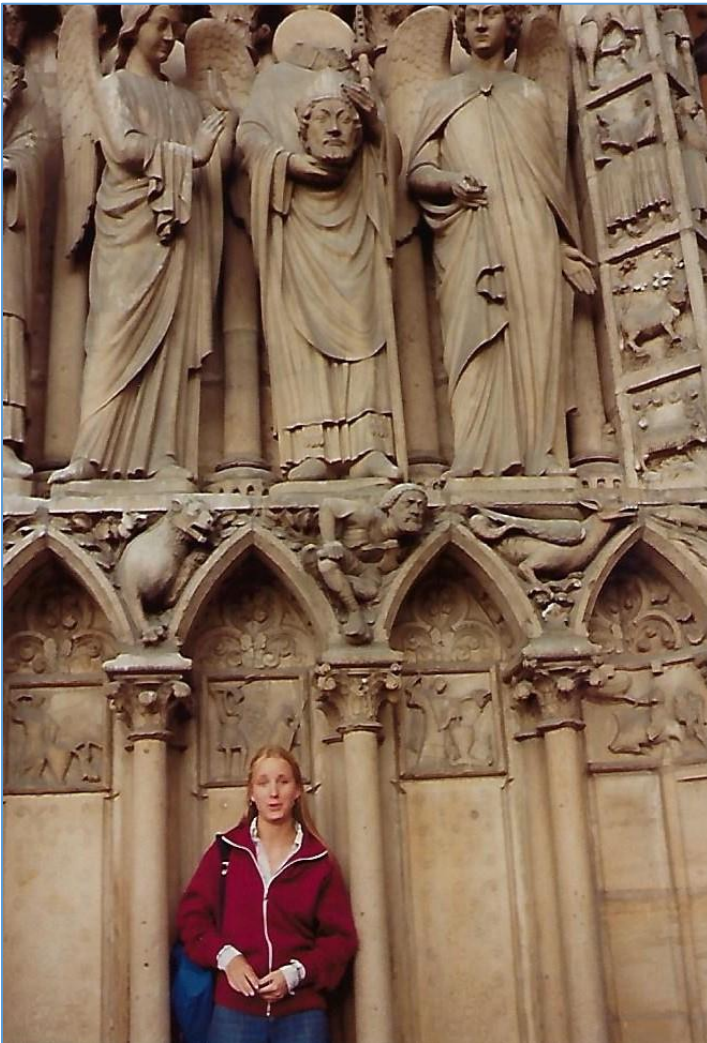
Paris Day 4: More city exploring

The *Musee d' Orsay* was our first stop of the day. This converted Beaux-Arts train station (originally built in 1900) opened as a museum in 1986 (so it wasn't there during my initial Paris visit in 1977 but Steve visited it in 1992 and said it is a "must see" – and I now agree). The museum of soaring space holds mainly French art dating from 1848 to 1914, including the largest collection of impressionist and post-Impressionist painting masterpieces in the world, as well as sculptures, furniture, and photography. After seeing Monet's garden inspirations the day before, it was fun to see some of his resulting masterpieces as well as those of Degas, Van Gogh, Renoir, Cezanne, and so many others. I especially enjoyed the view of Paris looking toward *Montmartre/Sacre-Coeur* through one of the top floor's huge "clock" windows.



Musee d Orsay clock window looking towards Montmartre

We ate a lunch of take-away crepes on the Musee d Orsay's entrance plaza before walking east along the left bank before eventually crossing the *Pont Neuf* ("new bridge") which is the oldest standing bridge across the Seine in Paris, completed in 1607). The bridge connects to the *Île de la Cité*, the island in the middle of the *Seine* River that was, between 250 and 225 BC, the birthplace of Paris and was during the medieval period, the heart of the city. Today we're mainly here for both of us to revisit the *Cathedral Notre Dame de Paris* and to take in its soaring gothic arches, menacing gargoyles, and incredible stained glass windows.



(L) Me at Notre Dame in June 1977 and (below) in September 2018 – note that one can no longer stand on the cathedral's stonework



Back on the *Pont Neuf* we cross to the right bank and walk to the *Hotel de Ville* (city hall whose south wing was originally completed in 1551). From there we pass by the *Tour Saint Jacques* (171' tower) with its flamboyant Gothic style (built between 1509 and 1523) – it became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998.



The Louvre



Tour Saint Jacques

Next up, the *Louvre*! Its famous glass and metal pyramids, designed by I.M. Pei, were completed in 1989 and thus, this was my first time seeing them. As we had both been here before, we skipped some its more famous items (the Mona Lisa, Winged Victory of Samothrace, etc.) and instead took in the French crown jewels, several decorative arts galleries, and the opulent Napoleon III apartments. We exited the *Louvre* into an underground shopping mall which was “new” to both of

us as it opened in late 1993. We did lots of people watching on the walk back to our hotel – the designer boutiques along the way yielded some interesting sights and helped take our minds off our tired feet:

- Totally veiled women being shown designer dresses by the shop clerk
- A couple sipping champagne while being shown shoes by a clerk
- A line of women waiting to gain entrance to a shop selling handbags (we didn’t pay attention to which brand)

An ice cream and diet coke also helped revive us. When discussing possible dinner plans, we both had the same thought: something close to the hotel and a hamburger sounded really good – so dinner was at the café across the street and we had hamburgers. We’ve learned during our many past adventures that when we are both craving a hamburger we are reaching the limits of time away from home ... in this case, as we were headed back home in the morning it was excellent timing indeed.

Paris Day 5 – Depart Paris and return to Denver:

The return trip to Denver involved a quick change of planes in Reykjavik, Iceland – I had just enough time to pick up some of our favorite Icelandic candy: “3” bars made from licorice, caramel, and chocolate (a weird combination but delicious). Upon our return home, we couldn’t stop thinking about the organic French butter we had tasted on our food tour ... Steve did some checking around online and found a British-based website that sold it and shipped things to the US so he ordered some but alas, then they contacted us and said they didn’t think the butter would arrive still cold given the anticipated shipping time ☹ ... bummer but probably a good thing after all (at least for our waistlines which seemed to have expanded a bit since the beginning of the trip).

Our time in Paris was great – revisiting memories from our separate past trips and making wonderful new ones together. However, after several days in the midst of the humanity that populates that great city, both Steve and I were ready for a return to our quieter and less congested lives here in Denver, at least for a while. The natural beauty and openness of Corsica seemed much farther in the past than just a few days before – writing of this has helped bring that back to my mind’s forefront ... a very good thing.