

A wide-angle photograph of a coastal landscape. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by a vibrant turquoise sea that transitions into a deeper blue as it meets the horizon. On the right side, a rugged, light-colored rock cliff rises from the water's edge, dotted with sparse green vegetation. The sky above is a pale, clear blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall mood is serene and natural.

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Ibiza may dominate the headlines for its own particular brand of hedonism, but its little sister Formentera has come into its own as a destination that prides itself on being different. Welcome to the Quiet Isle...

Girls in elaborate eye make-up and boys in vests sculpting finely tuned bodies ply Ibiza Town's harbour front. Above the pastiche of whitewashed buildings and stone ramparts preside billboards advertising the plethora of clubs for which this particular island in the Balearic Sea has become famous. It's May and the party season hasn't officially started yet, but already there's a buzz in the air – the thrum of the parties that have already started and the promise of those to come.

We stroll along the waterfront, just behind our ravers, towards the glittering sea, but rather than join them on their hunt for the next party, we're going to let our hair down in a different way. We're getting on a ferry out of Ibiza and away from its spirit of hedonism to an exclusive destination that does chilling out on its own terms.

We're headed to Formentera, an island only a 30-minute ferry ride south across the water, which has long been in its big sister's shadow. It has now come into its own as a place where you can truly switch off but also have the best of both worlds, with the option to dine out at fine restaurants and savour cocktails at bars perched on craggy rocks overlooking impossibly beautiful vistas. There are a few clubs too, if the call of Ibiza is too strong.

Formentera is the smallest of Spain's main Balearic Islands and is surprisingly diverse for just 32 square miles of land. The locals are fiercely proud of their island's natural beauty and much has been done to preserve it. There's currently a dune regeneration programme, so don't go trekking off the beaten track, and not all the roads are tarmacked so if you want to explore the lesser-known corners of the island, your best bet is to hire a bike. There are cycle paths all over the island – the clearly delineated Circuits Verds, or Green Tours, plot diverse paths through some of the island's most stunning spots.

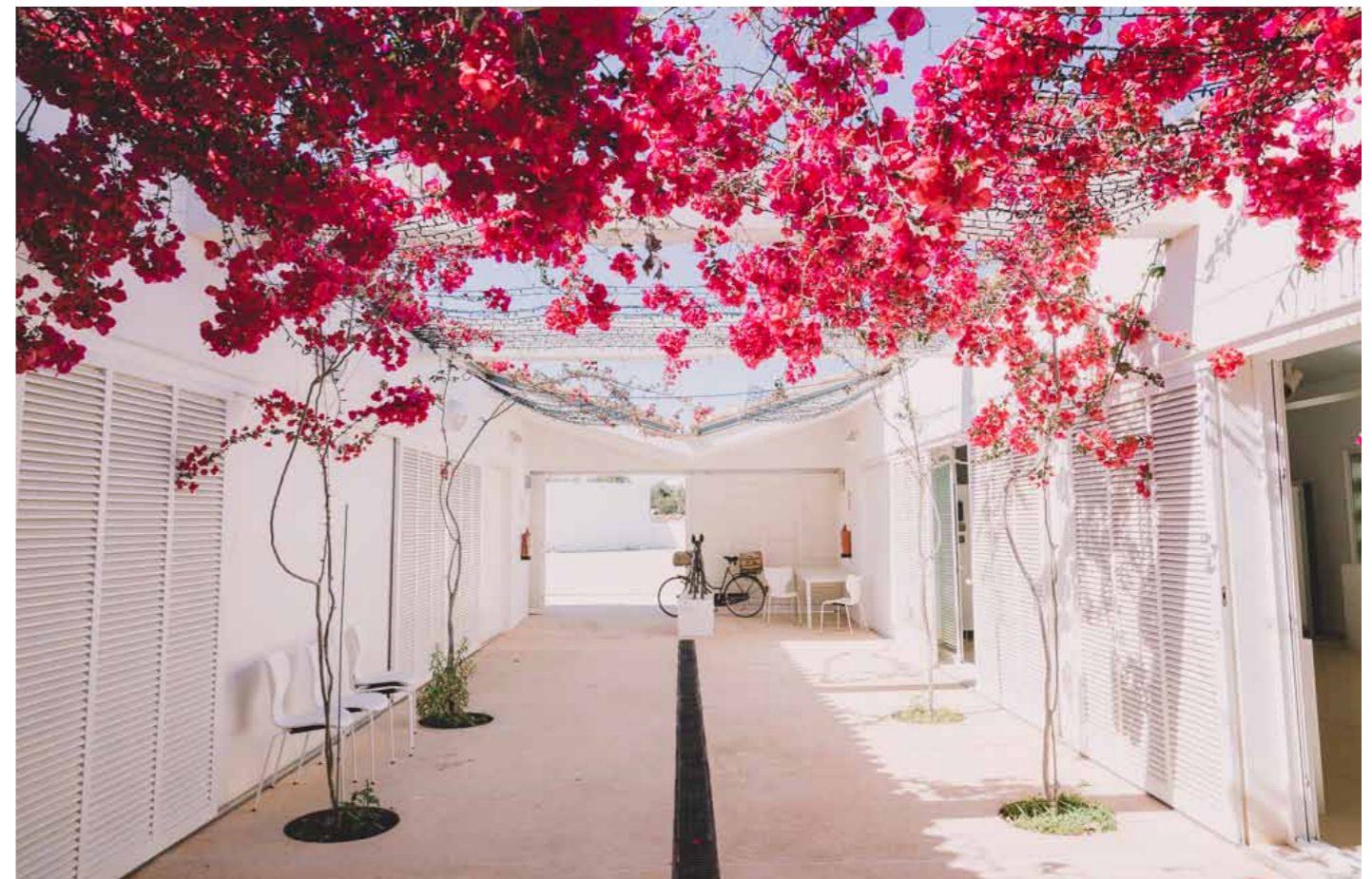
'There aren't even traffic lights here,' says Nura Sanchez, who runs the Es Pas Agroturismo hotel in Es Caló, which is set among swaying grass fields and clusters of olive trees. 'When I go to Ibiza now, I feel like a real country person.'

Nura's hardly a country bumpkin. Born in the US to Argentinian parents and schooled in Europe, she moved from Ibiza to Formentera three years ago with her family. 'A lot of people thought we'd be bored as it's so quiet but it's a lot of fun,' she says. 'It's like Ibiza 20 years ago. It gets deserted out of season, while Ibiza is more of a year-round destination. My husband and I worked at the big clubs in Ibiza for many years, so we've had that experience and wanted something different. You need to make more of an effort to come here, so it's quiet and more exclusive.'

This doesn't mean that the beautiful people don't arrive in their droves during the summer. The north of Formentera is the most popular with tourists, being close to the port of La Savina and Ses Salines National Park, which stretches between the south of the island of Ibiza and the north of Formentera. Ses Salines dominates Formentera's postcards with its stretches of white sand and azure waters, and has generated a fair few column inches thanks to the celebrities that frequent the Juan y Andrea restaurant at the Platja de ses Illetes. We're talking Jay-Z and Beyoncé, so the real deal. In season, this means ladies frequent the beach in high heels and full make-up, so not ideal chill-out >>

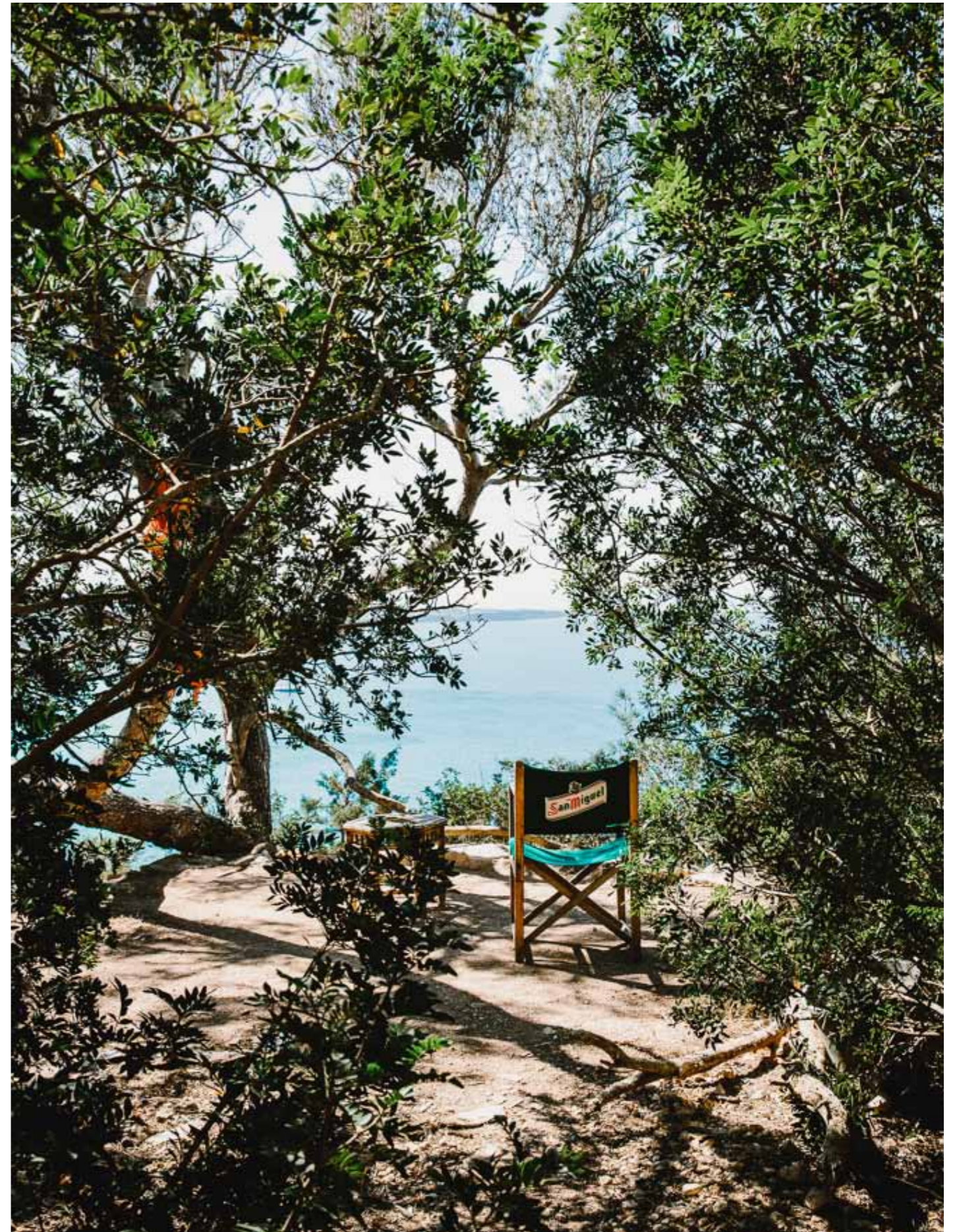


The pretty island couldn't be more different from the hustle and bustle of Ibiza, just a few miles across the water. Tourists come here to relax and enjoy everything Formentera has to offer





Formentera is famous for the incredible colour of the water that laps its beautiful shores. There are secret beaches and look-out points everywhere, where people set themselves up to enjoy the surroundings





'It's like Ibiza 20 years ago,' says Nura Sanchez (left), who runs the Es Pas Agroturismo hotel. Below: the Far des Cap de Barbària lighthouse sits atop craggy cliffs overlooking the sea



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territory. For a quieter beach session, head onto the other side of the skinny promontory to Platja de Llevant, which is a little quieter.

Formentera is especially famous for its beaches, and it has an impressive variety to explore. From the sandy, celebrity-friendly stretches of Ses Salinas, we drive west past the pink salt pans that are more for show these days, but on the odd occasion you may see someone doing some harvesting for old time's sake. The road takes us along the winding roads that ply a path around the Estany Pudent and Estany des Peix salt lagoons. We press on west towards Can Marroig, which is also within the national park but it feels like a world away.

Can Marroig was once a farm and is now open to the public to explore. There's the main house, which often has exhibitions about the local area and its history – it was once a major wine production area for Formentera – but we head straight out through the pine forests towards the craggy sandstone cliffs to look out at Ibiza across the water and admire the little yacht bobbing in the cove below. We're told that the locals sometimes swim here, leaping off the rocks into the sea below. We're tempted but the climb back up to the top looks a little too challenging.

In the distance is Torre de la Gavina, one of Formentera's five defence towers, built in the 18th century to protect the island against pirates. Formentera suffered at the hands of these marauders – even churches had cannons in their roofs – hence the network of towers to establish visual communication between the most strategic points of the island. During the day they communicated with smoke, and used fire at night.

It may have been pretty scary to live on the island with the constant threat of pirates, but these days some islanders celebrate this high-octane chapter in Formentera's history by flying skull and crossbone flags above their shops and restaurants. In fact, there's the Piratabus beach bar down on the long sandy stretch of Platja de Migjorn, which extends in a crescent across the south of the island. This

little wooden shack with its pirate flag fluttering aloft does a punishing mojito, as it should, named as it is.

Formentera certainly attracts those who like to do things a little differently. In Sant Francesc Xavier, Formentera's stylish village of a capital 'city', we meet Sol Courreges Boné, an artist who's originally from Argentina but was attracted to Formentera for its creative freedom.

'This place is filled with crazies,' she laughs. 'But I love it.' Sol's current project is titled Be Different, inspired by the island's countercultural spirit, and is about a little fish called Sargo who always swims in the wrong direction. Walking around the well-heeled streets of San Francesc, we spot a few Sargos of our own – leathery tans, elaborately curled moustaches, beads and dreadlocks – but no one bats an eyelid. Anything goes here.

Sol leans in conspiratorially and asks us if we'd like in on a local secret. Of course we do. She pulls out a map and circles the Far des Cap de Barbària, a lighthouse on the southernmost tip of the island that sits atop craggy cliffs overlooking the sea. 'It's the best place for sunsets,' she says quietly. 'But not everyone knows about the blue stairs.'

'The blue stairs?' I ask.

She tells us to look carefully within a 30m radius of the lighthouse. 'You'll find them,' she says. 'Some artists painted them blue so you know you've come to the right place.'

Down we drive to the lighthouse, the setting sun leading our path to these magical stairs that we spend 30 minutes trying to find until some French tourists clustered around a hole in the rocky ground lead us to our prize.

We climb down the stairs and into a cave that leads out to a ledge with the most spectacular views of the sea, a white sailboat completing the picture. It's the kind of cave that Homer would have written about in *The Odyssey* if he'd had the chance. The sun dips into the sea and the acid green Formentera lizards dart across the rocks, casting long shadows. If there was ever a place to disappear, this is it. 