

SARDINIA & CORSICA

2018

Sardinia and Corsica don't seem to get much attention in mainstream travel forums, so my curiosity was piqued after seeing them featured in an Adriatic Moto Tours brochure. I was aware of their location in the Mediterranean Sea, and that Napoleon Bonaparte had been born in Corsica, but otherwise was fairly ignorant of their history and attractions. The Adriatic brochure indicated both islands are very mountainous, very scenic, and have excellent motorcycle roads.

I can now confirm this is true on all accounts.

The tour started and finished in Venice, giving the opportunity to visit to the Ducati factory and museum in Bologna and the historical cities of Florence and Siena on route to the islands. Pisa is also in the itinerary, and this tour would visit there on the return leg.

Nico led the main group of 8 Americans, a Canadian and myself with Matej (junior) as back-up, while Anze led a separate group of 2 Canadian couples and 2 Kiwi couples. Diego drove the support van for both groups. Bikes were predominately BMW R1200GS, with one R1200RT, a Ducati Multistrada, a Suzuki 650 V-Strom and my choice of BMW F800GT.



Coffee stop on the way to Florence – we were well outnumbered by the locals

The main group soon divided into two, with four of the American contingent and the Canadian (all good friends, very experienced riders and some ex road racers) disappearing into the distance to do their own thing, and the rest of us choosing to ride at a pace where we could actually see and enjoy the scenery as well as the fabulous roads.

We would occasionally catch up with the fast group at lunch stops, but inevitably they were on their second beer by the time we arrived at our accommodation each evening. Still the smaller group made it easier to navigate through towns, and the scenery was more than worthy of our attention.



Tour group overlooking Florence

The second day was a rest day to do the tourist thing in Florence, starting with a walking tour led by a local guide then being set free to explore as we wished. A long queue deterred me from re-acquainting myself with Michaelangelo's mate David in the Galleria dell'Accademia, but I did catch up with his twin's statue in the open Piazza della Signoria.

Florence to Siena was another enjoyable ride, despite a forced deviation back along a rough section of road due to unexpected roadworks. This was a Sunday and there were a lot of Tour de France aspirants making things more difficult than they needed to be. We stopped for coffee at Greve in Chianti and wandered around the Sunday market to soak up the atmosphere. Lunch was in a small town after Montevarchi which didn't seem to have a name, and we arrived in Siena around 3:30pm, giving plenty of time to wander around the city centre. As usual with these tours, the first class accommodation was conveniently located near the tourist highlights.



Piazza del Campo, Siena

The main “square” in Siena is the more circular Piazza del Campo, and each year it hosts a horse race called the Palio. The contestants come from the neighbourhoods that have divided the city since the middle ages, and we quickly decided exploring was more easily accomplished from one of the many al-fresco restaurants surrounding the square. From there we could watch the antics of locals and tourists alike as well as re-runs of the Palio on a giant TV screen while sampling the region’s fine wines.



Tuscany countryside – so many shades of green

The next day in Siena was also a rest day, but most preferred a ride option to visit the smaller towns of Montalcino and Pienza and enjoy more Tuscany roads and scenery. The Tuscan experience continued the following day with stops at Monteriggioni, San Gimignano (my favourite) and the mighty walled town of Volterra on the way to the ferry terminal at Livorno.

The queue for the over-night ferry to Olbia gave a clue to the roads awaiting us in Sardinia, with lots of other sports and touring bikes waiting patiently. Certainly a much higher ratio of bikes to cars than that I've experienced on the Spirit of Tasmania. Cabins were provided on the ferry and I had no trouble sleeping, thanks to the excellent Montalcino wines provided by our guides.

Sardinia is an autonomous region of Italy and about half the size of Tasmania, while Corsica is a region of France and about a third the size of Sardinia. Both seem to function a little independently from their masters, and being ignorant of both languages I didn't notice much difference between them. They shared the important things like great roads, impressive scenery, friendly people, comfortable accommodation, good food and wine, and cold beer, and I understand now why they are popular destinations for motorcyclists from the Continent as well as further abroad.



Obviously the locals had been warned I was heading into town

After disembarking around 8:00am, our first day in Sardinia was a 250km ride to Cala Gonone, a popular tourist destination. As the crow flies, the distance is around 80km, but the terrain was mountainous all day and gave an entertaining mix of steep twisty passes and more gentle sweeping bends, generally with good surfaces and little traffic. After allowing for coffee, lunch and photo stops, we arrived at our beachfront hotel around 5:00pm.



When you employ a mountain goat instead of a road surveyor



And another long and winding road in Sardinia



Our tour guide Nico occasionally stopped to take photos of his entourage, including yours truly

Another rest day was scheduled for Cala Gonone, but most riders again chose to be out on the bikes, as you do, and Matej took several of us on his favourite ride south from Cala Gonone to Baunei. Have a look on Google Earth then eat your heart out.

After a coffee in Baunei we returned the same route and had plenty of time to explore Cala Gonone in the afternoon. The tour was scheduled just before the tourist season, meaning some shops and restaurants were closed, but this also meant little traffic to contend with. Each guide had his favourite section of road, but this seemed to change every day as the tour progressed, and I can understand why each had trouble staying loyal to their first choice.

Cala Gonone to Alghero was another great day of riding, the mountainous eastern side of the island changing to some flatter terrain towards the west coast, then more mountains hugging the coast from the picturesque sea-side town Bosa to Alghero. On the way we stopped for a guided tour at Nuraghe Losa, an archeological site with man-made stone structures unique to Sardinia and confounding the experts still trying to establish their purpose. We subsequently saw several more of these structures beside the roads. A stone-age version of McDonald's perhaps.

Each day's ride also had its interesting history, such as the coffee stop in mural festooned Orgosolo where family vendettas still simmer below the surface and grandmothers in black supposedly still carry knives. One wouldn't expect this from the friendly locals, but it was an additional incentive not to run into the stray cattle, goats and pigs sharing the roads with us.



Making some sort of political statement in Orgosolo



No Sea Cliff Bridge on the way to Alghero



Speed signs might apply to donkey carts

The road out of Alghero passed through a lot of farmland, including several wind turbine farms, and wasn't quite as interesting or challenging as the mountain roads. The town of Castelsardo was a pleasant diversion back to the coast and an unmissable photo opportunity. Inland again, and a series of longer straights brought us to the Santa Teresa ferry terminal after mid-day, where we scraped up some sustenance before the 1 hour crossing to Bonifacio in Corsica.



The delightful town and castle of Castelsardo



First in line for the ferry to Corsica

Entering Bonifacio harbour would have been an intimidating experience for early invaders, with massive fortresses built on the cliff faces. The French obviously took protection of their territories seriously. It was only a short ride to our hotel near the harbour, and dinner that night was in the “Upper Town” on the cliffs and within the fortress walls. I was glad I didn’t have to wear chain mail armour and carry a heavy sword while walking up the steep entrance path.

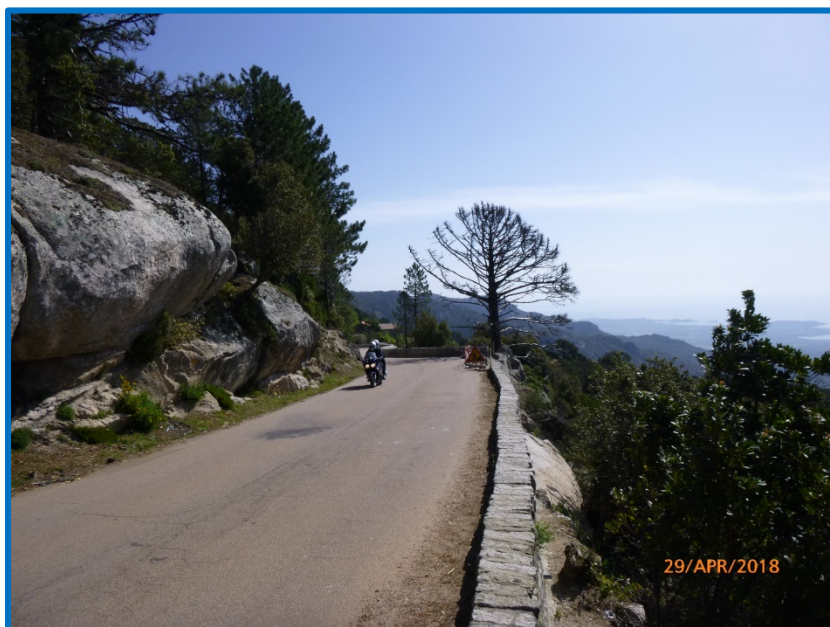


*Reported missing from the Great Ocean Road, Victoria:
found at Bonifacio Corsica*

When leaving Bonifacio next morning, we stopped to refuel and saw a collection of sports cars leaving the servo. I spotted several Austin-Healeys, XK Jags, Morgans, Triumphs, a Ferrari and a couple of models I didn't recognize. As you would expect from Triumph owners, a TR3A driver was the perfect gentleman and pretended to be broken down so we could have a closer look at his car. He even opened the bonnet and rattled some spanners to make it appear genuine.



A gentleman and his Triumph



Up in the mountains, again

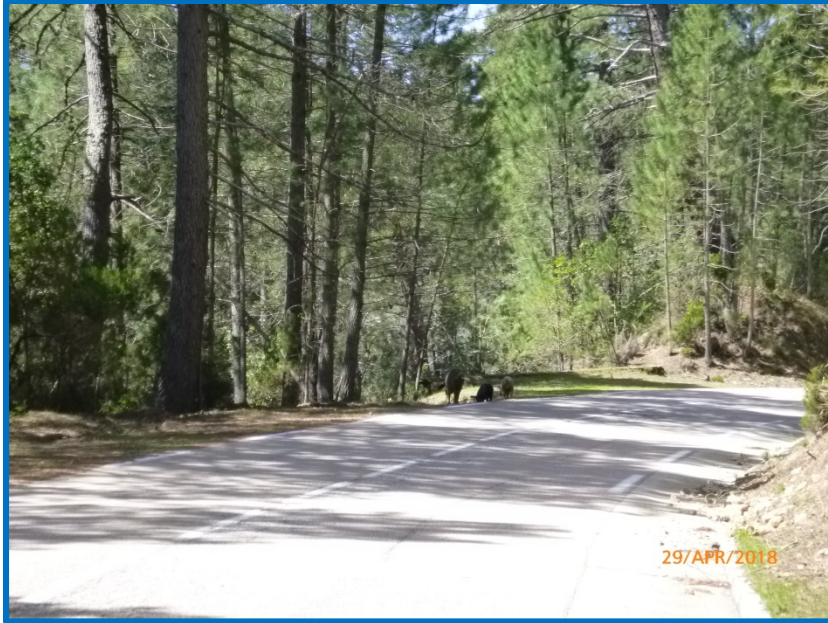
Surprise! Surprise! There were more mountains and more great roads on the way from Bonifacio to Porto. The morning section included fir tree forests, wandering cattle and wild boars to go with the Sunday mix of cars, motorbikes and cyclists. The road surface here was not as good as we had come to expect, with a number of bumpy sections to upset the rhythm. The weather remained clear, but varied from warm to cool depending on elevation. This area is known as the “Corsican Alps” and snow was occasionally visible on the mountain peaks.



That's snow ahead of us



Coffee stop at Zonza in the “Corsican Alps”



Sharing the road with wild boars

The afternoon sections were less densely forested but just as enjoyable to ride. The scenery at the Calanches de Piana was quite spectacular, with red granite rock formations that poke out at all angles and change colour from deep orange to russet red according to the time of day.



Strange rock formations at the “Calanches de Piana”

Off-road parking at scenic spots is not a Corsican strong-point



Motorbikes dominate the parking area at Porto, Corsica

The last day in Corsica was our only exposure to wet weather on the islands. There had been some rain overnight, but the morning looked promising with 50% blue sky as we set off to climb the mountains out of Porto. Unfortunately the roads had not dried due to the tree shade and cool temperature, and it started sprinkling soon after setting off.



Up here the tough ones don't wear rainsuits

We put on rain jackets and continued for over an hour in light rain and fog through mountain forests, still occasionally catching glimpses of snow on the peaks, before losing altitude and regaining some feeling of warmth. I certainly hadn't expected to see snow in the Mediterranean.

The rain stopped around the same time we stopped for a welcome coffee, then the sun came out, the roads changed to long sweeping bends, we passed through more interesting rock formations, and all was good with the world. I finally got into top gear after possibly two hours of riding, before stopping at Saint Florent for lunch.



Not sure if I'm fleeing my Yank mate Kurt or the snow in the mountains

Ignoring the short cut to Bastia, we rode around Cap Corse peninsula, taking in the stunning scenery while keeping an eye on the winding road, looking out for cars pre-occupied with the scenery and other bikers getting carried away thinking they were racing on that other Isle.

As well as the hazards posed by other tourists, there were a lot of small fallen rocks on the roads, low stone retaining walls were damaged every kilometre or so, and the only run-off options were black sand beaches generally positioned a few hundred metres down the mountainside. In a token gesture to road safety, some of the fallen rocks were marked with high visibility green paint. Why didn't the painters just move them off the road?



Black sand was unusual, but this style of road wasn't



A typical section of the road around Cap Corse

That evening we were notified our 10:00am ferry next morning had been cancelled, so it was an early start to beat the crowds to the 8:00am ferry for the four hour voyage back to the mainland. Obviously the cancellation wasn't a secret, and there were already many bikes and cars at the terminal when we arrived. Boarding was chaotic, it was sprinkling rain so the crowds on board took up every available inside space, and disembarking matched the boarding for absolute mayhem.



Waiting in the bike queue to board the ferry at Bastia

The rain persisted so rain jackets were called on for the short ride to Pisa, where I have photographic evidence we straightened up the famous Leaning Tower. Judging by the photo, I'll have to get the gang back together to straighten up the equally impressive Baptistry.



Leaning Tower set upright, now for the Baptistry

1st May is Independence Day in Italy, and the roads were as crowded as the ferry. Very, very crowded. After Pisa we took a tollway to Portovenere, lane splitting for many kilometres between the two lanes on the many occasions when traffic had completely stopped, and also up the outside edge when more convenient. Apparently the latter is not strictly legal, but unlikely to attract law enforcement under the circumstances.

The sprinkles came and went all day, and the hair drier in the hotel got a good work-out that night. Next day was a rest day to explore Cinque Terre and we took the boat cruise, but more light rain and heavy cloud cover detracted from the picture post-card beauty of this area.



Riomaggiore in Cinque Terre

The rain appeared to have stopped for our final riding day back to Venice, but the roads were still wet and the rain returned with a vengeance not far into the ride. We were venturing over the 1,000m high Apennine Mountains National Park, with very winding roads, rough surfaces, poor signage and line marking, thick woods and rather cold. Then the rain got heavier, dense fog closed in, the temperature dropped even further, and at times the GPS was the only way to see where the road was heading. I don't think I've ever ridden so far using only 1st and 2nd gear.

We eventually stopped for coffee but decided against making it a lunch stop as we were already well behind time and more rain was forecast for Venice later that afternoon. We also decided against visiting the Ferrari museum in Maranello and headed for the tollways as soon as we were out of the mountains. There we managed to sit on the 130kph limit for extended periods, making up some time, stopping mid-afternoon for a quick lunch break, and reaching our hotel in Mestre outside Venice around 4:30pm. Fortunately the rain forecast for Venice never eventuated.

Champagne on arrival was well received. This had been a particularly difficult day of riding, and the rain and fog prevented any views or photos of what I am sure would have been spectacular mountain scenery. At least we all arrived safe and sound, and I was philosophical that we'd had mainly fine weather on the islands, which were my main focus for this tour.

Total distance travelled was 2,615km. The riding and scenery in Tuscany, Sardinia and Corsica were most enjoyable, and more than compensated for the tollways leaving and returning to Venice, the traffic-congested ride from Pisa to Portovenere, and the wet ride over the Apennine Mountains.



All back safely, including the van

That night was the traditional farewell dinner at a nearby restaurant serving the best pizzas in the world (their claim, not mine), accompanied by plenty of good wine, liquorice liquors and other tipples, and lots of good cheer and exaggerated stories.

Many thanks to Adriatic Moto Tours, their guides Nico, Matej, Anze and Diego, and all the tour participants for another wonderful experience.

Geoff Roberts

