

CHALLENGE 9

CORSICA GR20

Europe's Toughest Trail

The GR20 in Corsica ranks as one of Europe's most demanding trekking routes. From the initial ascent on day one, it demands resilience, physical preparation, and unwavering determination. This 180km route traverses the island's mountainous spine from north to south, with over 11,000m of elevation gain across rugged ridgelines, alpine lakes, and striking high passes shaped by nature over thousands of years.

The challenge of this route lies in its unyielding nature: long days on steep, technical terrain, exposed ridges where the Mediterranean sea plunges below, and a total ascent that exceeds Everest's height. For many adventurers, completing the GR20 marks a significant milestone in their mountaineering journey.

Like all Pole to Pole Challenges, every aspect is meticulously planned, from route logistics and safety to fostering group cohesion and respecting the mountain environment. This is the ultimate way to explore Europe's most demanding long-distance trail.

Overview

| Location | Duration | Month | Difficulty |
|-----------------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Corsica, France | 14 Days | June/July | 8 |

CHALLENGE 9 – CORSICA GR20

The Pole to Pole GR20 Challenge is informed by experience gained in some of the world's most demanding environments. Our expedition leaders have guided teams across the Arctic and Alps, and have years of experience working in Corsica, always prioritising safety, endurance, and purposeful challenge. The complete north-to-south crossing of Corsica is no different.

The expedition starts in the island's rugged northern highlands and travels south through a landscape of jagged ridgelines, alpine lakes, and dramatic mountain passes. The route offers relentless challenges: steep ascents and descents, exposed traverses, long days of physical effort, and a total elevation gain of 29,000ft—greater than the height of Everest. Each day requires strength, focus, and dedication.

With decades of combined experience in mountain and expedition leadership, our guides and instructors meticulously prepare every detail. From equipment and training advice to route planning, nutrition, and safety on the ground, participants receive thorough support through comprehensive resources. Using live tracking, contingency planning, and trusted local partners, we maintain the highest standards of care throughout the Challenge.

This is not just a physical challenge but a mental and emotional journey through one of Europe's wildest trails. For those prepared to confront the ridgelines, exposure, and relentless ascents, the GR20 offers an experience as rewarding as it is demanding.

Itinerary

The itinerary has been carefully planned based on experience gained over multiple seasons on the GR20 and other challenging mountain routes. As with all adventurous activities in remote and rugged terrain, conditions may change, and Pole to Pole might need to adapt, sometimes at short notice. Alongside our local partners, we endeavour to follow the published schedule as closely as possible. However, we thank you for your understanding if unforeseen events require alterations.

Please note that delays and adjustments are a normal part of mountain expedition travel. For this reason, we recommend avoiding scheduling important commitments in the days immediately after your planned return. We also suggest booking flexible airline tickets that permit changes without penalties, providing you with reassurance should timings shift.

Walking Pace and Time

Times provided in the itinerary are for guidance only. These are average durations and account solely for walking time, excluding breaks. They are based on a pace of 300m to 350m per hour for ascent and descent. Walking speed may also vary depending on weather conditions and terrain.

Climate

Due to its geographical location in the heart of the Gulf of Genoa and its high relief, the climate is influenced by both the sea and the mountains. The rapid changes in altitude between the coast and the peaks result in marked contrasts, both in temperature and rainfall. Especially in the mountains, the weather can change rapidly, so be prepared and pack a minimum of items in your rucksack to protect you from the cold, heat, sun, or rain.

Fires and Forest Closures

From mid-June to mid-September, depending on weather conditions, access to certain massifs may be hazardous. These may be closed to the public at any time if there is a severe fire risk. From 1st July to 30th September, smoking is forbidden in forests, scrubland, and massifs.

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Day 1

Airport transfer to Calenzana.

Meet your guide in Calvi train station before a road move to the village of Calenzana, where you will settle into your first gîte and receive the expedition briefing before preparing your pack for the coming days

Day 2

Calenzana to Ortu di u Piobbu.

11km. 6 hours.

Ascent +1,360m. Descent -50m.

You start the GR20 uphill, making 1,360m in elevation before you reach your first refuge perched at the top of the Bonifatu cirque.

Day 3

Ortu di u Puibbu to Carrozzu.

7km. 7 hours.

Ascent +750m. Descent 950m.

You start in the high mountains as you pass over ridges before you descend over scree to your next refuge, nestled in the heart of the forest.

Day 4

Carrozzu to Haut Asco.

7km. 5.5 hours.

Ascent +800m. Descent -750m.

Passing through the forest over streams before climbing towards Col de la Muvrella and its lake. Stunning views begin to emerge as you get above the treeline before a pleasant descent to the ski resort of Asco.

Day 5

Haut Asco to Tighjettu.

10km. 8 hours.

Ascent +1,150. Descent -1,200m.

This section passes over the highest part of the route, reaching an altitude of 2,604m on the island's highest peak – le Cintu. A long descent takes you down into the valley for the next refuge.

Expedition skiing.

Day 6

Tighjettu to Col de Vergio.

12km. 6.5 hours.

Ascent +680m. Descent -710m.

A gentler start of paths offering shaded passage beneath the pine forest before a fairly steep climb up the ridges taking you to Col de Vergio.

Day 7

Col de Vergio to Camputile.

15km. 6 hours.

Ascent +750m. Descent -570m.

The start takes you through the Valdu Nielu forest beneath magnificent beech trees. The GR20 then gradually climbs up a pass, where at the top you see breathtaking views of the entire west coast. After crossing the plateau, you will reach the next refuge.

Day 8

Camputile to Onda.

16km. 9.5 hours.

Ascent +1,130m. Descent -1,320m.

A long high-altitude stage in the heart of the Rotondo massif. The GR20 crosses the highest passes on the route through high-altitude lakes before reaching your refuge.

Day 9

Onda to Vizzavona.

10km. 6 hours.

Ascent +710m. Descent -1,220m.

A gentle climb to start the day to the foothills of Monte d'Oro. The descent to Vizzavona follows the Agnone River where the stage ends in the cool Vizzavona forest.

Day 10

Vizzavona to Col de Verde.

28km. 9.5 hours.

Ascent +1,210. Descent -850m.

A long stage with no technical parts beyond the distance.

Day 11

Col de Verde to Usciolu.

15km. 7.5 hours.

Ascent +1,250m. Descent -850m.

The path climbs up to some amazing views overlooking the eastern plain and coastal lakes of Costa Verde. Through the granite landscape before reaching your refuge for the night.

Day 12

Usciolu to Croci.

13km. 5 hours.

Ascent +600m. Descent -820m.

The GR20 follows the ridge towards Bocca di l'Usciolu and then onwards through passages equipped with chains to make progress easier. The end of the stage is spent on quieter paths across the plateau.

Day 13

Croci to Bavella.

15km. 8 hours.

Ascent +780m. Descent -1,100m.

The penultimate stage crosses the last great peak in the island's mountain range before descending through majestic granite towers called Aiguilles de Bavella.

Day 14

Bavella to Conca.

18km. 7.5 hours

Ascent +490m. Descent -1,480m.

A shady path towards the Cannone ravine before descending to Conca, where your bus will pick you up for Figari airport.

Further Information

Money and Personal Expenses

There are no cash machines along the route. Credit cards are not widely accepted, so we recommend bringing cash to buy items during the journey.

Swimming

Along the route, certain stages will provide chances for swimming. Ensure you're prepared!

Water Treatment

The island has many springs along the paths and fountains in the villages. We cannot guarantee that the water is safe to drink. We recommend that you carry purification tablets or a water purification device.

Dietary Requirements and Intolerances

If you have allergies or dietary needs, please let us know when you make your booking. Small mountain establishments may not always have the facilities to accommodate certain dietary requirements. Depending on your needs, Pole to Pole could provide you with freeze-dried meals that meet specific criteria.

Logistics Assistance

In the event of physical weakness on a stage, there may be the possibility of being transported to the next accommodation, at an additional cost paid locally. This transport is not available on all routes, and we encourage you to be fit enough to complete the Challenge before departing.

What's included

Pole to Pole has carefully selected our partners and providers based on their experience, quality, and reliability. The following list is included in your booking:

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Fitness programme

Support in planning and preparation for training and the Challenge

Airport transfers from Calvi train station at 3pm and transfer to Figari airport for approximately 5pm.

Corsica-certified Mountain leader as your lead guide.

Shared accommodation on the GR20 route in refuges, gîtes, or tents equipped with mattresses.

Transport of your follow on bag, where you will have access on days 4, 5, 9, 10, 12, 13, and 14.

Meals while on the GR20 including:

Pole to Pole mid-layer and outer jacket.

- Continental breakfast.
- Evening meal including starter, main course, and dessert.
- Picnic lunch (bring Tupperware).
- Trail snacks (cereal bars, dried fruit etc).

Sleeping bag and hiking poles.

Not included

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Insurance coverage – personal, medical, evacuation, or otherwise

Accommodation or meals in Calvi or Figari

Flights to Corsica

Personal clothing and equipment

Expenses incurred due to delays

Equipment

The nature of any expedition may require the purchase of some specialised personal equipment. Please see below for the full kit list for Challenge 9. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask a member of our team.

On booking, the team will provide you with a checklist.

Clothing

| | |
|--|--|
| Good quality trekking socks | Midlayer jacket – PrimaLoft or fleece etc. |
| Underwear – Lycra or merino sports shorts – not cotton | Waterproof outer jacket |
| Light trousers, shorts, and waterproofs | Swimwear |
| T-shirts | Microfibre towel |
| Gloves | Cold weather hat (mandatory) |
| Gaiters (optional) | Sun hat |
| Hiking boots – waterproof and breathable. High ankle support is recommended | Flip flops or sandals for the evenings |

Personal Equipment

50-70 litre rucksack for trekking. The weight of the daily trekking bag will be between 8kg to 12kg without food or water. Rucksacks can be rented, if requested. Rain cover recommended.

Dry bags – various sizes to waterproof and store equipment

Headtorch

Camelback-type water pouch. Minimum 2 litres. A hard Nalgene style bottle is also recommended

0.5 – 0.8 litre airtight plastic container for packed lunch

Travel knife, fork, spoon

Travel mug

Basic multitool e.g. Letherman

Power bank and cables – for charging electronics

Follow-on luggage bag – must be easy to transport and not too bulky. We recommend a sports bag as suitcases are not allowed.

Carabiners – several strong for attaching equipment. They do not have to be rated for climbing

Earplugs

Toothbrush & toothpaste – manual toothbrush

Toiletries – expanding wipes, sanitary products, Sudo crème etc.

Personal first aid kit – water purification tablets, plasters, balms, pains relief, foot tape, antiseptic, scissors, anti-bac hand gel, lip balm, sun cream

Earplugs

Toilet paper

Cash for purchases along the route

Equipment Provided by Pole to Pole

Sleeping Bag

Pole to Pole Challenge 9 outer jacket

Hiking poles

Pole to Pole Midlayer jacket

Training

Training for an expedition in harsh conditions requires a good level of physical and mental fitness. The timings that pair with some of the daily distance are moving time and do not include time taken for breaks. While you do not need Olympic levels of strength and endurance, we recommend you follow the fitness programme we provide and increase your daily walking activity, preferably with a weighted backpack.

If you require further guidance on training, please speak to a member of our team.

Payment

You can pay your deposit and balance using the links on the invoice or via bank transfer. If you send money by electronic bank transfer, you are responsible for covering the cost of any associated transfer fees.

Cancellation

A non-refundable deposit of 20% of the total trip fee is required on booking.

In the event the client decides to cancel their trip at any time between booking and the trip's commencement, a deduction will be made from the advance amount. This is due to Pole to Pole's obligation to pay providers, personnel, and resources during the planning process.

The cancellation will only be effective from the date that the cancellation is received in writing by email. Cancellation charges will be payable as follows:

- A non-refundable deposit of 20% is charged on booking.
- A cancellation fee of 60% is charged if cancelled 150 days or less from the Challenge departure date.
- A cancellation fee of 100% is charged if cancelled 90 days or less from the Challenge departure date.

Rescheduling

We do not routinely offer rescheduling, but if there is flexibility, we may be able to facilitate a request if the course is rescheduled in the same season. However, if you are unable to attend the date you booked in the same season, you will need to cancel your booking.

Cancellation will only be effective from the date that the cancellation is received in writing by email. Cancellation charges will be payable as previously stated.

Insurance

We recommend that all guests have appropriate travel insurance that covers the nature of the activity being undertaken on the booked course and protects them from cancellation.

For the GR20, you may need specialist insurance that covers the location and medical evacuation. In the case of a medical problem arising during the expedition, which results in costs for evacuation, including, but not limited to, the use of aircraft or repatriation, responsibility for payment of these costs belongs solely with you. You must provide proof of adequate insurance or have other arrangements in place to cover costs associated with medical care and evacuation.

Please refer to your experience and determine the amount of coverage you will need.
Responsibility for all fees is yours, and you will be billed for such costs in Corsica.