

# FORMENTERA



TWO PENINSULAS GO TO MAKE UP THIS FLAT ISLAND WITH ITS TWO SALT WATER LAGOONS. IT HAS JUST ONE PARISH, SANT FRANCESC XAVIER, SPREAD OVER AN AREA OF 82 SQUARE KILOMETRES.

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**T**he never-ending light picks out every instant and every corner of the island. When the sun sets, all the lighthouses of Formentera take over and their beams sweep the horizon to warn sailors. The land is hard and beautiful. Not for nothing is it visited by one of Jules Verne's characters on his way round the world. There aren't many curious little islands like Formentera in our sea; flat: for some, with the outline of a boot, for others, of a prehistoric axe. Surely no other isolated community of less

than four thousand inhabitants has attracted so many out of work sociologists, doctors and scholars, searching for the obvious and the fantastic by the light of their abstract science.

Throughout history, the inhabitants of Formentera have suffered and enjoyed a fate which is typical of any coastal life; the fear of more or less imperial invasions, attacks by the Arabs, commerce of doubtful legality, and piracy, all gave way to the total abandonment of the island. From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries

Formentera was deserted. There was no escape from the marauding visits of enemy ships. Later on came the other exodus, towards America. There was massive emigration. If ever there was a poor, waterless land, this is it. A peasant woman, dazzled by the splendour of mass tourism, remarked,

*"Before, we had to go Havana. Now we've got Havana here."*

The inhabitants of Formentera have perhaps managed to understand or assimilate the tourist revolution better than the





more inaccessible island peasantry of Ibiza\*. There wasn't a man on Formentera who hadn't been to sea, who wasn't familiar with the world outside. Neither Barbary Point nor Ibiza mark the edge of the world. They used "the peasant speech", and the sailors and farmers, even the locals who work in the tourist industry, consider themselves "peasants", conscious as they are of belonging to the land and the community, so scattered and so varied.

Two peninsulas go to make up this flat island with its two salt water lagoons. It has just one parish, Sant Francesc Xavier, spread over an area of 82 square kilometres.

Formentera must have the most beautiful place-names in the Mediterranean. The Dice, Black Island, The Isle of Rats, The Small Marsh-mallow, Great Marsh-mallow, The Sponge, The Brush, The Great Snail-field, The isle of the Hanged, Gateway Point Island, The Straits, etc., are just some of the most eloquent and significant imprints we come across when we set sail for Formentera from Ibiza. The crossing is by no means easy. The sea is unpredictable and everybody knows of the treachery of Neptune. The devil himself is behind the weather here. The mysteries of their currents and winds make the seven kilometres of the straits a remarkably dangerous natural border. An overconfident Italian liner once rammed its hull against the rocks hidden beneath the briny mirror. An ironic shipwreck.

J. is a journalist who always looks unkempt and unshaven, and when he arrived on Formentera, he was flabbergasted. More than thirty years have passed since he fell in love with the island. In those days it still

had no electricity and communications weren't always guaranteed. J. opted for international news reporting and, with a large short- and long-wave radio, he set up his own observatory beside an immense fig-tree whose branches threaded their way in through his little window. Soon afterwards, another roving reporter threw in the towel and took a job as an assistant in a chemist's shop. Pau Riba strummed at his guitar and let his hair grow, while at local festivals the peasants danced and sang as they had learned two thousand years before. In spite of everything, Formentera isn't a paradise. It's an entelechy.

The wind has bent the pines and savines over. The green grapevines have never known phylloxera and the sharp, salty wine is delightful, as are the cheeses or the salted fish strung up on a pole in the wind and sun. One can still find unexpected corners, lakes of many colours and interesting characters. The occasional peasant woman dressed in black from head to foot, with her long pigtail and her simple peasant shoes. A foreigner may cycle past, with sandy beard and straw hat, a copy of "Le Monde" under his arm. Smuggling lives on in the memory of many of the locals as the chief occupation in the island's recent history. For the church, it wasn't a sin and legally it isn't a crime, it's just a tax fiddle. A politician from the island, Miquel Gaietà Soler, who stood up to Godoy, made smuggling legal. He was very popular, but when he was removed from office, the people took to the streets and sacked his properties. Soler's string-pulling had favoured almost all his family and friends. This is typical in a small community. In Formentera one finds special family ties, which are strengthened by inbreeding,

and which are the subject of a study by the anthropologist Joan Bestard. The solid, deeply rooted island structure has turned to smuggling and the "all for one" as a means of subsistence and progress.

This nocturnal adventure and the tightly woven social fabric are only to be found in places such as this. Smuggling started in the Middle Ages, when the inhabitants collected salt from the rock pools and puddles beside the sea, rather than going to buy it at the king's shops and paying duty. In the Balearic and Pitiüsa Islands, even the powerful priests, the church officials and the village priests formed part of the smuggling network.

Many things have been said of Formentera; that it's an almost African island, that it's filled with light, that it could have been a land of gods and a pirates' nest, but as the poet, Marià Villangómez, said:

Not with my thoughts, though, would I  
[understand  
all this tiny world that ends at Formentera,  
that grows under my gaze and neatly fits  
within my gaze: these ancient Pitiüses:  
mountainous Eivissa behind us to the  
[north;  
the Straits where now the lighthouses  
[shine over the rocks;  
the proud Vedrà, distinguished, stands  
[aloof;  
the sea is also ours, the sea, always the  
[sea;  
and the mysterious beauty of this Formentera,  
more sea than land, with its two lakes  
[where daylight dies.  
All my useless thinking here retreats; and I  
[live  
with my eyes, in the silence and in the  
[rumble of deep echoes. ●

\*In Catalan, Eivissa.