
Mediterranean

Welcome to the A-listers' secret island

The isle of Cavallo
off Corsica has
lovely beaches, great
diving and one chic
hotel. No wonder
Beyoncé loves it,
says **Sean Thomas**

Piece together your perfect island. It might have French cooking, Italian grace and styling or perhaps a hint of Spanish sexiness. What else? How about a clear, warm, Seychellois sea that unrolls its lacy waves on to gleaming deserted beaches: because this island is private.

It's just a dream, of course. Or is it? Let me introduce you to Cavallo — sometimes called the Mustique of the Med — a flat, rocky, sunny, myrtle and rosemary-perfumed island off southern Corsica.

Owned by a syndicate of Italian billionaires, this jagged, mile-wide chunk of demi-paradise is a mere two hours from Heathrow (and half an hour by taxi and

boat from Figari airport in Corsica) yet feels like it is on the other side of the globe: in a yearned-for world where there isn't much to do, in the nicest possible way.

And we're here to do just that.

On our first morning at the Hotel & Spa des Pêcheurs (the only going concern on Cavallo, apart from a smattering of villas that can be rented from time to time and a couple of independent eateries), I approach Giuseppe. He's head barman at the hotel's Shore Club, an agreeably affable place, with its bowered sunbeds and its tables pitched so close to the waves that you can practically eat your salad niçoise while you paddle.

"So what shall we do this afternoon, Giuseppe? What do you suggest?"

The charming Giuseppe shrugs. He looks at the jade-meets-sapphire sea.

“Ahhh. You can swim? Maybe you can dive.” Another shrug. “Then maybe swim again.”

“Apart from that?”

“Eat is good here.”

He’s right. Eat is good here. The Shore Club has an Italian ambience as well as a faint Ibiza buzz. Think chillout music and nude sunbathing in the next cove along. In this mix, though, the attitude to food is distinctly French. On Giuseppe’s advice I have a simple carpaccio of fresh fish with

a glass of chilled Corsican rosé. It’s delicious.

The seafood should be excellent because the surrounding seas are special. Cavallo (part of France) is one of the islands of the Lavezzi archipelago, and lies in a protected marine environment, shared with nearby Sardinia (part of Italy). No further development is allowed on Cavallo itself (Corsican nationalists firebombed a villa in the 1990s as a protest against invaders). On the surrounding islands, no settlement is allowed at all.

Add in the absence of polluting industry, a stiff and cleansing current through the Strait of Bonifacio and a ban on large-scale fishing, and you have some of the clearest waters in the Mediterranean, with some of the most amazing aquatic life. I’m introduced to that life by Silvio, who runs the hotel diving

centre. From June to September Silvio lives in Cavallo; the rest of the time he is in Thailand (“I don’t like winter”). Silvio has dived in some of the most iconic scuba sites on the globe and rates Cavallo in the top ten. Why?

“Groupers!” he says. I’m yet to be persuaded, mainly because I have no idea what a grouper is. Then, when we scooch our dinghy to a spot of blue water a kilometre offshore and dive to 20 metres, I begin to un-

derstand. Groupers are big fish, maybe a metre long. A school of them is an impressive sight. Moreover, in the coral-fringed underwater canyons of Merouville, they are so plentiful and so tame that they swim up and headbutt your goggles.

Don’t despair if you can’t scuba — the snorkelling is also excellent. The water is so clear that visibility is up to 60 metres, so it’s rather

like swimming in a vast pool of vodka. In the shallows the little fish dance around your hands, making you feel like an underwater medieval saint, gifted with the language of sticklebacks.

Swimming, diving, snorkelling and eating splendid seafood. What else? Well, the spa is jolly nice. While I am partying with the groupers my girlfriend has a “really enjoyable” hot-stone massage, with an emphasis on local stones.

That may not sound so amazing, but — like the seas around Cavallo — those ubiquitous rocks beneath your sandalled feet are special. Soft and rounded, they resemble the rocks of the Seychelles. What’s more, at the Hotel des Pêcheurs, where all of the large, soothing rooms have glorious balconies with sea views, some of the larger boulders are used as features in the rooms, right next to the minibar.

The rocks of Cavallo also played a role in the island’s history. The Romans came in the second century AD to quarry granite. You can still see traces of the picks and shovels wielded by slaves. After the Romans left, Cavallo was left to snooze under the Mediterranean sun right up to the 1970s, when a Paris nightlife mogul turned it into a retreat for celebrities.

In its heyday as a hideaway, practically everyone who was anyone took the ten-minute boat ride from the Corsican main-

land to little Cavallo. Marcello Mastroianni, Catherine Deneuve and Petula Clark summered here (Clark called Cavallo a heaven on Earth, and said, “we lived like gypsies and washed in the sea”). Exiled

princes and incognito artists came too.

Now Cavallo is being revived. The hotel and villas are being refurbished and the celebs are, accordingly, drifting back. Some of the Monaco royal family have bought properties and Giuseppe tells me that Alicia Keys and Beyoncé have been spotted.

Naturally, this rockrose has a thorn. Corsica is an expensive place, and Cavallo is pricier still. Whether you eat at the hotel or the excellent Italian restaurant near the island's tiny marina, you can pay three figures for a modest dinner. Hiring snorkels or renting golf buggies — the best way of tootling around — is similarly costly. Then again, what price an empty mind? Because that is what Cavallo delivers.

After two days, my cares fall away. I turn off my phone; I shove my laptop in its case. Strolling to the next empty beach I stare at the sea and the sky, and I think: what shall I do next? Then I realise that the silence is everything. The aimlessness is perfect. Maybe I'll take another swim. Or maybe I'll sit in the sun, where the air is scented with wild rosemary, and wait happily for nothing to happen.

sharing, and including accommodation, flights, transfers, and two nights' in-villa chef service.



Need to know

Sean Thomas was a guest of Simpson Travel (020 8003 6557, simpsontravel.com), which has a week at the Hotel & Spa des Pêcheurs from £2,146pp in September, rising to £4,496pp in August. This includes half-board accommodation, flights on the weekly Simpson British Airways charter into Corsica, and connections to Cavallo. Simpson also features villas on Cavallo, starting at £865pp in September rising to £1,750pp in August, based on ten

Five great deals for island breaks in Europe

Sicily, Italy

Stay for seven nights at Hotel Capotaormina and save up to £149 per person. The hotel is in a dramatic spot on a headland with a private beach overlooking the Bay of Naxos, plus a cliff-top pool. Rooms are spacious and modern. The hotel has three restaurants and three bars, and is close to the historic town of Taormina.

Details A seven-night B&B stay costs from £750pp, including return flights to Catania and private transfers, for travel from September 4 to October 24; you must book by June 30 (020 7838 5892, wexas.com)

Malta

There are some great deals in Malta this summer, particularly from the specialist tour operator Malta Direct. Some of the best are to be had at the Qawra resort, by St Paul's Bay, staying at the four-star Santana Hotel, which is 300m from the beach. The hotel has a rooftop pool, indoor pool, and a spa with a sauna. Rooms have a simple, elegant style. It's close to restaurants, bars and shops.

Details A seven-night B&B stay costs from £417pp departing from Gatwick on July 15, with transfers included (0845 6040035, maltadirect.com)

Lanzarote, Canary Islands

Seven nights' all-inclusive for less than £550 in July at a sporty hotel with three pools, and a wellness centre with a sauna and hot tub sounds tempting. That's the latest offer at Barceló Lanzarote Resort hotel in the Costa Tegui area of Lanzarote. The family-friendly hotel also has a climbing wall, water slides and a mini golf course. The price in July is £270 per couple off the rate published in the brochure.

Details Seven-nights' all-inclusive costs from £542pp departing from Gatwick on July 14, with transfers included (0871 2007799, firstchoice.co.uk)

Kladesholmen, Sweden

Kladesholmen is a small island connected to mainland Sweden by a road bridge. It's a peaceful place with a rather unusual hotel, the Salt &

Sill, which floats on pontoons. The hotel is made up of six two-storey houses with compact, modern rooms. The Scandinavian specialist Taber Holidays has put together a fly-drive package that includes four nights on the island and three in the city of Gothenburg.

Details A week's B&B with four nights at Salt & Sill on Kladesholmen and three in Gothenburg is from £1,095pp with flights from Heathrow and car hire for five days, for travel up to August 31 (01274 875199, taberhols.co.uk)

Kefalonia, Greece

Relax on the picturesque island of Kefalonia staying at the Lourdas Beach Apartments on its southern shore. The 12 apartments are set around a big infinity pool facing the sea. They are close to a beach and several tavernas, if you want a break from cooking for yourself.

Details A week's self-catering costs from £489pp, 23 per cent off the usual price, departing on July 11 from Gatwick, including transfers (020 8758 4758, sunvil.co.uk)

Tom Chesshyre



Beyoncé, left, and Alicia Keys







⋮ One of the bays on the island of Cavallo, ⋮
⋮ above; a patio and a bedroom at the ⋮
⋮ Hotel & Spa des Pêcheurs, right ⋮