



Monte Cinto seen from the approach. Michael Kent.

MONTE CINTO

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It was not yet dawn when I left the Hotel de la Plage in Algojola on the north coast of Corsica. A two-week package holiday had given me the opportunity for some walking in the impressive mountains of that island. The much heard cliché 'Corsica: a mountain in the sea' is very apt and only on its east coast, in the alluvial plane, does it have any tendency towards the horizontal.

By using a coastal base the twin joys of the island could be exploited; the mountains and the sea. The hotel was known to us from previous visits and with its friendly atmosphere and inexpensive demi-pension it was for us a natural choice.

My objective that day was the highest peak on the island, Monte Cinto at 2706m. The early start was desired both because of the drive necessary and the anticipated long day ahead: local opinion suggested 9 hours for the ascent and descent from the nearest roadhead at Haut Asco (1422m).

The morning air was heavy with the perfume of maquis, the mixed scrub-like vegetation which covers vast areas of Corsica giving it its other epithet 'The Scented Isle'. With the sinking of the night air to the coast and valleys, the concentration of this heady exotic cocktail of vapours increases to near narcotic proportions.

It was still dark when I left the tortuous and narrow coastal corniche and headed inland towards Ponte Leccia. From there the landscape gradually became visible in the early dawn light. My speed fell as I began to climb through the precipitous Gorge de L'Asco. Here were magnificent forests of chestnut, oak and pine set in the extremely rugged landscape of the National Park which occupies half of the island. Asco was passed: a mountain village scattered around a collection of hairpin bends on a bare hillside. Then, up through the forest I drove towards Haut Asco with still nothing on the road before me except the occasional bands of wild pigs and lonely lost cattle. The latter are a problem apparently caused by poor farmers driving the beasts they can no longer afford to feed out into the wilderness to forage and survive however they can. Judging by the menus in local restaurants however, the pigs are an asset well exploited.

When I reached Haut Asco the sun was just touching the highest tops and it was 7 am: time for breakfast in what appeared to be the Corsican equivalent of the Cairnwell ski development and with all its charm. This was a generally sordid collection of huts and chairlift paraphernalia.

On leaving the car I was chilled to the bone by the coldness of the mountain air having left the coast in shorts and tee shirt. Rapidly correcting this error I hurried through an overpriced bread and coffee offering known as breakfast. Having eaten many fine breakfasts in Continental hotels it seemed an insult to call this minimum a 'continental' breakfast. Like us though, the Corsicans call the European mainland 'The Continent' so it is doubly inappropriate. Thus modestly

fortified the day proper could begin.

Using sheet 20 (Corse Nord) of the Didier et Richard 1:50,000 version of the Institut Geographique National Survey, I located the path to Monte Cinto directly opposite the small café. From there it plunged into the pinewoods and skirted the beautifully sited hut of the Club Alpin Francais. This path gradually contoured upwards through the woods, leaving below the hairpins of the access road until after about one kilometre the forest thinned and was left behind. Although Monte Cinto itself was out of sight from this point, the route ahead up towards the Cirque de Trombalacciu was clearly visible dominated by Capu Larghia, with deep and mysterious recesses and totally alpine in character. Snow beds lay in late September high in the shattered corries, and from these the meltwater continued to feed the several streams running to the Asco river.

After crossing a fairly level but lumpy area of glacially smoothed rocks the Cinto path veered suddenly upwards to the left over steep and smooth slabs. At this point a taste of the exposure to come was experienced and I felt that at last the ascent had begun. Most of the scattered vegetation amongst the boulders was unfamiliar to me. There certainly seemed to be an abundance of juniper and other low shrubs interspersed with ubiquitous heathers, but most of the landscape was seemingly arid rock.

The path climbed steeply around the shoulder of un-named peaks rising ultimately to Capu Borba at 1936 metres. Above my head an eagle circled then alighted on a rock, indifferent to my distant struggling, panting form. In places the path was very exposed with dramatic views to the right across a deep valley and up into the dark recesses of the Cinto massif. An enormous rock pillar overhung this valley, its angle seemingly defying gravity. Most undramatic of all, Monte Cinto itself seemed but the highest point on an undulating rugged ridge. The scale however was deceptive as I later found.

By about 9.30 I was approaching a col (or bocca in Corse) at 2207m, marked on the map as Bocca Borba. By then I had passed three or four girls having a coffee stop, the only other party on the hill at that time. The path at this point offered choices of route traversing up and across very loose scree. None seemed to have any particular advantage so I took the highest, reasoning that any slippage of the scree would only take me down to the lower tracks.

Once past the col, where after joining another path from lower down the Asco valley, the route lay upwards into the shadow of the mountain, I entered a cool shady area of boulders and icy pools below the precipices of Monte Cinto itself. The cliffs were plastered in acres of the most vivid yellow lichen I have ever seen. In the shade of the morning sun these encrustations seemed luminescent (and probably were).

The steepest and most arduous part of the climb then began, following wherever possible the red paint daubs of the way – marking up steep and loose rock to finally emerge at about 2600m on the ridge leading to the summit. A problem of this route finding over such loose terrain is that boulders often move considerable distances off the route under the influence of ice and gravity taking

their paint daubs with them!

Once on the ridge and heading towards the summit barely one kilometre away, the map is less than truthful in its omission of the contours along this ridge. A full hour was to pass before I finally reached the summit, an hour occupied in passing vast gendarmes both around and over. The latter exercise resulted when the path itself was lost. From the edge of a precipitous face I could see the path some 30 or 40 metres below but could find no way to reach it except back along the ridge or climbing down. Rashly perhaps, I adopted the latter approach. The final and crucial move in these unexpected rock gymnastics necessitated an irreversible jump across a crack followed by a friction controlled slide down it to more negotiable ground. 'Controlled' is probably the wrong word for it but thank heavens for lined breeks!

The final and legitimate approach to the summit was across shattered boulders and scree, to arrive exhausted after a 5 hour climb, at Monte Cinto's crowning – anticlimax; a decayed brick and concrete wartime observation post with all the grace and beauty of a bomb site. That was the immediate impression but all around was spread the rugged beauty of these mountains. Close at hand the rock, with the appearance of a cloutie dumpling, so many garnets did it seem to contain, was illuminated with more of that luminous lichen. Beyond the mountains to the East and West the sea could just be seen. Closer to the North, some of the towns along the coast were easily visible. Southwards, disappearing into the haze rose chain after chain of Corsica's ribs. In perfect conditions it is said that the mountains of Sardinia may be seen. Immediately below to the South-East lay the dammed lake of Calacuccia. Lakes always appear uninteresting to me when viewed from height and this was no exception being just a featureless blob on the valley floor. Beyond it 15 or 20 miles away the magnificent peak of Monte Rotondo (2622m) also seemed just another top on a long ridge, ending with Monte Cardo (2453m) at its easterly point. The greatest impression of ruggedness and grandeur however was presented towards the western coast where the mountains rise directly from the sea. It was at that time just 2.00 pm and as on nearly every day that I have spent in Corsica, the mountains there were becoming cloud capped and I could see cumulus developing rapidly.

It seemed an appropriate moment to begin the descent. I had eaten my lunch and by then had been joined by a German couple and their dog whose combined presence threatened my solitude. Their concern for my welfare as a lone walker was appreciated but their offer of company was politely declined. I'm not overfond of dogs anyway. The route down proved almost as hard to find as the route up. Contrary to appearances on the map the path did not entirely follow the ridge and in places, because of the aforementioned obstacles, dropped 30 or 40 metres below it on the wrong side for a descent towards Haut Asco. On regaining the ridge proper and beginning the descent over familiar ground I passed again the party I had met in the morning, now descending, having been overcome by heat and exhaustion without reaching the summit. By this time Cinto itself was hidden in mist and I was thankful for my timely departure in view of the

navigational difficulties of the summit ridge. As I descended further towards the Bocca Borba the afternoon heat became intense so I stripped by a stream and lay for some peaceful rest. As the afternoon progressed the summits cleared again and I could trace by eye my route along the prickly spine of Cinto.

I abandoned my idle pleasure and continued down the valley. The afternoon sun was now shining straight down the cirques and gulleys over Cinto's flank, creating with the haze scenes of incredible beauty. Buttress upon buttress receded upwards like flat painted theatre sets placed one behind the other across the wings of a stage.

It was then 4.00 pm and to my astonishment I met a party just beginning the ascent. They asked me details of the route being amazingly mapless. Although they had no overnight equipment they seemed untroubled by the almost certain fact that they would be benighted if they pursued their objective at that time. I think I have met more madmen in the Alps and Corsica than I have ever encountered in Scotland. Despite the awesome nature of these ranges, people seem unimpressed by the threat and set forth on expeditions that we would see as folly even in lesser hills such as ours. This impression of casualness was further enhanced when half-an-hour later I met an Italian couple with no gear, no map, no food of any kind and wearing sandals and trainers. They also asked me the way to the top. I tried as subtly as possible to dissuade them and left them still weighing up the possibilities. I am no chauvinist and hide from Brits abroad, largely by keeping my mouth shut and this I did for the next party, chattering loudly in English inside their own narrow world. They also were heading upwards through the woods but apart from an excess of vocality they were well equipped and clearly well prepared for what lay ahead. They may have been doing the North-South route across Corsica that passes here or their objective may have been Monte Cinto. I didn't speak so I never found out. Their presence however brought me back to earth with an unpleasant jolt. Of all the parties of various nationalities I had met, none seemed to have dented my solitude more than these innocent compatriots with their blethering who irritated me more than any idiocy of the others.

Within a few hundred metres the job was complete. Haut Asco was full of car-borne tourists milling around, as could be found in any British beauty spot on any Bank Holiday or weekend. Apart from that last half hour of the descent, with its brutal re-introduction to the human race, I had enjoyed my day and would recommend to anyone who values unspoilt (largely) mountain scenery, to savour Corsica.

I jumped into my car and fled the crowds. It was 5.30 pm and two hours later I sat down for dinner with my wife in Algajola.