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The best of Spain - all in one place



Landmark: the Gothic Cathedral La Seu, particularly stunning when bathed by floodlights at night. Photograph: Scott R Barbour

The Balearic capital has all the style of Barcelona, Valencia or Seville, writes **ADRIENNE CULLEN**

IF YOU WERE to distill all that's best about Spain into one little city, plant it on a bijou island and drop it in the middle of the Mediterranean, then you'd have Palma, the ancient capital of Majorca.

Palma has all the sophistication of Barcelona, Valencia or Seville, combined with a certain devil-may-care attitude that is typical of islands and probably comes from being cut off from the mainland.

This atmosphere may have been soured by the recent series of bomb attacks on the island by the Basque separatist group Eta, but the Department of Foreign Affairs sees no reason for Irish people to be deterred from visiting the city or the island, and no special warnings are in place.

No doubt the celebrities with whom the island has become synonymous will continue to come, too. Regular A-listers

include Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, Claudia Schiffer, Michael Schumacher, Vivienne Westwood, Bob Geldof, Andrew Lloyd Webber . . . the list goes on. You're highly unlikely to spot any of them in Palma, given the number of exclusive hideaways on the island, but their presence hangs in the ether.

Here I should declare an interest, as for several years I've written a column for a glossy Majorcan magazine published by the Wexford businesswoman Helen Cummins. So I know that this is an island that likes to be noticed, but discreetly.

Whether you arrive by sea or by air, you certainly can't help but notice the magnificent Gothic cathedral of La Seu, built between 1229 and 1601 on the site of a mosque, which dominates the city and is particularly stunning at night, when it's bathed by floodlights.

This is the landmark by which you'll orient yourself probably every day of your stay. So imposing is it, in fact, that it seems only right to have it at the top of your sightseeing list, which most tourists do. Keep an eye out for the peregrines that nest high on the eastern side and prey on unfortunate rock pigeons and swifts. If you think your view is jaw-dropping, imagine theirs.

After the soaring heights of La Seu you'll be glad to ramble through the atmospheric cobbled lanes of the medieval old town, the Barri Gòtic, where you'll find plenty of fashionable shops, trendy cafes, cool bars and interesting restaurants, an alluring mixture of old and new.

This is also where you'll find three of the city's other architectural masterpieces: La Lonja, another Gothic gem, the exchange where merchants did their trading business as early as the 15th century, and which now hosts exhibitions and concerts; the Almudaina Palace, opposite the cathedral, which has gone from fortress to royal residence to museum over the centuries; and the Moorish baths, the Banys Arabs, dating to the 10th century and set in beautifully tended gardens.

Nor will you want to miss Bellver Castle, a 14th-century fortress with an extraordinary double moat and, once again, unforgettable views. It's a former summer residence of the kings of Majorca.

In you fancy a break from all this hiking around town, Palma has 17 art galleries, more per capita, it's claimed, than anywhere else in the world. The Museu d'Art Espanyol Contemporani, in the city centre, has a superb 20th-century collection, including works by Picasso, Dalí, Juan Gris and Joan Miró, who died here in 1983.

During the summer months Palma never sleeps. Early evening is aperitif and tapas time as the bars in the tiny streets fill up with chat and music. There's a burgeoning gay scene that adds colour. Have a cocktail at Abaco, the city's most eccentric bar, or take your pick of Michelin-starred restaurants.

Afterwards take a leisurely stroll along the seafront and gaze longingly at the hundreds of shimmering yachts that throng the marina. Could that possibly have been ice-cool Daniel Craig jumping ashore and straight into a taxi? Anything is possible in Palma.

See www.palma.com, www.mallorcaonline.com, www.mallorcaweb.com and www.mallorcaspain.net

Go there

Aer Lingus (www.aerlingus.com) flies to Palma from Dublin. Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from Dublin and Shannon. EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) flies from Belfast.

Where to stay, where to eat and where to go if you're taking a break in this Majorcan gem

5 places to stay

Palacio Ca Sa Galesa. 8 Carrer de Miramar, [00-34-971-715400](tel:+354971715400), www.palaciocasagalesa.com. A converted manor house in the Barri Gòtic with magnificent views of the cathedral. All 11 rooms and suites are uniquely decorated and adorned with original paintings and antiques. Such five-star luxury doesn't come cheap: doubles start at €350 a night and the most sumptuous suite is more than €500.

Castillo Hotel Son Vida. 2 Calle Raixa, Urbanizacion Son Vida, [00-34-971-493493](tel:+354971493493), www.hotelsonvida.com. On a hill overlooking Palma and the bay, this hotel is a turreted 13th-century Majorcan castle, set in not one but two golf courses. Classic doubles cost about €400; a Grand Deluxe with bay views costs between €650 and €700.

Hotel San Lorenzo. 14 Calle San Lorenzo, [00-34-971-728200](tel:+354971728200), www.hotelsanlorenzo.com. This exclusive nine-bedroom hotel is right in the centre of Palma, in the old Sant Pere fishermen's district, just a few minutes from the elegant Avenue Jaume III. Rates range from €150 for a double to €240 for a suite.

Gran Meliá Victoria. 21 Avenida Joan Miró, [00-34-971-732542](tel:+354971732542), www.gran-melia-victoria.com. In a stunning location on the Paseo Marítimo, this five-star hotel has great views over the bay of Palma. Overnight rates start at about €170, although the Grand Suite will set you back a little over €1,200.

Hotel Araxa. 22 Calle Pilar Juncosa, [00-34-971-731640](tel:+354971731640), www.hotelaraxa.com. The Araxa is in Son Armadams, one of Palma's quiet residential areas, about 10 minutes from the Castillo de Bellver and the seafront. It's a comfortable three-star with doubles from €140 in the high season and special child rates.

5 places to eat

Simply Fosh el Refectori. 7a Carrer de la Missió, [00-34-971-720114](tel:+354971720114), www.conventdelamissio.com. Marc Fosh opened his new restaurant in April. In this converted 17th-century convent, the Michelin-starred chef is offering simpler versions of his Mediterranean classics to suit credit-crunch budgets.

Caballito de Mar. 5 Calle Paseo Sagrera, [00-34-971-721074](tel:+354971721074), www.caballitodemar.info. A third-generation fish restaurant, located in one of Palma's most charming streets, a stone's throw from the cathedral.

Laurus Restaurant. 23 Calle Tit Livi, [00-34-971-263231](tel:+354971263231), www.laurusrestaurant.com. Located on the seafront at Playa de Can Pastilla, Laurus is ideal for outdoor dining, with chic surroundings and imaginative food.

Restaurante Mesón Ca'n Pedro. 4 and 14 Calle Rector Vives, [00-34-971-402479](tel:+354971402479), www.mesoncanpedro.com. The Estaban family has been in the restaurant business in Palma since Pedro Estaban opened his first restaurant, in 1976. Mesón Ca'n Pedro specialises in traditional Majorcan dishes and has a warm, friendly atmosphere.

La Boveda. Calle Boteria, [00-34-971-714863](tel:+354971714863). This is one of Palma's most popular restaurants, serving Basque-Catalan food, and always buzzing. Around the corner is Taberna de la Boveda, with much the same food in a more informal setting.

5 places to go

Catedral La Seu. Plaça Almoína, [00-34-971-723130](tel:+354971723130), www.catedraldemallorca.org. This Gothic beauty is Majorca's most popular tourist attraction and the building that dominates the city of Palma, with its golden sandstone walls and flying buttresses. Make sure to walk around to the south side, where the Portal de Miradon features scenes from the Last Supper. Antoni Gaudí fashioned the unfinished crown of thorns suspended above the altar.

Almudaina Palace. Calle Palau Reial, [00-34-971-214134](tel:+354971214134). A treasure trove, the most outstanding element of which is the 14th-century throne room, with huge diaphragm arches that support a ceiling identical to that of the Palace of the Kings of Majorca in Perpignan.

Moorish Baths. 7 Can Serra, [00-34-971-721549](tel:+354971721549). These baths, dating back to the 10th century, are known as Banys Arabs in Catalan, and although the streets here are a veritable labyrinth, remember that the baths are to the east of the cathedral, which should help. They're very dramatic, and one of the few examples of early Muslim architecture in the Balearics.

Museu d'Art Espanyol Contemporani. 11 Sant Miquel, [00-34-971-713515](tel:+354971713515). A great little museum with a permanent collection of 70 works by some of the most important artists of the 20th century, including Picasso, Dalí, Miró and Juan Gris.

Mallorca Balloons. Cala Ratajada, [00-34-971-818182](tel:+354971818182), www.mallorcaballoons.com. La Seu has great views, but a balloon voyage over Palma and along the coast is the trip of a lifetime. Mallorca Balloons has flights from March to October, operating eight balloons, one of which is listed in Guinness World Record as the biggest balloon in Spain.

Where to shop

Everyone loves Spanish shoes, and if this is your addiction, feed it at Carrer de Sant Miguel, where virtually every shop is a temple to footwear. If you're fond of bling, bring home some synthetic pearls, manufactured in the town of Manacor from opaline glass immersed in enamel. If it's high fashion you're after, try the boutiques packed into the pedestrianised streets near Plaça Major.

Hot spot

Tito's. Passeo Marítimo, [00-34-971-730017](tel:+354971730017), www.titosmallorca.com. The biggest and best-known nightclub in Palma, where DJs play everything from house to pop. In summer the dance floor is regularly packed until daybreak.

Coffee break

Horchatería y Chocolatería C'an Juan de S'aigo. 5 Calle Baró Santa Maria de Sepulchre, [00-34-971-725760](tel:+354971725760). Appropriately, both its name and its address are a mouthful, but this is the best-known cafe in Palma, loved for its coffee and hot chocolate. It may not have a website, but it does great traditional ensaimada pastries.

What to avoid

Magaluf. Located at the western end of the Bay of Palma, 15km away. Loved by 18- to 35-year-olds. Plenty of Union Jack shorts, all-day "belly busting" English breakfasts and Sunday roasts – even in temperatures of 35 degrees.

A good night out

Abaco. Carrer Sant Joan 1, [00-34-971-714939](tel:+354971714939). This is Palma's most bizarre bar, an old manor house in the centre of the city with the top-Garden-Miranda-style decor and expensive cocktails. Still, it's worth it to sit on the old Majorcan patio and soak up the camp atmosphere.

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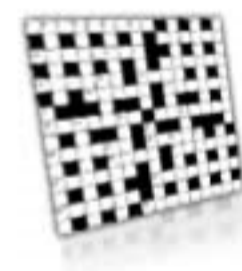
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