

# MALLORCA, THE WRITER'S ISLAND

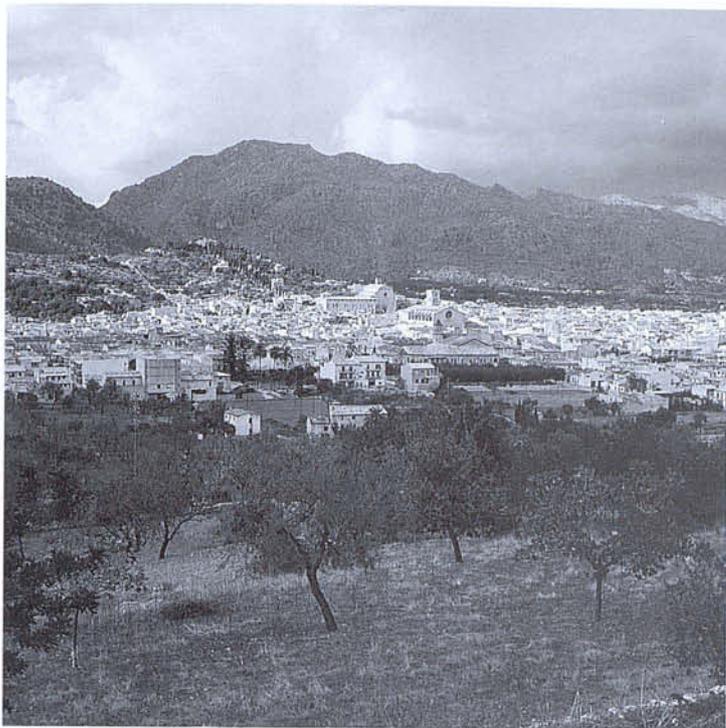


TORRENT DE PAREIS

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“A BEAUTIFUL LAND IN WHICH TO GROW OLD SLOWLY!”,  
EXCLAIMED MIGUEL DE UNAMUNO WHEN HE STAYED  
THERE IN 1906. A FINE LAND TO DESCRIBE UNHURRIEDLY!,  
AS THOSE WHO CAME ACROSS IT IN THEIR TRAVELS MUST  
HAVE SAID.

MARIA DE LA PAU JANER AUTHOR



POLLENSA



VALLEMOSSA

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**P**eople say that having the good fortune of being born on an island shapes your character, that it makes you see everything through a haze the colour of the sea, through eyes that are coloured by its power. Perhaps that's why everyone with a traveller's soul has at some time found themselves wandering over an island wishing they could spend more time there.

Mallorca is an island which is used to visitors in search of the warmth of its beaches and its sun –which doesn't turn its nose up at them, because it knows it needs them. It hasn't always been like that, though. There were gloomy years that seemed to drag on endlessly, periods when life on the island crawled by, when time was never measured from outside, when the Mallorcans' existence was unruffled by events from abroad. It was a land marked by the rigours of hardship, a land of savage beauty and of men who never changed their sullen expression. They had submitted to troops and armies, had seen flags of all sorts raised, but they didn't know how to welcome those who came alone from far away in search of shelter.

They had to learn, in spite of everything, to smile at their visitors. And they even learned to dance to the tunes the visitors brought with them, but that's another story. Now I'm speaking of the countryside, clean and untouched, back in the time when the island of Mallorca was almost paradise itself.

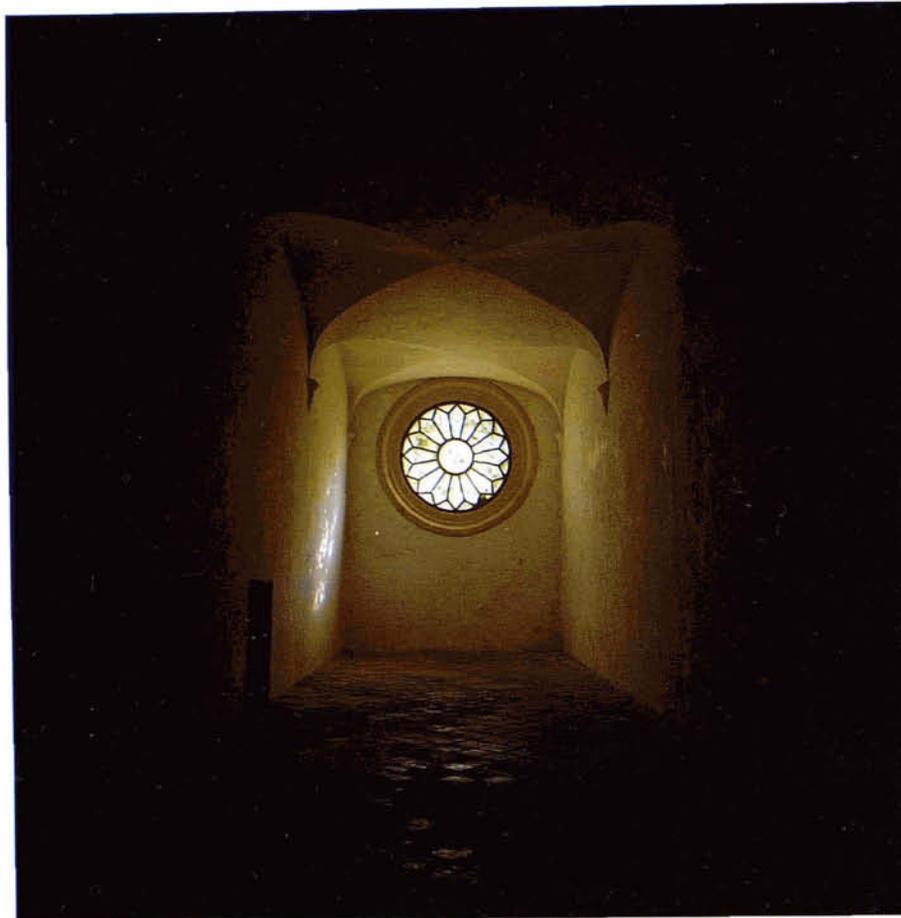
A paradise full of hardship, though, with shadows that darkened the greens. A paradise created out of the suffering of the men and women who lived there. Hard as the rocks. Difficult as the sea. But that was its strength, that was what surprised the visitors.

They say also that Mallorca is an island that stimulates the creativity of those who come near. Perhaps this is why so many painters have chosen to paint the light here. So many writers have been born here and many others have stopped off. Those who arrived here for whatever reason often filled pages and pages dedicated to the island, writings that today are the testimony of travellers who have wandered over this land and that reflect a range of sensibilities, that form the chronicle of a past age.

Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos was banished to Mallorca because of his differences with Godoy, a Spanish politician of the nineteenth century. The twentieth century had just begun when the Asturian writer arrived at a spot he hadn't had the opportunity to choose for himself. First he was imprisoned in the Carthusian monastery of Valldemossa, then in the castle of Bellver until the year 1808. Two magnificent settings for a tragic situation. The contrast between these places and his experiences there was truly striking. But Jovellanos managed to shake off the nightmare and reflect the little macrocosm in his writings.

One of the foreign names most profoundly linked to the island is probably that of the writer George Sand. Her relationship with the islanders was neither harmonious nor a particularly fortunate one. On the other hand, the links she established with the countryside of Mallorca gave rise to pages of literature with an extraordinary depth of feeling.

It seems that one of the things that drove her to write her book *Un hivern a*



CARTHUSIAN MONASTERY OF VALLEMOSSA

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*Majorque*—whose publication shook the island calm—was the book *Souvenirs d'un voyage d'art à l'île de Majorque*, by Jean-Joseph Bonaventure Laurens, a draftsman, writer and musician, a book which stands out for the lithographs it contains. George Sand bitterly criticized those gloomy-looking men who were unable to understand her, the women who looked askance at her, as if they saw the Devil in this foreign woman with her deliberately manly bearing. During her stay in Mallorca she received a visit from Carles Dembowski, a Polish traveller who described his stay on the island in his anecdote-filled correspondence with the writer. The letters are included in his book *Dos anys a Espanya i Portugal durant la guerra civil*.

Images that reflect what travellers often call the garden of the Hesperides, places like the valley of Sóller, full of orange trees, or the almond trees covered with

flowers in the dead of winter, the pitted hills and the tiny coves. The Archduke of Austria Louis Salvador of Hapsburg-Lorraine and Bourbon was especially familiar with the island and its inhabitants. An educated, inquisitive traveller, he arrived in Mallorca for the first time in 1867 and fell deeply in love with the island. Five years later he bought Miramar and spent long periods there. Having made the island his refuge and subjected the islanders to his domineering whims, he had endless amorous adventures with the peasant girls of Valldemossa—according to local gossip, this is why there are so many people of fair complexion in the area. Amongst his various affairs, one that stands out is the long story of meetings and appointments with Caterina Homar. The Archduke wrote *Die Balearen* (1869-1891), a work of encyclopaedic proportions. Another traveller who plied the waters of the Mediterranean

was Gaston Vuillier. His best-known work is *Les Iles oubliées* (Paris 1893), where he records his impressions of his travels in the Balearics and describes the people and their customs, the landscape, the city of Palma and its bay.

Writers have spoken of the island in chronicles that hold back time and describe it, sometimes with surprise, sometimes as though they had discovered a difficult world, as intense as its landscape. Borges conjured up the island in a poem and a story. Rubèn Darío devoted poems to it as well as two stories, *La isla del tesoro* and *El oro de Mallorca*. Graves settled there and his remains now rest in a pretty little cemetery in the hills of Deià.

“A beautiful land in which to grow old slowly!”, exclaimed Miguel de Unamuno when he stayed there in 1906. A fine land to describe unhurriedly!, as those who came across it in their travels must have said. ■