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# travel

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For the shell of it:  
grilled freshwater  
prawns. Opposite,  
Platja de Ses Illetes

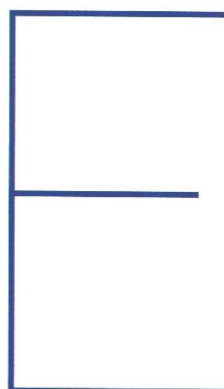


# CLEAR WINNER

The question readers ask us most is 'What's your top holiday spot?' After keeping schtum about her beloved Balearic idyll for years, **Katie Bowman** feels it's time to come clean







very time I leave Formentera, my heart breaks a little. In 20 years, this sadness has never changed, though the island has, little by little. In 1997, my other half and I had to make do with home-made *bocadillos* (filled with *jamón* and organic tomatoes from the only grocer's shop that was open) as we waited at La Savina harbour for the ferry back to Ibiza. In 2007, a kiosk had been built portside and we marvelled at being able to order ham and cheese *tostadas* with a cold can of Estrella before finding space on one of the new public benches. In 2017, we settled in for a flute of biodynamic Cava, sitting on café furniture made of upcycled driftwood, as young multilingual staff glided around the alfresco tables, like gorgeous extras in a foreign film.

And it's the arrival of those upturned wooden crates that forces me to break my silence. Because Formentera – a tiny, sandy, unspoilt Balearic island so shy and retiring compared to her disco-heeled neighbour Ibiza that most people have never even heard of her – has hit the holiday bullseye. She is, as the glossies say, 'having a moment'. Which is why you must go. Right now.

Twenty years ago, Formentera was idyllic, but too undeveloped for me to recommend to certain family and friends. Years passed and I continued to keep her selfishly to myself, not even correcting people who mistakenly thought I was 'off to Fuerteventura again' (a Canary island), or 'Formentor' (a resort in Mallorca). In a profession where I must constantly show my travel hand, share my greatest foodie finds, and post every discovery I make around the world, I wanted – just for once – to have my own holiday secret. But now the açai smoothie has landed, and private yoga tuition posters have begun to appear on *sushi*-bar walls (I've taken a class or two myself), and I fear that in another decade my island will be considered, God forbid, 'cool'.

So please listen to this secret with the same reverence it is shared – my perfect holiday has been 20 years in the making...

Start, where most memorable Med encounters do, on the beach. Life on Formentera revolves around the coast – you are never more than a 30-minute walk from it – and if you don't live for swimming or sunning, then this isn't the island for you. My beach is Platja de Llevant, the sort of stretch that would have a Caribbean cove blushing at its own shabbiness, while making the Maldives look over-manicured. For years, marine biologists couldn't

work out how the crystalline waters off Formentera could be so clear, so pristine; now they put it down to *posidonia oceanica* – a seagrass that thrives here – and residents throw an annual conservation festival, celebrating its incredible Dyson-vacuum-like properties. Platja de Llevant's seabed must be carpeted with the stuff because, from on high, as you walk along the protective boardwalk that snakes carefully through the dunes, the water appears like a descending colour chart of blues. The horizon is dark in naval stripes, the middle distance radiant in every shade of blinding turquoise from Lenor to Febreze, and the shallows so translucent that we started a smartphone photo quiz with friends back home called 'Pool or Sea?' (my mum mistook Llevant for a hotel pool however many times I sent the picture). Then, to sprint down to that sea and swim in water so close to perfection just 130 minutes' flying time from Gatwick, feels as if... Well, it should come as no wonder to you why it's taken me 20 years to tell anybody about it.

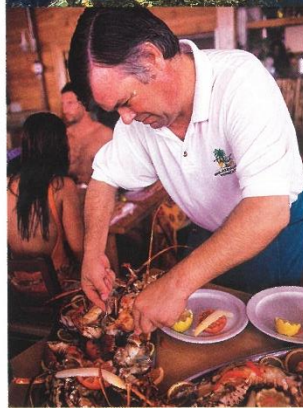
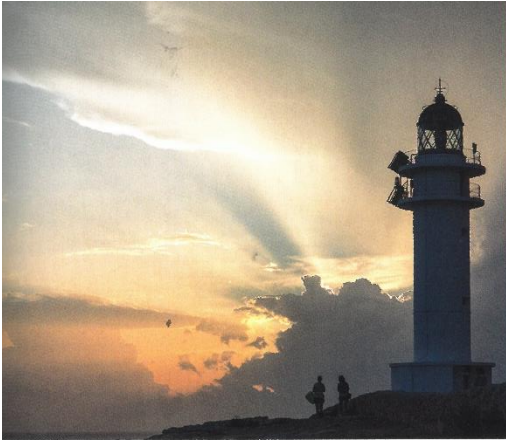
Llevant unfolds for kilometres, a string of shallow crescents, some of which you can have entirely to yourself in April, May, September or October (I have heard Formentera is 'busy' in July and August with Spanish and Italian students, but, having never seen it for myself, I think the term is relative). About halfway down is Restaurante Tanga, a *chiringuito*, or wooden shack with mismatched plastic chairs lodged in the sand. On our very first encounter we ordered the Balearic speciality, *bullit de peix* (a garlicky fish stew with hunks of grouper, scorpion fish, John Dory and more), but didn't notice the crucial words *con arroz de banda* – the latter being another local legend of a dish that is paella cooked in fish broth. We lingered over part 1, as glasses of Viña Sol came and went, not realising part 2 had yet to appear and gobble up another hour of our afternoon (as well as any sobriety we were still clinging on to). So there ➤

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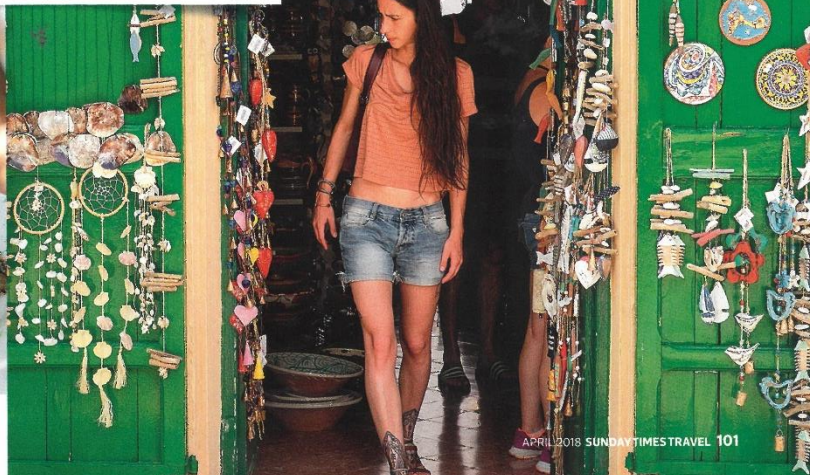
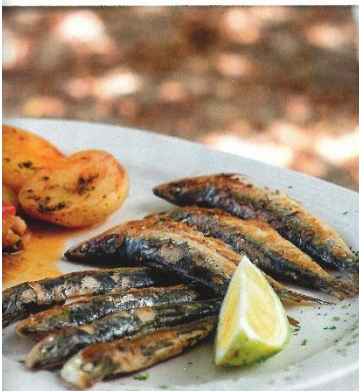




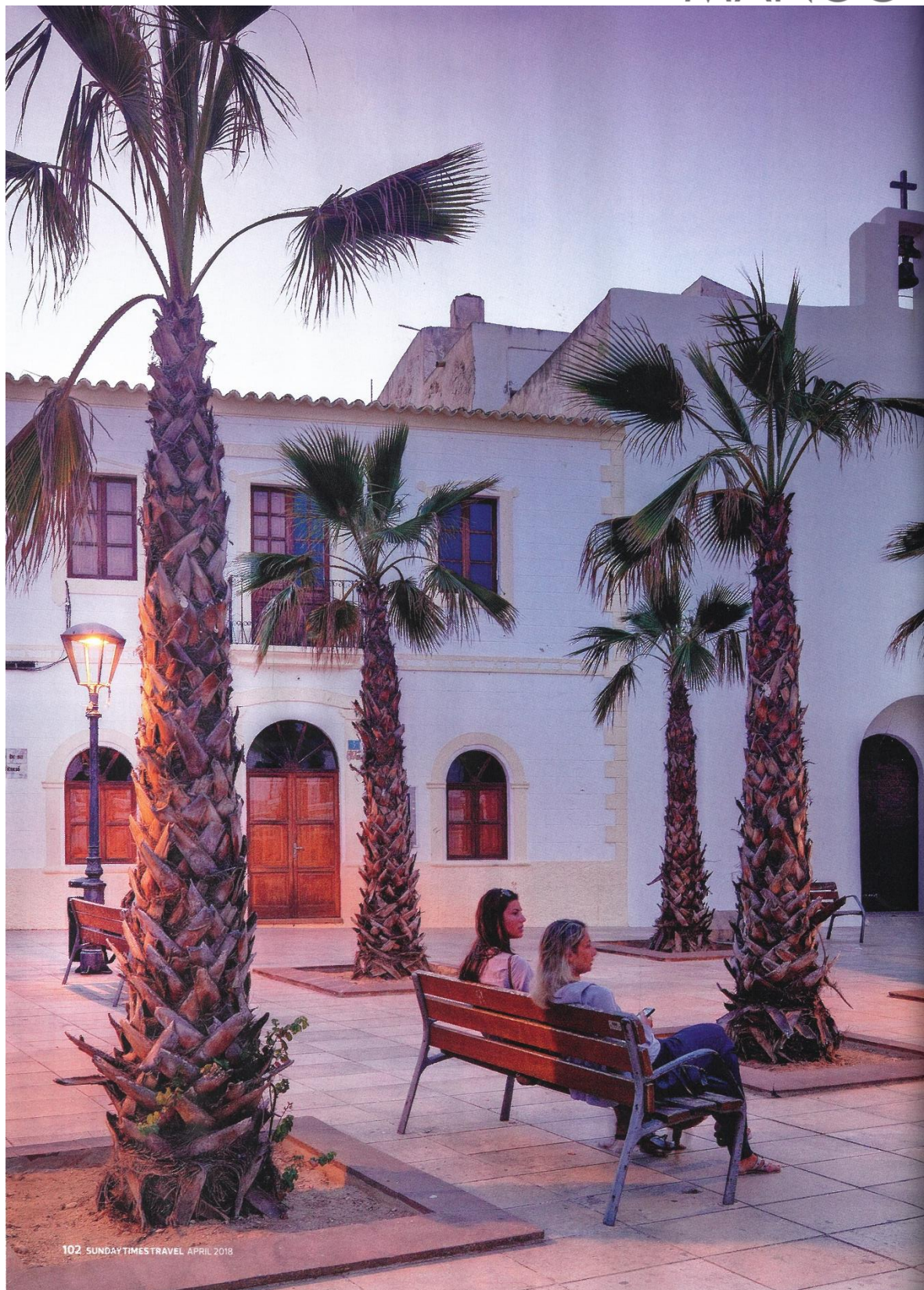
## Formentera



To the lighthouse: clockwise from top left, Cap de Barbaria; jetty at Es Pujols beach; preparing lobsters at Tanga restaurant; shopping for ceramics in Sant Francesc Xavier; Es Còdol Foradat restaurant; Ses Illetes beach. Opposite, Ibiza wall lizard









## Formentera

ON PLATJA DE MIGJORN YOU CAN ORDER THE CALORIE-CONTROLLED CEVICHE AT CHIC 10.7 RESTAURANT, FOLLOWED BY GORGEOUS CALAMARI RINGS AT ES CODOL FORADAT

you go – I learned that lesson for you. And we still order it year after year, anyway.

As the sun makes its apologies and departs for the night, you'll notice sun-kissed couples rolling away towels, and rowdy Spanish families picking up picnic plates (littering is a cardinal sin on Formentera) before folding up chairs and trailing barefoot back to the sand-filled rental car. Formentera is not an island of day-to-night beach clubs or full-moon parties. Everybody is heading back to the villa.

Limited accommodation (like the expensive ferry crossing from Ibiza – about £17 one-way – or the passionately protected *posidonia*) is yet another secret weapon in Formentera's fight to stay unspoiled. There simply aren't that many hotels around. Instead, locals rent out their homes, and these villas are beautifully authentic homes in ravishing, rural spots. Respectful planning laws keep new buildings to a minimum (and those that are built must often be for locals, not holiday lets), while derelict dwellings can only be replaced with another single home (not apartments). Each year I visit, I hear of more hotels closing because developers bent planning regulations, than I hear of new openings. And honestly? I think it's brilliant. There are no ugly high-rises to crop out of my holiday snaps; no nasty new-builds to blight the horizon. You simply need to know who to call when you plan a trip (see Get Me There), and be prepared to dedicate a little more of your holiday budget to digs than usual. Take it from me – it's worth it.

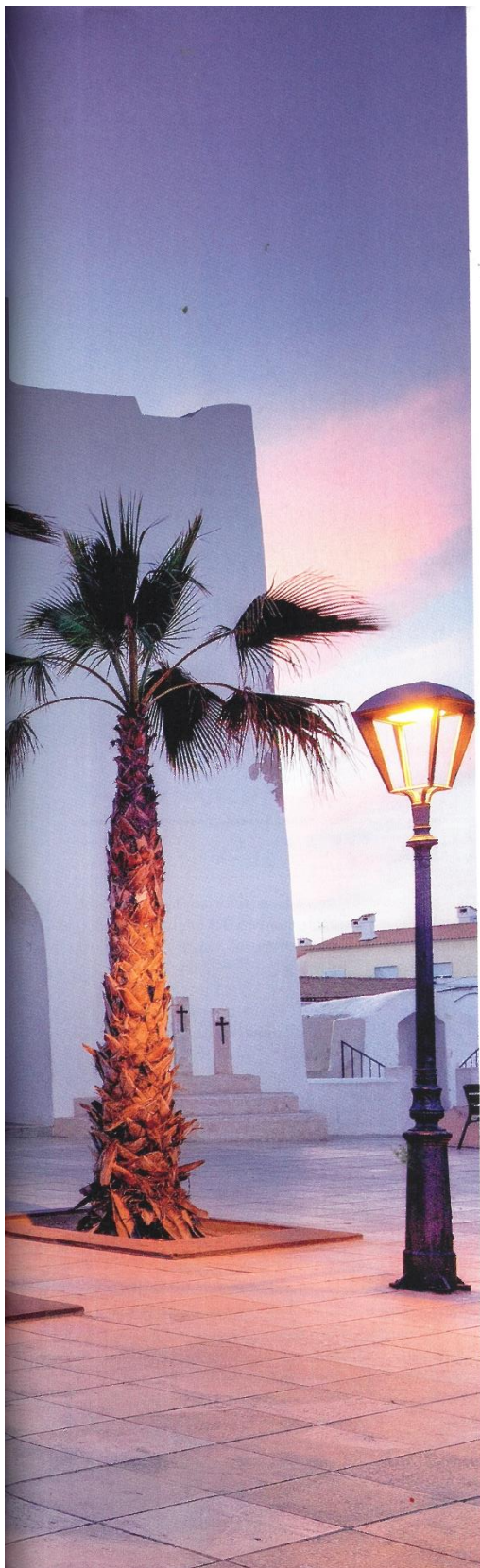
On my last trip I stayed at Can Pep, a simple but stylish stone villa among the vineyards of Cap de Barbaria. We could only ever find it each evening by looking out for the herd of goats beneath a fig tree, then turning right into fields before following a track through olive groves, corn crops and prickly-pear bushes. Our car boot stuffed with bags of local produce – because in this part of Spain siesta still reigns supreme and you must grab what you can when the grocer reopens from 5pm till 8pm – we would hunker down for the evening. We could have gone out for dinner had we wanted – I love Ca Na Joana in Sant Francesc Xavier town where just a few lucky diners sitting beneath vines are served pork belly or mussels just the way Granny 'Joana' used to make them – or to the lounge bars of Es Pujols (the closest thing Formentera has to a resort), but who would have watched that wood-burner for me?

Besides, if your evenings are filled with dinner and dancing, how are you ever going to work up enough of an appetite for those long, lazy lunches? Which, for me, are what Formentera days are all about. On the approach to Platja de Ses Illetes (often voted the most beautiful beach in Europe, sometimes the world), you've Es Moli de Sal, a converted salt mill, where four generations of Catalan families share lobster paella and never-ending plates of prawn croquettes while watching yachts sail in from ➤

### TOP TIP FOR DAYTRIPPERS

You can just dip your toe into Formentera with a day trip from Ibiza – something that is more affordable if you take the tourist 'Aquabus' from popular Playa d'en Bossa. It costs £17 return (instead of £34 from Ibiza Town) but is less frequent

At peace: the Church of Sant Francesc Xavier





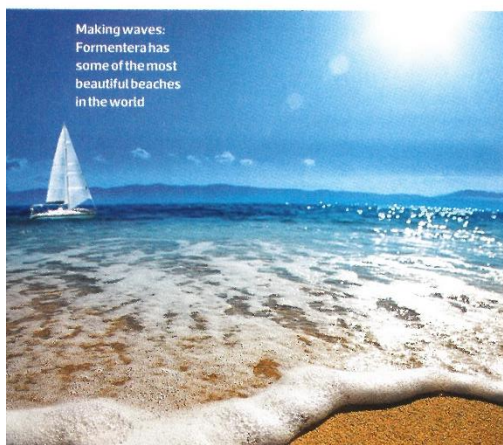
## Formentera

Ibiza. On Platja de Migjorn – a 6km stretch of spotless sand that got its 15 minutes of fame when Jade Jagger holidayed (and later moved) there along with Kate Moss – you can order the calorie-controlled ceviche at chic 10.7 restaurant, followed by gorgeous greasy calamari rings at old-school Es Còdol Foradat, then walk along the beach for gin tonica sundowners at Lucky Bar. Anywhere else in the Balearics, these establishments would be cursed by face-control doormen or stuffy waiting lists; here, on Formentera, they are loyally patronised, but as unpretentious as your local Nando's.

If you experience a misplaced twinge of guilt ('Shouldn't I see a museum?'; 'Isn't there an artisans' market somewhere?'), you need to swat it away with your sun hat. And if it persists, make for one of the island's lighthouses – the drive alone to either Faro de la Mola or Faro Cap de Barbaria feels like an intrepid expedition, your single-lane road slicing through sparse, spiky landscapes that look end-of-the-world eerie. Or there's Sant Francesc Xavier, a gorgeous whitewashed one-church town whose pretty plaza is blessed with both a bar serving sensibly priced *cerveza*, but also enough locally crafted ceramics and chic kaftan stores that your souvenirs are one-offs. Like I told you: Formentera has hit the holiday equivalent of a home run. In another decade, that *caña* of beer will cost double, and those espadrilles will be available in franchises from Qatar to Québec.

On my most recent pilgrimage to Formentera, I overheard a couple of hippies chatting as they sat on the harbour wall. There are tons of them about, but these two looked as if they'd been trying – and failing – to leave the island since 1967 when rockers King Crimson and Pink Floyd first visited. One mentioned to the other the name of a small Spanish island; he'd heard that it had 'only just received electricity' and, as he licked his roll-up he added, it had 'more goats than cars'. His friend mused: 'Hm... lovely. Sounds like Formentera, about 40 years ago.' I strained to hear the name of the island and just caught it before they both started to grumble about the price of tobacco these days.

The name of the island, you ask? I'm afraid I couldn't say. You'll need to buy the magazine in 2038 if you want to know that... ■



Making waves: Formentera has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world



## Get Me There

map: Scott Jessop

### Go independent

There are frequent flights to Ibiza from dozens of UK airports; these become even more regular between May and October. As an example, **Jet2.com** flies from Stansted, Belfast, Birmingham, East Midlands, Newcastle, Manchester, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Leeds Bradford from £83 return. From the airport, take a 10-minute taxi or bus to the port at Ibiza Town. **Trasmapi** (trasmapi.com), **Balearia** (balearia.com) and **Mediterranea Pitiusa** (mediterraneapitiusa.com) are the biggest ferry operators serving Formentera, with boats leaving about every half hour (£17 one way; 35 minutes). You could hire a car at Ibiza airport and choose a boat that takes vehicles (less frequent), but it's easier to hire on Formentera: **PRO Auto** (proautoarentacar.com) has cars at La Savina port from £25 a day.

### Where to stay

A villa is the best way to get under the skin of the island, and makes most

financial sense for families or groups of more than two. **DeCode** has a brilliant range of houses, including Can Suti, just a few steps from Platja Migjorn; the two-bed cottage starts at £1,625 per week (decodeformentera.com).

**Partout Homes** also has several homes, including Can Pep; the five-bedroom house with private pool starts at £6,925 per week (partout-homes.com). If you are going for a short stay or prefer a hotel, try **Gecko Beach Club** on Platja Migjorn (geckobeachclub.com/en; doubles start from £171, B&B) – but beware, rooms book up fast.

### Further information

Visit **formentera.es** for more on the island itself, or see **illesbalears.travel** for a general overview of the Balearics. Recommended restaurants include the following: **Tanga** (restaurantetanga.com); **Es Moli de Sal** (esmolidosal.es); **10.7** (10punto7.com); **Ca Na Joana** (canajoanaformentera.es); and **Es Còdol Foradat** (00 34 971 328281).

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