

INTO

THE

MAQUIS

A small but dedicated riding community is carving out a future for mountain biking on the mountainous Mediterranean island of Corsica

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• On the Mediterranean island of Corsica, the author makes her way down the sun-bleached Pointe de la Revellata, with the blue Golfe de la Revellata to her right and the hills of Calvi's Balagne region—the center of the city's mountain biking—behind.



In spring 2018, after hanging up our skis following another long Vermont winter, my husband Dana and I decided it was time to go somewhere warm to spin out the cobwebs accumulated from dozens of days spent plodding through snow-covered mountains. We required three main components—bikes, wine and beaches—and when we plotted those variables onto a map, transects led us to the Mediterranean Sea.

Upon further inspection, the French island of Corsica exhibited the most winning qualities. Not only did it meet our romanticized criteria for travel, a quick search on the Trail Forks app and some articles from UK-based bike travelers promised enough shred-worthy trail for a two-week trip.

We tempered our expectations of perfect berms and switchback climbs, however, knowing that exploring a new-to-us international location often requires heavy reconnaissance, a few failed trailhead searches and a high likelihood of hike-a-bike situations. We didn't expect that, while we'd be greeted with teeth-rattling descents and cramp-inducing climbs, we'd also be ferried along by a small but passionate and welcoming community of mountain bikers keen on spreading the word about the island's riding.

Before our mid-May departure, we'd picked two locations for our island home bases: the southern, ocean-side city of Porto-Vecchio and the more centrally oriented and mountain-ringed city of Corte.

• The Bay of Calvi, with its namesake citadel at left, plays host to a cruise ship at the foot of the Balagne. The region is home to a network of trails maintained by Wild Machja owner François Battesti.





Corsica, situated 109 miles across the Ligurian Sea from Nice, France, and 55 miles from the coast of Tuscany, Italy, is dubbed “L’Île de la Beauté,” Isle of Beauty, and boasts mountains that run the entire length of its 133 miles. As Dana and I peered out the plane window on our descent into the southern capital city of Ajaccio—pronounced “Ajaxio” in the Corsican language and the 1769 birthplace of Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte—I could see the cobalt blue of the Mediterranean and the island’s snowcapped 7,000-foot peaks in the distance.

“Corsica is mountains” is the refrain we heard from many people over the course of our stay when we expressed our naïve shock at the island’s steep topography. This sentiment was reiterated by Frederic Prat, 47, owner of Insulabike in Porto-Vecchio, our first stop upon our arrival to the island’s southern, sand-covered shores.

“All around, our trails are typically all-mountain with a big amount of rise leading to magnificent technical descents,” Prat explained this past April after our return in an email correspondence with Dana, who, conveniently, is fluent in French.

With such a thriving road bike culture in Europe, I’ve found it hard in the past to locate bike stores that focus on enduro-style riding. But just before settling into an afternoon of pain-au-chocolate and wine, we drove past Insulabike’s window displays boasting high-end, full-suspension bikes and an array of body armor that reassured us that we were speaking the same bike language.

After introductions, Prat invited us on a ride with his shop’s youth mountain bike team later that first afternoon. Within an hour of dropping into the first bike store we’d seen, we found ourselves driving into the foothills around Porto-Vecchio to the town of Muratellu, where Prat lives. From there, we donned our riding gear and dove into the maquis—the Corsican scrubland that’s comprised of wild rosemary, myrtle, thyme and larger cork oak, the bark of which is

traditionally used as stoppers in the coveted bottles of this region’s wine.

Soon we were barreling down a trail filled with baby-head-sized rocks and sandy soil interspersed with meters-long, shark-finned granite ledges. When one trail ended, we locked out suspension and pedaled back uphill to do it again, all while getting passed by Prat’s youth team consisting of seven 13- and 14-year-olds on e-bikes, the burgeoning mountain-bike mode of choice on the island.

“I created a club to pass my passion to the next generation,” Prat explained. It’s clear this appetite for mountain biking is being imparted to his 13-year-old son, Kevin, who served as the lead-in and inspection partner for many features on our ride.

During a post-ride hangout at the shop, Dana translated his conversation with Prat—who doesn’t speak English—about his history on the island. Corsica’s famed beaches, he said, first lured him from his home on mainland France to Porto-Vecchio in 2004. He later met his Corsican wife, Eve, on a ski trip in Les deux Alpes in 2005. At the time, Prat owned and operated ekosport.fr, an online ski retailer. By 2011, he was ready to live with Eve in Corsica full time, and after two years on the island, Prat sold his shares in the retail business. In 2015, he opened Insulabike to follow his mountain bike passion and hasn’t looked back.

“The mountain bike development in Corsica is progressing slowly, but since last year [the bike community] has experienced a growing interest in the development of trails,” Prat said. “We are really at the beginning of development, and we hope to have many marked trails for tourists and locals over the next few years.”

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• Along Corsica’s eastern coast, remnants of a scrubland forest make for eerie surroundings on the beachside trail dubbed La Tonnara.









IN CORSICA'S NORTH-ERN HALF, Monte Cinto (8,878 feet) stands as the island's tallest peak of Corsica's four mountain massifs—the northernmost Monte Cinto Massif, the north-central Monte Rotondo Massif, the south-central Monte Renoso Massif and the southern Monte Incudine Massif. Together, they boast 50 peaks taller than 6,000 feet. And while Dana and I kicked off our singletrack tour miles away from the island behemoth, our lungs still burned during the ascents of the Porto-Vecchio foothills. That effort on the up, it turned out, quickly became eclipsed by the technical prowess necessary to negotiate the island's steep, fall-line descents.

"In Corsica the singletrack is rather rough and requires a good technical mastery on the bike," Prat told Dana in their springtime correspondence. It's a fact he'd shown us earlier, as well, when he directed us to Cartalavonu, a trail accessed via a 12-mile road ride

passing through the quintessentially Corsican schist-tiled houses of the town L'Ospédale, or "U Spidali" in Corsican, burrowed into the hillside at 3,444 feet.

Cartalavonu's 2,900-foot descent, crafted years earlier by dirt-bikers who frequent the area, sported loose boulders, three-foot-deep ruts and hairpin switchbacks. Despite the initial paved grind to the top, Dana and I were thankful we'd grabbed our knee and elbow pads for the two-hour descent. Fog-blurred views of a vast sea greeted us on the way down as we passed through centuries-old shepherd pastures perched on rocky hillsides.

A few days after that ride, we learned how most area riders manage the large amount of climbing required to access trails in Corsica: shuttles. Prat invited us to join him, Kevin and Kevin's friend, Lisandru Bertini, for a day of shuttle riding at a bike park in the town of Zonza, 24 miles from Porto-Vecchio and deep into the southern Freto territory, bounded by the mountainous front to the north and Pian d'Avretu's scrubland plains to the south.

- [Left] The author drops a leg and rallies an alpine berm in the pine forest outside the southern mountain town of L'Ospédale.
- [Above] The reward of cold beach brews follows dusty trail reconnaissance.

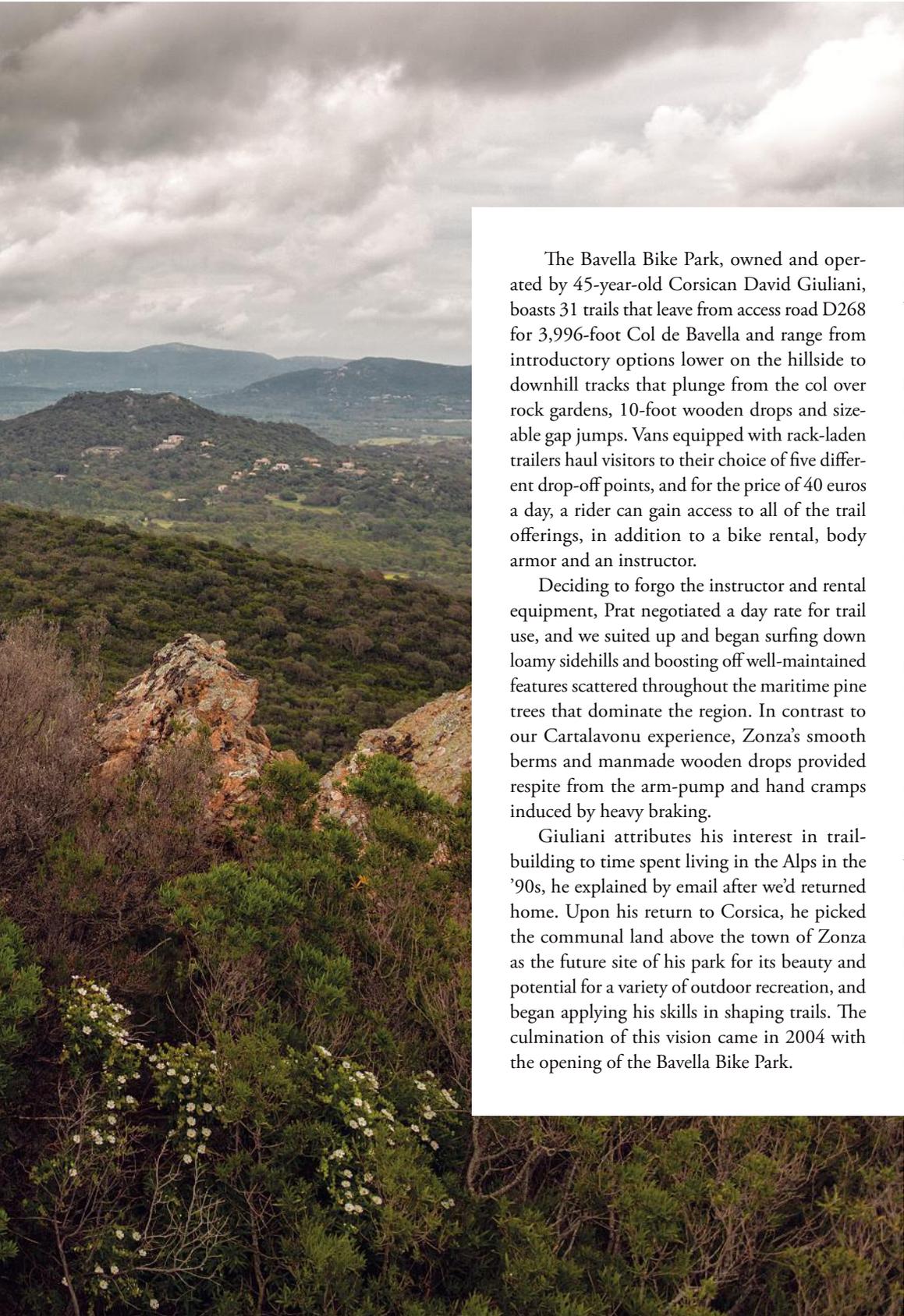


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The Bavella Bike Park, owned and operated by 45-year-old Corsican David Giuliani, boasts 31 trails that leave from access road D268 for 3,996-foot Col de Bavella and range from introductory options lower on the hillside to downhill tracks that plunge from the col over rock gardens, 10-foot wooden drops and sizeable gap jumps. Vans equipped with rack-laden trailers haul visitors to their choice of five different drop-off points, and for the price of 40 euros a day, a rider can gain access to all of the trail offerings, in addition to a bike rental, body armor and an instructor.

Deciding to forgo the instructor and rental equipment, Prat negotiated a day rate for trail use, and we suited up and began surfing down loamy sidehills and boosting off well-maintained features scattered throughout the maritime pine trees that dominate the region. In contrast to our Cartalavonu experience, Zonza's smooth berms and manmade wooden drops provided respite from the arm-pump and hand cramps induced by heavy braking.

Giuliani attributes his interest in trailbuilding to time spent living in the Alps in the '90s, he explained by email after we'd returned home. Upon his return to Corsica, he picked the communal land above the town of Zonza as the future site of his park for its beauty and potential for a variety of outdoor recreation, and began applying his skills in shaping trails. The culmination of this vision came in 2004 with the opening of the Bavella Bike Park.

As for the future of trails in Zonza, Giuliani said, "No mechanical installation is planned. We will stay with shuttles, but this year we are developing a new area dedicated to young children—three years old and up—called the mini bike park." In this way, he shares Prat's desire to steward a love for Corsican mountain biking for the next generation and help grow its recreational hold.

In light of Prat and Giuliani's dedication to fostering community and trailbuilding among mountain bikers young and old, both from Corsica and abroad, I began to see our seemingly serendipitous encounter at Insulabike cast in a different hue. Maybe what we first understood as luck was actually a Corsican cultural predisposition to hospitality. That theory was quickly proved true as we prepared to continue on our journey with bikes in tow.

As we readied for our departure from Porto-Vecchio, we told Prat of our plans to head to the north-central mountain city of Corte, a choice he promptly dissuaded us from making. He politely explained that Corte's mountains were even more rugged and steep than those found around Porto-Vecchio and that we'd be insane to try and bike up there. So we adjusted plans and took Prat's suggestions to head to the northern town of Calvi, located on the western side of Corsica where another trailbuilder and shop owner, François Battesti, is trying to establish a mountain bike destination in the Haute Corse region.

• Frederic Prat takes the lead on his backyard trail through the maquis above the southern city of Porto-Vecchio.



ALVI SITS AT THE head of a north-facing bay and is crowned by a looming stonewalled citadel, the supposed birthplace of Christopher Columbus. This heavily fortified section of Calvi was built in the 13th century during a time when the shores of Corsica were under attack by myriad cultures from mainland Europe hoping to gain access to a strategic location from which to control the western Mediterranean Sea. Now, ferries from Italy and France dock at the foot of the medieval stronghold, bringing foreigners to the beaches that dot the shores of this northwest-facing stretch of land before it fades into the spiny, porphyritic igneous cliffs of the Golfe de Porto UNESCO World Heritage Site to the south.

Like in Porto-Vecchio, the first line item on our to-do list after making the 125-mile drive to Calvi was to find a bike shop, and we sought out François Battesti's Wild Machja to ask for suggestions on a ride plan for the following days.

Battesti, 34, hails from Corsica's northernmost peninsula, which lies just south of the city of Basita. He grew up riding BMX and later picked up downhill, but it wasn't until he and his friend, Julien Paolini, opened Wild Machja in the heart of Calvi in 2012 that biking became a career. Upon the store's inception, Battesti explained, there was not much singletrack to ride, so he and his friends started explor-

ing their options on the area's hiking trails. Little by little, their knowledge of trailbuilding grew and now, seven years later, Calvi sports a trail system on the bluffs overlooking the south side of the city in a region dubbed the Balagne.

The network of Balagne sits under the watchful gaze of Notre Dame de la Serra—a 19th century church constructed over 15th century ruins—on the bluff where most of the trail in this region converges. Battesti's work connects wooden pallets stitched together to form perfect wall rides with natural Moab-esque rock roll-downs giving way to smooth descents. On our second day in Calvi, we sampled the system, starting with a hot 30-minute road grind from town into the hills. A coastal breeze wicked sweat from our faces when we reached Notre Dame de la Serra, and we wasted no time diving down the first purpose-built bike path we found.

"The singletrack in the Balagne region of Calvi is starting to be more mapped and sought after, but we're just at the beginning of the process," Battesti noted. "It's often people of [ages] 50 or 60 who travel here for road biking, thanks to the Tour de France [stage between Ajaccio and Calvi] hosted in 2013."



• On the two-mile-long Cartalavonu descent above the beaches of Porto-Vecchio, the author negotiates a rocky turn through a goat herder's pasture.





But Battesti believes that the future is bright for both trailbuilding and the growth of mountain bike popularity on Corisca and in Calvi, and he plans to continue with trail work to help grow singletrack offerings and the community support that comes with better bike infrastructure.

“With my friends, we will create more enduro singletrack in addition to maintaining the old ones,” he explained. “For the moment, there is no association; we do work between friends.”

Bringing younger generations into the mountain bike fold with incentives like hosting an Enduro World Series event is also part of his long-range vision to launch Calvi into the international mountain bike ring. “Younger people are more interested in mountain biking and singletrack creation,” he said, “and young Corsicans are more present in the international competitions like the Enduro World Series—[19-year-old Corsican] Nathan Secondi, for example. And maybe in five or 10 years, there will also be young people from Calvi competing.”

Thinking back to Kevin and his group of friends in Porto-Vecchio and our conversations with Prat upon returning stateside, it’s easy to picture Corsica’s riding taking shape in the way Battesti predicts. Corsica’s up-and-coming riders are skilled, and there’s no question that the next generation, like those on the Insulabike team, will continue to build trail and a riding culture among the mountains and the maquis.

As for the future of mountain bike tourism on the island, Prat’s outlook is positive. “It’s my hope that Corsica will become a must-visit for mountain biking in the future,” he told Dana this spring. Corsica’s offerings already are worthy of any rider’s bucket list, not only because of the island’s natural beauty, but also because of the generosity and openness of its dedicated mountain bike community. 🌀

- The trails built by François Battesti above Calvi are quite pallet-able.