

Tides of time



United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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The Gulf of Porto: Calanche of Piana, Gulf of Girolata, Scandola Reserve is a Unesco World Heritage site on the French island of Corsica. With its granite cliffs, chestnut forests, maquis and clear waters, the area is a stunning representative of the Mediterranean coastline

SPOTLIGHT | World Heritage on land and sea

The Gulf of Porto in Corsica: From red cliffs to turquoise waters, a natural ecological balance

Every six years, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) provides periodic reporting on its World Heritage sites, analyzing data that comes in from local site managers around the world and reporting, region by region, to the World Heritage Committee on conservation trends at listed sites. This process complements other monitoring and reporting mechanisms. In the 2006 periodic report for European sites, the site managers of France's Gulf of Porto stated that the area remains an "eminent representative" of the Mediterranean coastline, "one of the spots that comes closest to a natural ecological balance, which makes it a remarkable reference." Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1983, and despite the constant increase in tourism since then, the Gulf of Porto remains an outstanding example of a well-preserved natural site.

Despite the increase in tourism, it is a well-preserved natural site

Located on Corsica's west coast, the Gulf of Porto is a vast, V-shaped bay comprising the Calanche of Piana in the south, the harbor of Porto itself, the Gulf of Girolata and the Scandola Nature Reserve, which lies on a promontory on the northern end. The 12,000 hectares (about 30,000 acres) of the World Heritage site offer countless

opportunities to see both land and marine wonders. The marine site comprises 4,000 hectares, or one-third of the total.

The Calanche (plural of the Corsican *calanca*, or creek) of Piana are pink granite rocks whose twisted, wind- and water-eroded shapes dominate the gulf. The Scandola Reserve is part of the Regional Natural

Park of Corsica, whose clear waters let swimmers see down to 35 meters (115 feet) at some places, and where numerous islets and caves are home to rich underwater flora and fauna.

Nature lovers can discover the varied aspects of this site on the remarkable island of Corsica, known in French as the "Ile de Beauté" (Island of Beauty).

As its site managers noted, the Gulf of Porto stands out in the Mediterranean, which, though diverse, does not have many natural World Heritage areas. This makes the Gulf of Porto important as a type of marine site. Marine sites are of differing varieties — coastal areas, coral reefs and estuaries, for example — and it is the most outstanding examples within these characteristic categories that Unesco encourages countries to propose as World Heritage, in order to protect them for all time.

Since Unesco's work does not end once a site has been inscribed on the World Heritage List, the six-year reporting — supported by case-by-case reporting as needs arise — allows the organization and the World Heritage Committee to keep an eye on these sites. "It is one example of Unesco's monitoring activities," explains Mechthild Rossler, Unesco's chief of section for Europe and North America.

Periodic reporting not only helps to deal with problems on specific sites, but can also resolve difficulties shared by many World Heritage sites.

On the local level, for example, the 2006 report cited surveys from the Gulf of Porto's managers who found a healthy awareness of its natural heritage among visitors, businesses, and local and state groups. "The site's World Heritage status is, in particular, used by the tourism industry, specifically by tour operators for their boat rides to the site," Rossler says.

Parts of the site were listed as satisfactory, with managers noting good educational and scientific activities taking place. But on a wider level, the report concluded that management systems — in Europe, not just the Gulf of Porto — need improvement. According to Rossler, this includes visitor facilities and tourism management. "States who have signed the World Heritage Convention

have been asked to follow up on all issues detected in the report," she says. "This is an example of the continuous monitoring required for site management."

Periodic reporting likewise helps raise a broader awareness of natural disasters. Through it, Unesco coordinates risk management. Across the Mediterranean, for example, climate change has meant higher temperatures, which can lead to forest fires, and this risk is particularly high in Corsica.

"Coordination among countries and exchange among site managers are key to finding solutions," Rossler says. "We work with governments across the Mediterranean, not on a site specifically, but toward risk-preparedness concerning all World Heritage sites in the area, so each can benefit from the experience others have."

In November, the Greek government will invite experts, representatives from the

World Heritage Centre and site coordinators from across Europe to Olympia, a World Heritage site where fire destroyed part of the infrastructure and museum last year. Attendees will develop elements for a management plan they can use to be better prepared not only for fires, but also for other disasters, like floods and earthquakes. Site coordinators, such as those from the Gulf of Porto, can then return to their sites to train local staff, including firefighters, on lessons learned.

"Such networking is what World Heritage is all about," Rossler says. "It's a shared exercise — the legacy of humanity, not laws put forward by one government. It's wonderful to have governments helping each other across the Mediterranean, in countries where they don't have the same level of capacity-building, experience or financial support. That helps the sites very much." ■

Natural World Heritage sites

Unesco's World Heritage sites protect more than 177 million hectares (440 million acres) of land and sea, according to Unesco and the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Eighty-one countries have at least one area designated as a natural World Heritage site. Australia leads, with 44 million hectares or 31 percent of its area protected, followed by Russia (13 percent), Canada (12 percent) and the United States (4 percent). An average of 20 sites is added to the World Heritage List each year, based on decisions made by the World Heritage Committee, the body responsible for upholding the 1972 Convention. Visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

EXPLORING | From diving to mountain-climbing

Site offers the double magic of land and sea



Clear waters: The area offers 25 diving sites.

The French island of Corsica is a mountain in the sea, offering opportunities to enjoy both land and marine biodiversity. The Gulf of Porto, located on a bay on the west coast, has both, making it the locus of a unique tourist setting on the island. The site includes the Calanche of Piana, the Gulf of Girolata and the Scandola Nature Reserve. On land, the Calanche coastline of rocky inlets is famous for its contrasts: Mediterranean maquis, chestnut forests, and colored cliffs and red rock formations that rise imposingly from the sea. The clear, turquoise waters in those seas are ideal for swimming, snorkeling, diving and sailing. The area is a paradise for diving enthusiasts, who find conditions excellent year-round for observing submarine plant life and fauna of dazzling beauty, all easily accessible.

The double magic of land and sea makes the Gulf of Porto a wonderful place for learning to dive or for climbing the cliffs. Visitors can explore, on their own, around the small harbor of Porto with a snorkel and mask, or take scuba-diving excursions in the bay. In

summer, boats leave from Porto to circle the gulf, an ideal way to admire its red cliffs. Hikers will prefer the ascent of the Capo d'Orto (1,296 meters, or 4,250 feet) and its towering view.

Thirty kilometers (about 19 miles) north of Porto lie Girolata and the Scandola Nature Reserve. Scandola is the coastline's most famous attraction; its sunsets make it one of Corsica's biggest tourist draws. The volcanic landscape of the adjacent Girolata peninsula, accessible only by boat or on foot, has cliffs, jagged peaks and lava forms from which fish eagles plunge into the sapphire waters. They reign here, along with dolphins, and both will often be the swimmer's companions.

The ideal way to visit the Calanches is aboard a boat. Less than five kilometers from Porto, these creeks are lorded over by remarkable granite cliffs, formed by wind and water erosion into eerie shapes resembling towers, columns, animals and human figures. Guy de Maupassant described them this way: "I stopped stunned in front of these amazing rocks of pink granite, 400 meters high, strange, tortured, eaten into by time, bloody under the final fires of twilight and taking every form — like fantastic people out of a fairy tale, petrified by a supernatural power."

The Corseseb travel site (www.corsica.net/corsica) lists more than 450 species of algae around the promontory of Girolata alone; the waters there teem with grouper, limpets and mullet. From 30 meters and deeper, divers see a wealth of red coral, sponges, grouper and lobsters. In all, the Gulf of Porto offers 25 diving sites. Five minutes outside Porto, swimmers can see grouper, octopus and rays among the underwater canyons of Monterosso. The nearby Castagne creek is not deep, but it abounds with marine life. Farther down the coast at Ficajola, divers can swim through narrow tunnels and emerge into forests of blood-red coral. On the Gulf of Porto's left bank, Vardiola, a massive ochre and red granite rock rises out of the waves; divers can visit its white coral reefs. North of Porto, locals say Scopu offers the most interesting diving, rich in flora and fauna, including lobsters, cowries and moray eels. ■

Free diving: Plunging into the ocean on a single breath

Diving toward the ocean floor on a single breath is an ancient skill among sponge fishermen. Called free diving, it requires extraordinary levels of stamina; some divers can hold their breath for six minutes or more. Scientists are studying how this is possible. Oxygen-sparing adjustments made by the body underwater include lowered heart rate and vasoconstriction. Theories say the human species emerged from water, and people come from a liquid environment at birth. The human body apparently has an ability to tap into this aquatic background and recall mammalian diving reflexes.

But the body's efforts are not enough for a successful free dive. Having high-tech help is vital, and that now comes in the form of

Jaeger-LeCoultre's Master Compressor Diving Chronograph, the latest in the Swiss watch manufacture's contribution to pushing back the limits of underwater discovery. Patrick Musimu, a 36-year-old Belgian, took the Jaeger-LeCoultre model to an incredible 209 meters (685 feet) in a single breath — the first man to do so. He held his breath for eight minutes and four seconds. Talented as Musimu is, the achievement is hard to fathom without the Master Compressor Diving. The watch features a Pulsometer function, a scale indicating heartbeat per minute. Since free diving involves controlling and reducing one's pulse rate, the function is indispensable for breath-holding divers in charting the limits of their cardiac rate.

Visit the Tides of Time Web site for videos, interviews and more information on World Heritage marine sites: www.ihf.com/tidesoftime

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