

Village life

Hilltop heritage

Pictures by Tim Mannakee



The village of Pigna in northern Corsica put itself on the map with music and art, and now it's going green, as **Rosemary J Brown** explains

Gazing down from the heights of Monte Sant'Angelo on Corsica's north-west coast, a spiral of sienna roofs, sky-blue shutters and stepped streets comes into focus. The medieval village of Pigna below lies at the heart of the island's Balagne area between the tourist hotspots of Calvi and L'Île-Rousse. Perched on a hill and framed by the Mediterranean, Pigna is a flagship for the best of Corsican culture, past and present.

You can see it in the architecture, artists' galleries and artisans' workshops trading in paintings, pottery, music boxes, engravings and lutes. You can hear it in the Corsican music flowing from the church, cafés and the village's purpose-built auditorium, part of the Centre Culturel VOCE. You can taste it in the local delicacies in the restaurants and speciality food shops. It is manifest in the surnames of some of the 100 inhabitants: Consalvi, Martelli, Franceschini, Casabianca, many of which date from the origins of Pigna. It's before your eyes in the latest initiative, the restoration of the terraced gardens, orange and olive groves that once characterised the region.

Descendants of the founding families protect the heritage that began when *chevalier* Consalvo, part of the papal forces fighting the Saracens for control of Corsica in the early 9th century, established a settlement named after his neighbourhood in Rome. More recently, Pigna was rescued in the 1960s when homes abandoned by citizens no longer able to scrape a living off the land were converted into studios and galleries. Artist, writer and musician Toni Casalonga led a campaign that transformed Pigna into a cultural centre for the entire island. "The old livelihoods had disappeared, so we needed to create new ones," he said. "We wanted the village to live all year." This champion of experimental and traditional

LEFT: The Couvent Saint-Dominique de Corbara looks down on Pigna and the surrounding valley; ABOVE: The Église de l'Immaculée-Conception in Pigna

Corsican art and music celebrated a decade as artistic director of the village's auditorium in 2010. "The best thing about Pigna is the culture: the heritage, the music, the art, the artisans. Today the surrounding countryside is becoming a part of that culture."

The villagers, led by Mayor Josée Martelli, are now championing the environment and returning to Pigna's greener past as a carbon-free village. One of the first things she did as mayor was to create a community parking lot just outside the village to free the main square from cars. Vehicles are banned from the few driveable cobbled streets in the village.

The Mayor and her council also introduced a communal planning map to limit 'development for development's sake', but the green initiative that really excites villagers is restoring the gardens in honour of their agricultural heritage. Their vision is to encircle Pigna's arts and music scene in gardens: a cultural centre within a park. The abandoned mountain terraces once covered in almond, lemon, orange and olive trees are being replanted and work has begun to restore the water courses to irrigate them. "We are reconstituting the gardens from times gone by," said the Mayor. "With gardens you create colour, beauty... and food. This year we will have a harvest from the gardens of Pigna."

Decline reversed

The former gardens and groves worked by hand and cultivated with the help of donkeys surrendered to brush fires and a declining agricultural market in the 1970s and 1980s. Along with rakes, hoes, buckets and spades, today's volunteer cultivators benefit from all-terrain vehicles and power tools. They have created an association and have the backing of the Office du Développement Agricole et Rural de la Corse and the local council, which has decreed that "flocks of livestock can no longer graze freely on the flowers and vegetation in Pigna."

Council member Dominique Franceschini, owner of Hôtel U Palazzu, which was once his family home, said: "This initiative is very important for the commune." A former deep sea diver specialising in underwater archaeology, Dominique is now on dry land doing similar work with the restoration of the *hôtel de charme* and restaurant. His roots reach back to the village's beginnings; his ancestor, *chevalier* Francesco, accompanied Consalvo on his quest. The latter's last remaining heir, Patricia Consalvi Guidicelli, runs A Merendella, a café and *chambre d'hôte* bearing a plaque with his name.

In the 12 centuries since Consalvo and Francesco arrived on horseback, Pigna has staked its claim as the centre of the island's cultural identity, representing the best of authentic Corsica. 📍

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The garden terrace of Hôtel U Palazzu with views over the Mediterranean; A cobbled street leads to the Église de l'Immaculée-Conception; The orange roofs and sky-blue shutters of Pigna; A colourful door leads to a potter's studio; Dominique Franceschini, owner of Hôtel U Palazzu





FRANCOFILE

HOW TO GET THERE

By air: easyJet flies to Bastia from Gatwick, Manchester and Bristol.

Tel: 0843 104 5000
www.easyjet.com

By car: Southern Ferries runs services to Calvi and L'Île-Rousse from Marseille, Toulon and Nice.

Tel: 0844 815778
www.southernferries.co.uk



20220 Pigna
Tel : (Fr) 04 95 61 73 13
www.centreculturelvoce.org
For concerts and festivals in Pigna.

WHERE TO STAY

Hôtel U Palazzu

20220 Pigna
Tel: (Fr) 4 95 47 32 78
www.corsica-hotel-corse-palazzu.com

Hôtel Restaurant Casa Musicale

Fondu di U Paese
20220 Pigna
Tél: (Fr) 4 95 61 77 31
www.casa-musicale.org

A Merendella

20220 Pigna
Tel: (Fr) 4 95 61 80 10
www.a-merendella.com

Couvent Saint-Dominique de Corbara

20220 L'Île-Rousse
Tel: (Fr) 4 95 60 06 73
www.stjean-corbara.com
1km from Pigna;
guided tours.

Sant'Antonio

The oldest inhabited village in Corsica, dating from the 9th century, is one of the *Plus Beaux Villages de France*. It is a 45-minute walk from Pigna.

WHERE TO EAT

A Mandria di Pigna

20220 Pigna
Tel: (Fr) 4 95 32 71 24
www.restaurantpigna.com

A Casarella

20220 Pigna
Tel: (Fr) 4 95 61 78 08

The Casa Musicale and U Palazzu hotels also offer fine dining.

Monte Sant'Angelo

A steep, one-hour walk to the summit at 562m ends with a spectacular panoramic view.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Mairie de Pigna

20220 Pigna
Tel : (Fr) 4 95 61 77 30
Email: mairiepigna@orange.fr

Calvi Tourist Office

Tel : (Fr) 4 95 65 16 67
www.balagne-corsica.com

WHERE TO VISIT

Centre Culturel VOCE

Piazza à 'a Ghjesgia'