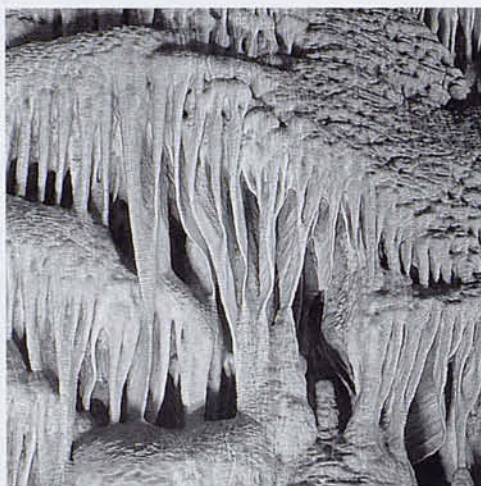


THE MILLENARIAN CAVES OF MALLORCA

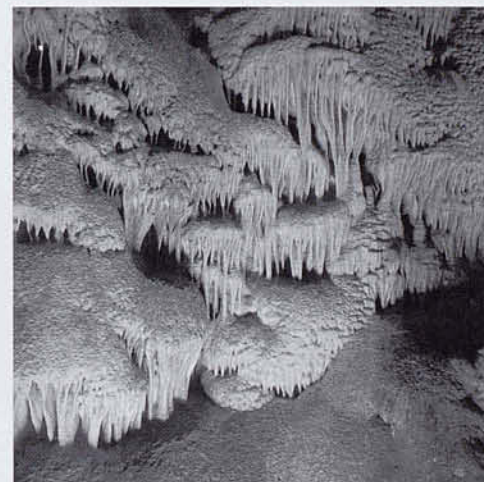


COVES DE CAMPANET. MALLORCA

*AQUÍ L'OBRA DES SEGLES LES ROQUES TRANSFIGURA,
I SENS DOLOR NI OBSTACLES, TRANQUIL.LA PROSSEGUEIX
POLINT AQUESTS ABISMES LA MÀ DE LA NATURA...*

MIQUEL COSTA I LLOBERA

*HERE THE WORK OF CENTURIES THE ROCKS TRANSFIGURES,
AND PAINLESSLY, RELENTLESSLY, THE HAND OF NATURE
CALMLY GOES ON POLISHING THE DEPTHS...*



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Mallorca is an island with millenarian caves. There are passages that lead deep into the earth, subterranean lakes, stalactites and stalagmites forming ghostly figures, and the running water and damp that shape them. The chance to lose oneself in the depths and discover the mysteries of these rocks draws the visitors who arrive at the island from all over the world, perhaps because human nature, necessarily subjected to changes over time and around the world, feels a special fasci-

nation for these rare and unusual places where the hours seem to have stopped for ever. As Miquel Costa i Llobera, the Majorcan poet and leader of the Majorcan School, said in his poem *La deixa del geni grec*, set in the caves of Artà, the stones there have centuries of calm. The caves of Artà are in the town limits of Capdepera, close to the beach of Canyamel. Situated some fifty metres below sea level, the entrance opens towards Cape Vermell. The caves run for 450 metres and boast a twenty-two-metre stal-

agmite known as the *Queen of the Columns*. They have always attracted the attention of geologists. Although there are inscriptions from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was not until the nineteenth century that they were first explored. The Archduke Louis Salvador devotes a chapter to them in his book *Die Balearen*. Victor Hugo and Eugeni d'Ors were other illustrious visitors. The "coves del Drac" (Dragon's Caves), with a total length of 1,700 metres and divided into twelve halls, are the largest

in Mallorca. They belong to Manacor and are formed in white Tertiary molasse, deposited by the sea to form the coastal relief. The stalagmites are of an enormous size and are characterized by their irregularity, while the stalactites, on the other hand, are very stylized. The caves contain six interconnected lakes linked to the "Cova des Hams" (Cave of Hooks) through canals and siphons. At the entrance to the caves we find a stone construction which suggests that it must have been used for burials. It takes the form of a passage built out of stones forming a false vault. Remains of Talayotic, Roman and Arab pottery have also been found. In 1896, the Archduke Louis Salvador sponsored a scientific exhibition to the caves. Nowadays, on one of the lakes, known as Lake Martel after the French speleologist who led the expedition, concerts of classical music are held. The Coves del Drac are visited by more than 800,000 people a year.

The Cova dels Hams is also located in the Manacor town limits. This cave was formed by a limestone cave-in, has sheer walls and a circular floor plan which becomes oval towards the exterior. It is characterized by the great variety of forms of its stalagmites. One example are those in the *Sala del Somni d'un Àngel* (Hall of the Angel's Dream), which stand out in all directions heedless of the vertical trend normally imposed by the falling water. In many cases they are shaped like hooks, which is what gives the place its name. One of the lakes is especially impressive, and is known as the *Mar de Venècia* (Sea of Venice) on account of its size. Since the middle of this century, numerous events have been held at the natural entrance to the cave, which has a lush growth of fig-trees, laurels, maidenhair and ivy.

The only entrance to the "Coves de Campanet", on the southern slope of the peak of Sant Miquel, in the village of Campanet, was originally a small hole in the rocks. This hole, which had been known to local farmers since very ancient times, was the source of a great many legends. In summer, when Mallorca was like an oven under the burning sun, a cool breeze came from the hole and a constant murmuring could be heard inside. In 1945 it was enlarged and it became possible to explore the caves. Until then, no human being had ever been inside them. They run for 400 metres and contain several small lakes.



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The island of Mallorca is riddled with paths inside the earth. The caves branch out and are inhabited by water currents and by the living rock, formed by the slow passage of millennia. The silence is broken only by the comments of the delighted visitors. In the poem by Costa i Llovera, the virgin Nurredduna dies in the caves of Artà as she embraces the lyre of the prisoner from her village whom she has freed. The price of freedom for her loved one is her own life, and Costa describes the maiden's death by stoning in the shelter of the caves, a true

temple of stone. The stalactites and the stalagmites bear witness, looking on with a certain envy as her life slips away. A life which the rock contemplates with regret because it can never be its own:

*For one beat of the anxiety with which
your heart expires
we would give the centuries of calm we
have.*

Today, years after the poet wrote *La deïxa del geni grec*, the life of thousands of visitors is bewitched by the stillness of the rocks. ■