

Travel diary

Destination:

Although Ibiza is famous for its clubbing scene and celebrity sightings, Suzan Crane discovers more than meets the eye

Ibiza

Diddy berths his yacht in Ibiza town during his frequent forays here. Kylie Minogue, Elle MacPherson and the ubiquitous Paris Hilton are off-seen visitors while jewellery designer and Rolling Stones offspring Jade Jagger is a long-term resident. Pike's Hotel, one of the island's most exclusive, is wallpapered with celebrity images: Jon Bon Jovi, Sade, Freddie Mercury, Naomi Campbell, Jean-Claude Van Damme.... A virtual 'who's who' in the lexicon of the rich, famous and infamous makes the Spanish isle of Ibiza a requisite stop on their jetsetting itineraries while battalions of other less-notorious tourists bombard this Mediterranean haven during the peak summer months.

Perhaps the party capital of the world – or, at the very least, the undisputed party capital of Europe – Ibiza is where celebrities and hedonists, ravers and package tourists, nudists and fashion victims

coexist on an island whose liberal attitudes and legendary club scene have earned it the nickname "Gomorrah of the Med".

An idyllic retreat for solitude-seeking artists and actors in the 1950s, Ibiza was a fashionable hideaway until the advent of jet propulsion allowed for easier access. By the '60s, the island's scenic splendour, laidback vibe and spiritual mystique served as a call for hippies and other bohemian types and for many years remained an alternative lifestyle enclave. By the '80s, however, dance clubs began to define Ibizan culture, and that raucous party reputation remains – for better or worse – the island's identifying characteristic. These days, a plethora of guesthouses and seasonal apartment complexes are peppered amidst expensive resorts and exclusive boutique hotels; McDonald's and Pizza Hut share prime real estate with fine dining establishments, English pubs

line the *calles* of Santa Eularia des Riu and Sant Antoni de Portmany, and designer shops exist alongside trendy boutiques. With over a million visitors annually, Ibiza happily caters to bulk tourism with high season charter flights depositing hordes of revellers onto its once hallowed grounds.

But Ibiza (or *Eivissa* in Catalan, from the original Arabic word *Yabisah*, so called in medieval Spain when parts of the Iberian peninsula were under Muslim rule) – one of the Balearic Islands along with Formentera, Mallorca and Menorca where human habitation dates back to at least 5000 BCE – is much more than its famed clubs, all-night raves and fast food joints. Boasting a rich history, textured culture and natural beauty, it has plenty to offer those who prefer to retire before the sun rises and wake before it sets, who visit the island not for celebrity sightings but for its celebrated beaches, UNESCO

World Heritage sites, undisturbed pine-covered interior, quaint Mediterranean villages and historic architecture dating back thousands of years to the Phoenicians, Romans, Moors and Catalans.

To best experience it all, avoid the peak summer months when most Europeans take their vacations – unless of course you want to be in the thick of things, literally. If you arrive in August, as I did, expect grid-locked beaches, inflated prices and drunken marauders, particularly in the British ghetto of Sant Antoni, which features in its centre the famous Egg monument erected in honour of Christopher Columbus, who, according to islanders, was born in Ibiza. And while it is difficult at this time of year to find a secluded beach (despite the fact that more than 70 are tucked around the island), it is possible to ferret out an isolated rocky cove along

the jewelled, turquoise coastline or a quiet café in one of the less trafficked, nostalgic villages scattered throughout the island's unmarred interior.

Further, while the inter-island bus lines are efficient, renting a car allows for autonomous exploration of Ibiza's many natural and archaeological wonders, including the famous prehistoric wall paintings of Ses Fontelles, the underground caverns of Cova de Can Marca, and Es Vedra, a 400-metre-high island composed solely of cliffs with almost vertical sides. Referred to by locals as "The Rock", Es Vedra is widely believed to possess magnetic properties and spiritual significance. But the most enigmatic and fabled place Ibiza is Atlantis, the unmarked, unmapped location which is often difficult to garner as residents are reticent to share their secret with tourists. If you are lucky enough to find Atlantis, you'll marvel at the extraordinary landscape created over 1,000 years ago when rock was quarried to build the fortress walls of Ibiza town. Over subsequent centuries, other stonemasons and sculptors have created people seemingly emerging from within the rocks, dragons and other symbolic features surrounded by stalactites and stalagmites

Although the tangled web of roads is a mess - under constant construction with an ever-growing series of confusing turnabouts which provoke debate and consternation amongst locals - a vehicle will let you explore the

island's many and varied beaches (or *calas*), as well as Placa de la Vila, the cobble-stoned old quarter, museums of charming Ibiza town and the Wednesday and Saturday "hippie markets" at Es Canar and Las Dalias, where prices are nothing but traveller-on-a-budget friendly. For a more authentic "hippie" experience, hightail it to Sunday sunsets at Benirras, where, when the police don't stop them, "gypsy" vendors sell their wares on the beach while the primal rhythms of drum beats permeate the wafting sea breeze.

But despite Ibiza's abundant natural attributes, for many, night time is the right time, and for them the island's inimitable club scene is the big draw. With the action never beginning before midnight and rarely ending before dawn, disco

buses ferry throngs of partygoers to such internationally famed clubs as Privilege (the world's largest nightclub), Pacha, Amnesia, Es Paradis and Space. For a 50 or 60 euro (JD45-55) price tag, one gains entry into a parallel party universe where dancers are swathed in foam emitted from cannons, swimming pools transform into aquatic dance floors and dry ice machines assault revellers with sudden rushes of frigid air. Fuelled by the provocative trance and house sounds proffered by the world's top DJs, it is full throttle hedonism, part theatre, part circus. So famous is the electronic music scene here that, similar to Goa trance being coined for the scene in India, an entire sub-genre, Balearic Beat, has been named for the experimental trance created

over-crowding, over-development and crass commercialism that delineates peak season, I found it challenging to experience the "magic". I often wondered what the island must have looked and felt like before concrete replaced the palms and marvelled at the thought that only 12 cars existed here in 1956.

"Wait until September," they urged every time I threatened to leave. "Tourism wanes and the sanctity of the island returns," they insisted. And you can actually rent a car for less than 55 euros (JD50) a day! The climate is still perfect and the beaches are again visible to the naked eye, no longer carpeted by overcrowded sun worshippers. The locals are more relaxed, the traffic abates and the magic... prevails. So I waited.



and recorded on the island. But lest we erroneously assume that electronic music holds an unrivalled monopoly, note that British artist Mike Oldfield devised some of his most evocative instrumental pieces while living on Ibiza and Wham!, George Michael's pre-solo career multi-platinum duo filmed their *Club Tropicana* video at Pike's Hotel.

According to my insistent friends who have planted roots here, Ibiza is magical, possessing a powerful energy that suffuses and infuses the island. "It will either embrace or reject you," I was told upon arrival. I must admit, though, that amid the

And it was true to a degree. Ibiza seemed to decompress, literally, as each day more and more people boarded planes headed for home, work and their real lives.

On my last day, a friend took me to a small, isolated beach where only a naked couple and their naked young child frolicked in the calm, warm waters. Later that same day I met an island native who generously invited me to the hillside home in which he was born, a sanctuary really, to shower before my midnight flight. Sitting on his porch, which offered an unobstructed view of the glistening Mediterranean below - peaceful and quiet - I finally felt the magic.