





SPANISH ISLANDS

Kicking off with Ibiza, we take a tour of the Spanish Islands, and discover another side to the Balearic and Canary archipelagos. Words by Sam Lewis >>

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IBIZA

The many faces of the beautiful Spanish island, from its original hippie roots and reputation as Europe's clubbing capital to its less well-known serene side



OUT OF NOWHERE, THE STRANGER APPEARED, GRASPED MY HEAD IN HER HANDS AND PASSIONATELY KISSED ME ON THE LIPS.

As quickly as she had appeared, she was gone, engulfed in the 1,000-strong crowd at Privilege, where partygoers, at 3am, were only just beginning to get into the swing of things.

Stories from my yearly pilgrimage to Ibiza never cease to amuse my family and friends, many of whom think that, at 40, I should have outgrown the island, notorious for its megaclubs, celebrity DJs and moonlit beach parties.

Perhaps I was being rebellious — or grappling with a mid-life crisis? — but I went not once, but twice last year to celebrate my coming of age. On one trip, I didn't venture near a nightclub. My mission was to discover Ibiza's alternative side, away from the crowds and hip bars. I planned to go to bed before midnight, not dawn, with a herbal tea instead of a couple of paracetamols washed down with water.

My aim was to rediscover the Ibiza where, as a five-year-old, I once rode on the back of a donkey through terraced fields of figs, almonds and oranges, past whitewashed villages and hilltop Moorish churches and down sandy tracks to reach hidden coves and picnic in the sun. Retracing my tracks I found the island still has hidden bays and an unspoilt, thickly wooded interior, although now there are dedicated cycle routes and hiking trails to help visitors explore them. Many of the farms have now been converted into attractive 'agrotourism' hotels with pools and spas. The donkey rides have gone, but flares are still the rage and the beatnik vibe is still strong.

Ibiza's alternative ambience can be traced back to the 1950s and 60s when leftists opposed to the Spanish dictator Franco settled here alongside US pacifists

dodging the draft for the Korean War, and later Vietnam. Freedom and love was the mantra of the day, and in the 1970s, Ibiza and the nearby island of Formentera became the centres of the European hippie movement. Famous musicians flocked to the islands — Pink Floyd recorded an album on Formentera, while Bob Dylan lived in a windmill outside La Mola — and they soon became famous for their wild parties.

Today, while Ibiza remains home to some hippies and continues to lure famous musicians and their fashion friends, the island attracts a wider crowd of nonconformists, including alternative healers and therapists who come from all over the world to practice ancient arts such as yoga, meditation and Qigong. While some operate out of the island's gleaming spa hotels, others will rock up to wherever you desire. It's a slickly, organised affair, with companies such as Ibiza Retreats offering an A to Z of mobile therapists and classes.

And so it transpires that early one morning I find myself trying to contort my body like Play-Doh; adopting a variety of poses with a slight, svelte yoga teacher called Lena. I'd opted for a lesson away from prying eyes in the privacy of my hotel, Can Gasi, a beautifully restored 19th-century finca, but the next day I find myself coaxed further afield to a secluded rocky outcrop overlooking the sea, to be coached in the art of meditation by a man called Miguel. The intention was to learn the art of de-cluttering my mind, but I find it hard not to let my mind wander when he's so good-looking and, he tells me, just settled here after living in a Tibetan monastery.

Desperate to get in touch with my inner beatnik, I decide to get a new wardrobe from Las Dalias, the most famous hippie market on the east coast. Here you can take your pick of bohemian beaded jewellery and ankle-tie linen pants. For something less touristy, head to Saturday's flea market in Sant Jordi's hippodrome to scour eclectic items while rubbing shoulders with locals, hippies and even the odd celebrity. >>

Previous pages, clockwise from left: Fisherman in Puerto de Mogán harbour, Gran Canaria; The beach at Cala D'Hort, Ibiza; Bakery in Palma de Mallorca; Ensaimadas, a Majorcan favourite.

These pages, clockwise from left: La Mola Formentera; Benirras Bay; Oranges; Benirras beach



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With my new attire, I head to the bohemian hotspots, taking the ferry to Formentera to visit another hippie market and swim naked in its vivid turquoise waters. Back on Ibiza, I drive north to Benirras beach, which still attracts the odd bongo drummer when the sun begins to disappear behind the monolithic rock island known as God's Finger. This part of the island, particularly around San Carlos, remains a mecca for an 'alternative' crowd, with detox and fasting retreats such as the Buddha House attracting abstainers. I have to pass, as I'm not quite ready to give up alcohol, let alone food, especially when there's so many good restaurants here.

NORTH & SOUTH

While the north remains the least developed part of the island, with hills carpeted in pine trees, the south has its fair share of mystic beauty, with tales of paranormal activity reported close to the picturesque beach of Cala d'Hort, where Es Vedra, a small limestone island, juts out 1,240ft above the ocean.

Reputedly the third most magnetic place on Earth, there are tales of sailors finding it almost impossible to get a compass reading in its vicinity and of homing pigeons losing their way as they fly overhead.

Some say the island is inhabited by the same race of sea nymphs who lured Odysseus from his ship in Homer's epic, while others attribute to it Bermuda Triangle-like powers to spirit away people and objects. Pilgrims who journey to the rock — a shrine to Tanit,

the Carthaginian goddess of love and fertility — say it has similar energy to Stonehenge. Personally, I wouldn't recommend going out of your way to visit Es Vedra (there's little life here, save a few goats), but watching the sunset here is really quite something.

Another great place to view it is close to the popular Ses Salinas beach and nature reserve, at the restaurant Cap des Falco. To get here, you'll pass the ancient shimmering, bird-rich salt flats dotted with storks, herons and flamingoes. Salt has been produced on Ibiza for more than 2,000 years, and these 1,075 acres of pools of seawater — first developed by the Phoenicians, then exploited by the Moors — are still in use today.

To discover more about the island's history, it's best to take a guided tour of Dalt Villa, one of Europe's best-preserved walled cities. Built on a rocky escarpment towering above the port's translucent waters, the UNESCO World Heritage site is topped with a Moorish mosque and a Gothic Catalan cathedral, protected by walls over a mile long and 80ft high. Walking tours take you across the mighty stone ramp and drawbridge and through the Portal de ses Toules and its floodlit cobbled streets to discover why this was a pivotal part of the Carthaginian empire.

As the tour guide tells me about the nuns who still live here, largely eschewing contact with the outside world, the bass beat from a nearby hotspot is vibrating in the air. Stranger things can be experienced in Ibiza away from the dance floor, it seems. You just have to venture out during daylight. >>

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GETTING THERE

>> A number of airlines offer frequent direct flights to Ibiza from regional and London airports, including British Airways (which now operates from London City until late October), Ryanair, EasyJet, BMIbaby, Jet2.com, Monarch, Thomas Cook and Thomson. There are also ferries from Majorca or from the Spanish mainland.

>> **Average flight time:** 1h45m from London.

GETTING AROUND

>> Car hire is the best way to see the island. Formentera is a 30-minute ferry ride from Ibiza Town. Yachts, including Sunseekers, can be hired by the day. www.rhinocarhire.com www.aferry.co.uk www.sunseekeribiza.com

WHEN TO GO

>> Peak season runs from May to the end of September, but late March, April and October can be ideal for spa breaks and alternatives including cycling and hiking.

NEED TO KNOW

>> **Currency:** Euro. £1 = €1.10.

>> **International dialling code:** 00 34 971.

>> **Time difference:** GMT +1.

MORE INFO

www.ibiza.travel

HOW TO DO IT

>> Seven nights at Can Luc Rural Hotel, San Rafael, cost from £1,077 per person B&B, including return flights from Gatwick and private transfers. www.classiccollection.co.uk



Left: Las Dalias hippie market





ANOTHER SIDE TO THE ISLANDS

TENERIFE

This popular Canarian island has long attracted sporty types, with Olympic swimmers training in its 50m open-air pools and pro golfers teeing off on its rolling greens.

But you don't have to be a top athlete to join in some of the island's soft-adventure sports, from kayaking to rock climbing. La Punta de Teno, the most westerly part of the island, is the place to kayak through caves and snorkel in the sea's crystal blue waters. Or take a guided tour through one of the world's largest lava tubes, Cueva del Viento, to explore its labyrinthine network of narrow passages, formed by volcanic lava flows.

For something more energetic, head north-west to the Teno Mountains, where you can brave the four-hour Barranco de Masca hike, winding down from the picturesque village of Masca through the impressive ravine to the sea below. Along the 2.8 mile route, the sides of the ravine rise up nearly 2,000ft above sea level. Because the going is steep in places, it's advisable to arrange for a boat to pick you up at the beach below, so you don't have to endure the nightmare return uphill journey. Set off early in the morning to avoid the midday heat.

■ **How to do it:** The new five-star Vinci Buenavista Golf & Spa is only a short drive from these attractions. Seven nights' B&B costs from £760 per person in June including flights from Gatwick and private transfers. www.classic-collection.co.uk Book excursions with Teno Activo www.tenoactivo.com

Above: Mascae village, Tenerife
Right: Menorcan horses

LANZAROTE

Escape the crowds on the smallest inhabited island in the Canaries and head to the charming, unspoilt retreat of La Graciosa, just a mile across the water to the north of Lanzarote. With a population of around 500, most of whom live in the harbour capital Caleta del Sebo, only residents are allowed to drive on its roads, which are all tarmac-free zones. As fishing is the main island industry, the harbour has some of the best seafood restaurants around, where you can sample *vieja* (parrotfish), *dorada* (sea bream) and *cherne* (sea bass).

Explore its rustic byways and gentle hills on foot or by mountain bike, or take a 4WD taxi to one of its many unspoilt beaches. The most scenic is Playa de las Conchas, hidden behind sand dunes in the north-west of the island. Here you can relax on the beach or search for hidden treasure — marauding pirates in the 1700s and 1800s often used the island as a base and are thought to have inspired Robert Louis Stevenson's classic book *Treasure Island*.

■ **How to do it:** A week's rental of a four-bed property with private pool costs from £995 per person. Return flights and ferry transfers are excluded, but can be arranged on request. www.vintagetravel.co.uk

MENORCA

The island's best beaches, hidden coves and ancient treasures can be discovered best on foot or by bike via Camí de Cavalls, an ancient bridle path that loops around the island. Recently reopened following a €1m (£872,000) restoration programme, the 114-mile 'Horses Path' was once a vital part of Menorca's coastal defence, patrolled by guards on horseback in the 18th century. If you don't have the time (it takes about two weeks) or the inclination to walk the entire loop, simply pick a section. In the north, Cala Tirant to Binimel-la is a five-mile hike, ideal for those who want to spot birds such as vultures and red kites, while the six-mile route in the south from Cala Galdana to Santo Tomas offers stunning views of caves, floral displays and secluded bays. Other sections pass prehistoric monuments and settlements. You could, of course, follow in the hoofprints of the horseguards and take to the saddle from one of the island's many stables.

■ **How to do it:** A seven-night Coastal Trails of Menorca walking holiday costs from £987 per person including half-board accommodation in the converted, 17th-century finca, Morvedra Nou, near Ciutadella, and car rental. The price excludes flights and is based on travel in September. www.headwater.com >>

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GRAN CANARIA

Flee the crowds and sunbathing hordes in the south and stay on an 18th-century working banana plantation, just 15 minutes from the capital, Las Palmas. Situated in Arucas, La Hacienda plantation is owned by the Marquis de Arucas, whose family also lays claim to most of the land in the region, as well as the botanical gardens. A rugged coastline and pleasant beaches such as Bañaderos-El Puertillo, with fine golden sand, are only 10-15 minutes away by car and there are also numerous biking and hiking trails for exploring the mountainous terrain.

Be sure to climb Mount Arucas, renowned for its stunning views — on a clear day you can see Mount Teide in

Tenerife. The area is steeped in history, having once been farmed by the island's ancient inhabitants, the Guanches, who lived in nearby caves, which are still inhabited today.

Arucas is also famed for its rum production. The 19th-century Arucas factory, Destilerías Arehucas, is well known for its premier rum, Ron Areucas, named after a local Guanche tribal leader. Take a tour and be sure to taste all the different flavours, including chocolate, lemon, coffee, almond and banana.

■ **How to do it:** A week's stay at La Hacienda costs from £657 per person B&B including return flights from Gatwick and car hire.

www.prestigeholidays.co.uk

FUERTEVENTURA

Home to the Windsurfing World Championships every July, the second largest and least populous of the Canary Islands is famed for having more than 150 golden beaches. The wind is reliably strong from May through September, with July typically the blowiest month. If you're an avid surfer, the best way to hit the more secluded spots all around the island is to hire a car or join a surfing safari, where you and around six other people of a similar standard are taken to a new spot each day.

■ **How to do it:** AWOL Holidays offers surf safaris and will advise on accommodation to suit your needs. A five-day surf package costs from €229 (£202). www.awol-holidays.com

Above from left:
Maspalomas dunes,
Gran Canaria;
Santanyi, Majorca

LA GOMERA

This small, vertiginous volcanic island is famed for El Silbo, a whistling language invented by the original inhabitants of the island, the Guanches, to communicate across deep ravines. It's the only place in the world to have developed whistling into a language.

Visitors can still hear the language 'spoken' in the mountain village of Chipude, considered to be the oldest settlement on the island. There are even whistling accents, with the northern and southern whistles sounding slightly different to each other.



MAJORCA

Avoid the mega resorts of the south and head north for beautiful hilltop villages, a rugged coastline and views of the spectacular Serra de Tramuntana mountain range, where you can rent one of the island's many converted fincas, surrounded by olive and citrus groves.

Base yourself near scenic Puerta Pollensa and Badia d'Alcudia and head west to discover the island's most deserted beaches, including the nearby virgin cove Cala Tuent, with its backdrop of pine trees and mountains. The bay can be accessed via the Sa Calobra road, turning off 1.2 miles before the end, past a 13th-century church, Ermita de Sant Llorenç. Rise early and hike the nearby Torrent de Pareis (Twin Streams), where you'll see magnificent limestone scenery. Open-air concerts are sometimes held here.

■ **How to do it:** Stay in Villa Alfabia, a restored finca with stunning views of the Tramuntana mountains. Prices from £8,145 based on four adults and four children for seven nights' fully-catered (includes a chef, villa host and nanny). Price excludes flights and transfers. www.scottdunn.com/alfabiavilla □

EL HIERRO

The smallest and least-populated island in the Canaries may not offer any sandy beaches, but it has a marine reserve, La Restinga – Mar de Las Calmas, where divers can explore incredible tunnels and rock formations.

