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A THRILL to CHILL



Off-season and without the crowds, Ibiza and Formentera are aiming to prioritise sustainable, responsible tourism

BY **ISABEL CONWAY**

THE last time I visited Ibiza, we dozed all day on soft sandy beaches amid idyllic coves. Pine and juniper trees clung to the rocks, shading sunburnt Irish skin from intense summer rays.

We were in recovery mode having danced until dawn at Pacha, the island's oldest club, beneath its cavernous sea of mirror balls. I remember how we counted down the hours before taking an afternoon saunter over to the beach bar for a welcome 'hair of the dog'.

This time, Pacha – heaving with techno between May and early October – is in off-season hibernation, maybe no bad thing for the health of my liver and ear drums.

Ibiza and its Balearic neighbours start to wake up again in spring, when the days are longer and warmer, but without the extremes of summer. The pleasantly balmy temperatures are perfect for a refreshing dip, an uncrowded visit to open-air monuments such as World Heritage site Dalt Vila citadel that looms above Ibiza town, and bag restaurant and cocktail bar tables without having to queue.

Loved for their mesmerising landscapes, small intimate coves and long stretches of shimmering beach, averaging 300 days of sunshine a year, there's more than a hint of paradise about the four Balearic islands off Spain's south-east coast, each enduringly different.

Party-loving Ibiza is home to mega-clubs hosting Europe's top DJs, Mallorca mixes Michelin-starred restaurants with unpretentious great value tapas bars, while blissful Menorca's Cami de Cavalls medieval bridle path reveals a stunning coastline and ancient past.

The smallest island, Formentera, is where walking and cycling reigns supreme – and where the Caribbean and Aran islands meet.

But the immense popularity of the Balearics – whose summer population tops more than 16.5 million – comes at a cost. As the summer season was kicking off last year, several million people hit the streets of Majorca, Menorca and Ibiza to demand steps to limit overtourism, under the slogan 'our islands are not for sale'.

Residents protested over clogged roads and pollution, but above all the impact on house prices, because many apartments have been transformed into tourist accommodation, including the explosion of Airbnb.

To preserve the natural beauty of the islands, conserve their biodiversity and protect livelihoods, the Balearic government has taken a pioneering role in Spain by introducing a more balanced tourism model through a sustainable tourism tax.

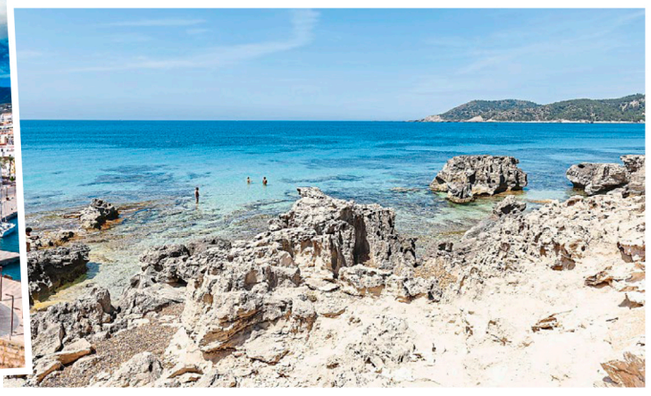
More than €377 million to support current and future projects – including those that extend the tourism season, preserve historical and cultural heritage, and promote responsible tourism – has already been collected.

One of the primary goals of the tax – levied at between €1 and €4 per night – is to reduce the seasonal reliance on visitors by coming up with interesting off-season activities and promoting new attractions to run through spring, autumn and winter, as well as clamping down on illegal accommodation.

Whether it's the party crowd flocking to Ibiza and Mallorca or summer sun-seekers descending on Menorca and Formentera, overtourism on these blissful Spanish islands has grown into a major concern in recent years, prompting a raft of new responsible tourism measures to become 'the world's first circular destination' and achieve more balanced and sustainable tourism.

On a sun-dappled early October afternoon, Ibiza's airport crawls with girls – and boys – in hot pants, with real tans and bloodshot eyes. The end-of-season rearguard army is returning home at the end of their big, non-stop party.





Island life: Clockwise from main, coastal views in Formentera; The salt pans of Ibiza; A view over Ibiza town; and Isabel enjoying a sandy beach

Myself and a few 'party poopers' are arriving to lie on newly-vacated beaches, meander along quiet promenades, stroll through picturesque, almost empty villages and browse the island's famous hippy markets, some dating back to the 1960s, including the best-known, Las Dalias, which is always jam-packed in summertime.

'There are so many sides to Ibiza, apart from partying,' says French-born guide Shana Dominique, who is passionate about promoting sustainable tourism. 'I show visitors the other face, one rich in history, off-the-beaten-track hikes and more than sun and beach. No wonder so many bohemians and artists settled here.

'All the islands are perfect for nature lovers who come for the walks, for our superb landscapes, the wonderful tranquil vibe, and to enjoy our gastronomy and wines.'

Trundling along Ibiza's twisting rutted roads and laneways, the island is surprisingly empty. Some beaches are only accessible on foot, with just a handful of swimmers and a few kayaks bobbing about.

Arriving at Ses Salines Unesco World Heritage site, whose salt pans host hundreds of different bird varieties, I am ashamed to admit that having stayed relatively close to them during my youthful visit, I had no inkling of their existence. To save face, I mention an excursion on a packed small boat over to Formentera in choppy seas all those years ago, a queasy adventure that cancelled sundowner cocktails that day.

You can't visit Ibiza without coming across the island's beloved multi-coloured lizards. A symbol of good luck, they're everywhere – decorating beach towels, straw hats, bags, fridge magnets and other souvenirs on street stalls. The real ones soak up the sunshine, scurrying over rocks and up walls, darting through pine woods, streaking along beaches.

But their days are increasingly numbered, I discover. The native lizard, also found on Formentera, has been around for millennia but it's under serious threat from invasive snakes, who first came to the island 20 years ago. Their numbers have risen alarmingly since then and, though harmless to humans, they feed on the endemic lizard population that risks extinction.

In Ses Salinas, I find Victor Colomar, an environmentalist and senior manager of the Consortium for the Recovery of the Fauna of the Balearic Islands, inspecting one of the many traps installed in rural areas to catch the elusive snakes.

The capture ratio is far too small but the sustainable tourism tax revenue may yet be an efficient snake charmer. Plans are afoot to purchase drones and high-tech tramps as well as to fund scientific research to save the lizards from insatiable predators, says Victor.

Only 30 minutes away from Ibiza's south coast by regular ferry, I count my blessings at the opportunity to explore Formentera properly, this time with a two-night stay at an enchanting small boutique hotel hideaway. Hotel Casbah is nestled deep in a pine grove in the Migjorn area, not far from Sant Francesc Xavier in the heart of the island. It has been awarded accolades for commitment to innovative and sustainable tourism. Rooms arranged in a Kasbah-style clustering of cubed buildings offer minimalistic comfort.

Owner Juan Vincente Boned returned to the land of his forefathers, transforming 50 hectares into a garden of Eden, growing fruit and vegetables on terrain that to Irish eyes looks daunting with irrigation challenges. But through persistence, his dream for self-sufficiency to supply farm-to-table cuisine in the hotel's superb restaurant is realised.

Reviews of the food – prices are high but worth it – and our own experience attest to its reputation as a benchmark of excellent contemporary Mediterranean food.

OVER a few glorious days, I visit an organic winery to learn about Terramoll native wines and methods, enjoy a fulsome fish stew at Restaurante Sa Figuera and seafood at Can Rafalet overlooking a rocky cove. I hear about the value of the endemic Neptune seagrass and a project supported by the sustainable tourism tax to protect it, especially from the threat posed by superyachts, who drop their anchors to the detriment of the seabed.

The seagrass – official name posidonia – filters the water, absorbs carbon and creates oxygen so is vital for sustaining marine life. An exhibition of recycled beach debris turned into art by a local artist Sol Courreges also gives new meaning to the contents of discarded plastics and metal.

Formentera has been limiting vehicle access during high season since 2019 and visitors are encouraged to discover this gorgeous paradise that is only 18km long but has 70km of coastline sustainably, on a rental bicycle or on one of more than 30 green route tracks that circumvent Formentera's pristine beaches.

We depart with firm plans to return, next time using pedal power to find more hidden corners, laidback restaurants and waterside terraces on this sparkling jewel in Spain's treasure chest.

And yes, a short meander along a maze of tiny pathways from Hotel Casbah does lead to a beach bar hippy hangout dive where sunsets and gin and tonics are, as we've now come to expect, simply divine.

TRAVEL FACTS

Isabel was a guest of Balearic Islands Tourism Board, see *sustainableislands.travel* and *spain.info*. She stayed at Tropic Garden Hotel Ibiza, a huge apartment-hotel property offering all-inclusive fun and mountainous buffets featuring local produce. Rooms from €95, see *gardenhotels.com*. Rooms at Hotel Casbah Formentera from €107, *hotelcasbahformentera.com*.