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French chic to Italian cool — by ferry

Take the boat from the south of France to Sardinia for a great twin-centre break, says Tristan Rutherford

Stepping off the new overnight ferry to Italy's coolest coast is an assault on the senses: emerald seas, cobalt skies, citrus trees...

More interestingly, the ship from which I have just alighted originated on France's sexiest shore. A ferry link now lets holidaymakers take in the Côte d'Azur and the Costa Smeralda — from the blue waters of the French Riviera to Sardinia's emerald coast — via an overnight voyage.

The route cries out for a twin-centre holiday. Think St Tropez and Porto Cervo in a week. Or the chance to swap champagne for prosecco as you show off your Sundek swimming trunks in two A-list locations. Drivers will revel in the fact that they can hop from France to Sardinia's seascape highways while avoiding the traffic and tolls of mainland Italy...

The first two nights of my break are spent in the Port of Nice, where there has been massive regeneration in the past five years. I dine at Restaurant Jan (set dinner £80, restaurantjan.com), which won the area's first Michelin star in 2016. Then I work it off on a rented bike from Café du Cycliste (cafeducycliste.com), a new port-side venue that offers professional vélos such as the Milanese-built Passoni. Not for nothing do several Tour de France cyclists live near by; the Col d'Èze and the Col de Tende are a short ride away.

Locals stop at the harbour café La Gratta (56 Boulevard Stalingrad) to buy £3.50 pan bagnats, a salade niçoise in a bun. They munch them on the tiny beaches that run east from Nice port. The water is lovely, but hold on tight when the giant ferries depart every few hours.

It's hard to miss your connection to Sardinia; Corsica Ferries' yellow boats are the biggest in Nice port. Better still, because the vintage chuggers were built in the 1970s they meander at under 20 knots and the cruise-

like views are first class.

Departures to Golfo Aranci leave at about 8pm, which means I'm sipping spumante on deck as the French Riviera slips away. First Nice, then Cap Ferrat, then Monaco pass by, the last's bright lights searing the sky.

The ferries have teak decks, a rooftop pool bar, exceptionally comfy cabins and a cracking Italian-run restaurant that serves a £19 set meal, aperitif included.

Dawn brings caffè macchiato and dolphins off the prow. There's a 50-strong pod off Cap Corse, the Corsican ridge that heralds the first land since Nice. Eagle eyes can spot the Italian islands of Capraia and Pianosa to port. Like the Côte d'Azur and the Costa Smeralda, both islands are frequented by wealthy yachties.

The Maddalena Islands sparkle midway between Corsica and Sardinia. Rare is the Brit who knows about this archipelago of seven Thai-style gems. I spy Porto Cervo, the marina built by the Aga Khan to service the super-rich. The rest of the shore is beach, beach, beach until the ferry puffs into Golfo Aranci at about 10am.

Sardinia's most famous road, the SP94, leads north along the Costa Smeralda. My hire car follows the route taken by Roger

Moore, who as James Bond was chased along this highway in The Spy Who Loved Me. Remember when the car goes underwater then drives up the beach?

That's Spiaggia Romazzino, a perfect curve of sugar-white sand.

For my final three nights I hit the Maddalena Islands. So strategically important are these beach-trimmed jewels that several have been off-limits to the public for centuries, used initially as Giuseppe Garibaldi's retirement home and latterly as a Nato naval base. The islands now make up a national park that hosts a third of Sardinia's flora, plus dolphins, swordfish and sea turtles.

The main island of La Maddalena is a

20-minute ferry hop from Palau on Sardinia's northern tip. It's Sardinia in miniature — a tiny fishmonger's sits next to a tiny restaurant that serves squid-ink risotto for £6 a pop, all within walking distance of a priceless tiny beach.

Ah, the beaches. Only three of the seven Maddalena Islands are inhabited. I hire an inflatable speedboat for £65 a day and drop anchor off the footprint-free sands of Razzoli, Budelli and Santa Maria. Hikers will prefer Caprera, a Robinson Crusoe wilderness linked by footbridge to La Maddalena. Some 12 miles of walking trails wind through umbrella pines to Spiaggia Cala Napoletana, a twin-bay beach.

The drive back to Olbia Costa Smeralda Airport promises more silvery sands. Each beach has a modern moniker, having been named only in recent decades. There's Spiaggia Shirley Bassey, a wild white swoosh beloved of the Welsh songstress.

Plus Spiaggia Ira, an icing-sugar shore named after the actress Ira von Fürstenberg. Spiaggia Banana does what it says on the tin: a perfect yellow arc of beach that culminates in a swim-to island.

The best beach in the area? Plage Palombaggia on the neighbouring island of Corsica. Those on longer holidays can take another new Corsica Ferries route, this time from Golfo Aranci to Porto Vecchio, only seven miles from this fabled beach. But that's a story for another day.



Tristan Rutherford was a guest of Corsica Ferries (00 33 495 32 95 95, corsica-ferries.co.uk), which starts the season on April 8. It costs about £140 for a family of four with a car.

Where to stay
In Nice, the Hotel Le Genève (00 33 495

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568479, hotel-le-geneve-nice.com) has room-only doubles from £46. In La Maddalena, the Residence Villa del Parco (00 39 078 972 0026, villadelparco.com) has B&B doubles from £55.

Take a tour

GRJ Independent (01904 527181, greatrail.com) runs a bespoke rail package for £545pp. EasyJet flies from Olbia Costa Smeralda airport to London from £37 one way.

