

The other side of Mallorca, where nightingales sing and there's not a tattooed lobster in sight

On a walking trip to the Spanish island, well away from the tourist hordes, **Jeremy Laurance** discovered its hidden charms

What does the name of Spain's largest Mediterranean island conjure up for you? Sun, sand and sangria? Bars crammed with tattooed, lobster-hued Brits, getting noisily sloshed? Probably – if you have never been there.

In 1960, Majorca – Mallorca in Spanish – received 500,000 visitors. In 2008, almost 23 million passed through its gleaming new airport. Mass tourism has transformed the economy – but with unhappy effects on the sea front. Yet away from the high-rise hotels and featureless beaches in the south, there is another Mallorca – beyond the Sierra de Tramontana, the dramatic range of hills that bisects the island. This Mallorca, with its rocky coast, is small scale, and distinctly upmarket. In the limestone hills around Soller, there are quiet hamlets with hidden hotels and a multitude of paths heading into secluded valleys. It was here that we were heading, on an eight-day "Secret Villages of Mallorca" walking break with Headwater Holidays.

The taxi ride from the airport across the Mallorcan plain and up into the hills took 40 minutes. Our hotel, l'Hermitage, a former bishop's palace of ivy-clad golden stone, was a kilometre outside the hamlet of Orient, set on the side of the loveliest valley. From the terrace outside our room we looked across an orchard of young fruit trees – apple, cherry, and apricot – and a meadow dotted with olive trees to a wall of pale fissured limestone rising 300 feet, with a bank of yellow gorse at its foot.



discreet, polite and, thankfully, non-British.

On our fourth day it was time to move on. Ken, our considerate Headwater rep, took us to Cuber reservoir, on the other side of the range of hills, and left us to walk the dozen kilometres to the Hotel Ca'l Bisbe in Soller, where our luggage would be waiting for us.

White limestone hills, pale new grass and an azure sky framed the lake – it was, momentarily, like Yorkshire in the sun. Bees warmed themselves on the rocky path and the air was still and cool. We climbed gently to the col and then down a winding cobbled path with magnificent views to the sea, following the old pilgrims' way (in reverse) from Soller to the monastery of Lluc. We passed terraces of olive and

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It was dusk and we sat for a few minutes listening to the bells of the sheep as the breeze rattled the leaves of the palm trees above our heads.

Then a bird started to sing like no other I had heard. It began with a series of trills which built through a complex arrangement of whistles and kisses to three high looping notes – heep, heep, heep – like molten silver cascading through the dusk. They say you always know when you hear a nightingale, and now I know it is true. The end of May is their mating season, and the valley was full of them. Their songs echoed across the valley not only in the evening but in the morning, too, pouring forth from the eucalyptus trees beneath which we ate our breakfast. For me, hearing my first nightingale was as exciting as seeing any big beast in the African bush.

It was with difficulty that we tore ourselves away that first morning. Over the next three days we climbed in different directions, contouring across the hillside above the velvety Orient valley, into the forest. One route led up to the crag that supports Alaro Castle, so spectacularly situated that the Moors were able to hold off their Christian assailants for two years. We would not have found these paths on our own – there were few signs and consequently few walkers. Our fellow guests at l'Hermitage were, like us, of a certain age –



Island's secrets
The dramatic scenery (above and right) around the village of Soller (below)



COMPACT FACTS

HOW TO GET THERE

Jeremy Laurance travelled to Mallorca with Headwater (01606 720 199; headwater.com) whose eight-day "Secret Villages of Mallorca" trip costs from £1,027 per person (based on two sharing a room). The price includes seven



nights' accommodation in four-star hotels, breakfast and evening meals, luggage transfers, and route notes and map kit. Flights can be arranged from most UK airports. (Prices with flights start at £1,177 per person from Gatwick to Palma.)

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We tramped through Soller's narrow streets to its charming central square. It is dominated by the church of St Bartholomew and by the Bank of Soller, its wrought iron grille as tangled as a skein of wool. The hotel, minutes from the square, was cool and quiet and we sat on the balcony of our third-floor room with a drink, grabbing the last rays of the sun as the swifts wheeled and screeched over the rooftops.

Next day we set off along the old mule track to Deia, where the writer Robert Graves (who is buried there), has been followed by a succession of literati and glitterati – drawn to the rocky promontories and secret coves on the starkly beautiful northern coast.

Twenty years ago I did the spectacular walk from the bay at Deia, winding eastwards, in and out of the pine trees clinging to the cliff, teetering above promontories of bleached rock and aquamarine sea. I was anxious to repeat it but it was not on our itinerary – and we soon discovered why.

Alas, a storm two years ago felled scores of the pines, taking whole chunks of the cliff with them. The walk became an assault course as we clambered over, around and underneath obstacles, and by the time we reached Cala Es Galle at its end we were weary and the sun was low.

Time, then, to call the uncomplaining Ken who returned us to our hotel balcony, where we stretched our aching limbs, drinks in hand, and allowed our spirits to soar free with the swifts.