

Getting What You Came For

Adventure Climbing in Corsica

— By Majka Burhardt · Photos by Gabe Rogel —

I HAD PLENTY OF GEAR, JUST NOWHERE TO PUT IT. QUAKING IN A STRENUOUS STEM, I GAVE UP TRYING TO SLING A SLOPING HORN. GOING HORIZONTAL OUT A THREE-FOOT ROOF, I USED ALL THE CORSICAN TRICKS I'D LEARNED IN THE PAST WEEKS — I UNDERCLINGED THE ROUNDED *TUFONI*, HEEL-HOOKED PRECARIOUS FINS, AND KNEE-SCUMMED ON LICHEN. I TRIED NOT TO THINK ABOUT THE RATING. AT 5.9, THIS WAS THE EASIEST OF THE FIVE ROPELENGTHS ON *LA LUNE DANS LE CANIVEAU* (5.11). FIFTEEN FEET LATER, MY WEIGHT ONCE AGAIN ON MY FEET, I SPIED MY NEXT BOLT. NESTLED IN A CONCAVE ENCLAVE, THE STUD AND HANGER HAD RUST-EDED A DEEP AND ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR BROWN, AND ORANGE STAINS MARKED THE ROCK BELOW. THE HARDWARE WAS SO CORRODED I COULDN'T TRUST IT TO HOLD A BAGUETTE, MUCH LESS MY LIFE. I REMINDED MYSELF THAT I'D PICKED TODAY'S ROUTE. AND THE TRIP. AND THE ADVENTURE. I CLIPPED THE MANGY HANGER AND DELIBERATED MY NEXT, UNFATHOMABLE MOVE. *THIS*, THEN, WAS CORSICAN ADVENTURE CLIMBING.



Burhardt going trad on the bolted crack *Resurrection des Roses* (5.12c), Col de Bavella.



So much granite, but how do you get there? The Col de Bavella, Corsica's adventure-climbing showcase.

Corsica is the Brigadoon of the climbing world: Most have heard of it, few know where it is, and nobody, apparently, has climbed there. Flipping through old magazines, I saw an article by Arnaud Petit: "Corsica: a mountain in the sea" [*Climbing* No. 152]. I had nurtured a mild obsession with the island ever since. "Have you climbed in Corsica?" I would ask every climber I met.

"Isn't that in Italy?" most would ask in return.

"That's Sardinia," I'd explain, naming Corsica's much larger sister island, to the south.

"Doesn't it have something to do with Napoleon?" Well, yes, but I wanted climbing Beta, not a history lesson.

The Mediterranean island of Corsica is a French territory 50 miles southeast of Nice. The birthplace of the aforementioned diminutive conqueror, Corsica boasts a wild geography that beckons explorers of every ilk. Large for an island — 52 miles wide and 114 miles long — Corsica, chock full of regional pride and separatist tendencies, is essentially a country unto itself. It is also an adventurer's paradise: Between the white-sand beaches and 8,000-foot-tall peaks (the highest on any Mediterranean island); an innumerable array of granite towers and crags; and skiing, rafting, snorkeling, and canyoneering, Corsica has it all. More than 10,000 people a year come to hike the GR20, or, in Corsican, the *Fra Li Monti* ("Between the Mountains"), a rugged 104-mile trail following the island's continental divide past glacial lakes, remote villages, and peat bogs.

We — me; then-hubby, Eli; and our photographer friend Gabe Rogel — came to Corsica to investigate these mythic granite massifs. Sparked one too many

times at European sport-climbing venues, I'd chosen Corsica as an effort in redeeming myself on the Continent. The last time I'd gone to Europe I'd packed light — quickdraws and sports bras — and had left wishing I'd brought a bigger duffel in which to hide, following the schooling I'd received at the Verdon and Ceüse. This time, however, I filled three bags with tag lines, offwidth gear, and triple sets of micro cams and RPs.


The Col de Bavella is home to Corsica's most famous (and infamous) routes: 200 to 2,000 feet, adventurous, intricate — exactly the kind of climbing that I liked. Not everyone goes climbing in Corsica in search of adventure, though. Many climbers visit then promptly forego the Col's frightening, rusty-bolt epics in favor of clipping shiny hangers at the smattering

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of sport-climbing areas along the coastline and in the mountains. The main draw for us, however, would be the Col de Bavella. Unfortunately, it had never occurred to me that "adventure climbing" might translate into all adventure, no climbing. On our first day at Bavella, we never even donned our harnesses.

Two hours of tight, twisting roads from Ajaccio, Napoleon's birthplace on the west coast, lead to the Col, at 4,000 feet. As you motor along, beaches turn into pastures, which merge into sloped terraces and finally into the spine of mountains at the heart of the Bavella. From the Col, blue sea frames the jagged peaks and granite





Orange granite, slopy blobs, fat bolts — the Restonica provides a good respite from Corsica's fearfests. Here, Burhardt takes a spin on *Fa Cume l'Acellu* (5.11c).

towers to the east and west. It was more than 90 degrees F when we left the coast; the thermometer at the Col hovered around 45.

Our objective that day was the Teghie Lisce, Corsica's "Petite Yosemite," a 1,000-foot dome boasting a handful of 5.10 to 5.13 adventure-endurance fests. We set out at noon, our packs full of baguettes, Brie, and a sampling of Corsican charcuterie, supplemented with a double rack of gear. Though we were supposed to meet the French climbing legend and Corsica pioneer Arnaud Petit at the cliff, we had not set a meeting time. Petit's first glimpse of us came in the form of the treetops rustling below the cliff, a half-mile from the correct approach trail, two hours later.

I had been in charge of navigation. Using my high school French, I'd determined, as per the guidebook, that we should "follow the stream then go right at some cairns." I couldn't quite translate two or three other sentences, but they didn't seem important. After all, we could see the Teghie Lisce from the trailhead, separated from us by what looked to be an easy thousand feet of forested elevation gain. "We'll be climbing in 30 minutes," Gabe said, not bothering to fasten his pack's waist belt as he trotted behind me. "Forty, tops."

"YOU DIDN'T LIKE THE ROUTE?" ARNAUD ASKED, FLIPPING THROUGH THE BOOK. "HOW DO YOU SAY 'SANDBAGGED' IN FRENCH?" I REPLIED.

At the first cairn, I confidently led us right, onto a worn trail. For the next hour we followed cairns over car-sized boulders, through tunnels in the dense maquis branches (a scrubby and short tree with pungent flowers that cloaks most of the Bavella), and up slippery, black mud runnels between plateaus of thorny rosebushes. Two hours into our "30-minute" approach, we called a halt in a small clearing with cairns on every side.

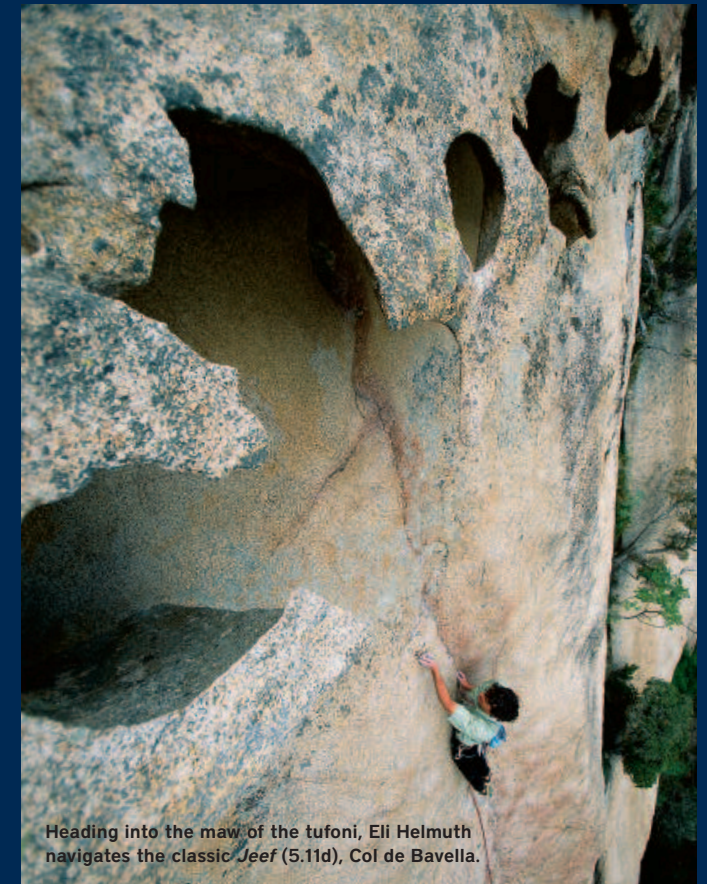
"Which one is the biggest?" I asked.

"I told you we should have gone left 20 minutes ago," Eli said.

I looked at Gabe; he looked away. Married himself, he'd chosen to stay out of Eli's and my directional squabbles. I swatted the flies swarming around my maquis-marred elbow and squinted into the brush. "The biggest cairn usually means the route, right?" I asked.

Eli scratched a growing bite on his thigh. "Or, it could mean you've gone the wrong way," he said.

He might have been right. Later, Petit later told us about a friend on a similar approach. While struggling through the bushes, snapping the branches back at his partner, he realized he was lost at the precise moment she did. When she



Heading into the maw of the tufoni, Eli Helmuth navigates the classic *Jeef* (5.11d), Col de Bavella.

burst into tears, he turned away and quickly stacked a few stones. "Look!" he exclaimed, pointing at the cairn. "We are not lost after all."

By the time we made it to the base of the cliff, our bodies were slick with sweat, and prickly pear spines and rose thorns clung to our socks, shorts, and in my case, hair. Arnaud was two pitches up.

"You made it!" he shouted down.

"No problem!" I called back.

"There is a good route, over there," he said, pointing out right. "It's very classic — bolts, good rock. Perfect for you." Perfect for us? What was that supposed to mean?

The first bolt was 35 feet off the ground. Eli bouldered up to it to see how much the ocean air had corroded the hardware. "Is it still vacation when you can die on your first route of the day?" he yelled down. It was already 4 p.m., and the next, rusted bolt was another 30 feet up ... we needed little impetus to bail. We easily found the approach trail — a broad, well-marked path that took us directly back to the river in about 25 minutes — on the way out.

That night we met Arnaud at his van. He was climbing with two friends, the UIAGM guide Frédéric Gentet and the photographer Evrard Wendenbaum. Trading beer for information, I offered up our guidebooks for comments and hand-drawn modifications.

"You didn't like the route?" Arnaud asked, flipping through the book.

"How do you say 'sandbagged' in French?" I replied.

"Sandbag? What is *sandbag*?"

"You are a *sandbagger*," I explained, telling Arnaud about our experience on the "classic" route.

"Perhaps this is because you are *la donna Grigri*?" he countered. The other Frenchmen went quiet.

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CORSICA (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 59)

"A belay bunny?" I guessed, stretching my French into Italian, and then to the universal language of climbing. "Not on your life."

"Good, then," said Arnaud. "We can now talk about the real routes of the Bavella."

Soft-spoken and with a surname that aptly describes his stature, Arnaud Petit calls himself an "alpine cat." In a café, dressed in a button-down shirt tucked tightly under his belt, he looks more like a computer technician than a climber, but put him on rock — any rock — and he dances. From success in climbing competitions, to pioneering traditional climbs, to establishing the Ceüse testpiece *Biographie* (5.14c), to full UIAGM guide status, Arnaud has lived almost every side of European climbing.

The Petit family first visited Corsica in 1988, when Arnaud was 17. By then he'd already been putting up routes at home in Albertville, France, with his younger brother, Francois. The pair, along with their climbing dad and land-loving mother, were immediately smitten by the island, and Arnaud has been coming back since to establish some of Corsica's most adventurous routes, such as *Octogenese* and *Delicatessen* (both 5.13). He has recently begun to rebolt his older lines and says that now, at age 34, he is more interested

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in sharing his climbs with other people than making them impossible to repeat. "I used to think that you were only climbing if there was the potential of a big fall, a broken leg, or even death," he told me over a La Pietra (a local ale). "Now I only need to be that scared once, maybe twice, a year."

Corsica, indeed, is not for the faint-hearted, as Arnaud had warned me via email. I had e-tackled him for the Beta: His was the only name I knew in conjunction with Corsican rock, attached to that old issue of *Climbing*. His reply was brief. He told me he slept in his van, not to miss the Teghie Lisce, and then gave the crucial nugget: "Please note that climbing in Corsica is sometimes not as easy as we imagine," he wrote. "The topos are not very precise, the approach hard to find; it's a bit remote even though it's an island in Europe." Bah, I scoffed. I was a trad climber from America, not la donna Grigri from Nice.

On our second day at the Bavella, we actually found our approach trail, to Pointe de L'Oiseau, the track dead obvious at the very top of the wind-scoured

CORSICAN NAVIGATION

After our first day's approach epic, we decided to use a more proactive strategy. The navigator, torso out our little rental car's sunroof, guidebook in hand, would scout the crags. (Note that the 12 guidebooks, most the work of the "Boss" of Bavella, Jean-Paul Qulici, are the subject of much debate — as in, the 12 together might comprise a useful tome, but individually, they are quite vague.) Meanwhile, the driver, avoiding errant pigs, cyclists, and oncoming RVs, did his best not to kill the navigator.

A typical exchange, then:

Majka (scout): "I think I see it."

Eli (driver), careening his neck to the left: "Where?"

Gabe (passenger), looking at the trip odometer, which reads 1.6 km: "I thought it was supposed to be 3.5 kilometers past the col."

Majka: "It looks kinda like the picture."

Eli: "Branches!"

Majka, ducking into the car just in time: "Think maybe next time you could slow down, too?"

Eli: "Think anyone would believe us if we said the driving was as stressful as the climbing?"

Gabe, pulling over, turning off the stereo, and unfastening his seatbelt: "Rotate."



The mysterious Col de Bavella. Teghie Liscie is the broad apron at the toe of the hill, while Punta u Corbu is the steep formation, with the slender ridge, behind it.

col. I headed up *Le Temps Peau Noir* (5.10a), where I supplemented four bolts with two shallow cams and three slung tufonis in 140 feet. Tufonis are scalloped sections of granite that create small pockmarks and large holes — they are the oft-photographed, defining feature of Corsica rock climbing, on which proficiency with a lasso is critical. I, unfortunately, realized my rodeo skills were lacking just as I remembered Arnaud's email advice. I'd interpreted "not as easy as we imagine" to mean creative or challenging, like Eldorado Springs Canyon. I didn't think it meant pulling out every trick in my trad arsenal: non-stop routefinding epics, tricky gear placements, and runouts combined with blank face climbing, overhanging dynos, and shallow cracks.

On the flip side, there are numerous excellent, safe, moderate routes at the Bavella. For example, *Le Temps* boasts a perfect combination of friction, crack, and overhanging face climbing. Not that it was lacking in excitement: Where else can you find a 15-foot roof full of pockets and huecos that goes at 5.10a?

I had taken the email version of Arnaud for a pushy, chauvinistic Frenchman. After meeting him in person and experiencing the reality of Corsican climbing, I realized he was just trying to be helpful. Factor in that area guidebooks (penned by the "Boss," Jean-Paul Qulici, a longtime local and guide known for his rainbow scarf and notoriously cryptic guidebooks) do not denote recommended or dangerous climbs, few have overview maps, and approach descriptions are sparse and often incorrect, and climbing here can be brutal, even with good information. When approaching routes in the Bavella, for

example, Petit carries hedge trimmers strapped onto his pack.

Corsica, indeed, is rugged — both in terms of terrain and people. The island has a tortured history of occupation by Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Goths, Moors, and Genoese, and since the 1700s has belonged to France. Nonetheless, Corsica has long tried to assert its independence and as recently as 2003 had a referendum for autonomy that only lost by a narrow margin. Corsica has its own language, a blend of French and Italian; a propensity for salty meats and cheeses; and personality, wherein most Corsicans identify themselves as “first Corsican, and then French.” On road signs marking small mountain towns and villages, French names had been shot with bullets and/or spray-painted through with an “X,” the Corsican spelling (“Corti” instead of “Corte,” for example) scrawled beneath. According to my Lonely Planet guidebook, the “official” resistance movement in Corsica, called the Fronte di Liberazione Naziunale di a Corsica, is small and fractured and has “a strict hands-off policy with regards to tourists themselves.” Indeed, we saw little sign of the “official” movement, though the “unofficial” alliance with the resistance was everywhere — most of the Corsicans we met were recognizable as supporters by their propensity for camouflage pants.



After a week in Corsica, swelling with confidence, we decided to return to our first day's nemesis: the Teghie Lisce. Our goal was *Resurrection des Roses*, the route Petit had been on the day we first met. We redpointed the approach and made it to the base in record time. Above us lay one of the more perfect 5.12 finger cracks I've ever seen. Unfortunately, the first pitch was a wet chasm with rosebushes spurting from its depths. A week before, while strangled in the vegetation below, I'd seen Petit methodically smearing on the crystalline granite with what looked like a perfectly nice offwidth less than an arm's reach away. Now, as I did battle with the first pitch, one leg raked by thorns and smeared in blood, Petit's face-climbing technique began to make sense. The bolts lining the right edge of the crack also helped ... a lot.

Above the offwidth lay the money pitches: two 90-foot sections of vertical and overhanging 5.12 granite. Bolts lined the all-too-perfect, 180-foot finger crack where solid gear placements could easily be found. The irony was not lost on us — the day before, while lassoing hollow tufonis, we'd prayed for bolts.

As, as obstinate American trad climbers, we felt obligated to protect the tips crack with the triple sets of micro-cams and RPs we'd been lugging around. Our cams and nuts held fine as we fell past the unclipped hangers, and *Resurrection des Roses* is still awaiting an onsite, gear-placing ascent.

Climbers like Arnaud, who have Corsican climbing wired, will do a route on the 1,000-foot Teghie Lisce and on its higher sibling massif, the 1,000-foot Punta u Corbu, in a day. Punta u Corbu is home to one of Corsica's more famous climbs, *Jeef* (5.11+), often photographed because of its dramatic, jutting tufonis and feet-cutting crux. While I was researching the trip, photos of *Jeef*, and *Jeef* only, were the sole evidence I could find of Corsican climbing in more than a decade's worth of magazines. Petit and his brother, Francois, established *Jeef* in 1992 as a memorial for their friend Jeef Lemoine, who died while climbing the north face of Les Drus. The day we went to Punta u Corbu, Petit was returning with Frederik and Evrard for another ascent, to be followed by a quick romp up another eight pitches on the Teghie Lisce. The French climbers took us under their wing for the complex, hour-long approach, and as we jogged to keep up with the

“Alpine Cat” over wet slabs and around waterfalls, we were thankful for the help.

Still, that didn't stop us from wishing the trio a good climb and proceeding to beeline confidently to the first pitch of our objective. After Eli whipped off yet another micro crimper, Evrard came over and asked what we were doing. “*Lelephant*,” he said, mentioning our intended route, “is 20 meters this way.” I threw Eli one of our ever-dwindling supply of bail biners, and we regrouped.

Le Dos de Lelephant, once we found it, was a superb granite climb reminiscent of the best of Tuolumne Meadows. Serious friction combines with occasional dishes and cracks, with bolts just far enough apart to keep you on your toes. A 12-pitch climb to the top of the formation, with numerous 5.10 pitches and only one at 5.11, the route was a welcome window of pleasure during a week mostly spent thrutching.

The last pitch I did at the Col de Bavella was the aforementioned “5.9.” It's still on my tick list. I couldn't figure out how to move past the corroded bolt. Eli got us one mangy bolt higher before he, too, bailed — describing the handmade hardware as more frightening yet.

We packed up the rack I'd been so convinced would be our European salvation, readying for the long journey home, and I thought back to how haughtily I'd treated Petit's initial warning. “Those Europeans probably think anything with gear is exciting,” I'd thought, brushing off his well-meaning but cautionary words. Alas ... I'd come to Corsica to kick ass and got my ass kicked instead. Though not easy on my ego, it was exactly the trip I'd come for. After all, if adventure becomes easy, we'll have to call it something else. ☞

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CORSICA LOGISTICS

Seasons: Spring and fall are superb in Corsica. Summer is warmer, but highly touristed over much of the island. The coastal sport climbing is good all winter, but climbing in the Bavella might involve ice and snow.

Getting There: Fly to Nice, Marseilles, or Italy, and then take a plane (\$150-200) directly to Corsica's capital, Ajaccio, which has the most reliable air service and is convenient to the Col de Bavella. Alternately, take a ferry (\$90 during the shoulder season; additional \$130 for a car) from Marseilles, Toulon, Genoa, Livorno, or Sardinia.

Getting Around: If you're headed for the Col de Bavella, base yourself in Ajaccio, also near the better sport areas. Calvi is best for the northern island (i.e., the Restonica and other sport areas). You can cross the island in less than four (tortuous) hours.

Guidebooks: Guidebooks are difficult to obtain in the United States. *Corse: L'île Verticale*, by Martial Lacroix and Pierre Sanchou, is a best-of guide. At the Auberge, you can buy several Bavella guides, including *Rocca e Sole*, by Jean-Paul Quilici and Francis Thibaudeau. (Consulting the local guide, the *Livre d'Or*, located at the Auberge, is a must.) *Corte Restonica et Tavignano* covers the Restonica. Also, visit coronn.com to download topos.

Lodging, Col de Bavella: The family-owned Auberge du Col de Bavella, home of the *Livre d'Or*, is the most popular climber doss (email: auberge-bavella@wanadoo.fr, 04-95-72-09-87; \$16 to \$30; reservations recommended in the summer). Go upscale (\$65 to \$90) with the bed and breakfast Hameau de Cavanello (04-95-78-66-82), only seven kilometers from the Col. Or get down and dirty at the Camping Municipal de Zonza, four kilometers from the Col toward Zonza.

Lodging, Restonica: Hotels, hostels, and campgrounds abound in Corte, the principle city of the region.

Food: In Zonza, restaurant Le Randonneur has fantastic pizza at a reasonable price. There are also two grocery stores.

Moolah: ATMs are found at most post offices in Corsica, and closest to the Bavella, the town of Levie. Corsica is expensive: Expect a 10 percent increase over mainland prices.

Gear: For the Bavella, bring a good-sized rack (cams up to 4" and a solid selection of nuts and RPs), a 60-meter rope, a tag line, webbing, rap rings ... and a half-dozen bail biners.