

When it comes to holiday destinations,

Mediterranean islands tend to top lists. Reflected light and cooling breezes hold out more attractions than the shore of a sweaty continent in the blazing days of summer. Ibiza, Mallorca, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, Cyprus, Crete, Rhodes and the watering holes of the Aegean all surrender themselves to the tourist season, nowadays from Easter to the mid-term school break at the end of October, plus the Christmas-New Year solstice. But Corsica?

Corsica's resort coasts bustle in July and August. A clientèle of regular and contented visitors, mostly French nationals, profit from a conspiracy of silence between Ajaccio, Paris and the developers and operators. The Isle of Beauty has been given a miss by the masses – despite offering the best beaches, the finest scenery, the most benevolent climate and the purest air of the region.

Too good to be true? In terms of what is the major cash-earner for the struggling island economy, it's a disaster. Corsica is blessed – or cursed – with a cornucopia of statistics. Whether from the Corsican Tourist Board, from INSEE – the French national organisation with a branch in Ajaccio – or from the European Union of which Corsica is a region, the figures tell the story. Tourism is a low-performing staple of the island economy whose productivity will only be improved by major investment. Which depends on a mind-shift in attitude. That may never happen.

This season the number of tourists visiting the island is expected to exceed 2 million. They will spend around 5.5 billion francs, not including travel to Corsica, confirming tourism as among the most important sector in the island economy along with agriculture,

industry and commerce. They will stay an average 14 days. Three out of four visitors will come from mainland France. One quarter of francs spent will be from the pockets of the Ile de France...

The reason, barring disaster, for such confident predictions is that Corsican tourism has grown consistently over the past decade to the point where capacity is reached during peak season, mid-July to mid-August. Mid-June to mid-July and mid-August to mid-September are also busy; the season starts slowly and ends abruptly. By mid-October peace reigns over of a Mediterranean paradise whose climate until the following May is milder and sunnier than that of the Côte d'Azur.

Perhaps this is what many of Corsica's 260,000 residents want. Why not? If you make enough in three or four months to survive the other eight or nine in relative serenity why mortgage your existence and endanger your coastline to provide high-season capacity or spring and autumn facilities? Most tourist establishments are small businesses employing a few people on a full-time basis – often family. They exist on low overheads, and on hiring seasonal labour. Extending the season by a few months represents a serious commitment.

Perhaps there are deeper factors in play: Corsican society's traditions of hospitality do not align with tourism's cash ethic. Visitors are guests, not paying guests. Making money is not a practice you own up to. Serving strangers who are not guests is an unworthy occupation. There's something shameful about a life given over to exploiting visitors who have little knowledge of or interest in island values...

Tourism has survived in the low-investment climate this engenders. Despite all-round prices on Corsica being 10 per cent higher than those on the Continent because much has to be imported, the average tourist spends per head, lodging included, just 200 francs per day. As someone put it, Corsica is the land where holidays are given away. Hire a villa within walking distance of the beach, the supermarket and the restaurant for an occasional meal. Sun, sand and shining water are free.

Hotels make up just 17 per cent of the island's tourist "offer". And things are getting worse. According to INSEE, the years between 1994 and 1999 saw a halving of bedspace offered by one-star hotels; during the same time two-star establishments lost ten per cent of beds while three-star hotels gained two per cent and four-stars five per cent. This leaves Corsica light on one and two-star hotels compared with the continental French profile, better-endowed with three-stars but still way below average on four-star luxury. As for five stars, forget them.

Lack of hotels means the island has no elasticity during the season when every room is at a premium and has a poor quality reserve out of season when many establishments simply close for five or six months. A tally of the Michelin red guide for Ajaccio – the island's business centre – shows the top hotel in town, Les Mouettes, closed between November and March. The same goes for the Cala di Sole on the attractive Route des Îles Sanguinaires, where even the Dolce Vita with its medallioned restaurant closes between the third week in January and the third week in March.

It's the same but worse in Calvi, Bonifacio, Ile-Rousse, Porto, Porto-Vecchio, Propriano and the smaller resorts, where seasonal closures leave just a sprinkling of places to eat. The brave late-autumn or early spring tourist, not to mention the winter variety, is faced with the prospect of a shuttered waterfront even though the sun shines and the air can be warm enough for meals outside. There's nothing sadder than a closed resort.

Lack of choice is the numbing factor. In Bonifacio this February I was searching for somewhere to eat lunch by the harbour. I was starving, having made the three-hour journey from Ajaccio to interview a group of environmental activists. The only place open was crowded. Yes, they fitted me in at a tiny table between two couples, on holiday from France. I had been sitting for ten or fifteen minutes waiting for a menu when I realised that neither couple had yet ordered.

It was a seafood bar where mussels came with a beer, or other drink. I would have liked a beer but it proved impossible before the meal. When the waiter arrived to take the order of the couple on my right, I tried to chip in and was told to wait my turn. Their drinks arrived. The waiter returned to take orders from the couple on my left. Their drinks arrived. Finally it was my turn. We all went through the same waiting game for our meals. Good for stimulating conversation between strangers, but lousy for the digestion. My beer and plat du jour took 90 minutes to serve, ten minutes to consume.

Seasonality applies everywhere: to sea routes linking the island with France and Italy; to air routes serving Calvi in the north and Figari in the south, both principally holiday airports; to car hire offices; and to events. Ajaccio is starting to break the mould with arts festivals at off-peak times like the Italian film festival of February 2001; and, as the tourism office is quick to point out, it does boast a casino. In fact, Ajaccio is the year-round choice of sophisticates. It's less crowded in summer than Calvi or Porto-Vecchio and has a life which survives the season. Bastia, with more character, just can't compete on facilities though its shopping is better.

For the Victorian English and other north Europeans who "discovered" Ajaccio at much the same time as San Remo, Nice and Biarritz, mild, light-filled winters were the attraction. If global warming speeds up in the way scientists are predicting, torrid Mediterranean summers will become less and less appealing. Our concepts of season could well be changing again; 50 years from now, spring and autumn might be peak times. There's little sign of such thinking in Corsica.

The Corsican tourism industry is a peculiarly stay-at-home business. Judged by visitor nights spent on the island – as recorded by the Corsican Tourist Board – 30 per cent are in holiday villas and rented accommodation. Another 28 per cent are with family or friends. Just 17 per cent are in hotels or bed and breakfast establishments; 12 per cent in holiday villages; and a further 12 per cent on organised campsites. Perhaps one per cent are spent camping in the wild. Of all these only five per cent of visitors make their base inland, away from the coast.

Most of Corsica is mountain or maquis. Leave Ajaccio in the evening rush hour on the N193, the main road for Corte and Bastia. Within six or seven kilometres the traffic is thinning out, turning off for suburbs and villages or stopping at out-of-town stores; within 20km it has disappeared. Rural Corsica, even on the island's main road, remains largely undisturbed. Stop at the sparse villages, also served by the romantic railway line paralleling the road linking the island's principal towns. The shuttered cottages are unlikely to be gites lying in wait for the season. Many belong to families who live and work in Ajaccio, returning for the occasional weekend and the month of August.

Corsica's ambivalence about its coastline – which has led both to shabby development and lack of development – can be traced back to the seasonal migration of a mountain people. As winter set in herds of sheep, goats and cattle were moved down from the mountains towards the coast. Families built up grazing rights for and eventually ownership of "their" bit of coastal pasture. Today, Corsicans tend to live in one of the conurbations but retain both their village and coastal pasture rights. This, compounded by complex French inheritance law, effectively seals mountain villages off from major tourist investment and makes coastal schemes notoriously difficult to patch together.

Désertification, the depopulation or abandonment of the countryside, has long been an official phenomenon in Corsica. In European density terms, Corsica is in the bottom segment of regions. If you take out the urban areas – apart from Corte, they are all on the coast – Corsica is the most sparsely-populated region of the EU. The island is literally dying at its centre.

A major objective of the Parc Naturel Régional de Corse when created in 1972 was to reinvigorate the mountainous interior of the island by pursuing community-based conservation policies alongside promotion of the natural environment. There have been notable successes like the creation and maintenance of 1,500 km of hiking trails, among them GR20, the high-altitude footpath which splits the island north-south and is among the most spectacular and demanding hikes in Europe.

The PNRC has established nature reserves at Scandola and Cerbicale-Lavezzi, has reintroduced the Corsican deer to the wild, formally protected the unique Hermann tortoise in the tortoise village of Moltifao and, perhaps most importantly, pioneered the concept of micro development in eight separate areas. But it has failed in its principal role of reversing population flight from the mountains.

A map published in the 1998 CNRC Charter, working on 1995 figures supplied by INSEE, shows it all. Of the 143 communes which together form the park (and make up almost half the island's land mass) some 18 are classed as resistant to depopulation. Four are designated as having strong tourist potential. Another five – including Corte, the historic capital right in the heart of the island – are seen as urban centres. All the remaining 116 communes are "en voie de désertification". The charter confirms that population densities, at an average seven inhabitants per square km, are on the very threshold of wilderness status. It warns that depopulation will lead inexorably to the death of the communes.

It is not a matter of blame on the part of the CNRC. The organisation, funded principally by the Collectivité Territoriale de Corse, with contributions from the two départements and the communes themselves, has a pathetically small budget. It has been asked to perform miracles, blending commune-by-commune initiatives into an overall plan. But it has no cash for, or control over, the real levers of social change – provision of housing and schools, transport infrastructure, planning permissions and "soft" loans to farmers, shop-keepers or bed-and-breakfast providers.

Its president, Jean-Luc Chiappini, is mayor of Letia, a village commune in the Cruzzini et Deux Sorru district off the D70 between Ajaccio and Evisa. Letia is itself subject to désertification. M. Chiappini lists the small-scale battles in which the commune attempts to fight depopulation, but admits that it is still losing the war.

Parts of the French Alps, the Vosges, the Pyrenees and the Scottish Highlands have harnessed tourism as a means of rural stabilisation. In landlocked Austria and Switzerland tourism is the

mainstay. Corsica, however, lacks the mechanisms for creating a self-generating tourist industry in its interior (the problems are difficult enough on the coast). While families hang onto ancestral rights, ghost villages will get ghostlier. No matter that the scenery is unrivalled, the air of the purest, the climate invigorating, the food and wine delicious – for the moment hikers have it mostly to themselves.

Scenic but tedious and occasionally dangerous mountain roads don't help. You can fly to any of the island's four international airports from Paris in under two hours; the next two could take you 40 kilometres into the mountains.

One of the problems in trying to establish whether Corsica seriously seeks the tourist euro is the island's ambiguous relationship with continental France. As an underdeveloped part of the European Union, it qualifies for Objective One or maximum grant-aid from the European Regional Development Fund. The ERDF sees tourism as an important job- and -revenue earner and is predisposed to approve funding. But, as a region of France, Corsica is obliged to prepare its recommendations in partnership with Paris – whose officials actually do the forwarding to Brussels. It's a demeaning process in regions like Corsica struggling for greater autonomy.

Ajaccio has spent 20 years talking about the modest convention centre linked to the chamber of commerce building currently being constructed on the waterfront. This centre will allow Ajaccio to stage conferences for several hundred delegates and should bring a boost to business in the less busy months along with a more cosmopolitan feel to hotels and bars. Almost half of the FF 52.6 million cost is being met by the ERDF. But the complicated nature of EU funding also demands contributions from the Collectivité Territoriale Corse, the Conseil Général de la Corse du Sud (both ultimately staked by Paris) and the French state itself, as well as the municipality of Ajaccio and the chamber of commerce.

The private sector receives equally ambivalent signals. Back in the de Gaulle days of the early 1960s Corsica was singled out as France's potential rival to Spain's Costa culture. After all, there are more kilometres of beach around the island than along the whole continental Mediterranean coast of France – great rolling dunes and exquisitely beautiful bays compared with the arid wasteland between Marseille and Perpignan.

Encouraged by Paris, French and international syndicates put together a series of proposals for hotel and holiday villages along attractive on the west and south coasts of the island. These projects fell victim to problems associated with Corsican nationalist opposition.

Given the threat by ETA, the Basque separatist organisation, to target the 48.5 million tourists expected in Spain this season, Corsica perhaps feels blessed that it never got into such competition and that much of its finest coastline remains unspoilt.

That's not to say the battle for preserving coast or architectural heritage is over. Conservation groups like ABCDE – the Association Bonifacienne de Comprendre et Défendre l'Environnement – despair at pressures building up from serious money seeking to make private or corporate investment in the island's southern tip, where nationalist and mafia interests – after a history of feuding – seem now to be working in co-operation.

ABCDE, composed of Corsicans from a cross-section of backgrounds, accuses the local Bonifacio municipality, the CTC and the French government of acting illegally in the face of the Loi du Littoral and other statutory protection legislation. The group fears that devolution of planning powers to Ajaccio (Paris maintains final arbitration at present) would be an invitation for the less scrupulous to line their pockets at the expense of the environment. Fears for the Loi du Littoral were given priority in the May 2001 debate over Corsican devolution in the Assemblée Nationale.

However, environmental causes do not sit particularly high on the agenda of most holidaymakers. With Corsica still deliciously relaxing and unspoilt compared with the Côte d'Azur or the Brittany coast in August, your average French tourist prefers to see guaranteed sunshine in a slightly exotic location without the struggle of a foreign language or obtaining a passport. The problem with the French is that they tend to take their two weeks away at peak times, stay in furnished accommodation or other low-yield areas, and bring their own trappings.

If Spain's typical holidaymaker is the Northern European on a package deal, Corsica's is almost the opposite. Parisians apart, people from the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region head the list, followed by Italians, Germans and visitors from Rhone-Alpes. These groups arrive typically by car ferry from Marseille, Nice, Livorno or Genoa, equipped with their own consumables. The big-spenders of Belgium, Switzerland and Franche-Comté and Pays-de-Loire are in short supply. Only Parisians are both numerous and relatively free-spending, arriving by air, renting vehicles and eating out frequently.

So, in tourism terms as in other matters, Corsica has become a fiefdom of France. It's a francophone enclave in a Mediterranean holiday world where English is inexorably growing as the lingua franca. Charming as this is, it puts Corsican hoteliers at a

disadvantage when faced with the island's small pool of English-speaking workforce. (The figures here are disputed, but there seem to be as few as 3,000 year-round fulltime tourism jobs on the island. Much of the expertise, as well as the brawn, is bought in for the season.)

One Corsican professional with strong views on tourism is ironically the person who has built up the island's largest and most successful independent travel agency. Francois Ollandini, as Entreprises Ollandini's grand old man (his son has run the business since the start of last year), now has the time to address conventions and educate journalists on why the magic of tourism has yet to kiss the Isle of Beauty.

To Ollandini, rich dreams tap deep pockets. In his view, Corsica is saddled with cheapskate projects. Lacking real numbers, there's not even a mass element to counter things. It's a choice, he believes, the politicians have made at their peril. He expresses his anger and despair in an allegorical sort of way, comparing the role holidays play to real-life romance. Corsica's potential for dream-fulfilment is extraordinary; therefore, its present failings are that much more of a nightmare.

Ollandini is one of the instigators of an event called Trans Corsica. During March each year some 100 top-level representatives of the industry around Europe are bundled into 4x4s to see the sights, the real sights, of the isle. They visit hidden villages, scale mountain paths, hear the best polyphonic choirs, feast off chestnut and wild boar. The event serves both as initiation for those who haven't experienced the island's charms before and as inspiration for jaded island operators.

Yet whether Ollandini's dream – splendid restaurants and hotels, international-standard resorts and golf courses, above all an extended season packed with special events – will ever be realised remains in doubt. It's all very well pointing out that visitors to the Côte d'Azur spend 25 per cent over and above their travel and living costs on entertainment where in Corsica the figure struggles to reach five per cent. Corsicans profess nothing but disdain for Nice and Cannes. They are happy with their own recurrent dream – seeing the last tourist ferries of the year vanish over the horizon leaving their precious island largely to themselves.

