



Words/Tom Howells → Photography/Jonny Hughes

La buena vida

Famous for its fantastic medieval architecture, Palma de Mallorca is much more than evocative byways and Catholic monuments. We took a trip to this up-and-coming "Barcelona of the Balearics"





Palma's La Seu is about as austere (and awesome) as cathedrals get. A gargantuan Gothic box rising from the city's old town like a sand-coloured totem, it's got plenty to recommend it to history fans, including cabinets of saintly relics (bones wrenched from St Sebastian) and the world's largest Gothic rose window.

But move down the right-hand side of the interior and things get a lot more modern – and eclectic. In 2001, a chapel here was given over to local artist Miquel Barceló, who refashioned it to depict Jesus feeding the 5,000, creating an unnerving panorama of spectral fish, human skulls, blackened windows and a robust Christ modelled on the artist himself.

This pinch of unexpected modernity in a glorious ancient monument is a neat metaphor for Palma as a whole. It's a city of binaries: a staunchly traditional town – with austere churches, Arabic-inflected architecture and traditional festivals – that's also hip and creative. In the past 15 years, it's been hailed as the Balearic's answer to Barcelona, with cutting-edge »

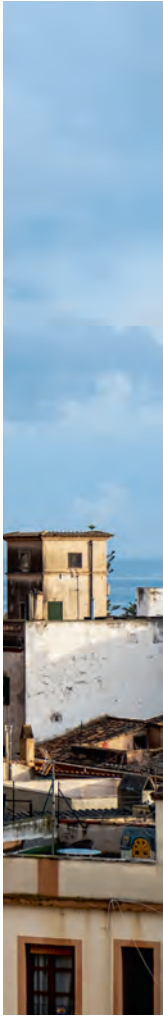
GET TO GRIPS WITH PALMA'S PASTRIES

Ensaïmada
A sweet spiral pastry often stuffed with a pumpkin jam called "angel's hair".

Panada
A squat empanada made with lard, filled with lamb or fish and normally eaten around Easter.

Llonguet
A ubiquitous bread roll with a fluffy interior, sold unadorned or in sandwich form.





Clockwise from top left: Looking east to La Seu, from the ramparts of Es Baluard; La Seu's colourful Gothic rose window is the world's largest; motorboats in Palma's marina



The hoteliers/ Giovanni Merello & Mr B

Palma isn't lacking sumptuous hotels – but Can Bordoy is a boutique pile with a difference. The owners undertook restorations of the derelict building using the Japanese art of imperfection, *kintsugi*.

"They've created these phases of the life of the building," explains managing director Giovanni Merello, pointing out how its repairs are clearly on show so it feels lived in, rather than glossy. "Like wrinkles in a human – to give this living thing character."

Today Can Bordoy is more a "grand house" than a hotel. There's no reception, check-in and -out times are fluid, and the à la carte breakfast can be taken at any time of day. The team even offers a "pet package" with organic, chef-made food, grooming and concierge-led walkies around town for €150 a night.

For dog lovers, Bordoy's biggest pull is indisputably its most radiant resident: Mr B. The maniacally coiffured Afghan hound has been with the house for almost a year, and has "an inner elegance and attitude that is extremely novel," says Merello. He's so charming, in fact, that he's threatening to upstage the house itself. "In town, people ask: where's Mr B's hotel?"

canbordoy.com



The designers/ Mauricio Obarrio & Juan Peralta

Contain is the industrial design practice of émigré Argentinians Mauricio Obarrio and Juan Peralta – plus their adopted street mutt Otto. Working out of a workshop on a mews off Calle Sant Feliu, the duo creates elegant, Art Deco-inspired terrazzo tables and lighting from traditional local materials, via modern processes like 3D-printing.

“The philosophy of the brand,” explains Peralta, “was to find local stone, local glass, work with local people – people who know the materials. And to give to this material a new design.”

The studio – which will appear as part of a Made in Mallorca expo at this year’s London Design Fair – formally launched two years ago, after the duo moved to Palma from Buenos Aires in 2016. They’ve since seen the design scene flourish: the local Mallorcan government has even made a map of makers and suppliers to encourage collaborations like theirs.

“There are a lot of designers moving here, starting a brand like us,” adds Peralta. “It’s a beautiful city to live in and very connected to the world. When I first met Mallorca, I found my place.”

contain.es

“Palma offers everything. Spring and autumn are spectacular, and winters are mild”



food, abundant art and design, buzzy nightlife and a thriving LGBTI community. Put together, it’s an urbane year-round destination on an island often seen as purely seasonal, stuck somewhere between the bougie hedonism of Ibiza and the rural idyll of Menorca.

“Palma offers everything,” says Javier García Montes, manager of old town hotel Glòria de Sant Jaume. “Modern wine bars, exclusive boutiques, a huge gastronomic offering – and just walking its narrow streets and getting lost. Spring and autumn are spectacular, and the winters can be quite mild in comparison to the rest of Europe.”

The beating heart of this compact city – which has a population of 410,000, that swells with the influx of tourists between April and November – is the medieval old town, where one could lose days wandering its higgledy warren of alleyways.

Every wooden door or iron gate seems to hide an ornate chapel or private patio. Some conceal the atria of old mansions, now restored as boutique stays like Can Bordoy or Glòria de Sant Jaume (the latter’s spa is housed in its old underground stables).



Neighbouring Santa Catalina is the jewel of the island's renaissance. A once-grungy fisherman's barrio, it's now brimming with design concept stores and cafés. It's home to a community of emigrés that have washed up here over the course of the island's mid-late-20th-century tourism boom – recalibrating Palma as the inclusive melting pot it is today.

“The island has had a mixture of civilisations and they left their mark for centuries – you can see their influence in the art and architecture,” García Montes continues. “Today, we have people from all over the world visiting and living here. Mallorca is easily accessed – it's a short flight from anywhere within Europe. That makes it very cosmopolitan.”

As in any Spanish city, food is paramount to Palma's identity. Traditional bakeries and cafés sell *ensaimada* pastries, almond ice cream and *llonguet* rolls – those from the iconic Forn de la Gloria and Tomeu Arbona's “radically traditional” Fornet de la Soca are must-eats – and visitors can rummage through a wealth of fresh seasonal produce at the bustling markets of Santa Catalina, de l'Olivar and organic ME Ecològic Mallorquí.



From above left ✓ Bellver Castle looms over west Palma; the Royal Palace of La Almudaina is the summer seat of Spain's royal family; La Calatrava's Arab Baths, the most important remaining Moorish monument in the city; a sphinx, carved in 1833, on the Passeig des Born



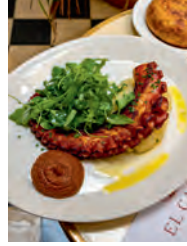
The island hasn't historically had much of a restaurant scene – and the influx of foreign visitors did little to introduce compelling food to Palma. But as global interest in gastronomic heritage and seasonality have skyrocketed, chefs here are slowly embracing traditional Mallorcan cuisine, which is imbued with Moorish and Sephardic Jewish elements.

“There's a trend of moving towards our culinary heritage that was a little bit abandoned,” explains local journalist Deborah Piña Zitrona. “A renewed interest in our own varieties of crops, of oils, of pigs.”

Santi Taura is one chef who's taken to this ethos with conviction. “My cooking is about historical recipes and produce unique to the island, interpreted for today's point of view and palate,” he says of his vision for his restaurant DINS, with its dishes like *panada de peix de roca* (a rockfish pastry), and the veg and eel *espinagada* pie.

Modern tapas bar El Camino also has a keen eye on provenance. Opened in 2018 by British expats Eddie Hart (co-founder of London's acclaimed Barrafina) and Samuel Gough (great-nephew of Mallorca's adopted literary hero Robert Graves), it serves typically local tidbits like *sobrasada* and *camaïot* sausage, bitter local olives and gutsy plates like the *frit mallorquí* of diced lamb's offal.

Foreign interlopers Hart and Gough may be, but El Camino is heralded as one of the city's best. “All of the team are Spaniards, and some are locals,” says Hart, knocking back a glass of local Fogoneu Mallorquí red wine. “It was always our desire that they would feel ownership and pride that there was a restaurant like this in their city.” »



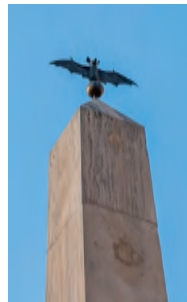
From left ✓
The marble bar at El Camino; grilled octopus with mojo rojo – an El Camino signature; looking east from the woods below Bellver Castle

Another matter of pride is the city’s art scene, which punches above its weight in cultural nous. The killer draw for art lovers is painter Joan Miró’s studio complex at the Fundació Miró Mallorca, found on a hill above the western barrió of Portopí. A close second is Es Baluard – one of Spain’s most important contemporary galleries and Mallorca’s key art institution – which envelops a stretch of ancient city wall just east of Santa Catalina.

Aesthetes with a taste for more up-and-coming creativity should amble to nearby Carrer de Sant Feliu. The area is now home to a mind-boggling number of dinky commercial galleries, showing everything from lurid sculptures of rhinos by Rogelio Olmedo at Gerhardt Braun, to Marcelo Viquez’s folk-horror farm tools at Kewenig.

“The abundance of galleries for such a small city is really impressive,” explains Óscar Florent of L21 in Son Castelló. He’s been instrumental in giving various Mallorcan and Spanish artists their first major shows. “My intention was to add something fresh to the art scene,” he says. “Mallorca could be an art capital – the conditions it has as a place to live and work as an artist are quite incredible.”

The same could be said for its designers. Where the island’s traditional crafts are few and far between – ikat-patterned textiles, blown glass from factories like Gordiola and rustic siurell clay whistles are about it – there’s been an explosion of enthusiasm in Palma for upscale products. »



Seen a bat?
 You’ll see a peculiar number of bats placed on obelisks around Palma. It’s the city’s quirky emblem, derived from the dragon helmet worn by James I of Aragon – the Spanish king who took Mallorca from the Moors.





“Mallorca could be an art capital – its conditions are quite incredible”



The art guru/ Imma Prieto

The current director of Es Baluard – Palma’s pre-eminent contemporary art museum – only took the helm last October, but she’s already got grand plans for the place.

“One of my goals is to start thinking of the museum not only as a space for exhibitions,” says Imma Prieto. “A museum today is a knowledge space. We need to generate a reflection – we have to connect with citizens.”

One way to do this is by upping the provision of local artists in each of the museum’s four annual seasons, always showing a Mallorcan native alongside two national or international names. The first, currently on show, is Marina Planas, who also runs an independent art space in Palma. “She’s working here on the idea of tourism but thinking it’s somehow like a kind of 21st-century war,” says Prieto.

When she first started at Es Baluard, Prieto was commuting from the hectic Catalan hub of Barcelona – but the wholesale shift to Palma was welcome. “Mallorca for me is a place that you still find an equilibrium, a balance between contemporary and past. The time and rhythm is human.”

esbaluard.org

Below
 Inside Rialto Living,
 Palma's pre-eminent
 lifestyle emporium



The scene's de facto elder statesmen are Barbara Bergman and Klas Käll, a Swedish couple who opened Sant Feliu's enormous Rialto Living concept store in 2007. As well as stocking a curated inventory of fashion, lighting, textiles, books and homeware, they also run an interior design studio – which collaborates with local brands like the terrazzo-obsessed industrial duo Contain – and an in-house art gallery showing work by Mallorcan painters.

"I like that it's a city that's open all year round," says Bergman of her adopted home's pull. "It's not just about the beach and sun. It's a summer paradise for many, but there's life even in the winter."

Traipsing Palma's streets and experiencing its harmonious mix of Moorish-tinged medieval heritage and contemporary cultural spirit first-hand, it's hard to believe this Balearic gem will stay a relative secret for much longer. For the enlightened traveller, European cities don't come much more fully formed than Palma.

It's a sentiment echoed by Giovanni Merello, the Sardinian-born director of Can Bordoy – a resplendent "grand house" hotel in a converted mansion near Es Baluard. "Palma has the greatest environment in terms of local culture, mixed with the international," he says, emphatically. "I find it amazing: the mix of nationalities, the way they lead the local life. It has technology, culture, art. It's a beautiful city." elcaminopalma.es, gloriasantjaume.com, grupsantitaura.com, l21gallery.com, rialtoliving.com
Norwegian flies to Mallorca/Palma from nine destinations. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com



The radical baker/ Tomeu Arbona

Peering into the window of Fornet de la Soca is like gazing into the past. Underneath the elaborate Belle Epoque signage lie rows of intricate pies, pastries and cakes, all baked dusky brown like medieval props and laid out as if in a chapel. This, you see, is the domain of self-defined "radically traditional gastronomic archaeologist" Tomeu Arbona.

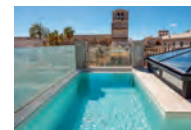
Arbona has committed his life to rediscovering the traditional recipes of Mallorca "without reinterpretation". Digging through historic books, he collected umpteen archaic recipes that he bakes for his store.

"All of the recipes are quite simple," he says, "but they must be treated as sacred. It's about reconnecting with ourselves – to show how the tradition is real."

Take the ubiquitous *ensaimada*. Arbona adds fat from the black pig, harking back to Mallorca's Jewish history. "The Sephardics were kicked out of Spain," he explains. "Here, they made their bread more Christian with the pig fat, to hide the fact that they were Jewish."

Fornet de la Soca opened a decade ago and has been revered ever since – not least by his own taste buds. "I opened the bakery to have everything for myself," he laughs. "There's not one special recipe. Everything is special." tomeuarbona.com

While you're there...



Sleep Hotel Glòria de Sant Jaume

Palma's old town is lousy with luscious hotels, but Glòria – with its lofty roof terrace, El Patio de Glòria restaurant, stylish Mid-Century lobby, and subterranean spa – is particularly nifty.

gloriasantjaume.com



Eat Fera

At this smart Carrer de la Concepció joint, chef Simon Petutschnig creates meticulous "Mediterranean without borders" fare. Don't swerve the crisp nori rolls or tuna tartare.

ferapalma.com



Do Convent de Santa Clara

A hushed chapel set back from Carrer de Can Fonollar, just east of La Seu, the nuns of this old order do a great sideline in biscuits and macaroons, delivered via a wooden turnstile.

clarisaspalmamallorca.wordpress.com

BAVETTE