

The Balearic Heartbeat



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Dominic Smith / Monday 24 January 2011 / Travel

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The day I arrived in Mallorca the island's daily newspaper, *Diario de Mallorca*, ran a story highlighting how 45% of residents under 35 were unemployed. One islander, Adrián López, was even quoted saying he was coming to England to search for a job.

Perhaps we passed him at Palma airport. To compound matters, Valerie Crespi-Green, who writes walking guidebooks to the island, tells me visitor numbers have dropped from ten million a year to between six and seven million.

Thankfully, behind the bad news is a beautiful island whose inhabitants are working hard to remind people it is more than a helter-skelter collection of 1960s hotels built to recreate England-in-the-sun during the boom budgetflight years. Away from the mega-resorts is a varied, open landscape, and Valerie seemed to know every acre.

She led us on a bracing three-hour hike through a rocky, gnarled mountain range in the west, Serra de Tramuntana, which is awash with Moorish and medieval Christian relics hidden on promontories.

It was October but summer is almost eternal in Mallorca. Below the beaming sun were citrus groves split by dry stone walls. Further afield were the sol-worshippers toasting on the beach.

We climbed to the impenetrable

Castell d'Alaró, a castle carved into the rock, and so high and fearsome that when Aragonese King Alfonso III was reclaiming land during the Spanish Reconquista, the Arab edifice remained untouched, with a self-sufficient settlement inside, until 1285.

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Our journey took us through a wooded plateau, arriving at an isolated peak-hut next to a tiny pilgrim's church, Mare de Deu del Refugi – which is presumably the island's closest point to heaven. Donkeys still carry up the simple food, and we followed their route past some adrenaline-seeking Germans scaling the castle's lower reaches.

At the top was an overworked girl who must have been praying for assistance.

She served us pa amb oli – bread rubbed with olive oil and garlic and served with serrano ham – which is the sort of straightforward Mediterranean staple dish you make for yourself over and over when you return home.

Valerie, like many Brits on the island, emigrated before mass tourism. Her mother, a once prolific and in-demand Mills and Boon writer, loved the place so much she refused to return to England when her commissions dried up (she declined to “sex up” her copy).

Other creatives have been lured by the island's tranquility. Surrealist painter Joan Miró, whose wife and mother were both Mallorcan, lived and worked in Cala Major through the 1950s to 1970s. English poet Robert Graves lived and died in the well-to-do village of Deiá, where labyrinth-like alleys of old peasant houses curl through to the church where his remains lie. The house where Graves indulged his predilection for young women – and leapt from an upper window in pursuit of one muse – is open to the public.

French polemicist George Sand lived with Frederic Chopin in Valldemossa, and their stay in the Royal Cartusian Monastery, which has art upstairs by Miró, Picasso, Francis Bacon and Henry Moore, was commemorated in Sand's A Winter In Majorca and Chopin's Raindrop.

Nowadays Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones own island property, as do Annie Lennox, Boris Becker and Claudia Schiffer. Presumably those modern day celebrities spend their days lounging by pools on marble-clad farmhouse terraces, just as we did.

On Saturday evening we danced and dined and splashed in the pool, then awoke early the next day for a dip before breakfast.

What makes Spain so special is that it is the only country left in Europe where it is still acceptable to drink until the sun rises and be up a few hours later for work. Sure enough, on Sunday morning the Mallorcans were at their stalls in Felanitx market, a short drive from our Mansion Ses Oliveres, near Cala d'Or on the island's south west coast.

Here were live chickens and budgerigars, sardines laid out in sunflower shapes and cured Mallorquin sobrassada sausage. We rummaged and hunted for leather bags and crockery, embroidery and art.

It being Spain, our days were arranged around food.

Upmarket dining at Port Petit in Cala d'Or Marina, where an unofficial deck-shoe and polo shirt dress-code complemented the slender but rich European fusion-style food, was topped off with a nosy from ashore into the yachts of our fellow diners.

The following evening, again in Cala d'Or, we tried a traditional taverna, Can Trompe, where the chefs prepared cod caught that day. Later they brought us the island's speciality, ensaimada, a spiralled flaky pastry filled with custard creme, before the local digestif, hierbas. Just like the island, the sweet aniseed liqueur, distilled from 18 different herbs, sends you home woozy and content.

● Monarch offers year-round flights to Majorca from Gatwick. Fares, including taxes, start from £76.99 return. Visit www.monarch.co.uk ● Valerie Crespi Green offers guided walks from €100 for half a day. Contact 0034 971144055 / 0034 625981582. Valerie's books [Walk And Eat Mallorca](http://www.sunflowerbooks.co.uk) and [Landscapes Of Mallorca](http://www.sunflowerbooks.co.uk) have inspirational hike ideas.

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