# Napoleon's Mountains

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By a mist-girt church under Monte Giove, 600m above the sea, Elba's only emperor met his Polish mistress. He was Napoleon; she, the countess who had already borne his son.

A century and three-quarters later I trudged up the stone steps of the Pilgrims' Way leading to the shrine of Madonna del Monte, and pondered why they should have chosen to renew their liaison in the modest outbuildings of this isolated place. For Napoleon, passion usually took second place to politics. He may still have hoped that the Austrian archduchess who had succeeded Josephine as his empress would be allowed to join him; if so, a little discretion in the conduct of his amours might have been desirable. Did his mistress still see him as the man whose armies had ranged from Moscow to the Tagus? Or was there a more prosaic reason? Was she carrying messages from Europe, just another agent in the great game of deception being played out between Napoleon and the great Powers who had forced his abdication? Whatever the truth, she was dispatched equally secretly in a small boat which was nearly lost in a tempest on the short journey back to the mainland. With that voyage she vanishes from history; her lover's fate is high drama, passing through escape and triumph to ultimate disaster on the field of Waterloo.

The island donated to Napoleon by the Allies after his first abdication is 30km long, with a width varying from four kilometres at its narrow waist to 18 at its eastern end, parallel to the Tuscan coast. 'Half the size of the Isle of Wight and four times as high', said the guidebook. But its shape is very different, with scarce 200m of straight road anywhere. While there is a small airstrip at Marina di Campo in the west, the usual access is by ferry from Piombino, an unattractive port 65km south of Livorno (Leghorn).

Jenny and I had spent the previous week absorbing culture in a very damp Florence, and the prospect of little bays and villages, backed by limestone mountains, was a welcome change after numberless marbled galleries and museums. In these hills precious iron ore has been mined from the time of the Ancient Greeks, fought over by Romans and Spaniards, and exported until 1945. Then the mines were shut down and tourism took over.

We arrived at Portoferraio, the island's capital and only substantial town (about 10,000 people) on a sunny May afternoon. Napoleon, too, came in May, escorted by the British navy. He was a little uncertain of his reception but was welcomed with enthusiasm by the islanders, who were flattered to have gained so famous a man as their ruler. He set about his duties and by nightfall had dictated memoranda giving instructions for the improvement of the island's roads and the installation of a sewerage system.

Almost equal enthusiasm was displayed by the large Elban lady who

seized our luggage. Brief identification problems were soon resolved and Brunhild, as we christened our taxi-driver, was soon speeding along the road to Marciana Marina, tyres squealing at every bend.

Marciana Marina is a small fishing port a few miles to the west of Portoferraio, its little harbour dominated by the ancient Pisan tower which stands astride the mole. It has only a shingle beach and perhaps for this reason has escaped the worst evils of tourist development. Our hotel was an attractive two-storey building about half a mile from the shore. After a brief assault on the mosquitoes which had forgathered in our room, I lay back in a deck-chair beside the pool. Beyond the town and overlooking it stood two hill villages backed by slopes of maquis and a promising granite ridge.

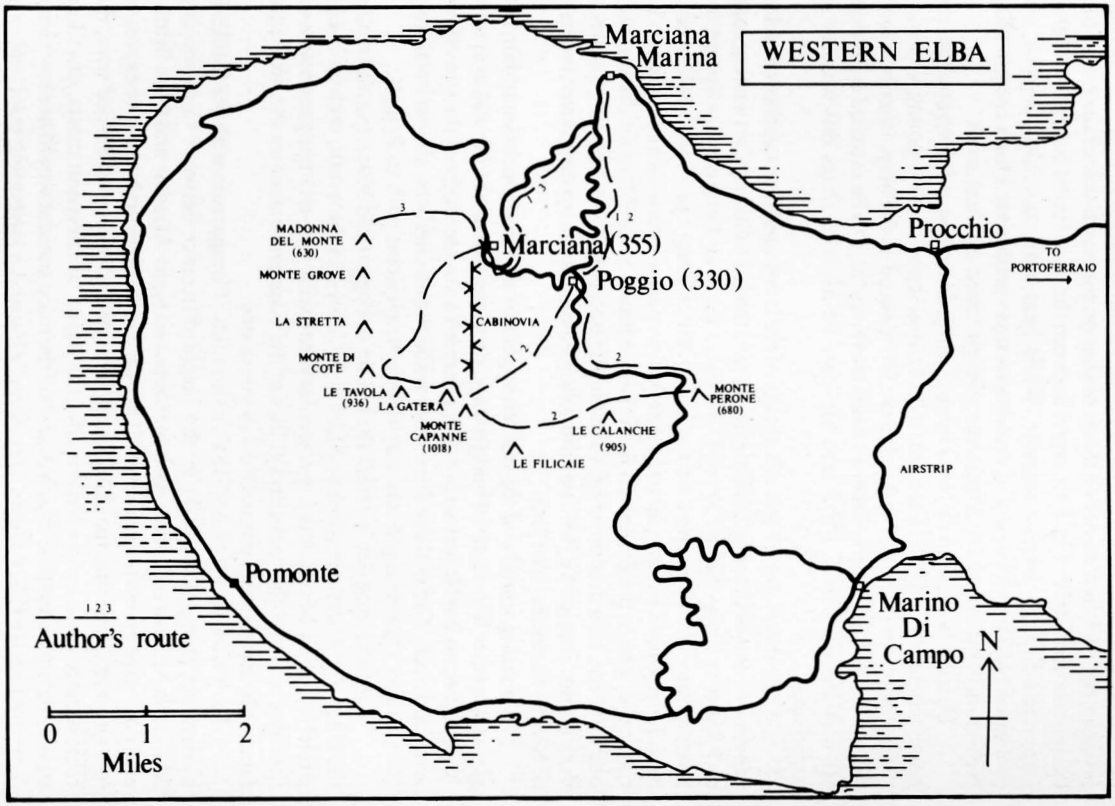
After breakfast Jenny departed to paint the harbour and the multi-coloured houses which backed on to it. Eschewing the bus which klaxoned its way up the hairpins about three times a day, I set out on the almost traffic-free old road to Marciana, passing by olive groves and occasional small vineyards. After an hour I reached the main road from Poggio to Marciana, ignoring a further track leading off to the Cabinovia di Monte Capanne which, I knew, was not working.

Marciana itself, a traffic-free walled village, looked down to the Ligurian Sea, as it had looked down for a thousand years. Behind its walls the inhabitants of the coastal villages had fled from many invaders, and in particular from the slave-seeking North African corsairs of Dragut and Barbarossa whose galleys had once terrorized these shores. More recently, the islanders had had the experience of being 'liberated' by the Free French, whose Moroccan and Senegalese troops had interpreted 'free' as 'make free' and had behaved almost as badly as the original pirates. Nowadays Marciana seems sinister, a place of horizontal alleys divided by steep medieval steps.

I passed by the old fort at the apex of the village and found a path which climbed further up the maquis-covered hillside. A little further on it developed a contour-hugging syndrome – 15m up to the next spur, followed by 15m down to the next ravine. Students of forestry roads will be familiar with the process. After a little scrambling I reached a second parallel path and then one which led diagonally upwards. Hitting the ridge between the summits of La Stretta and Monte di Cote, I gained the twin boulder-piled summits of the latter. The granite felt good.

The first section of the main ridge was broad and allegedly crossed by a path; it led on to the Tavola whose rocks were surmounted without much difficulty.

Further on, La Galera (950m), a summit whose wedge-shaped face seems impressive when viewed from Marciana Marina, gave a little more trouble. A good scramble up pleasant rocks on the crest led to the summit. An unroped descent on the opposite side seemed imprudent, and an open corner proved a little more awkward in practice than it appeared from above. One of the less engaging features of the ridge is the intrusion of an extremely sharp species of thorn between the rocks. In arresting a small slip, I put an incautious hand into one of the bushes; much of that evening was spent extracting great black thorns from the hand.


WESTERN ELBA
Marciana Marina
Procchio
TO PORTOFERRAIO
Marciana (355)
Poggio (330)
MADONNA DEL MONTE (630)
MONTE GROVE
LA STRETTA
MONTE DI COTE
LE TAVOLA (936)
LA GATERA
MONTE CAPANNE (1018)
CABINOVIA
MONTE PERONE (680)
LE CALANCHE (905)
LE FILICAIE
AIRSTRIP
Pomonte
Marino Di Campo
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1 2 3
Author's route
0 1 2
Miles

The ridge-crest leading to the next summit produced a profusion of downward-sloping holds. After a brief foray, discretion found a passage between the rock and a bevy of thorn bushes on the north side of the ridge; this led into an open gully which emerged between the wire fences bounding Monte Capanne's Fylingdales-like summit. While heat-haze concealed Corsica, the outline of the Tuscan coast and mountains was visible over Elba's eastern hills. Nearer at hand, the azure Mediterranean glistened on three sides.

Descent was by an obvious ridge leading down towards Poggio from the point where the cable-car terminated. At this stage I met a young German. 'Where is the bar?' he wanted to know. We glanced at the map, inscribed with the word BAR quite prominently. And our thirsts had to be satisfied with that. He was the first person I had seen for some hours, so perhaps this was not so surprising.

A few days later, I took advantage of the continued fine weather to tackle the eastern end of the ridge. A little unimaginatively I followed the twisting road to Poggio as far as Monte Perone (680m), a good and popular viewpoint for Portoferraio and the centre of the island. Recrossing the road, I followed a broad bridle path leading up to Monte Maolo past a forester's hut and on to Le Calanche, where the granite took over once more. Scrambling up the crest for one moment, and detouring off to avoid the occasional *mauvais pas*, I reached the summit, crossed Le Finicaie, and followed easy rocks up the eastern buttress of Monte Capanne (1018m).

A buzzing sound and the sudden appearance of two tourists standing in a glass jar, rather like a pair of budgerigars, proclaimed that the lift was in action. Alas, again, no bar! It was so hot that I donned a sweater to keep the sun off my arms and neck. Today there were more walkers and climbers, almost invariably German, so I 'guten tag'd' my way down the pleasant path to Poggio.

The following day we took the bus up to Poggio and Marciana and round the cliffs of the western coast to Marina di Campo in the south, with its broad stretch of sandy beach. It is a spectacular route with ever-changing sea vistas on the one hand and the rocks and gullies of the Capanne massif on the other; the faint of heart are advised to sit on the near side.

How should one assess Elba's mountains? Comparison with the Cuillin is overstating things a little. True, the height difference between Capanne and Marciana Marina compares with that between Sgurr Alasdair and Glen Brittle, and both give extensive sea views. The ridge is much shorter and the exposure less although, ignoring the thorns and occasional stretches of barbed wire, the rock is more consistently reliable. But the legion of television masts, discs and sundry defence antennae which desecrate the main summit would not have been permitted above Coire Lagan. Yet cheap wine and a swimming-pool make up for quite a lot.

A low cloud base on the first day prompted a visit to Napoleon's rendezvous. It was a little eerie in the mist and an insect raised a lump an inch high on my leg. Could its ancestor have bitten Napoleon and explained his swift departure?