Shifting Gears

A seven-day bicycle tour provides a slower (more challenging) way to tour Corsica and Sardinia.

By Jeff Book

I was biking uphill when the black dog gave chase. Was this one of the Corsican mutts I'd read about, afflicted with the Evil Eye and, perhaps, trying to give it to me? I reached for my water bottle, ready to give the beast a good squirt—or failing that, hurl the bottle into his jaws—but discovered he was just preternaturally friendly. Unshakable as a shadow, he loped along tirelessly under the hot Mediterranean sun, reappearing even after downhill sprints. Several kilometers later he vanished like one of Corsica's fabled bandits before I could invite him to lunch: a picnic at Plage de Palombaggia, a lovely crescent of sand on the island's southeast coast, where bread and charcuterie, cheese, fruit, soft drinks, and a frisky Corsican *vin blanc* were arrayed in the shade of a seaside grove. After eating, my fellow cyclists and I lazed on the beach, chatting and dozing, before getting back in the saddle again.

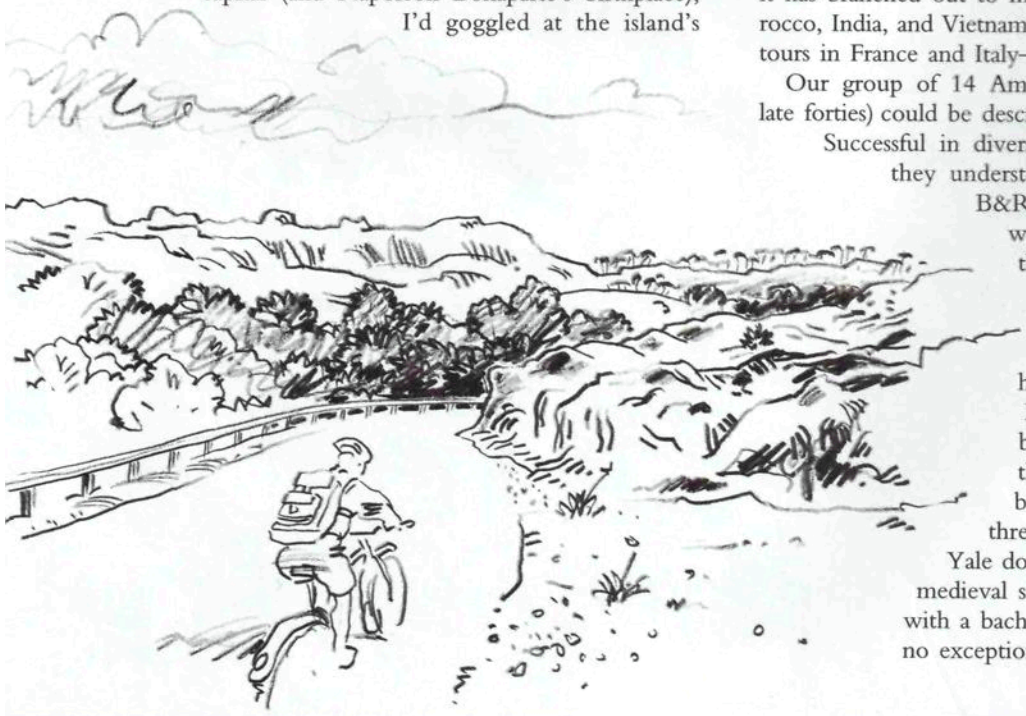
Such is the agreeable rhythm of Butterfield & Robinson's seven-day biking tour of Corsica and Sardinia (five days on the former, two on the latter), which I took in June. I'd approached the trip—rated as "moderate to challenging"—with trepidation, having managed to get in just one training ride after dusting the cobwebs off my bike. On the approach to Ajaccio, Corsica's capital (and Napoleon Bonaparte's birthplace), I'd goggled at the island's mountainous spine, which rises to nearly 9,000 feet. It was a relief to think we'd be cycling the less lofty, if still rugged, southern end of the island and getting around by bus, train, and boat, with plenty of opportunity for walking and swimming.

Corsica has been called the last overlooked Mediterranean destination. Except for July and August, the island is largely free of tourist hordes and traffic jams. This is due in part to its geography, in part to its attitude. Despite more than two centuries of French rule, the island remains less French than Corsican, as evidenced by the stubborn local separatists. Corsicans are hospitable yet proud and tough; they have survived a history rife with invaders, including Romans, Greeks, Saracen pirates, Vandals, and Spaniards. The Genoese, who ruled the island for four centuries, had a saying: "The Corsicans deserve the gallows, and they fear not to meet it." The natives considered it a compliment.

Founded in 1966, Toronto-based Butterfield & Robinson (B&R), began by offering student bike tours of Europe. In the 1980s it pioneered luxury biking and walking tours, catching the first wave of baby boomers who were both affluent and aerobically inclined. (Perhaps it took a Canadian company to synthesize Puritan abnegation and Gallic savoir-vivre.) Since then it has branched out to more exotic destinations, such as Morocco, India, and Vietnam. But the company's mainstay remains tours in France and Italy—in this case, a bit of each.

Our group of 14 Americans and Canadians (average age: late forties) could be described as fit but not fanatical about it. Successful in diverse fields—business, medicine, law—they understood the stress-vanquishing value of B&R's slogan, "Slow down to see the world." Half had already experienced the company's signature blend of exertion and indulgence, among them a woman who had survived cancer and a man coping with intermittent heart arrhythmia.

Like their clients, B&R guides tend to be well-traveled overachievers, with the added distinction of being able to bike the day's 18 to 36 miles two or three times over. Ours—Jason, an affable Yale doctoral student in Italian literature and medieval studies; and Saakje, a lively Canadian with a bachelor degree in animal biology—were no exception.



Pedaling from Cucuruzzu through the Forêt de l'Ospedale

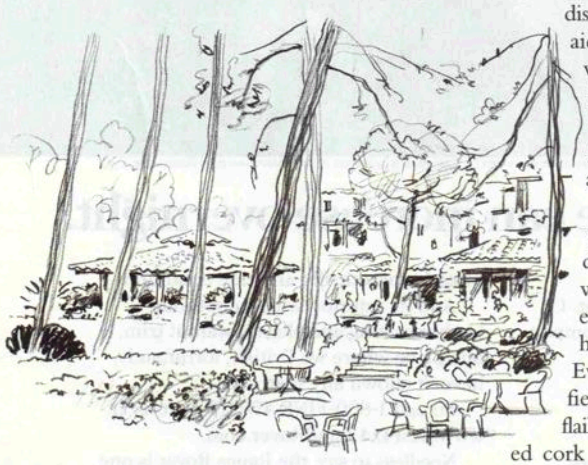
Sartène, high up in the mountains of southwestern Corsica

On our first day, Jason and Saakje began our orientation aboard the chartered bus that took us from the coast into the hills, past tumbling streams and austere stone houses clinging to craggy slopes. In Casalabriva, we met our grip-shift mounts: a choice of traditional, curved-handlebar touring bikes and mountain-bike-style hybrids, both made by Cannondale to B&R's specs. We had lunch on an arbor-shaded terrace, then kicked off the tour with a blissfully long, downhill run past hills cloaked in the lush vegetation known as *maquis*—a potpourri of fragrant foliages (rosemary, thyme, lavender, and sage among them)—the time-honored refuge of Corsican bandits and resistance fighters.

Our first stop was the mysterious megaliths of Filitosa, the island's most important prehistoric site, which was discovered in the mid-'40s. There we learned that Corsica has been inhabited since at least 6000 B.C. and that ancient Corsicans created some of Western Europe's first portraits in stone—granite menhirs sculpted with elementary human features. Most were sculpted before 1500 B.C., when the Corsicans were conquered by invading Torréens (named for the rude stone towers they erected). Accompanied by a Corsican guide, we walked among gnarled olive trees, menhirs, and Torréen ruins and peered at artifacts in the site's small museum. The day ended with a steep climb to the Grand Hôtel Miramar in Propriano.

Though it boasts fine views of Propriano's blue bay, the Miramar was the least impressive of the tour's three hotels. There was some grumbling among guests about noise from the road below; my only peeve was the shower's tendency to oscillate between scalding hot and icy cold. However, the pool terrace was a marvelous place for sunset cocktails, followed by a satisfying dinner featuring such dishes as cured salmon with a fig-and-dill coulis and veal with a *duxelle* of mushrooms, accompanied by copious amounts of Corsican wine.

The next morning set the pattern for the rest of the trip. Choosing from an ample buffet, we breakfasted in the hotel's palm-shaded garden while the guides passed out the day's itinerary—a breakdown of route segments, distances, and concise but thorough directions that fit into the plastic pouches atop our handlebar bags (as backup, we were given detailed maps highlighting the routes). "If you get lost or want to go off the route, don't worry—we will find you," said Jason. Expert route-sweepers, the guides would alternate between biking and driving the support van, a rolling dispensary of water, snacks, and first aid for bikes and riders. Anyone who wanted more road could have it; those in need of a break could hitch a ride with the van or relax at the pool and beach, which all of our hotels had.



The Grand Hôtel de Cala Possa, on the Corsican coast near Porto-Vecchio

The long slog from Propriano up to Sartène, which Jason had described as "a healthy climb," was challenging. (As another rider later demanded, "What would he consider an unhealthy climb? Everest on stilts?") We passed broad fields, a rock-strewn river, and the flailed, purplish-red trunks of harvested cork trees. As we pedaled (and pedaled) up the winding road, the climb became a kind of meditation—"like the spinning class at my gym, with scenery," one woman said. But at Sartène, which French writer Prosper Mérimée called "the most Corsican of all Corsican towns," there was time to roam narrow medieval streets and have a cold drink at a café terrace on the picture-perfect square.

That afternoon we rode twisting backroads past massive boulders and the Corsican equivalent of the coastal chaparral I know from the southern California hills near my home. Bees and butterflies flitted among the aromatic brush, while prickly pear and spiky agave cast shadows in the intense sunlight. Even a headwind would have been welcome in the heat, but the eucalyptus trees barely stirred. Relief finally came with a downhill coast to a peaceful beach, where we put on swimsuits and plunged into the turquoise sea. (The Mediterranean is at its most limpid around Corsica and Sardinia.)

The next morning, to save our legs for the choicest route, we received a motorized assist from a horn-happy bus driver who hurled Corsican imprecations as he barreled around mountain curves. He took us and our bicycles to the cyclopean stones of a Torréen castle dating from 2000 B.C., located in Cucuruzzu, an uninhabited area in the center-south of the island, about one mile due north of the town of Levie. (This is one of the advantages of touring with B&R: You get to see places such as this, which many guidebooks overlook.)

From there we set off on the most spectacular ride of the week. Quiet country

lanes led up to the Fôret de l'Ospedale, a forest of tall pines rising from a tapestry of lacy ferns. After a break for Champagne mimosas we climbed to a mountain pass where serried granite ramparts towered above tree line. Descending past a placid lake, we arrived at a restaurant with views stretching to the sea, for an alfresco lunch of Corsican specialties—a minestronelike soup, *sanglier* (wild boar), sharp Brocciu cheese, and chestnut cake.

The day's ride ended with a long, exhilarating run to the Grand Hôtel de Cala Rossa, an appealing Relais & Châteaux set on a sheltered cove. My room resembled a soigné beach cabana, with paint-striped, wooden walls and fabrics in muted shades of blue and gold—typical of the hotel's appealing mix of elegance and indolence. At the beachfront bar we unwound over Gallic cocktails. That night, accompanied by the *son-et-lumière* show of a thunderstorm, most of us went into nearby Porto-Vecchio to feast at the friendly Le Lucullus, where seafood was presented with élan by the attentive staff. (I chose a salad with goat cheese and a dollop of live tapenade, followed by baked *chapon* fish in a Corsican tomato sauce served with remarkable potatoes cooked with lemon rind.)

On our last night at the Cala Rossa, after a tasting of Corsican wines on the tree-lined terrace, we enjoyed an animated dinner that almost cleaned out the hotel's lobster tank. In a group happily free of prickly personalities, a genuine spirit of camaraderie had developed, and road-weary muscles were hardly mentioned.

The next day we took a break from the bikes. A trio of motorboats whisked us down the southeast Corsican coast, past chalky cliffs and sentinel lighthouses, to see Bonifacio, an ancient bastion perched atop a soaring limestone promontory. A narrow channel led between rocky headlands to a natural harbor precisely matching Homer's description of the spot where the cannibalistic Laestrygonians staged a bloody ambush that almost ended the adventures of Odysseus. After docking amid the pleasure craft and fishing boats, we climbed up to the much-besieged citadel to stroll among buildings packed as tightly as the houses of the dead in the clifftop Cimetière Marin. There was time for lunch and shopping before we boarded the boats and motored the 10 miles across the strait to Sardinia.

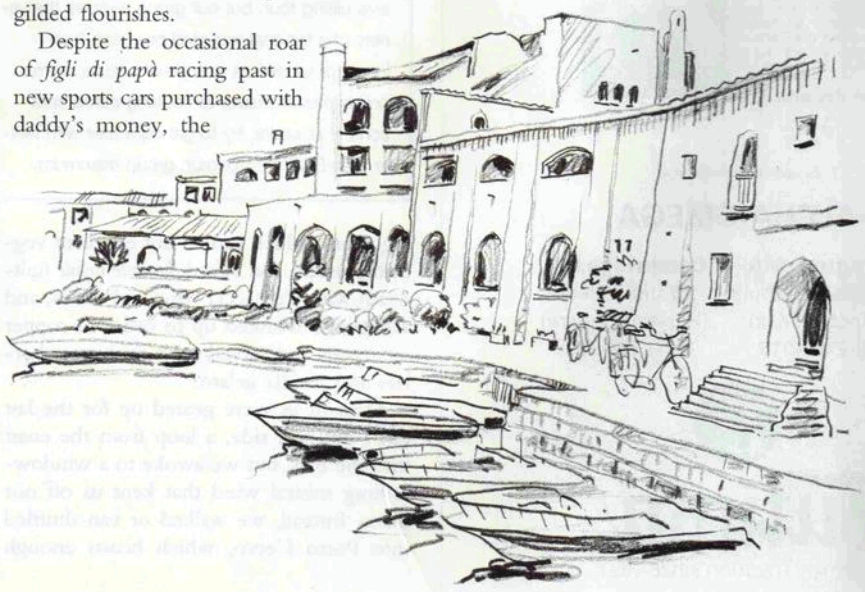
Sardinia is larger and less wild than Corsica, with six and a half times the latter's quarter-million inhabitants. Like its northern neighbor, Sardinia was subject to repeated incursions by Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs, among others. The Pisans and Genoese left a legacy of Romanesque architecture, while Spain's Aragonese introduced Gothic. But the island's most striking structures are those built by prehistoric shepherds and warriors: thousands of round stone dwellings known as *nuraghi*; walled fortresses; and mausoleums once containing fascinating bronze figurines.

Ruddy and relaxed, we arrived at the Cala di Volpe (member of Platinum Card *Fine Hotels, Resorts and Spas*), our most luxurious hotel, in Porto Cervo. A whimsical synthesis of vernacular Mediterranean architecture, this stylish pleasure dome was decreed by the Aga Khan in the early '60s, as part of the plan that turned Sardinia's northeastern shore into the posh playground known as the Costa 'Smeralda. Since then controlled development has preserved the coast's rugged beauty and kept it a perennial favorite of the very well-heeled.

When we got to the Cala di Volpe, 40 pieces of luggage were in the forecourt, signaling the arrival of a Saudi prince and his wife. Officers from the grand yachts anchored offshore were rubbing epauletted shoulders at the bar. I found the hotel rooms varied and pleasingly quirky. Mine had white plaster walls, a terra-cotta tile floor, dark timber ceiling beams, a trompe l'oeil armoire, and a four-poster bed with gilded flourishes.

Despite the occasional roar of *figli di papà* racing past in new sports cars purchased with daddy's money, the roads on our route the following morning were quiet enough. We rode through an open, pastoral landscape, then whizzed through the village of Arzachena, where we boarded a restored turn-of-the-century train that took us and our bikes on a 45-minute ride across hills dotted with olive trees and rocky outcroppings south of Lago di Liscia. Back in the saddle, we pedaled past vineyards and rolls of newly mown hay to Li Licci, a farmhouse in the Gallura area. In the basement, where *coppa* and salami hung from the ceiling and rounds of *pecorino* crowded wooden shelves, we observed as two women made ravioli and *gnocchetti*. Upstairs we feasted on roasted eggplant, prosciutto, cheese, olives, grilled eggplant and peppers, before departing for the town of Sant'Antonio di Gallura (a grueling ascent) and a tour of another Bronze Age tomb.

This was not a trip for weight-watchers—particularly Sardinia, where dinners were extended, multicourse affairs that began with a cornucopia of antipasti and ended with a cavalcade of desserts. For sheer romance, it was hard to top the splendid meal we enjoyed on the terrace of Il Pescatore in Porto Cervo, overlooking the sunset-tinted harbor, where we indulged in an abundant buffet of antipasti; salmon roulade stuffed with zucchini, pine nuts, onion, and sundried tomatoes and garnished with squash blossoms; and two Sardinian wines, red Cannonau di Sardegna and white Vermentino di Sardegna. The culinary high point was the Cala di Volpe's frescoed din-



The Hotel Cala di Volpe in Porto Cervo, Sardinia

The Trip

The seven-day biking tour of Corsica and Sardinia is one of Butterfield & Robinson's most expensive European trips. For $4,975 (plus airfare and a $550 supplement for single travelers) you receive a bike, helmet, water bottle, and map; lodging; most meals (all breakfasts, four lunches, six dinners); all transportation from rendezvous to airport drop-off and baggage transport during the trip; all special events; private tours and local guides; all gratuities except for the B&R guides (for good service about $10 per day per guide). You can supply your own bicycle or saddle, but for most people B&R's equipment is more than adequate. Note: The 24-speed hybrid model is better than the 21-speed touring model for taking the steepest hills on the trip. An odometer would have been helpful (if you bring one, the guides will install it). By all means bring a gel-seat cover to soften the seat. The bikes are restored to mint condition between trips at B&R's Burgundy facility.

The Corsica and Sardinia tour is a well-designed blend of exercise and luxury. The guides handled logistics, individual needs, and miscellaneous glitches smoothly and unobtrusively. The B&R approach favors independence over regimentation. Briefing materials and route directions are thorough and helpful. Gung-ho cyclists might prefer a more intensive biking tour, but our group enjoyed the variety of a trip that included boat and train journeys as well as dollops of culture, from prehistoric-site visits to cooking demonstrations. If possible, try to get on a tour with fewer than B&R's 24-person group maximum.

GETTING READY If you're reasonably fit, aerobic conditioning and a few training rides should get you up to speed. Stationary-bike sessions will help maximize your pedal power and minimize time spent in the van (akin to taking the ski lift down), but don't skimp on the roadwork.

WHEN TO GO In the year 2000 the biking tour will be offered six times (late April to mid-October), skipping the high-traffic months of July and August.

GETTING THERE Butterfield & Robinson recommends purchasing an "open jaw" ticket, arriving in Ajaccio, Corsica, via Paris and flying home from Sardinia's Olbia airport via Rome. From New York you can fly nonstop to Nice on Delta/Air France, then on to Ajaccio from there. Several major carriers have code-sharing arrangements with the regional carriers that fly the connecting routes. (You can also arrive via train and ferry, preferably the fast NGV ferry from Nice.) It's a good idea to come a couple of days early, to recover from jet lag and explore parts of Corsica not on the tour, such as the northern town of Calvi. The night before the tour begins, B&R suggests staying in Porticcio and recommends two hotels, the Sofitel, which has a thalassotherapy spa, ocean views, and beach access; or the more expensive and quaint though quirky Le Maquis, which has a beautiful terrace and pool on the sea. (Rooms 41 and 42 have balconies with the best sea views.)

INFORMATION Butterfield & Robinson, 70 Bond Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5B 1X3; 800-678-1147; 416-864-1354; fax 416-864-0541; www.butterfield.com.

ing room, which turned out excellent vegetable risotto and baked *daurade royale* (gilthead) with Vernaccia wine and olives, and zabaglione whisked up to order in copper saucepans and served with fresh strawberries and vanilla gelato.

Most of us were geared up for the last day's optional ride, a loop from the coast into the hills, but we awoke to a window-rattling mistral wind that kept us off our bikes. Instead, we walked or van-shuttled into Porto Cervo, which boasts enough big-ticket designer shops to rival Rome's Via Condotti. Our festive farewell dinner was marked by a general sense of contentment. The tour recalled the halcyon days of summer camp, only with savvier counselors, ritzier cabins, and far better food. In the end, I had managed to keep pedaling, persevering even on seemingly endless hills where the lowest gear was my best friend. And I'd come to realize that even on a bike the old Irish toast—"May the road rise to meet you"—can be a benediction.