

**Trek**  
**in**  
**Corsica**

**I. Corsican Haute Route (GR20)**

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This is a short account of a trek across the spine of mountains which run in a north-south direction down the length of the Island of Corsica. The trek is well known as the GR20 and is reputed to be one of the most demanding recognized walking trails in Europe. The trail takes between 10 and 16 days. Most people do it in about 14-15 days, which allows time for some side trips or mountain ascents en route. If time is short it is possible to double up on some of the shorter days and do it in 10 or 11 days, as I did and is described below.

The trail involves some scrambling as it traverses across sharp ridges and passes over some steep cols but in this is far less than one percent of the total route. Apart from these short scrambling sections

about half the trail encounters quite steep terrain crossing slabs and boulders. These sections are more common in the northern half. The other half of the trail goes along quite reasonable paths, many of which follow old pastoral routes. These easier sections are more common in the southern half. A typical day though will encounter both steeper sections with slabs and boulders and easier paths.

Accommodation, meals and provisions are provided by some 35 refuges, gîtes (bunkhouses) and bergeries (mountain farms) located along its length. Of these it is the refuges that most of the logistics revolve around. The 15 odd refuges are open year-round for accommodation. From June to September inclusive the refuges are run by a *gardien*. The *gardien*



The endless ridges of mountains in Central Corsica stack up layer upon layer until they disappear into the haze. These ridges are extremely rugged and barren in their higher reaches but the valleys between are surprisingly lush despite the scarcity of water.

# GR20 in Corsica



The Laricio or Corsican Pine, *Pinus nigra ssp laricio*, is indigenous to Corsica. It thrives on the higher slopes,



Cyclamens, *Cyclamen repandum*, are abundant in the lower forests in the late summer



The Fire Salamander, *Salamandra corsica*, are generally active at night but may come out after rain.

will allocate beds to the first 30-40 hikers who arrive each day, provide meals and sell limited supplies from a shop. During the peak months of July and August the refuges fill up early and a tent is essential. In later June and early September the refuges may be crowded and a tent is strongly advised. In early June and later September the refuges are usually half full. The bergeries are summer farms which operate from June to September. There are about 15 along the route. A few provide accommodation in fixed tents and nearly all sell basic food provisions. In the 6 places where the route meets a road there are gîtes or hotels. These are usually open June to September and provide accommodation, meals and provisions.

Camping is only allowed by the refuges and some of the bergeries and gîtes.

In May the passes are snowbound and accommodation is limited. In June the heat is tolerable but there will still be some snow on the passes. During the summer months of July and August it gets very hot and afternoon thunderstorms are common. In September the heat become more bearable. June and September are the best months to go as the weather is not so hot, the trail is not so busy, the refuges are staffed and the bergeries are operating. In October the chance of rain or snow increases and accommodation is limited to refuges, while meals and provisions are almost nil outside villages.





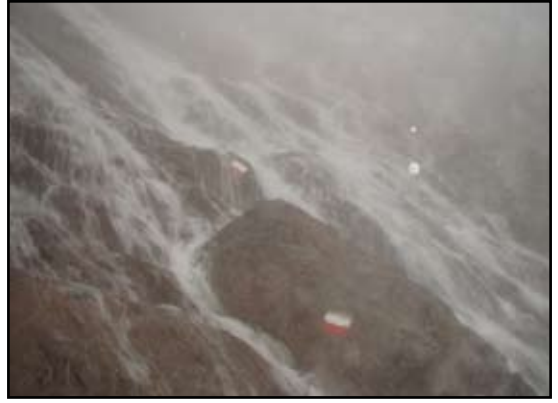
The entire centre of Corsica is a convoluted jumble of 2000 meter mountains, sharp ridges, deep valleys and limited pastures. During the summer domestic animals are taken up to these pastures.



The 10-16 day Corsican Haute Route, or GR20, starts at the village of Calenzana on the north west corner of the island and heads southwards for 190 km, passing over many rocky cols and along sharp ridges (crêtes) to arrive at the village of Conca on the south east corner of the island. The above map shows the 11 stages as described in the route summary below. Most people will want to insert 2 or 3 more stages.



On day 3 the route passes through the notorious Cirque de Solitude. This section involves scrambling down 200m and then up 250m. There are chains to assist with the more exposed sections (here shown on the ascent). In dry weather like this it is quite straight forward.



When there is heavy rain in the Cirque de Solitude, however, a cascade forms very quickly submerging the chains in a torrent of water, making this section somewhat precarious. This was the case for me. These two photos were taken from the same place at the top of the ladder.



Refuge de Petra Piana is at the end of the alpine day 6. It is a typical refuge with 30-40 beds in a dormitory and cooking/living area.



Refuge de l'Onda is nestled on a saddle between mountains. It overlooks a thriving bergerie. It only has about 20 beds. It is half way on day 7.



On day 5 the route passes the busy Bergeries de Vaccaghja. This bergerie has a large herd of goats and makes cheese, which it sells to walkers. Like a few bergeries it has tented accommodation



On day 8 the trail passes the Bergeries d'E Traghjete. There some 20 old traditional buildings to this idyllic complex nestled in a wooded valley under sharp mountains.





Day 6 is a rugged, but spectacular, trip across jagged ridges with some scrambling along lofty arêtes. There are plenty of good views down into steep cirques and valleys carved into the granite by vanished glaciers.



The hot daytime temperatures in Central Corsica causes the air to rise dragging in moist air from over the sea. At the height of summer this causes afternoon thunderstorms. It also creates marvellous sunsets.



On day 9 the route goes along a convoluted ridge to the saddle in the picture. It then climbs up the ridge onto the crest of the mountain and follows it south to reach the charming Refuge d'Usciolu which is located on a shelf just below the crest.



There are many scrambling sections on the trail. Most of these are straightforward and unexposed. Where the scrambles are more demanding or exposed chains have been installed. This short section is on the descent to Bavella from the Aiguilles de Bavella on day 10.

## Corsica: The Haute Route or GR20

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Calenzana	Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu	12 km	1400	200	6 hrs	Leave the village of Calenzana and head up the path for 3 hrs to a col. Then sidle a rocky, forested ridge with some easy scrambling to gain another col in 2 hrs. This takes you into the heart of the mountains. Contour for an hour across a hillside into a gully, just beyond which lies the first refuge on a grassy shelf.
2	Refuge d'Ortu di u Piobbu	Refuge de Carozzu	8 km	770	1040	6 hrs	From the refuge cross a low ridge to ruined bergeries, then make a steep ascent up a slab and boulder, birch covered valley to reach a col in 3 hours. From the col follow a convoluted rocky ridge in precipitous terrain for 2 hours, with some scrambling, to reach another col. From this col it is a steep hours descent to the refuge.
3	Refuge de Carozzu	Refuge de Tighjettu	14 km	1700	1250	9½ hrs	Leave the refuge, descend to a footbridge over a river and follow this river up steep rocky terrain to a col. Cross the col, follow a jagged ridge passing above Asco, then descend to the head of a valley. Ascend to a col and enter the Cirque de Solitude. Traverse this steep cirque with much scrambling to a col, then descend to the refuge.
4	Refuge de Tighjettu	Hotel Castel di Vergio	17 km	880	1170	8 hrs	Descend into the pine forest, pass a bergerie, contour a forested shoulder and then climb up a valley with some scrambling to rounded col. From the col ascend a gentle ridge to a refuge. Then descend into the valley and follow the east side of the river to a bridge. Cross the bridge, pass a bergeries and follow the path to the hotel/gite.
5	Hotel Castel di Vergio	Refuge de Manganu	17 km	630	450	5½ hrs	After four rugged days this one is easy and pastoral. Follow a forested path to a small col with a shrine, climb a gentle ridge to a broad grassy col. Descend shallow slopes to a large meadow and Lake Nanu. Cross a flat watershed and descend a pleasant valley, past bergeries to another large meadow. Cross this to reach the refuge.
6	Refuge de Manganu	Refuge de Petra Piana	10 km	910	680	6 hrs	Ascend a steep bouldery valley up to a jagged ridge. Cross the ridge through a slot into a splendid cirque with lakes. Scramble along an arête to the of the cirque. Then traverse an awkward slope and climb steeply to reach a high valley. Ascend this valley and cross a col. Then descend a slope, crossing a ridge, to reach the refuge.
7	Refuge de Petra Piana	Col de Vizzavona	18 km	1150	1840	9½ hrs	Descend a rocky path to a col and climb a broad ridge to a summit. Head south along the ridge past a saddle to another summit and descend slopes to the refuge. From this refuge climb a long sustained ridge to a col. After the col there is a long slabby descent into a pretty valley. At bottom there is a side path to the col and a quirky hotel.
8	Col de Vizzavona	Col di Verdi	28 km	1230	1110	10 hrs	Leave the col and hotel and take the alternative route to the ridge. Thereafter contour the forested hillside passing 2 bergeries and climbing steeply to Capanelle. From here climb over short rugged ridge to more bergeries and descend to a bridge. After this bridge is a very long, but pleasant, forested contour along the hillside to the refuge.
9	Col di Verdi	Refuge d'Usciolu	16 km	1390	950	8½ hrs	From the refuge ascend 2 hours through forest and pasture to Refuge de Prati. After the refuge follow a long convoluted ridge passing jagged crags and open meadow to a prominent saddle. After the saddle climb steeply up onto the ridge and follow its sharp crest with some easy scrambling until the refuge appears on the south side.
10	Refuge d'Usciolu	Col de Bavella	25 km	1620	2150	12 hrs	Climb back onto the ridge and follow it south to a large idyllic grassy plateau. Cross the plateau and make a long gentle ascent up Monte Alcludina followed by the long knee-breaking descent to Refuge d' Asinau. From this refuge take the shorter, rugged, alpine variation over the Aiguilles de Bavella (with the odd scramble) to the gîtes.
11	Col de Bavella	Conca	19 km	710	1590	8 hrs	From a gite in Bavella follow a forest track crossing a ford and climbing over ridge to reach a refuge after 2 hours. From the refuge ascend slightly, cross a ridge and descend into pine forest to the foot of the last big climb. Ascend this rocky path then make the long, varied descent past swimming pools to the gîtes and restaurants of Conca.
			184 km	12390	12430	89 hrs	