

**Travel**

# The real Mallorca



The view over Palma at night, with the Gothic Seu Cathedral in the background

Art, history, fine food and fine wine: while 'Majorca' might have a reputation as a brash holiday hotspot, the real Mallorca has everything a tourist could wish for, writes

**Sile McArdle**

**T**here were 40 shades of vibrant green and even more of subtle orange on the curved hillside in Banyalbufar as the turquoise Mediterranean rippled below. Just 90 minutes drive north of the capital of Mallorca, this village is oceans away from the high-rise hotels of Magaluf and Palma Nova.

From this tranquil spot you can walk in the Sierra de Tramuntana mountains (the Tramuntana reserve spans the island's western coast), or along the winding coastline during the day. In the evening you can linger over delicious Mallorcan dishes such as stuffed aubergine and buttery John Dory.

We eased ourselves in gently, the terrain benevolently flat for our two-hour stroll north of Banyalbufar among shady pines and chaotic calcite formations, the Balearic Sea never far

from sight. On stony Cala Gata beach, we had a picnic on bleached tree trunks.

Our guide had earlier pointed out Hollywood actor Michael Douglas's house – a white dot on a green headland – and the decaying manor house which tycoon Richard Branson bought with the aim of turning into a luxury hotel, but which was refused planning permission.

Tennis ace Rafael Nadal may be Mallorca's most famous present-day son, but supermodel Claudia Schiffer and racing driver Michael Schumacher are also among the celebs with homes here. And in their heyday, Liz Taylor and Audrey Hepburn frequented the star-studded Hotel Formentor on the island's northern tip.

It all went south when package tourism exploded in the Bay of Palma in the 1970s, our host explained, and now the Mallorcans – especially those pushing



**The Valldemossa Charterhouse monastery**

eco-tourism – are working hard to reclaim their classy name: Mallorca, not Majorca.

Most tourists will visit the clifftop village of Deia, home to Michelin-starred hotel La Residencia, sold by Branson six years ago after his Banyalbufar project stalled. The English poet and writer Robert Graves (1895-

1985) was Deia's feted adopted son, and the child-like writing on his plain flat tombstone in the windy graveyard of Iglesia Parroquial de San Juan Bautista belies the sophistication of his historical works (which include *I, Claudius*).

Despite the daytrippers, this remains a locals' village with its own spiritual pace.

Corkscrew streets make it impossible to hurry, tiled Stations of the Cross are set into stone walls, and the golden buildings have classic green shutters. The land around is in steep, walled terraces; the sea hugs a hazy horizon. There is a sense of peace.

Another other popular excursion nearby (a half-hour drive from the centre of Palma) is the former monastery at Valldemossa, where composer Frederic Chopin, his lover George Sands and her children boarded during two gossip-inducing winter months in 1838 and 1839.

The now-museum's rooms are individually owned, which explains the souvenir corners and strange mix of antiquity and modernity. But Chopin's hand-inked works are well worth seeing.

There's a bitter row over which cell the Polish composer occupied, though in February a Mallorcan judge ruled it number four over number two, and ordered all



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existing publicity destroyed.

Other gems within Real Cartuja de Vallemossa (don't miss the adjoining Palace of King Sancho) include the Museu Municipal Art Contemporani upstairs, which features the obligatory works by Joan Miró, 15 small Picassos on the gable wall, and – a surprise treat – a brooding lithograph of John Edwards by Francis Bacon.

More than Deia, Valldemossa is geared for visitors aplenty. Alexander Sorokin's attractive art gallery beside Real Cartuja has wonderful little sploidy originals for a fiver. The cosy Sa Cova wine bar on Calle de la Rosa is brimming with bus-tour visitors, and curious tourists are clustered around barrels of local liqueurs on tap at the warehouse-like souvenir shop Bodegas C'an Goxto on busy Via Blanquerna.

While Deia and Valldemossa are interludes, however, the unspoiled sights, eats and walks of Palma are



The Serra de Tramuntana mountain range

the stuff of many, many cores.

Start with the imposing Gothic Seu Cathedral – its height hugely impressive, as is the Rose Window – built on the site of a 13th-century mosque. Of special note are Antoni Gaudí's bizarre cardboard octagonal altar canopy and the Chapel of the Holy Sacrament designed by Miquel Barceló – the latter wouldn't be out of place in a Tim Burton movie. If you need a breather as you wander the atmospheric streets surrounding La Seu, pop into Jardí del Bisbe, off nearby Calle Sant Pere Nolasc.

Incongruous along the walls of the ancient fortress of Palau de l'Almudaina, now King Juan Carlos's official residence in Mallorca, is a row of brown Dalek-like machines which pipe the city's waste out of town.

Facing Almudaina is the intriguing Palau March Museu. Highlights here include an amazing display of 16th-century maps, huge intricate Nativity scenes, a small collection of paintings by Dalí and – never one to be overlooked – Joan Miró lithographs in beautiful suede and leather-bound books.

Art is everywhere, so keep an eye for the word 'fundación', which usually denotes a great gallery in a fabulous old building. One such is the Museu Fundación Juan March, on Sant Miquel 11, set up in 1955 by financier Juan March Ordinas in a 17th-century merchant's house.

The most striking work, apart from Picasso's graphic take on misery and suffering in *Le Repas Frugal* (1904), is Luis Gordillo's pastiche of 72 different abstracts in a 15 by 5 grid (the top row has the three even gaps).

But enough of the sights.

The true beauty of Palma is strolling the stylish old-town streets in the evening sunshine, wandering in and out of shops and having an al-fresco coffee or a glass of wine.

We pass an intimate wine-tasting at Lo DiVino on Carrer del Carme late one evening and promise to return 'm a n a n a'. We wander through winding Santa Cruz, up and over the majestic Bastion de Sant Pere and west to up-and-coming Santa Catalina, past white-washed mews-type cottages and on to wow-factor design cafes such as Idem on Sant Magi.

On the way back we cross Passeig Marítim and admire the yachts swaying in the dusky lights.

Around the corner from our hotel, on Carrer Sant Joan, is one of the most bizarre bars ever: Abardo is part vegetable stall, part candleabra museum, part naughty bordello (with the lights on) and part jazz club.

Mallorcans eat well, on succulent fish and tender meats, and always pan amb oli (bread rubbed in oil, garlic and tomato). The ensaimada – a spiral pastry – is another classic; a sweet breakfast for locals but too sugary for many Irish palates. Sobrasada, a chorizo-style sausage spread on bread, was a more savoury wake-up call for us.

With all this, it's no wonder Mallorca wants the world to see there's more to life than Magaluf.

## Getting there

**Getting there:** Aer Lingus ([www.aerlingus.com](http://www.aerlingus.com)) flies from Dublin to Palma four times a week (excluding Monday, Wednesday and Friday), and Cork to Palma on Mondays and Thursdays. Palma airport is about a 15-minute taxi ride from the old city.

**Where to stay:** Hotel Marivent, Carrer Major 49, Banyalbufar ([www.hotelmarivent.com](http://www.hotelmarivent.com)), a rustic family-run three-star with wonderful sea views from all 29 rooms. Hotel Tres, Calle Apuntadores 3, Palma, cutting-edge redesign of an old palace gives four-star hospitality in the city's historic heart ([www.hoteltres.com](http://www.hoteltres.com)).

**Where to eat:** Cas Batle Negre, Esperit Sant 13,

Banyalbufar serves hearty traditional tapas; Tasca, Blanquerna 6, Palma ([www.foshfood.com](http://www.foshfood.com)) for dainty Mallorcan fusion; Ca'n Joan de S'aigo, Can Sanc 10, Palma is an old-world gem for hot chocolate and home-made ice cream.

**Getting around:** bikes, obliging hotel owners and walking will do nicely on the coast. In Palma, the compact old town is a joy to walk around.

**Time difference:** +1 hour

**What to buy:** authentic glassware such as Gordiola ([www.gordiola.com](http://www.gordiola.com)); sturdy local wines (Jaume Mesquida, [www.jaumesquida.com](http://www.jaumesquida.com), only uses biodynamic methods).