

# From its much-coveted coastline to its unruly interior, Corsica remains a unique French treasure. By Carolyn Reynie

**T**he Greeks called it Kallisté, the fair one, the French call it Ile de Beauté – and a beautiful island Corsica is indeed, with just under 1,000km of spectacular coastline, a richness of biodiversity and a wild, mountainous interior.

The island, which lies in the Mediterranean just north of Sardinia, has been French since 1770, despite being closer to the Italian peninsula than it is to France. It is divided into two *départments*: Haute-Corse in the north and Corse-du-Sud, with a combined population that recently passed the 300,000 mark.

While the city of Ajaccio on the west coast is best known for being the birthplace of Napoleon Bonaparte, Bastia, in the north-east, is the birthplace of the Brise de Mer, the local mafia.

Corsica is France's least economically developed region but, ironically, this has also spared it from the most dramatic effects of the current downturn. "We're experiencing the crisis like everyone else," says Yves Menassé at estate agency Max Immobilier in Ajaccio, "but with less of a decrease because we didn't have significant price rises like in Paris and Nice." Nevertheless, buyers report greater difficulties in obtaining loans and Menassé says persistent media gloom has made locals wary of the future. Most are waiting for prices to tumble.

In this climate, the few who do purchase choose property either in the centre of Ajaccio or along the Route des Sanguinaires, which heads west towards the Pointe de la Parata and the Sanguinaires islands. It is here that Dr Catherine Mascheix, who lives in central France, has bought a large studio as a second home. "I love the climate, the courtesy, the insular side," she says. "There's a cohesion; you have the impression people know each other, talk to each other, protect each other."

Laurence Colleaux and her partner, both from Paris, are also buying an apartment nearby. "It's heaven on earth," she says. "Ajaccio has many of the advantages I was looking for: easy access to the airport, cultural activities, sandy beaches and rocky coves reached by boat."

Apartments in the town centre average €4,000-€5,000 per sq metre and €3,000-€3,500 per sq metre for the *péricentre* and the areas to the west. And building plots are available around the town's periphery in Suartello and Pietralba, where a new villa of 160-180 sq metres and including 1,200-1,500 sq metres of land costs about €1.1m.

"Currently, French buyers are more predominant than foreign ones in Ajaccio," says Menassé, adding that this is not the



case in other parts of Corsica, such as the Balagne region in the north-west, which stretches from Calvi to L'Ile-Rousse, and communes such as Bonifacio and Porto-Vecchio in the far south.

In Bastia, a slight decrease in prices has made property more accessible for first-time buyers, says Evelyne Casanova at Bastia Immobilier. "We're also seeing new buyers – those who have a sum to invest and prefer to buy property rather than put it in the bank." Favourite areas remain the large, café-lined Place St Nicolas and the colourful and animated Vieux Port, both of which benefit from sea views. Also popular are the town centre and Toga, a modern marina complex bustling with bars and brasseries. Prices range from €2,200 to €3,000 per sq metre, more for property in the Place St Nicolas or with views over the Vieux Port.

On the town's hillsides, the neighbourhoods of Fango and Annonciade are also popular. Plots are available, too, on the rugged Cap Corse, the finger of land pointing north, and to the south of the city around Biguglia, Borgo and Vescovato.

Most buyers are Bastiais purchasing main homes, with some *continentaux*, as the mainland French are called, either moving to the island or buying second homes. Foreign buyers are primarily Italians plus a

**Capital** Napoleon Bonaparte Fountain in Ajaccio, birthplace of the emperor

Corbis



sprinkling of Britons, Germans and Dutch.

Floriane Fauvet at Axe Immobilier in Aléria covers an area along the island's eastern plain, from Moriani in the north to Solenzara in the south, where coastal properties are the most sought-after. The local urban plan – Plan Local d'Urbanisme (PLU) – for the various communes is currently under discussion, making building plots harder to come by than new residential developments. "We're currently selling lots of new promotions such as the Résidence Santa Maria in Aléria," reports Fauvet. Prices range from €1,200-€1,700 per sq metre for renovated old properties to €1,700-€2,800 per sq metre for new builds. From Aléria you can get to and from any part of the island within a day, says Fauvet, and prices are lower than elsewhere. "It's currently an interesting region to invest in," he adds.

In Corte, the largest town in the island's mountainous interior and home to the University of Corsica, supply and demand have evened out in the past few years, says Eric Boistard, director of staff at the town council. Corte's PLU has released new land for construction and plans to build a mixture of leased council and private housing. "The pressure on land speculation is considerably less here than in coastal zones because we're in the heart of Corsica, which is suf-

fering from desertification," says Boistard.

Throughout the island's interior one sees tumbledown houses, many roofless, some reduced to just a pile of stones – a result of *l'indivision*, a 19th-century decree that dispensed with a time limit for the winding of estates. Some families have left the island, abandoning their ancestors' homes and for many others the identity of the legal heirs is not known. As properties fall into ruin, repair costs render the reappearance of beneficiaries increasingly unlikely.

There's also a distinct lack of paperwork for properties. "We realised the extent of the problem when people started coming us wanting to sell or buy a property, or exchange a parcel of land with a neighbour," recalls Maître Alain Spadoni, president of the Regional Council of Corsica's Notaries. Even when it was clear that people owned what they said they owned, no title deeds existed. "Corsicans realised a long time ago that if you write something down, it costs you money," says Spadoni. In 2005 he secured the creation of a Land Agency (Agence Foncière) to get the legal land and property situation back in order.

André Valat is one member of the public interest group set up to accomplish this. "We carry out all the necessary archival, fiscal, genealogical searches. We trace back up the property chain," he says. Absent owners need not fear a hefty inheritance tax bill. Thanks to recent 2007 measures, tax allowances are high – and property values are low.

It is a different story along the coast where development pressure is intense. A recent plan for sustainable development proposed that coastal construction should be allowed in areas protected by the 1965 Loi Littoral, which prohibited any building within a 100m band of coastline. But this is being fiercely opposed.

There is, too, an active mover against the ever-rising number of second homes. Is Mascheix concerned? "Absolutely not!" When she moved to the island, she decided to buy furniture in Ajaccio rather than drive it over from the mainland. "I wanted people to know that Corsica was participating in the island's economy."

## Details

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