

The (Dis)appearance of Corsica?

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“So, then, you were determined to come and see Corsica? You have done wisely to hasten your visit, for in a very few years, thanks to the hand of progress and civilisation, they who come to seek for Corsica will not find it.”

Edward Lear,
Journal of a Landscape Painter,
1870.

Edward Lear’s warning to his fellow European travellers anticipated the death of a Corsican authenticity. It prophesied the imperialism of industrialisation and predicted the spread of western socio-economic and political culture. In the face of such threats, Lear feared, the late nineteenth-century image of Corsica would completely disappear.

I was determined to go and see Corsica and to explore what marks the hand of civilisation and progress had made. As Lear leaned forward, peering into the future, I wished to look back and assess the effects of the past. From the present day I would travel Corsica in the wake of Lear’s warning, searching for what was left of the island, or discovering, perhaps, its new twenty-first-century incarnation.

Resolved to replicate, as far as possible, the explorer’s impoverished existence, I allowed myself only a tent and a rucksack and left behind all electronic equipment. In my mind, I was equipped only with the identity of a nineteenth-century European traveller, ready to wander through the island and to submerge myself in its unknown solitudes. I longed to entangle myself and to feel, as Lear and his contemporaries felt, lost within the island’s imperceptible labyrinths. Though a man of the early twenty-first century, my idea was the same as theirs had been almost one hundred and fifty years ago: to ‘sketch’ Corsica.



For thirty-one days I traversed the island’s changeable face. At first I clung to the coastlines, negotiating the sharp angles of the western precipice. I circumvented Corsica’s peninsular *Cap Corse*, reaching the island’s northern extremity and looking out across the Ligurian Sea to Genoa. Later I moved inland where I reached new highs and lows in the depths of the wilderness. Mountains and valleys gave way to

one another with such rapidity that buoyancy became but a dream to me. When I climbed Corte's cobbled streets to its supreme citadel my vision revelled in a panorama free from domineering stalagmitic rock.

In between, I went below the surface. I camped in valleys and followed paths through their forestation. I plunged into the ice of mountain-rivers and shook myself out of paralysis. The signs of national separatism tempted me through towns and villages, pointing the way to an infinitely unravelling political riddle. My tent became both haven and cell, my rucksack my possession and burden.



In some ways, Lear was right. Modernity had inscribed its effects indiscriminately across the island's surface. The railway cuts through the island's heartland like a threaded homage to nineteenth-century progress; man had conquered the heights of Corsica's perilous mountain ranges and opened the way for new experiences of time and space. The highways into Bastia and Calvi portray the congested, centripetal surges towards Corsica's centres of commercialism, like bottlenecks heaving under the weight of exchange. And the coastal promenades of Ajaccio and Porto boast the extravagance of post-war European consumerist culture; their waterside hotspots shimmer with luxury.

The high gloss of tourism sparkled strongest in Bonifacio, reflecting the shine of luxury yachts back onto itself in a never-ending super-imposition of unmitigated wealth. In the east, just north of Porto-Vecchio, hotels offer grass beaches to the world's millionaire community, inviting them to feel the soft touch of a living carpet all the way to the water's edge.

For all its apparent successes, however, for every achievement and irrevocable mark, modernity's presence in Corsica and the image it has built of the island is being challenged once again. As Lear foretold a change from tradition to modernity, those who go to see Corsica today cannot fail to witness a new, far more subtle metamorphosis taking place.

Today Corsica is a fragmented world of juxtapositions. As I travelled across the island, mind racing and senses tuned, my consciousness reverberated under the weight of a multitude of meaning, under the impression of its multi-layered cultural expression. Corsica's road signs exist simultaneously as directions for road users, as the bearers of the bullet holes of a rich and turbulent separatist history, and as the focal point of light hearted tourist intrigue. No longer can the great grand narrative of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries hold sway over the island's historical story.

Progress has vanished from Corsica's repertoire of self-affirming concepts. In its place is a confusing dynamic of preservation, restoration and development, operating

with no sense of contradiction whatsoever. The pace of construction in Bastia and Ajaccio is matched in its intensity only by the restoration of points of historical interest; the wonders of Corsica's urban future remain anchored in a proud and unmovable sense of national tradition, both standing side by side and admiring each other's role in constituting Corsican identity.

There is a consideration that my confused representation of Corsica is itself the result of the solitude that characterised my adventure; the image of wealth exaggerated by my own frugality, the shadows of mesmerising mazes made more sinister without the reassurance of company. In this sense, my sketch of Corsica, perhaps, is nothing more than an inscription of my daily experience back onto the island. It was, in many ways, not an objective assessment of the effects of modernity, but a troubled and kaleidoscopic investigation into my own unique relationship with the island. I was the juxtaposition in Corsica, not the island itself. I contained within myself the clash of meanings I ascribe to its physical and cultural terrain. And I projected my own feelings of isolation back into the island's character, struggling to mark distinctions between the imperceptible labyrinths of Corsica's mountainous heartland and those of mind own mind.

