



# ROUND HE GOES

One kayak. Three weeks. Six hundred kilometres. And a storm approaching... A solo circumnavigation of the spectacular French island of Corsica takes guts, stamina and a whole lot of luck when it comes to the weather.

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**O**N OCCASION THE outdoors can reduce you to tears. I'm not talking about blistered feet that make you wince with every step or that sinking feeling when your map blows away in a white-out. I'm talking about tears of joy. When the combination of place, time and activity come together to deliver a sensation of total satisfaction. Sometimes this manifests in a whoop of joy, sometimes in a little sob of ultimate happiness. As I wove in and out of the intricate cliffs of Scandola Nature Reserve on the Corsican west coast, a tear dropped into the Mediterranean. This was spectacular country — unbelievable cliff and rock formations, caves, inlets, tiny beaches, rock pinnacles and a calm sea that allowed me to paddle hard up against it all.



Fuelling up to do battle with the wind near Porto Vecchio.

The French island of Corsica looked ideal for a kayak circumnavigation. A coastline of some 600km held within it some of the most rugged country in Europe. Running the length of the island are granite mountain chains, renowned for their climbing and trekking opportunities. For the most part, these mountains tumble into the sea, creating the magnificent coast. Not for nothing is Corsica called the *L'Île de Beauté* — The Island of Beauty. Hire gear often promises more than it delivers — leaving you with mountain bikes that should never go near mountains, kayaks that are best kept on land. Taking up most of the hotel reception in the Roy of Aragon Hotel in Bonifacio was a 6m-long box and, inside, a new Tiderace Xcape sea kayak. Telemaco, from a kayak business in Sardinia, had more than delivered on his promise to provide me a decent boat!

The kayak had arrived in Bonifacio that night on the ferry from Sardinia. I'd arrived in a shared taxi after the bus south from Bastia had broken down. Carrying paddles and kayaking paraphernalia, I was squeezed in between an Italian carrying two cats and a very overweight Dutchman carrying a large chip on his shoulder. The taxi driver, a Corsican nationalist, told me a nasty weather system was on the way — very strong westerly winds were forecast to blow for days, with snow predicted in the mountains.

I'd originally hoped to have a day or so getting organised in Bonifacio; packing gear, testing the kayak and exploring this most southerly and most spectacular of Corsican towns. But I was desperately keen to cheat the arriving storm

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and get out of the narrow 15km strait separating Corsica from Sardinia. The Bouches (“mouth” in French) De Bonifacio had a reputation for foul weather and I wanted to paddle into the shelter of the east coast before the mouth started spitting and snarling.

After a good night's sleep, I ran around the harbour buying food and gear, and trying to find somewhere to start the trip from. The harbour at Bonifacio was a spectacular 2km-long, 100m-wide “calanque”; a gash in the cliffs that offered no beach to launch from. Eventually I found a low pontoon that I could lift the loaded kayak in from. On the south side of the calanque, the old town and fort perch on cliffs, which on the ocean side overhang to quite some degree. Ancient buildings alarmingly totter on top of the cliffs, looking straight to the water below.

### THE CIRCUMNAVIGATION BEGINS

Farewelling the enthusiastic staff at the hotel, I headed to the kayak and lowered the boat into the water. The circumnavigation had begun. No time for test paddles, no time for a warm up. Having just come off three weeks on the mountain bike in Italy, my legs were strong, my

arms less so. I turned left out of the calanque and into the strait. A breeze was blowing and with every small gust I worried the big blow was coming. But, in reality, conditions were perfect as I paddled beneath the limestone cliffs to Cap Pertusato, Corsica's most southerly point. It was good to be en route, good to be on the water. The kayak felt comfortable, the sun was shining, a flying fish sailed across my bow.

Rounding Pointe de Sperone took me out of the straits, into the granite and onto the east coast. Corsica was already showing off her wares — the rock, the beaches, the clear Mediterranean water. I passed the first of dozens of Genoese towers. Round stone towers, dominating headlands right around the coast, they were used to great effect to pass on warnings of invading forces. In this age of email, text and social media, they remind us of the old ways — communicating by fire or foot messenger.

In the early evening, I turned into a now rising wind to paddle up into Porto Novo and found a camp on a long, sandy beach. The following morning there were whitecaps out in the bay. I took time to properly look at the kayak and make adjustments I'd not had time for in Bonifacio. The sea was up but generally, by hugging the coast, I could avoid the worst of it.

A strong coffee at a beach bar at Palombaggia kept me awake for the lumpy, confused sea around Punta Cerbicale before a brief respite in calmer waters in the lee of some cliffs. I knew that as soon as I reached the 10km-long gulf of Porto-Vecchio I'd be turning fully into the wind. Sure enough, once I'd come under the lighthouse at Chiappa it was slog time. Progress was painfully slow and wet, with waves breaking over the bow. I stayed as close to the shore as possible, but a number of small headlands forced me further out into the wind. As I inched up the gulf, numerous old, wrecked boats were a reminder of similar days when the wind had torn them from their moorings. Arms and shoulders were glad to reach a little beach below the old town, where, in exactly one month, the eyes of the sporting world would be focussed. Porto-Vecchio had been chosen as the departure town for the 2013 Tour de France. The race was marking its centenary and it was the first time Le Tour had visited the island.

### A TOUGH CHOICE

The following morning, the wind fair blew me out of the gulf. The run up to Solenzara was another day of trying my best to avoid the westerly. As soon as I headed across a bay, the gusts would do their best to rip the paddle from my hands. But in the lee of cliffs all was calm and it was great



A rocky cleft in Scandola Nature Reserve, Corsican west coast.



paddling. While the coast had its fair share of campgrounds and resorts, there was plenty of quiet paddling along coastlines with sculpted rocks and white sand beaches backed by rock spires, the Aiguilles de Bavella, dusted with fresh snow.

Running north from Solenzara, long, long sandy beaches rolled up to Bastia for over 100km. It actually wasn't too bad; the lack of much surf meant you could paddle close in, viewing life on the beach and the ever-impressive mountain backdrop. Late one afternoon I started to think about camp, perhaps just around the next rounded headland. I encountered 100 or so naked sorts enjoying the last sun. The map showed a French military firing range starting 500m further up the beach. I preferred to take my chances there and survived the night with neither explosions nor nude runs, although I was woken at one point by a llama nudging the tent.

### STUNNING PADDLING

Six days from Bonifacio, I paddled into Bastia town. Just north, it was good to be back on a rocky coastline. Some magnificent houses clung to the rocks up to the old village of Erbalunga, with its classic, tiny, rock-hewn harbour. North there were only scattered hamlets and a road hugging contours of hills that fell straight to the sea. I camped in a bay and dined that night with a group of Puerto Ricans and Corsicans. The two islands have strong links after many Corsicans left to make their fortune there in the 19th century.

Despite the calm conditions and forecast, I was a bit nervy about Cap Corse. Maybe I just couldn't believe my luck. But it was stunning paddling as I went around the top under grey skies, past the Finocchiarola Islands and north-west to the Genoese tower on Punta Di Agnello. Then it was west across the Cap, where for 5km or more I out-paddled a yacht trying to make progress in the light breeze. At Capo Bianco, I turned onto the west coast of Corsica for the first time.



Calm seas, warm sun, superb coastline in western Corsica.

At the classic fishing village of Centuri, I was happy to stretch the legs and celebrate with a Pietra, the local beer, before finding a place to camp on a rocky beach south of the village. Wild camping is banned on Corsica's coast, but a sea kayaker has little choice but to find a spot close to the water.

Walking back into the village, I saw a couple of sea kayakers camped on another tiny beach. I dropped down for a chat. Peppino and Catherine, from near Paris, were the first paddlers I'd seen in this sea kayakers' paradise. The three of us headed to a bar for a few more Pietras and agreed to paddle together the following day.

### 'THE LUCKY MAN'

Our journey down the west side of Cap Corse peninsula took in a couple of the cutest of hamlets — three or four houses huddled around minuscule harbours big enough for perhaps two small boats. We lunched in hot sun on the terrace of a derelict bar, looking south across to the Desert des Agriates and beyond to Monte Cinto (2706m), Corsica's highest peak. Peppino

## Seeing how high driftwood was piled at the back of beaches showed the power of winter storms.

nicknamed me "The Lucky Man" to have enjoyed such fair conditions and I certainly wasn't complaining.

The following day we made a beeline across St Florent gulf to the desert, an area of fine, white sand beaches and low scrub hills. About 40km from camp we landed at L'Ile Rousse, disturbing a couple of teenage lovers on the beach. In severe need of rehydration, we spied what we thought was a bar just beyond the lovers. As we sat on the terrace, I noticed everyone else was at least 70. The waiter came up to tell us it was not actually a public bar, but the bar of an old people's home. Still, it served beer, the waiter was happy to sell it to us and it was a perfect contrast looking down on young love in action.

### BEST YET TO COME

I bade farewell to my enjoyable French companions the following morning and wandered the markets buying supplies. Ten days into the circumnavigation, I still had the best to come, according to everyone I'd met and everything I'd read.

Rounding Pointe de Revellata, it all began. Day after day, kilometre after kilometre of some of the finest coastline I've seen anywhere. And the mostly calm conditions allowed me to explore caves and calanques. Seeing how high driftwood was piled at the back of beaches showed the power of the winter storms. I kayaked up a narrow slot, following the sound of freshwater echoing off the walls and discovered a series of pools in the rock linked by a small stream; a perfect place to soak and wash off the salt. I paddled into one deep cave and swore I could hear the voices of giants gobbling and groaning. It was, of course, the water echoing off the rock further into the cave, but it sent a shiver down my spine in the darkness.

From a distance, Punta Palazzu in the Scandola

Nature Reserve looked like a section of Uluru displaced at sea and when I paddled under those soaring cliffs I felt as small as I looked. Even the tour boats in the reserve did little to diminish the power of the place. At the end of the 12th day, as I rounded a headland to Cargese village, an absolutely vicious sou'easter came from nowhere and within minutes had whipped up the sea. The kayak was being thrown all over the place. At one point, I tried to sneak through a gap in some rocks, but the wind tunnel effect meant it took me four or five attempts to get through. Cargese was less than a kilometre away, but I pulled the kayak up onto some rocks to wait until all was relatively calm again. The following day I was chased across the Golfe de Sagone by thunder and bolts of lightning and the first rain since leaving Bonifacio. I ran for shore and sheltered from the storm at another old people's home, isolated on the south side of the gulf. Perhaps it was telling me something...

### BREAK TIME

After two weeks of solid paddling I left the kayak for a week, joining my wife and a dozen friends at a villa to celebrate my own ageing process — a half century.

I celebrated the first day back in the kayak as a 50-year-old with a 50km paddle on a stinking hot day. At times, it was a struggle to stay awake in the languorous conditions. Did I need afternoon naps now?

From the Iles Sanguinaires, the "Bloody Islands", I headed 15km straight across the Golfe D'Ajaccio, not feeling a need to visit Corsica's largest town and the birthplace of Napoleon. Once back close to the coast, it again showed off its delights. Around every little bay, rock was contorted into the most fantastical of shapes. Much was abstract, but I'm certain I saw a scarab beetle, a couple in conversation, a crouching cheetah, a row of human faces. And no, it was not heatstroke.

### WIND'S UP

I was reaching the end of the west coast and would soon turn back into the Bouches de Bonifacio. The mouth was welcoming me back with a hot, strong breath from the east as I edged my way along a remote coastline toward Punta di Senetosa. I kayaked into Calanque de Conca, a narrow opening to a perfect horseshoe beach. A few boats swung madly on their moorings in the gusts. Senetosa was where the coast changed from running south to heading east. There was no way I'd get around the point in the howling wind nor paddle against it if I did.

My wife had stayed on in Corsica after the birthday bash and had made her way to Tizzano,



Approaching a wreck off a beach on the west coast.

a small village 10km away. I decided to leave the kayak at Conca and follow a coastal track (a three-hour walk) to surprise her. That night we found a superb restaurant in Tizzano that had the perfect blend of great food, presentation and service. The following morning, the easterly was still blowing, but not as strongly, while the forecast was for a strong westerly change to come up and blow for the next five days. That would put the wind behind me for the run to Bonifacio, but it was along a very exposed coast. Bonifacio was only 50km or so away, but I was starting to think that it might be best to paddle the trusty Tiderace as far as Tizzano and leave it there until the weather settled.

I walked back to Conca and paddled slowly against the wind back to Tizzano. Within 20 minutes of landing, the easterly, without drawing breath, became a wild westerly. Beach umbrellas and inflatable toys in their dozens headed off down the beach. Wendy and I carried the kayak

up to the hotel and started to make plans for the next few days as general tourists.

But the Lucky Man was blessed one last time. That night the wind dropped a bit and I started to entertain thoughts of creeping a little further along the coast. I was down on the beach at dawn; things didn't look too bad. The forecast too had improved for the day. I pushed off the beach and kayaked out around Cap de Zivia. All was well. Paddling headland to headland, I was making great progress, unable to believe my luck. The kilometres seemed to pass with ease as I skipped across the capes. Capo di Feno, one final headland of hundreds, and then there was Bonifacio up on the cliffs. It was the last few kilometres of stunning coastline among 600km of stunning coastline; granite changed back to limestone. I turned back into the calanque of Bonifacio, a little more than three weeks since I'd turned out of it.

For five days afterwards, 70-80kmh winds blew in the Bouches. The Lucky Man? I think so.

## THE ESSENTIALS

**When to go:** May to October is the best time for paddling. It is probably best to avoid the main holiday season of July-August.

**Where to go:** For a full circumnavigation of Corsica, some 600km, you should allow anything from 20-30 days, depending on pace and weather. I paddled for 17 days in total. Many days could be spent exploring small sections of the coast. If you have limited time then anywhere on the west coast from Calvi down would blow you away. There are plenty of campgrounds and resorts in different sections, but as always with sea kayaking it is hard to guarantee where you will be on any given night and obviously accommodation needs to be close to the water.

**Kayak hire and tours:** While there are plenty of kayak hire places on beaches in Corsica, these are generally sit-on-tops for day use only. The even larger Italian island of Sardinia, just to the south, has a

number of operators that hire kayaks and run tours. The fantastic people at Waternest ([www.waternest.it](http://www.waternest.it)) helped me with a kayak for the Corsica paddle.

**Getting there:** Flights from various parts of Europe come in to Ajaccio, Bastia and Figari (near Bonifacio). Numerous ferries run from various ports in France and Italy to Ajaccio, Bastia, Porto Vecchio, Calvi and L'Ile Rousse. Corsica Ferries ([www.corsica-ferries.com](http://www.corsica-ferries.com)), La Meridionale ([www.lameridionale.fr](http://www.lameridionale.fr)), SNCM ([www.sncm.fr](http://www.sncm.fr)), Moby Lines ([www.moby.it](http://www.moby.it)).

**Maps:** I used a 1:150,000 Michelin map of Corsica. *Mediterranean France & Corsica Pilot*, by Rod Heikell (Imray, 2002), is a worthwhile investment.

**More info:** Corsica Tourism, [www.visit-corsica.com](http://www.visit-corsica.com). The various Capitainerie offices in most ports and marinas are a good source of weather info. Pick up a brochure and map of Union Des Ports de Plaisance De Corse for locations and details on all these.