

# Corsica's GR20 challenging and beautiful

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL LAPOINTE

Corsica is a French island in the Mediterranean Sea, located an hour's flight south of Nice, France, and a few hundred kilometres off Italy's west coast. Though a part of France for more than two centuries, the Corsican people retain their own language and culture as well as a fierce sense of pride and independence, which remains visibly present, particularly when one ventures beyond the popular coastal tourist towns to explore the interior villages.

Two thirds of Corsica's astonishing geography is a single mountain range spanning the oval-shaped island from north to south. Known as Europe's toughest long-distance trail, the GR20 follows 180 kilometres over the summit of that range, most of which is situated in Le Parc Naturel Regional de Corse.

I've always been fascinated with this island and its people. I read about Corsica as a kid in *Astérix En Corse* [from a popular French language comic book series] and that attraction continued when I later read Napoleon's biography—perhaps the island's most historical figure. Through Internet research for potential hikes in Europe I discovered the GR20 and soon was hooked. I had to do it; the right time was June 2013.

Fellow hikers Didier and Anne pause just before the descent to the Haut Asco refuge at the valley bottom. The mountain in the far distance marks the entrance to the Cirque de la Solitude.



Bergeries such as this one offer campsites, meals and basic supplies to GR 20 hikers, including delicious fresh cheese made from the family-owned cows and sheep.

I flew directly from Montreal to Nice, and from there took a seven-hour ferry to the town of Calvi. Arriving there was magical. A medieval citadel overlooks the small port and the old town with its tiny, narrow streets full of cafés, restaurants and stores, all loaded with Corsican *charcuterie*, *saucisson* and fantastic local cheeses. With its beautiful sandy beach, this Mediterranean port city is surrounded by snowy peaks to the south and east. I immediately fell in love with the place.

After a day in Calvi dedicated to last-minute preparations, a cab delivered me to the start of the trail at Calenzana. As a North American, Europe fascinates me. The age and history of every little detail, every step of the way is an experience that never gets old. Corsica, with its historical and stunning natural beauty, was no exception, and the village of Calenzana offered that mix of beautiful old buildings and rugged natural beauty.

The first leg of the journey takes the hiker from slightly higher than sea level to 1,500 metres. As the trail passes between 500 and 1,000 metres, hikers experience the Corsican maquis, a shrubland biome of the Mediterranean region. This rare experience only happens once more on the last day of the hike, some

15 stages later when the route descends again to that elevation. The Corsican maquis is unique; the composition of the thick flora gives it a wonderful aroma, making the experience particularly pleasant and unforgettable.

The beauty of the mountains and the delicious citrus smells of the maquis, however, weren't enough to compensate for the fact I wasn't prepared for the heat of the first day. By noon, I was on the verge of dehydration despite frequent stops at creeks and mountain springs, which fortunately were still running in mid-June, something I'd been advised not to expect.

The heat gave way to colder temperatures as the trail led upward, and soon I was waking to single digits nearly every morning, and more comfortable hiking temperatures. As all the trail documentation I read stated, the first (northern) half is tough; in my opinion, none of these comments were exaggerated. What made these first five days more difficult was the large number of short (and sometimes long) scrambles, up and down. Carrying a 20-kilogram pack, the first four days were difficult.

Fortunately, the third day was a bit shorter and allowed for some well deserved rest in preparation for the fourth

day, the “Cirque de la Solitude.” Everyone was somewhat nervous about that stage, a serious section that can be tricky. Passing through in good weather when it’s snow- and ice-free is important, as one must rely on fixed chains most of the way down, and back up the far side of the cirque. We were told that 10 days earlier a man who tried it when it was still snow covered died during the attempt. Even when the weather is nice, large numbers of hikers can make crossing the cirque difficult because of rockfall, traffic jams at difficult sections and other challenges. Things become easier after that fourth day, but some sections are still demanding throughout the entire trail, whether it’s a steep descent into camp, a tight col passage or a narrow ridge; the GR20 is not short on challenges!

Working my way through the first nine stages, I arrived in the hamlet of Vizzavonna, an unofficial mid-point hub. It’s the only agglomeration where the trail goes directly, and there are many *Gites d’Étapes* as well as a train station. For many who want to hike only 10 days, this is the end of the line. Since one of my boots needed repairs, I took a day off and visited the town of Corte, an hour by train. I found assistance at a small outdoor store and enjoyed a wonderful rest day being a tourist—eating, drinking and recuperating.

The beginning of the south section is somewhat smoother than the northern half. After a long but easy climb on a forest trail, I emerged past tree line to much rounder terrain than what I’d become accustomed to. From a beautiful col, I could see the Mediterranean and the southeast shoreline of the island for the first time. The moment was magical.

The next few days were a mix between high and sometime vertiginous ridge walks, and beautiful, green valleys. Although reportedly easier, a few sections of the southern section were still fairly challenging. Some fellow hikers explained it’s best to start in the south so one is better prepared for the more difficult northern half, although north to south is the “official” GR20 direction. The last two days descended gently back to just above sea level in the village of Conca.



By mid-morning on day one hikers beginning in the north can enjoy the view of the town of Calvi on the Mediterranean Sea.

My Corsican adventure was wonderful in many aspects—a difficult trail, a sustained physical challenge. But beyond that, the beauty of the island, both natural and man-made is what resonates. The aroma of the maquis, the taste of fresh cheese made right on the mountain where I pitched my tent, the authenticity of the mountain shepherds—all are things I will forever remember.

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Daniel Lapointe's "selfie".



## Thoni tops Canadian skimo championships

Canadian Ski Mountaineering Competition Team member Reiner Thoni once again captured top spot in the men’s elite division at the Dogtooth Dash – 2014 Buff Canadian Skimo Championships, which took place at Kicking Horse Mountain Resort in Golden, BC March 21 thru 23.

With the help of 26 eager volunteers, an 800-metre Vertical Race was staged on the Friday evening, followed by Saturday’s Individual Ski Mountaineering event. With the individual course consisting of an 1890-metre course with six climbs, six downhill—four of them steep—four bootpacks and about 100 switchbacks, racers had no choice but to draw on their best technical skills as well as their strength and endurance conditioning.

National Team member Marg Fedyna won the women’s Vert event, with Reiner Thoni winning the men’s. Thoni also won the men’s Individual race—his fifth Canadian title, while Michelle Katchur Roberts earned top honours for the women’s field.

The 800-metre Enduro race for the Canadian junior title was won by 16-year-old Brinton Wolever, while recreational skier Karen Mckirdy won the women’s race.

As Canada’s national team members train through the summer, all eyes are aimed toward the ISMF World Ski Mountaineering Championships taking place in Verbier, Switzerland in February. Stay tune for more skimo in the Winter issue of the *Gazette*.