

Bastia – Gateway to Upper Corsica

Although the Greek Islands are among the most popular sun spots in the Mediterranean, the French Island of Corsica is becoming an increasingly attractive destination. **Luigi Vallero** visits Bastia's Poretta Airport, the primary gateway for most holidaymakers.

The beautiful island of Corsica is part of France, yet very much Mediterranean and part Italian in character. It continues to attract increasing numbers of visitors, thanks to its pristine beaches and lively nightlife in the hot summer months. However, its rich cultural heritage, hiking and skiing opportunities on its snow-capped mountains are popular during the rest of the year.

Corsica's second largest city (after Ajaccio) is Bastia, on the eastern shore, almost facing the Italian island of Elba. It is a pleasant, fortified harbour city, as well as a major economic centre and a combined sea-air transportation hub for the whole island. This helps to make it the ideal gateway to Upper Corsica, including the characteristically-shaped finger-like peninsula of Cap Corse, renowned for its rugged territory and

picturesque forests, interspersed with desert areas and traditional villages.

Bastia and north east Corsica are served by Poretta Airport (BIA - Aéroport de Bastia - Poretta) which is 13 miles (20km) south-southeast of the city.

History

The airport is on the La Marana plain, an area renowned for its beaches, adjacent to the town of Lucciana and bordered by a swamp and a nature reserve/lagoon. From 1944 during World War Two, the airfield was an important American 12th Air Force base, and used by Lockheed P-38 Lightnings, North American P-51 Mustangs and Northrop P-61 Black Widows. The airport is historically significant because on July 31, 1944, legendary French pilot and writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, took

off for the last time in a P-38 Lightning on a reconnaissance flight over Southern France, disappearing forever. Today a small monument in front of the passenger terminal pays tribute to this aviation hero.

After the war the airport returned to civilian use under the auspices of the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie) which aimed to use it to improve traffic flows to and from the island. In 1947, upon the request of the chamber, Air France introduced flights using French-built Dewoitine 338s. At the time facilities included a 5,905ft (1,800m) earth runway, an apron, control tower, bar-restaurant and small Air France office.

To cope with the needs of larger aircraft a new asphalt runway was built in 1954, and three years later work started on a passenger terminal, while a temporary structure replaced the original building.

In 1959 the chamber officially became the managing authority and the new terminal opened the following year. The following decade was dominated by the Sud Aviation SE 210 Caravelle which linked BIA with Paris, Nice and Marseilles.

A new freight terminal was built in 1968, while approval for further upgrade works

to cope with anticipated traffic growth was obtained. Runway 16/34 was lengthened to 7,546ft (2,300m) in 1976, but it was extended again nine years later to 8,235ft (2,510m) and strengthened to allow it to handle widebody jets.

Construction of the current 1.5mppa terminal began in 1992, and was completed in 1997. In 1996 the Chamber of Commerce promoted the development of 'Aéroparc', a business park for trade, transport and aviation-related activities within the airport grounds. Today Aéroparc hosts an MRO run by local carrier Air Corsica, along with the activities of express shipping company Chronopost, newspaper publisher Corse Presse and equipment manufacturer SISIS.

During the 2000s, BIA underwent further upgrades, both landside and airside, to enable it to handle the increasing numbers of travellers during the peak summer months. In 2009 recorded passengers reached 1,011,820, passing the one million mark for the first time.

The airport shares links to the French mainland with the facilities at Ajaccio (AJA), Calvi (CLY) and Figari (FSC), all of which have been significant in the development of the Continuité Territoriale - the Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes linking Corsica with Marseilles, Nice and Paris Orly. Charles de Gaulle is not included in the scheme and is therefore considered a 'free market'. Under the Continuité Territoriale scheme, flights linking the four Corsican airports with the three mainland French gateways are regulated by the local Government with regards to frequencies, schedules, capacity offered and fares. Currently all these services are provided by Air Corsica, using a fleet of ATR 72s and Airbus A320s, in co-operation with Air France.



▲ The check-in area has 19 counters and a row of self-service check-in kiosks.



▼ The airport's terminal was completed 17 years ago, but its rather 'space age' shape still gives a very modern impression. (All photos author)



◀ With passenger levels hovering around the one million mark self-service check-in kiosks are essential to help reduce congestion.

✈ Airport Statistics

ICAO Code: LFKB
 IATA Code: BIA
 Location: 42° 33.16' N, 009° 29.01' E
 Elevation: 26ft (8m)
 Runway: 16/34 8,266 x 148ft (2,519 x 45m)
 Frequencies: ATIS: 125.925
 Tower: 118.0
 Ground: 121.825
 Approach: 123.825
 Website: www.bastia.aeroport.fr

▼ The majority of resident carrier Air Corsica traffic is to the French mainland, notably PSO flights to Marseilles, Nice and Paris/Orly. CCM Airlines - (Compagnie Corse Méditerranée) Airbus A320 F-HBSA (c/n 3882) arrives on stand. The airline changed its name to Air Corsica in 2010, but this aircraft retains its old livery.



Today's airport

The terminal covers approximately 96,878sq ft (9,000m²) and is of simple, yet efficient architecture, made up of two connected vaulted buildings. There are 19 check-in desks on one side and baggage reclaim on the other, served by two conveyor belts. The connecting structure also houses the boarding gate area. Amenities include snack bars, local specialty shops and car rental providers. Corsica's three other airports are surrounded by challenging terrain, which requires complex landing and take-off procedures (along with special crew certification) in order to avoid high ground. Fortunately BIA was built in a completely flat area, with an unrestricted north-south runway, ideally aligned with the prevailing winds. This, coupled with 24-hour opening, makes it the island's easiest aerial gateway.

Although 2012 closed with a slight decline in traffic figures for the airport,



◀ Outside the terminal this plaque commemorates Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the legendary French pilot and writer who disappeared in July 1944 whilst flying from the airfield in a Lockheed P-38 on a reconnaissance mission.

with 1,003,749 passengers against the 1,025,346 of the previous year, 2013 reversed the negative trend. In the first seven months of the year, traffic grew by 13% (72,660 passengers) compared to the same period in 2012, mostly thanks to the introduction of 12 new routes and increased frequencies on existing ones. The performances in May, June and July were particularly impressive, with 21.12%, 21.35% and 14.56% increases respectively. Projections for the year end indicate a potential annual figure of 1,096,000, representing a 9% increase, with domestic traffic accounting for the vast majority at 88%.

Airlines

BIA is the second largest base for Air Corsica, the island's flag carrier, after Ajaccio. In addition to its three PSO routes it also flies seasonally to Dôle. Air France also connects with Paris, normally using A320 family aircraft, sometimes substituted by larger capacity types like the Boeing 777-300s and even 747-400s during the busiest summer weekends.

▼ Air Corsica ATR 72-500 F-GRPZ (c/n 745) takes on passengers for a flight to Dôle.



Domestic traffic

	2013	2012	% Change
Paris/Orly	224,622	221,171	1.56
Marseilles	134,137	132,463	1.26
Nice	59,506	61,173	-2.73
Paris/CDG	30,913	33,472	-7.65
Lyon	19,215	21,900	-12.26
Nantes	17,821	4,332	311.38
Toulouse	14,433	375	3,748.80
Bordeaux	11,370	3,336	240.83
Lille	6,941	594	1,068.52
Brest	5,130	-	-
Strasbourg	4,051	-	-
Pau	684	-	-
Dôle	386	401	-3.74



▶ A pair of baggage reclaim belts is sufficient for the current traffic levels.

◀ The airport's control tower is as distinctive in shape as the main terminal building.



▼ The village of Bastia is just one of the beautiful places to explore on Corsica. (iStock Photo)

Air France's regional links are performed by HOP! - flying seasonally to Bordeaux, Clermont-Ferrand, Lille, Lyon, Metz-Nancy, Nantes and Toulouse using a mix of Bombardier and Embraer regional jets. Another domestic player competing for its market share is XL Airways France, deploying A320 and widebody A330s on thrice-weekly seasonal connections to Paris/CDG during the summer.

Since mid-2012 the largest international carrier at BIA has been Spain's Volotea, which now offers domestic low-cost connections to Brest, Bordeaux, Lille, Nantes, Strasbourg and Toulouse with its 125-seat 717s. Some of these routes are seasonal but Volotea is trying to maintain all-year services to at least Bordeaux and Nantes and has indicated it would like to expand its Corsica operation. This follows its first year using BIA when it carried 29,459 passengers.

UK-based LCC easyJet also serves Paris/CDG with year-round A319 flights. The

airline also has summer-only schedules to Geneva, Gatwick, Lyon, Manchester and Toulouse.

Last summer other carriers included bmi regional (to Bristol); British Airways (charters to London/Heathrow); Germanwings (to Berlin/Schönefeld and

Tegel, Cologne/Bonn, and Stuttgart); Lufthansa (to Frankfurt, Hamburg and Munich - the latter two provided respectively by Eurowings and CityLine); InterSky (to Friedrichshafen); Luxair (to Luxembourg); SkyTaxi (to Dôle); and Jetairfly and Thomas Cook Airlines (to Brussels). Charters are also provided to Scandinavian destinations like Copenhagen, Billund, Oslo, Gothenburg and Stockholm.

With established regular connections to several European cities, Bastia is perfectly positioned to continue serving the beautiful Mediterranean island of Corsica and play a vital part in the local economy. ✕

International traffic

	2013	2012	% Change
Genève	9,550	6,730	41.90
Cologne	8,448	8,944	-5.55
Stuttgart	6,280	4,039	55.48
Frankfurt	5,723	3,282	74.38
Brussels	5,388	2,260	138.41
London	3,802	4,063	-6.42
Manchester	3,047	2,989	1.94
Berlin	2,434	3,496	-30.38
Luxembourg	2,427	2,915	-16.74
Munich	2,293	1,789	28.17
Hamburg	1,838	1,789	2.74

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