Granite Island

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

*Rubáiyat of Omar Khayyám of Naisháp*úr
Translated by Edward FitzGerald

Granite Island

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Corsican Retrospective

(Plates 35–38)

It was with a fine sense of literary instinct that François Dévouassoud, Douglas Freshfield's lifelong guide and companion, pronounced of Corsica ' ... that when "le bon Dieu" was building the Alps, he must have had a bit left over and have thrown it down in the Mediterranean'.[1] Dévouassoud had recognised that, uniquely of the Mediterranean's islands, Corsica is *the* mountaineering playground for all seasons.

The island of Corsica, barely 183km long and 83km broad, rises like Venus from the sea to its 2706m culmination in Monte Cinto. Few travellers have not succumbed to Corsica's potent scenery and showered it with epithets – Ile de Beauté, the Scented Isle, the Mountain of the Sea, the Granite Island. Freshfield, the outstanding mountaineer/traveller of his day and no mean judge of scenery, knew of 'no region in Europe where within so small a space Nature takes so many different sublime or exquisite aspects'.[2] In summer its anchorages, coves and white sand beaches are the stuff of dreams. In winter its peaks are like diadems of pearls catching the rising sun. Corsica has a range of brilliantly coloured faces. Its abundant forests, exploited by seafaring nations from the Romans onwards, combine chestnut, oak, beech and, above all, the transcendental Corsican Pine, a monarch of European trees, which attains 700 years of age and over 50m in height. Equally characteristic is the impermeable jungle of shrubs, plants and herbs – arbutus, myrtle, cistus, rosemary, lavender and thyme – known as the 'maquis'. For long inviolate as a refuge of bandits, outlaws and Second World War resistance fighters (the 'Men of the Maquis') this matted aromatic growth is both a scourge and a challenge to all who stray off the beaten track. Stark and sheer above labyrinthine valleys and maquis-choked gorges rises Corsica's granite backbone – a twisting snake of rock crossed and recrossed by transverse ridges, buttressed by vertiginous walls and slabs crowned with aiguilles, gendarmes and obelisks. This is a country fit for heroes and a paradise for climbers.

Corsica's physical characteristics have moulded the mettle of its people and spawned a succession of larger-than-life, demi-mythical figures overladen with pride and ambition. Of this variegated cast of heretics, revolutionaries, idealists, irredentists, bandits, gangsters and soldiers, typical have been the likes of the patriot leader Pasquale Paoli, the murderer debaucher Miguel Manara (a historical Don Juan who adopted as his role model Molino's fictional anti-hero), the bandit Bellacoscia and, above all,

35. The Corsican High Route: David Williams on Serra Tenda. (*John Harding*) (p125)

36. Stephen Baker on Serra Tenda, Monte d'Oro behind. (*John Harding*) (p125)

Napoleon Bonaparte, the quintessential Corsican, who recruited 43 of his generals and 10,000 soldiers from this his native island.

In classical times, Corsica was at the hub of a maritime trading crossroads. The Pax Romana gave it seven never-to-be-repeated centuries of stability, when the vine, olive, cereals, irrigation, law, Latin and, latterly, the Christianity of the Old Testament prophets were introduced. But its subsequent history of invasion and resistance, the malign shadow of 'vendetta' and the inaccessibility of its interior, left Corsica to its own devices and made it something of a European *terra incognita*. Corsica's very existence barely touched British consciousness until 1765 when James Boswell became its first accredited British visitor. On this embellishment of his Grand Tour, Boswell's avowed object was to meet Pasquale Paoli, the charismatic statesman/general who led Corsica to 14 years of independence from Genoa between 1755 and 1769. To 18th century romantics, this tiny state was perceived as the embodiment of a political and social liberty that encompassed both classical republicanism and the ingenuousness of the innocent savage. Paoli himself remarked to Boswell that 'a man come from Corsica will be like a man come from the Antipodes'. Corsica marked a turning point in Boswell's life but, as an 18th century man of his time, he was more concerned with its people and politics than with its scenery. Yet within 30 years of Boswell's visit and a year before his death in 1795, the British came to Corsica to fight the French at the invitation of his hero Paoli. After the siege of Calvi, where Nelson lost an eye, Corsica became an Anglo-Corsican kingdom with a British Viceroy for two brief years before French reoccupation.

The actual unveiling of Corsica to the British travelling classes came 100 years after Boswell's visit through the works of an itinerant artist. Although popularly known for his Nonsense and Limericks (which have always confused the serious-minded picture-buying public), Edward Lear, influenced by Turner, Ruskin and John Martin, was arguably the outstanding topographical artist of his day. As a painter he was denied the recognition he craved in his day, but his journeys through harsh and unwelcoming country in the remoter corners of Europe, the Near East and India gave outlet to an adventurous and creative genius. Lear's 1868 visit to Corsica was effectively his swansong and his *Journal of a Landscape Painter in Corsica* the last and least successful of his many travel books. For all that, he always reckoned that this journey was 'worth any amount of expense and trouble'. Above all, his romantic landscape engravings convey, as none before or since have done, the 'grave hard splendour of the island untainted, then, by foreign ways; a place of untenanted wooded landscapes and brooding heights of rock and snow'.[3]

Two years before Lear's historic visit, Corsica had already been reconnoitred by a member of the Alpine Club. In 1866 the Rev W H Hawker arrived with a party which included five ladies and proceeded to climb Corsica's most beautiful peak – Monte d'Oro. Hawker's ascent was a British

first but he formed a low opinion of the Corsican character which he considered compounded jealousy and ambition with vindictiveness. Fourteen years on, in 1880, Douglas Freshfield arrived with François Dévouassoud for the first of two visits. Freshfield's descriptions of Corsica's scenery, geography, history and its people are lyrical, perceptive and sympathetic. But essentially a mountain traveller rather than a cut and thrust climber, his Corsican peak bag was limited to Incudine and Rotondo in 1880 and Monte d'Oro in 1894. The first British ascent of Cinto had to wait until Frank Tuckett's 1883 visit with the artist E T Compton.

At this dawning stage in Corsica's climbing history, British attitudes to Corsica's mountains were cautious and condescending. Alpine Club member T G Ouston, who made the first British ascent of Paglia Orba in 1908, commented that Corsica 'appears to be treated by the British like a woman with a past ... interesting because fascinating, romantic and beautiful but otherwise to be left severely alone ... '. [4] It was left to the Australian brothers George and Max Finch with the Norwegian Alf Bryn to initiate the era of modern mountaineering. Their first complete traverses of Tafonato and the Cinque Frati were crowned by a daring ascent of Paglia Orba by its NE face in winter conditions in April 1909.[5] George Finch was later to become the first exponent of oxygen on Everest and a President of the Alpine Club. His Paglia Orba route remains a Corsican classic but, after his visit, Corsica's climbing history largely becomes a Continental catalogue.

Corsica's popularity with ramblers, roamers and rovers is a relatively recent phenomenon and a direct consequence of the creation in 1972 of the Parc Natural Regional de la Corse which covers over a third of the island. The aim of its founders was to revive districts where the old pastoral economy had declined as a result of depopulation and the conversion of winter pastures into farmland and vineyards. To reintroduce the traditional mountain life based on transhumance, sheepfolds and huts were rebuilt and communications between the inner and coastal island re-established. Tourism has many ugly faces but in Corsica it has been handled sympathetically and has rejuvenated the island's interior.

The thread which binds together so many of the Parc's component parts is the GR20 High Level Walking Route. This, an elaboration of an earlier route, runs some 200km from Calenzana to Porto Vecchio and has become the most popular and famous of its kind. With vertical intervals of 19,000m, the GR20 can either be done in 18-21 easy stages or as a stunt for fell-running freaks and fantasists bent on breaking 36, 24 or 12 hours to taste. I first visited Corsica in August 1986 with Roger Chorley, George Band and our respective families. On the GR20 we encountered Tilleke Naar, wife of Ronald Naar 'the flying Dutchman'. We had shared a hut on Mt Olympus with the Naars the previous year and back home I received an account of Ronnie's 1986 Corsican ski traverse characteristically described as ' ... one of the finest I have ever made ... the most difficult of its type for those in the know'.

37. The Corsican High Route: Patrick Fagan (R) and Rodney Franklin ascending Monte Rotondo, 2622m. (*John Harding*) (p125)

38. Paglia Orba, 2525m, from the ridge of Monte Cinto, 2706m. (*John Harding*) (p125)

Hype invariably sets middle-aged pulses racing so I hurriedly consulted Parmentier's oracular *Les Grands Raids à Ski* for elucidation. This revealed that ski routes across the island had preceded the creation of the GR20 itself. A local team had done the central section from Verghio to Vizzavona way back in 1960 and, seven years later, Jerome Pinoncely completed, solo, the first ski traverse of Corsica. Without the existence of huts, these were remarkable feats. Here surely was a *grand raid* for cognoscenti and connoisseurs. The line of the Corsican High Route on ski is self-selecting with little scope for deviation. Basically, you follow the GR20. South to north has to be the preferred line of march, for this way you progress inexorably towards that spectacular knot of peaks – Tafonato, Paglia Orba, Minuta and Cinto. These are Corsica's quintessential mountains whose attainment marks a crescendoing climax to the ski traverse of the Granite Island.

Where best to start and finish? The 'dream traverse' would run the gamut of the GR20 from Conca to Calenzana. But this would mean at least 16 stages and, given the unpredictability of snow cover, the weather's vicissitudes and the problems of reprovisioning *en route* without pre-arranged food caches, you might need three weeks to complete it. Altogether shorter, but dramatic and demanding, is the traverse of the northern section of the GR20 ending up at Asco or Calacuccia. Parmentier suggests seven days for the Bastelica to Asco traverse but to allow a mere 4-6 hours for the initial stage Bastelica to Vizzavona must be braggadocio. Naar's party took some 2½ days to negotiate this section, encountering problems galore on the steep, thickly forested slopes of the upper Gravona valley. Starting from Bastelica, a large village at the head of the Prunelli valley, there is the advantage of hotels and restaurants and the likely scalp of a popular Corsican classic, Monte Renoso at 2352m. But Bastelica is half a day from Ajaccio by public transport, well below the snowline at 770m, and some way off the GR20.

The logical start point for the northern traverse has to be Vizzavona, a hamlet with three hotels grown from the railway stop perched just below the 1163m Vizzavona pass that divides the massifs of Renoso and Oro. This pass forms a watershed between the westward-leading Gravona valley and the Tarvignano valley which inclines north to Corte, Corsica's ancient inland capital. Easily accessible by train from Ajaccio, Vizzavona is the GR20's natural break point.

My first attempt on the Corsican High Route in 1989 was frustrated by lack of snow. But 1994 was an outstanding snow year and on 26 February 1994, our party of six – Alpine Club to a man – having flown in from London the night before, waved down the 0800 hours Corte Express at an unofficial halt conveniently close to our Ajaccio hotel, to the irritation and incredulity of its indulgent driver. By 0930 we had alighted, located the GR20 and left behind us Vizzavona's sad, shuttered hotels which once welcomed Ajaccio's British community with log fires, ballroom dancing and skating on an ice rink set in a forest clearing. In summer, Vizzavona

swarms with an international *mélange* of tourists and hikers. Now we had the path up the Agnone valley to ourselves. Our first stop was at the Cascade des Anglais, a spirited waterfall bounding down a succession of steps through polished granite, which recalled a dim memory of Victorian high days. Eight days later, in the bar of the Acqua Viva Hotel, Calacuccia, we were celebrating the end of our traverse under the baleful glare of a wildly mustachioed Bellacoscia photographed with his monstrous dog whose Tysonesque savagery put a price on its own grotesque head.

So what of this ski traverse which Naar described as 'the most difficult in Europe'? At first blush the whole venture had seemed wildly improbable but the route definitely goes. Besides, it is a wondrous thing of beauty tracing a firm but delicate line along the island's spine through clusters of spiky peaks crossed by porcupine ridges that fall and fade away on either side into hazy, impenetrable valleys running down to the sea. Atop this magical ridge, suspended between heaven and sky, with snow crystals glinting in the sun and the white-capped Alps and Apennines palely luminescent across the Mediterranean's blue gulf, we thought this 'paradise enow'.

But the route itself is unusual, complex and strenuous. Although Corsica's peaks are small by Alpine standards, they give an impression of height and have big vertical intervals. Whereas most Alpine routes run from col to col, traversing snowfields and glaciers, the Corsican High Route generally sticks to ridges. There are no glaciers but the terrain is broken and snow conditions variable. Progress is punctuated by a tiresome 'skins on, skins off' regime. Winter weather can be turbulent, with squalls coming in quickly and unexpectedly. Precipitation is higher than that of any part of south mainland France but, curiously, heavier on the eastern side of the island than the western. Thus, while a billowing cloud sea obliterated the eastern versant for the first four days of our traverse, the western was always clear and brilliantly illuminated by the winter sun.

Snowfall and snow cover are capricious. Proximity to the sea creates a hard, crusty surface névé before the sun gets to it. Thereafter, it soon turns to slush. On our traverse, snow lay thicker and longer on the northern slopes but was usually an unpredictable mishmash of crust and crumble. Some south-facing slopes, though well above the north snowline, were bone bare. But although mushy by afternoon, south-facing snow achieved a degree of consistency through freeze and thaw, and our best runs – Rotondo, Tozzu and outstandingly Cinto – were mainly on such slopes. Both Parmentier and Naar had their problems with the weather. Naar's party was delayed for three days by torrential red rain brought in from the Sahara by the Sirocco. Parmentier counsels as essential prerequisites for this route good navigation and Alpine competence. His own traverse of the Serra Tenda ridge was almost terminated by a windslab avalanche which landed him some way down the Manto Ravine. Storm or bad visibility would make route-finding mistakes serious – especially on the three key ridge passages, Onda to Pietra Piana, Pietra Piana to Manganu and the

traverse of Monte Cinto. We were lucky in having only one bad weather day in eight. But that coincided with the critical passage of Pietra Piana to Manganu which, via a series of cols, culminates in the ascent of the SW ridge of the Punta ala Porta. This involved a snake-like progression, weaving through, or sidling along, a staircase studded with rock towers which emerged ghostly through the mist like ships' prows. In such conditions, to have reached the Brèche Capitello barely 4½ hours after leaving the Pietra Piana hut was a triumph of David Williams' navigational skills and the *tour de force* of our traverse.

The huts were a revelation and proved that humping fuel and cooking equipment over the entire route was a needless penance. All were equipped with the complete *batterie de cuisine* and gas cylinders. Solar panels provided instant electricity. But we had our problems. An older member almost parted with his hamstrings after accomplishing a geriatric splits in unyielding snow. Stephen Baker was reduced to a hospital case with torn ligaments after tripping over an inconvenient stone not far from the Col de Verghio.

Clear skies and panoramic mountainscapes set off by a Mediterranean backdrop usually marked our progress and the traverse of Monte Cinto justified Naar's description as 'one of the great ski climbs of Europe'. For the gluttons, the gastronomic high point coincided with our last day. Before catching the train back to Ajaccio, pause awhile at the Francardo's Auberge Casimir. There an eight-course lunch of immodest helpings awaits you with a wizened waiter of unexceptionable attentiveness.

Summary: Our northern Corsican ski traverse from Vizzavona to Calaccucia, probably a British first, was completed in seven stages between 26 February and 5 March 1994, with an extra day to climb Rotondo. Team members were Stephen Baker, Patrick Fagan, Rodney Franklin, John Harding, Rupert Hoare, David Williams, with Patrick Hemmerle in part. The stages of the traverse were: Vizzavona to Onda, Onda to Pietra Piana, Pietra Piana to Manganu, Manganu to Col de Verghio, Verghio to Ciottulu; Ciottulu to Tighiettu, and finally Tighiettu to Calaccucia.

Peaks climbed: Pinzi Corbini (2021m), Rotondo (2622m) with the zealots also bagging Manicca (2519m), Capu Tozzu (2007m), Paglia Orba (2525m) and Cinto (2706m).

REFERENCES

1 Douglas Freshfield, *Below the Snow Line*. Constable, 49, 1923.
2 Ibid, p70.
3 Dorothy Carrington, *Granite Island*. Longman, 1971.
4 T G Ouston, 'Nineteen Days in Corsica' in *AJ24*, 645, 1908-1909.
5 G I Finch, *The Making of a Mountaineer*. Arrowsmith, 33-39, 1924.