



palma de mallorca

The Balearic capital is buzzing, thanks to sophisticated cuisine, chic inns and an ambitious new marina development, says Paul Richardson

Palma punches above its weight. Though a small city of 400,000 souls, it is the capital of Mallorca and of the four Balearics, as well as the administrative hub of a tourist industry that brings in more than 9m visitors every year. Whenever a Spanish publication compiles a ranking of cities in terms of quality of life, Palma routinely comes top. Hardly surprising, when you consider its unbeatable setting on one of the Mediterranean's most spectacular bays, its peerless climate and its rich heritage.

Yet until recently, "elegant" wasn't a word that would have readily been applied to it. Charming, yes. Historically the city has tended to follow its own placid provincial routines. But for too long, Palma's old town, a marvellous warren of medieval streets, was uninhabited and unloved. The city's gastronomic and retail offerings were uninspiring. With the honourable exception of the *Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró*, which houses the great painter's studio, home and around 2,000 of his works, there was little of cultural heft to

be found. And most importantly, there was nowhere decent to stay.

The change that Palma has undergone in recent years is nothing less than prodigious. Foreign money has flooded into the city, along with successive waves of immigration from wealthy, sun-starved northern Europe, so that Palma is now emerging as one of the most cosmopolitan, as well as prosperous, towns in Spain. House prices have rocketed and whole neighbourhoods have been transformed – none more so than Santa Catalina, the delightful former fishing quarter behind Palma harbour.

Food and drink illustrate the improvement as well as anything. Old-style *mallorquin* cooking is still on the menu, but Palma is increasingly a foodie town. Kent-born chef Marc Fosh – whose three downtown restaurants MISA Brasería, Tasca de Blanquerna and Simply Fosh combine cool London style with nods to the French tradition – is the man of the moment. Elsewhere, clever cocktails, funky tapas and Asian-Hispanic fusion

(especially at Emilio Castrejón's *Innobar*) are three current themes. The *Mercat de l'Olivar*, the city's produce centre, is worth a stroll for its prodigious displays of locally landed fish, island-grown fruit and veg, and charcuterie. The markets' new gastro stalls, where you can wash down a prawn with a glass of *mallorquin* white, have added value to the experience.

Palma was a major Mediterranean entrepôt in medieval times – if proof were needed, visit the harbourside's 15th-century *Sa Llotja* (exchange), a

gothic masterpiece of soaring interiors and slender, twisting columns – and is now back on top as a maritime centre of international importance. This time, however, the emphasis is firmly on leisure. The city has no fewer than 10 marinas, ranging from Club de Mar in the west to Portixol in the east, with a total of 3,506 moorings, of which (and this is a telling figure) nearly a thousand are designed for craft of more than 15m.

Indeed, for the owners of generously sized yachts, Palma has never looked a more attractive destination.

In October last year, the Spanish government's matriculation tax on charter boats of more than 15m was summarily lifted, to the satisfaction of companies such as Camper & Nicholson, whose sales broker Jonathan Syrett was part of the nautical lobbying committee. Syrett believes



ABOVE: the Palma Cathedral and harbour. LEFT: Anima Beach Club

that the measure will work in favour of the yachting community in Spain in general, and Mallorca in particular, making more boats available and encouraging owners to spend the mild winter in Palma.

Further developments are on the way. A new leisure and marina area covering 1,300sq m is poised to open this month in the *Moll Vell* ("old dock") beside the Port Authority HQ in central Palma, in the shadow of the 13th-century cathedral (one of Spain's loveliest). The €6.5m development has completely refurbished what was formerly a harbourside area popular with *palmesanos*, to provide 26 moorings for boats of between 15m and 40m, with a series of shops and terraces to entice the locals back for the traditional evening *paseo*.

As attention swivels towards the harbour, the seaside is also having a moment. New-generation "beach clubs" like *Anima* and *Puro* (the modern beach bar/restaurant being a genre that Mallorca does well, and with none of the noisome debauchery of the Ibiza version) are a recommendable option for evening drinks and daytime lounging, and within easy reach of the city centre.

Meanwhile, the barrio of Santa Catalina, behind the *Paseo Marítimo* at the old-town end, is a natural choice for boat people who gravitate towards laid-back bars and restaurants and superb traditional produce markets. The neighbourhood has kept its bohemian flavour, but fashionable proposals, such as the self-styled "cantina" *Patrón Lunares*, are like a layer of gloss paint over weather-beaten whitewash. Closer to the docks themselves is *Horrach Moyá's* contemporary art gallery in a three-storey townhouse with a ground-floor *coctelería*, *Sadrassana*, whose gorgeous take on mid-century modern has made the spot probably the island's numero uno bar interior.

Even while good hotels were proliferating in the rest of Mallorca, Palma could never offer anywhere very

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room with breakfast. **Brondo Architect Hotel**, Can Brondo 4 (+34971-1720 507; www.brondooarchitect.com), from €189. **Can Alomar**, Carrer Sant Felu 1 (+34971-715 012; www.boutiquehotelcanalamar.com), from €240. **Can Cera**, San Francisco 8 (+34971-715 012; www.cancerahotel.com), from €250. **Cuba Colonial**, Carrer de Sant Magi 1 (+34971-452 237; www.hotelhostalclub.com), from €313. **Hotel Calatrava**, Plaça Llorenç, Villalonga 8 (+34971-728 110; www.boutiquehotelcalatrava.com), from €221. **Hotel Cort**, Plaça de Cort 11 (+34971-213 300; www.

hotelcort.com), from €240. **Palma Suites**, Plaça Mercadal 8 (+34971-727 900; www.palma-suites.com), from €160. **Posada Terra Santa**, Posada Terra Santa 5 (www.posadaterrasanta.com), from €218.

RESTAURANTS, BARS & BEACH CLUBS

Prices are for a three-course meal with half a bottle of wine. **Anima**, Antoria de Levante s/n, Playa de Can Pere Antoni (+34971-595 591), €50. **Bar Nicolás**, Plaça del Mercat 19 (+34971-724 078). **Emilio Innobar**, Carrer Concepción 9 (+34657-507 294), €50. **MISA Brasería**, Carrer de Can Maçanet 1 (+34971-595 301), €60. **Patrón Lunares**, Carrer de la Fàbrica 30, Santa Catalina (+34971-



From top: Sa Llotja maritime exchange. A suite at the Hotel Calatrava. Tast Club, with one of the Patrón Lunares cantina



Santa Catalina is a natural choice for boat people who gravitate to laid-back bars



interesting until a first wave of old-town "boutiques" – namely *Ca Sa Galesa*, *Hotel San Lorenzo* and the two Scandinavian minimalist joints, *Puro* and *Tres* – came along in the 1990s. Highlights of the past decade's flurry of openings have included the hip *Brondo Architect* and *Palma Suites*, a collection of luxury apartments (also Swedish-owned) in various permutations of comfort and size. Best of all perhaps is the *Hotel Cort*, which opened last year, with interiors by Spain's design doyen Lázaro Rosa-Violán and a ground-floor restaurant from the same thoroughbred stable as *Tast Club*, Palma's most spoken of speakeasy.

This year there's to be no let-up: the four-star *Cuba Colonial*, housed in a fine old hotel building dating from the 19th century, will open at the end of the month, while the 26-room *Posada Terra Santa* ("Hidden Away Since 1576") should raise the bar for the old-town hotelito.

If the bar was already high, it is largely thanks to Barcelona-based designer

Cecilia Conde Moragues and her son Miguel, the masterminds behind *Can Cera* – a restored 17th-century *palacio* deliciously combining antique *mallorquin* furniture and rich fabrics with rustic flooring and bold contemporary art. The success of *Can Cera* inspired the family to open another perfectly pitched *palacio*, but conceived in a lighter, brighter style – the *Hotel Calatrava*, overlooking the sea at the old town's quiet eastern end. The third property in their portfolio, *Can Alomar*, opened in May in a noble edifice on the *Passeig del Born*, the social and commercial axis of old-town Palma.

The location of this new hotel is significant. The *Born*, a bijou version of Barcelona's *Rambles*, is now the epicentre of the new, elegant Palma.

Rombys, exemplifies the way Palma is bucking Spain's recent (downward) trend. Palma is on a roll, suggests Rombys, whose exquisitely assembled collections attract both local women and moneyed foreigners. It's a view endorsed by jeweller Isabel Guarch, who has just opened a chic little boutique on the *Plaça del Mercat* (beside the *Bar Nicolás*, a sophisticated cocktail bar) after a lifetime of discreetly catering to the upper echelons of *mallorquin* society. Guarch's client list includes Queen Sofia, who regularly spends her summer holidays in Mallorca with the rest of the Spanish royal family.

"There's a new impulse in Palma; we've noticed it over the past couple of years," says Guarch. "And the good thing is that it's all about quality."

WHEN TO GO

May and September let you avoid the high-season crowds, though June's weather is ideal: dry and temperate, with still-cool nights.

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

Set among the Tramuntana mountains, *Deià* is the picturesque village on Mallorca's northwest coast where the poet and novelist Robert Graves lived on and off from 1929 until his death in 1985. (His home, *ca N'Alfany*, can be visited.)

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways flies four times a week from London City and four times a week from Heathrow, from £116.



LEFT: GETTY IMAGES/P. JAMES; MIDDLE: GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: GETTY IMAGES/STOCKPHOTOS.COM