

HOLIDAY IN CORSICA

Having experienced rather poor weather while on holiday for a year or so, I determined to go to a place where it did not usually rain in the summer. Time and distance being of importance, Corsica seemed indicated.

Having no time to make the necessary arrangements for myself, I went to a travel agency, told them which day I was starting and the date of return, the places I wished to visit and the length of time to be spent in each. In a few days I had a letter from the agent who said that it would be better to stay in Nice and visit the Island for a three-days trip only. Having made them understand that I did not want to do any such thing, they next wrote to say that the place I wished to stay at in the south was not possible as there was no suitable hotel. Thereupon I said they must book me at the least unsuitable. This was Bonifacio, a most interesting place and one I specially wanted to see. After this I expect they thought me quite mad, so made no more objections, only stating that they would do the work, but would not be responsible in any way for the type of accommodation or my safety.

One Saturday morning I left Victoria with luggage which, at a pinch, I could carry myself. Had some tea in Paris and dinner on the train on the way to Nice, arriving there about 9 a.m.

The agent's man had a car and took me to the boat. I called at the office on the way to get some French money, but being Sunday they said they would rather not give me any if I could manage. I had a little, so cheerfully said I would wait till I got to Calvi and get a cheque changed at the bank there. The man smiled and said I could try. (I found on getting to Calvi that the bank was two days' journey away).

The boat sailed at 11 a.m. and at 12 noon the welcome sound of the gong for lunch roused me from a sleep in the sunshine and down I went to an excellent meal, rather strange dishes, and very good native wine topped off with strong black coffee. I hoped my small stock of French money would pay for this and waited in some anxiety for the bill to come. As it did not do so and everyone else was going on deck, I went also, knowing that the steward would know where to look for us all. I found a very comfortable corner on a coil of rope in the shade and slept well for some time, to the amusement of the Captain who discovered an English woman very much at home on his ropes and asked if I was happy there. Looking later for the head waiter, I was most surprised to hear that the meal was free and no tips were allowed, all being included. We arrived at the port of the day, on this occasion Ile Rousse, about 6.15 p.m., so I looked about for a porter to take my luggage to the station, or a bus or something. There was none, but a grand porter with Hotel Splendid on his cap grabbed my things and carted them off, putting them on the smallest donkey I have ever seen.

I tried to explain in my very limited French that I was not going to a hotel, but to Calvi by train, and where, please, was the station? He directed me round the harbour and said I would come to the "Gare" and that the luggage would arrive in good time.

I walked round that harbour; no sign of a station. I walked into the town; still no station, I asked a passer-by; he had never heard of a station. I asked at the café. Yes! there was a station, but no one could tell me where. More questions, but no success. Well, the only thing was to walk back and find the man with the ass. Half way back to the boat I met him, now riding the ass and no sign of the luggage. He greeted me with joy and asked for payment. "Only when we were at the station," I told him. At this he laughed a great deal and said the baggage was at the wine shop opposite the station.

He then showed me the station, a patch of grass with a tumbledown shed on it. He pushed aside the grass and showed me with joy some rusty looking rails under it. A train would come certainly, if not to-day, why then perhaps to-morrow, anyway there would be a train. And a train there was, that very night, broken in parts and mostly tied together with string, but still a train, and after much delay it actually started and ran for about half an hour, then it decided that it had forgotten something so went back and played about for another half-hour. In the end we really did arrive at Calvi, and here I had a great surprise, for I was met by a real porter and taken to an hotel which was called, and looked, like a palace. I was given a good bedroom with a private bath and a view over the harbour (after the first night a mosquito-net also, as during that night I was well bitten, though the manager said that there were *no* mosquitos in Calvi).

Calvi is a very interesting old town, built, as are most of the fortresses in Corsica, on the top of a rock, the sea-side protected by a thick mass of cactus with long, sharp spines, almost impossible to cut down and quite impossible to get through. Below the Cité is the harbour, with many yachts lying at anchor and brightly coloured fishing boats. Then there is a sandy beach, very safe for children, as to get into deep water one has to go out quite a long way. This I found a bit tiresome as I like deep water, so asked if it would be in order to swim from the rocks below the fortress. I was then asked if I could swim very fast. Having said no, but that I could stay up a long time, was told that I should be caught by a fish. Sharks! but surely not, so close inland! No, "the fish with the arms so long." On the whole I would rather have shallow water than meet an octopus, so that was that.

After four days I took the train again, this time at 6.0 a.m. For three hours the train puffed and jerked up into the mountains, wonderful views and smells like aromatic vinegar. The conductor of the train was much distressed by my ticket (issued before leaving England and in one of the usual books); he said it was paper, and not stiff, he would not take it or even punch it, but instead laid himself down on the opposite seat on guard. He slept blissfully, only waking up if the train stopped, or arrived at a station.

When we arrived at the top I think the string on the brake must have broken; we came down from those hills in less than 20 minutes, the train rocking from side to side, whistle screaming all the time. Workers on the line had no time to get clear, but had to leap for ropes hanging from the rocks, hanging there while their feet dangled in at the windows. At 1.0 p.m. I reached my next destination, Vizzivona, set in a thick pine forest among the mountains. Here I spent five or six days, lovely walks and scrambles, forest, streams and mountains; hot sunny days, cool nights. The Forest Hotel was comfortable, but rather bare. The bell for meals was fixed outside and rung by a rope so could be heard for miles. The electric light burnt cheerfully in the daytime, but frequently failed when it was dark, so we often dined by lamp and candle light.

No one here spoke or understood anything but French, but they were all most kind in trying to understand me. The little waitress specially. It was she who advised me to stick to red wine in Corsica, as the white was not at its best that year. She also used to try to get me ripe figs when there were meant to be only apricots as the last course at dinner, having found out that I liked the figs very much.

On Sunday, having noticed a small church in the forest, I enquired at what hour there would be a service. No one could say. If a priest came, then doubtless there would be a service, but then there might not be a priest. The church when unlocked, was found to contain an altar,

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