



SA LLAPASSA

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THE “POSSESSIONS” OF MALLORCA

THE DAYS WHEN THE “POSSESSIONS” OF MALLORCA, ISLAND FARMHOUSES AND THEIR ESTATES, WERE THRIVING CENTRES OF LIFE HAVE GONE. NOW THEY EXIST AS VESTIGES OF OTHER TIMES AND ARE EXAMPLES OF A STURDY ARCHITECTURE OF GREAT BEAUTY.

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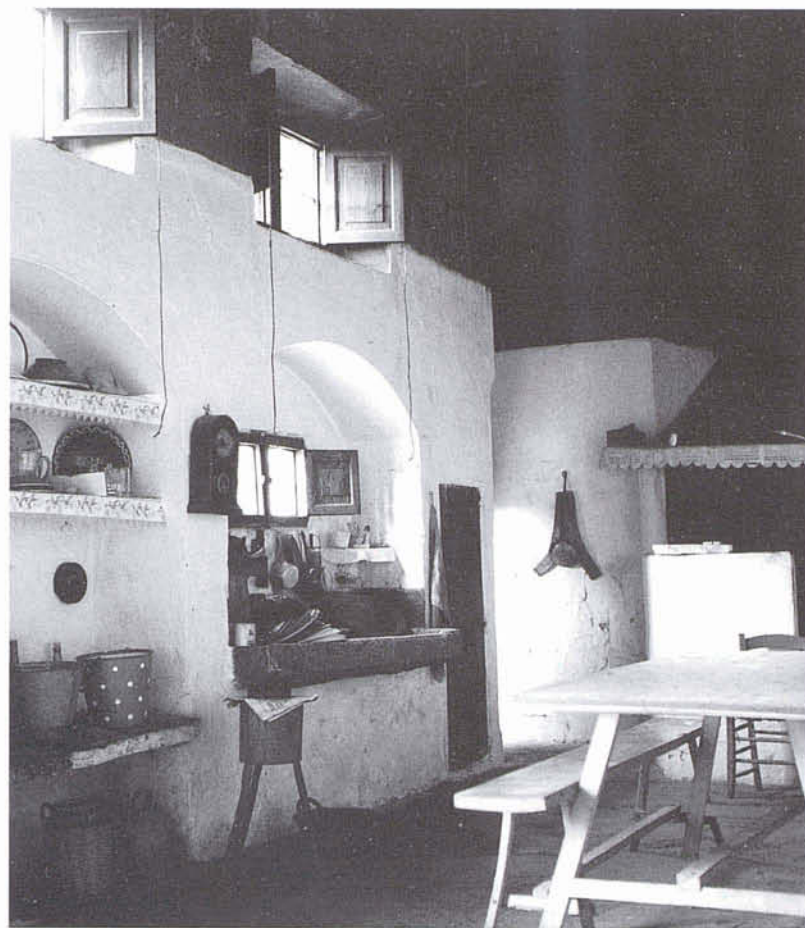
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Until not many decades ago, Mallorca was a land with a rural economy. Long before tourism imposed its pace on a society used to slow growth, the life of the Majorcans in the country revolved around small centres of population, the island's villages. The countryside then was divided into a series of plots belonging to the peasants who worked the land, or, in the case of a considerable extension, was the property of the country gentry, powerful landowners respected all over Mallorca. Many men, and often even whole families, depended on the estate they worked, where they lived and very often where they had been born. An existence ruled by the cycles of the earth, at one with nature, wise to the importance of the sun and the rain that marked the rhythm of the crops, of the

life of the fields and of the animals. Hard times, and very often times of misery, later idealized by many city poets who hoped to rediscover a lost paradise in a reality of which they knew nothing at all. The days when the Majorcan estates or *possessions*, island farmhouses and their estates, were thriving centres of life have gone. Now they exist as vestiges of other times and are examples of a sturdy architecture of great beauty, of those houses conceived as homes for many, a genuine protective fortress against bad years and storms. Before that, though, they served as the nucleus for a complex social organisation that found shelter there; from the *senyor*, a ghost-like figure on the estate, often no more than a visitor to the land, to the *amo*, who usually had a house of his own on the estate and was

responsible for overseeing the work in the fields, in direct contact with the workers, the mainstay of the estate's economic development. And then there were the fixed employees and the casual workers, hired to undertake specific work on the crops. The *parellers*, *oguers*, *missatges*, *porquers*, *hortalans*.

The *possessions* were formed by large houses and a whole series of related adjacent constructions. These were the employees' accommodation and the buildings in which they kept the animals, the ferment and the tools. In Mallorca, the *possessions* today have become models of good taste, dwellings imitated in the home-and-garden magazines that preach a return to country life, to familiar, secure places, to the old ways of working stone to build the



KITCHEN OF SA ILAPASSA

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houses of the Majorcan peasantry, very often filled with riches, frequently centres of small, thriving microcosms that today have lost the dynamism that once characterized them. Nucleuses that become an empty shell, imitated and observed from a modern standpoint, rarely inhabited anew, perhaps because they are so difficult to adapt to the pace of life today.

If we visit the land of the Plane of Mallorca and see the Puig de Randa, very close to the place where Ramon Llull withdrew to pray, we shall find close by the houses of Aubenya, one of the most famous *possessions* of the region. The building takes us back to the times of the Catalan conquest by King James, although it must already have been the site of an earlier Arab farmstead. A few years ago, Maria del Mar Bonet, a Majorcan singer of recognized worth, used to sing a song about this part of Mallorca:

"In Aubenya they were reaping barley a month before Saint John's Eve

when they saw the huge field they cried God have mercy..." Because some years ago Aubenya had twenty people working full-time, even in winter, and in summer there would be more than fifty. Life on the estate always centred on the *clastra*, a paved area in front of the main façade of these constructions, a place where all its inhabitants would meet, often in the shade of the great nettle-tree, the tree that so often stands, alone, by the paths of the Majorcan *possessions*. Close by, the main door of the house, a sundial, the stone coat-of-arms, remains today of past splendours. The same splendour that strikes walkers as they approach Sa Torre, once the finest *possessió* in the whole of Mallorca, the property of a Majorcan lady of enormous wealth. They called her *La Gran Cristiana*, and people said you could walk the whole of the way round the island without ever leaving her property. At Sa Torre, there is a *clastra* of enormous proportions, now invaded by the weeds and the obli-

vion. The house, with more than thirty rooms, is full of dusty old furniture, works of art, collections of Mozarabic plates, of heavy curtains, of crowded bookshelves, of Neo-Classical paintings. And then, the estate's Neo-Gothic chapel, with artistic stained-glass windows, sometimes broken, with cracks and dust, covered with spider's webs.

When Costa i Llobera, the poet from Pollença who wrote the *Horacianes*, the follower of the Latin classics, wrote the poem *El pi de Formentor*, he must almost certainly have been referring to one of the luxuriant trees that grew on the land belonging to his family, who lived at the eastern tip of the north coast of Mallorca. Today, Formentor is only known for its beaches and for the hotel that bears its name and that takes in hundreds of sun-starved tourists every summer. But a long time ago, the old houses of Formentor seemed to keep watch over the visitors who went from the beach to the lighthouse. Just next door, the old watchtower has a



ALFÀBIA

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spiral staircase with a stone handrail. From the tower, where the corn was hidden for fear of pirate invasions, fierce sieges that came from across the sea, the distant horizon can be made out through the narrow loopholes.

In another part of Mallorca, outside the town of Llubí, there stands the castle of Vinagrella, beside a gigantic holm-oak, near the semi-circular arch of the gate. A gate from which we can see inside the house, with the staircase leading to the principal residence, and opposite, outside, the *castra* surrounded by arches. Beside it, the chapel, a beautifully preserved little church. Then, in another nearby town, Sineu, we discover a *posseïó* with an Arabic name, Deffa, a place described with words of wonder by the Archduke Louis Salvador of Austria in his writing, almost a fairy-tale palace. It's reached by a shady path lined with wild olive trees, this land of tales handed down by the Majorcans over centuries. There the watchtower—one of the oldest on the island, built in

the year 900—serves to look out over the broad plane, where all the gardens are bathed in green in the clean breeze, in surroundings of fragile, almost decadent beauty, the estate's accommodation is an example of good taste, the chapel, guarded by two stone lions, is white. On either side of the outer gate, a battlemented wall offered an almost medieval image.

The entrance to Alfàbia is full of plane-trees to guide us, offering the visitor the entrance to the fountains which, from the gardens, dazzle us with their watery patterns, emphasizing the outline of the bougainvilleas, of the leaves. The origins of Alfàbia take us back to the time of the Arab domination of the island, when there was a rich man named Ben Abet, whose lands stretched throughout the north of Mallorca. His dearest possession was Alfàbia, where he lived surrounded by acres of gardens. During the Catalan conquest, the Lord of Alfàbia adapted to the new times, converting to Christianity and

offering his support to King James, which guaranteed the preservation of his wealth.

But these are just a few scattered names, picked almost at random from a range of possibilities. In Mallorca, the *possessions* have had to catch up with the new times, when the days no longer revolve around the cycles of the land, and years are not measured according to rainfall or drought, at a moment when the work of the land has been discredited and shunned, and is now just the task of isolated little groups amongst the peasantry, almost entirely unprotected. Restaurants have been built in some of the old houses on the estates, or luxury homes where tourism comes in search of real rest, far from the drudgery and the turmoil of the coast. Some open their gardens to the public at certain times, others remain deserted, unprotected and with no chance of surviving. They are the remains of a bygone age, one that is almost remote now, that fades into the distance. ■