

Welcome to the pleasure dome

Saturated with sun, sand and sex, Ibiza is renowned as one of the world's hedonistic hot spots. Journeying there expecting one helluva party, David Leser is not in any way disappointed.

THERE IS A MYSTERIOUS ROCK island off the south-west coast of Ibiza that is claimed to be one of the most magnetic points on earth. It is called Es Vedrà and, according to legend, this is where the sirens of Homer's epic poems once lured sailors to their doom with songs of seduction. After six nights of recent merry abandon, I can safely report that something is definitely happening out here in the blue sweep of the Spanish Mediterranean.

Call it natural journalistic curiosity (unlikely) or an overdeveloped instinct for harvesting life's pleasures (far more plausible) but I have decided that it is only fit and proper – despite the sobering realities of middle age – to test Ibiza's infamous allure once and for all. As they say, you are in the ground a long time.

I KNOW I AM IN TROUBLE FROM THE MOMENT my friend and I touch down at Ibiza airport after flying in from Granada, Spain, on a cloudless summer's day. Our plane has tracked low over the Sierra Nevada mountains, then pointed its nose for the clear azure waters of Ibiza, where we are greeted on arrival by the delightfully named Feldon, our English-born "conciERGE", and his even more delightfully named partner, Peach.

Most concierges confine themselves to being doorkeepers, cleaners or, at best, front-of-house hotel employees with an admirable facility for languages. Feldon, we soon discover, is far from your normal concierge. He looks more like a walking beach party than a concierge and, as it turns out, has just left his other clients after partying with them till 5am.

Tanned, unshaven and in board shorts and bare feet, Feldon migrated to this "Gomorra of the Med" eight years ago from the French snowfields. He's made it his business to provide the island's high-paying guests (and the occasional freeloading journalist) with restaurant bookings, boat trips, car rentals, villas and – perhaps most importantly – VIP entry into the world's biggest nightclubs.

Feldon has already sorted our itinerary, and what is alarmingly clear is that sleep doesn't figure remotely in its scheduling, at least not until after the sun is well above the horizon. A test for anyone, you will agree, over 35.

Our first night is at El Hotel Pacha, next door to the legendary Pacha nightclub where French music producer and DJ superstar David Guetta and his wife Cathy have, since 2003, held their

F... Me I'm Famous parties. Such was the throb of their electronic dance music, the gorgeousness of the people attending their weekly Thursday-night parties and the social barriers that apparently came tumbling down behind Pacha's walls (aided and abetted by many of the things you can and can't imagine) that everyone wanted to attend a F... Me I'm Famous party – including this scrupulous chronicler of the human condition.

(Important caveat: I still can't fathom two things. First, how is it that David Guetta gets paid €60,000 to play music at Pacha for just half an hour? Second, is the title of the party meant seriously or to be taken with great dollops of irony? Do they mean F... Me I'm Famous in the sense that I'm so famous you may as well f... me? Or do they mean F... Me I'm Famous in that I can't believe I'm actually famous? Yes, perhaps I'm over-analysing.)

Anyway, the FMIF party doesn't start till after 1am and Feldon suggests we may as well enjoy the €21 million Ushuaia Beach Club first up because Sasha, an equally famous DJ, this time from Wales, is playing a gig there. Not just any gig, mind you, but a party dubbed Never Say Never.

Up until this very moment, I had no idea who Sasha was, despite him having remixed tracks for artists like Madonna, formed his own record company and long been considered among the world's top DJs. House, trance and techno music have never been my forte because – and here I reveal my vintage – I'm still enjoying David Bowie, Fleetwood Mac and Johnny Cash. But, then again, I like to dance and from the looks of things here at Ushuaia, this is going to be one hell of a dance party.

There are at least 3000 people jumping up and down and pointing at the DJ god Sasha himself up on the stage. Thanks to my VIP pass, I am now being ushered on up there for a brief moment, too. F... me, I'm famous.

There are several female dancers in various states of undress on the stage and I find myself positioned directly behind the bottom of one very nubile performer as she writhes languorously to the music, her upper body showing a defiance of all laws of gravity. The crowd is ecstatic. I am jumping up and down, too, and marvelling, not at the DJ but at the dancer's derriere. Hell, yeah ... this is better than Johnny Cash.

No sooner have I had time to revel in my new eminence than Feldon tells us we are off to an exclusive beach party at Cala Conta, a small cove popular with nudists on the west of the island.

It is already 3am and the suggestion from a



Party central: (clockwise from bottom left) frothy fun at one of Ibiza's huge nightclubs; an open-air disco on one of the island's beaches; getting into the wing of things; Ibiza Town harbour at dusk; top sound systems for the world's top DJs; life's a beach.



Spanish local is that we go there in a red Volkswagen, which I only decode later as the little red pill that everyone on the island seems to be taking in order to stay awake. There are 200 people on a rock ledge at Cala Conta dancing to the music. A light show projects images onto the cliff face. The turquoise waters pool gently below. Exquisitely formed women smile at me, or is it the tall Italian man with the gleaming eyes directly behind me?

Before I know it, the sun is coming up and we still haven't made it to the F... Me I'm Famous party. By the time we get there at 7am it has been going for six hours and there are still hundreds of people dancing. F... me, I'm spent and it's only our first night.

LONG BEFORE RUSSIAN BILLIONAIRE ROMAN Abramovich sailed into Formentera's crystalline waters last year on his \$1.2-billion, 163-metre superyacht, Eclipse, and Australian billionaire James Packer sidled up alongside him in his (much smaller and cheaper) refurbished icebreaker, Arctic P, the Balearic Islands (of which Ibiza is the third largest and Formentera the fourth) have been prey to invasion.

From the Carthaginians and Romans, through to the Visigoths, Byzantines, Vandals and Moors, on to the Norwegian Crusaders, Aragon's James the Conqueror and the Catalans, these islands off the Spanish east coast have been a marauder's playground for centuries. In the first instance, they came for the island's salt and wood. In the second, they were drawn by both the effable and ineffable. Ibiza is bountiful in vineyards, olive groves, pine forests and almond trees that glow milky white under the full moon. All its rivers, streams, underground springs, fountains and wells, blessed by the great mother herself, the Carthaginian goddess Tanit, are said to have medicinal properties.

The cult of Tanit has long been the most magical throughout the Mediterranean, the love goddess's powers said to reside in these primeval waters. It was here, during the reign of Carthage, that people came to dance, to heal, and also to die.

Little wonder, then, that with all this mythology and history – plus its sun-kissed coves, its medieval villages, its fresh produce and light wines, its stories of love and fertility – hippies would feel the gravitational pull, as would musicians, writers and artists from around the world. Thumbing their collective nose at European materialism, hippies flocked to the island's north in the late '60s and '70s to recast their lives along simpler lines. Many deserters from the Vietnam War found refuge here, too, with both groups being received with a rare tolerance by the locals.

Markets and vegetable gardens began to flourish. Alternative therapies spread, so much so that today you can find almost anything here to soothe body and soul: yoga, meditation and reiki workshops, healing with angels, healing with light, healing with sounding bowls, healing with crystals. There's even "snake massage therapy which involves surrendering to your fears, knowing that the serpent sliding across your back is able to remove the blockages in your muscles and nervous system". (I kid you not.)

The hippies brought with them their guitars and bongos. Van Morrison, Bob Dylan and Bob Marley came here later for live music events, but there was already a tradition of music on the island long before – ancient songs and dances based on courting rituals; wind and percussion instruments and Spanish castanets hewn from the roots of juniper trees. Summer nights in Ibiza have always been music-filled.

In 1973, the multi-roomed Pacha Ibiza nightclub opened its doors to become the club that would effectively lay the golden egg, eventually setting up franchises around the world. Pacha Ibiza became the nightclub jewel in the crown, welcoming into its throbbing embrace kings, queens, marquesses, duchesses, artists, crooks, the famous, and, of course, the infamous.

Today, Ibiza boasts some of the biggest and best nightclubs on the planet, including Pacha, Privilege, Amnesia, Space and El Paradis, and on any given summer night Pacha alone will rake in up to €1 million. Russian billionaires and Middle Eastern sheikhs will pay €10,000 for a VIP booth. Herds of East European hookers will circle the room. Toilet attendants will take small tips to allow five or six people into a cubicle at one time. No prizes for why this is also called the “White Isle”.

As Pacha boss Ricardo Urgell told Austrian filmmaker Günter Schwäger in a new film called *Ibiza Occident*, “People have a serious problem today. They like to be packed tight like sardines, otherwise it is not successful. Success means uncomfortable. Before, couples looked for a corner to kiss or have a quickie. Now they just step on each other.”

I KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HE MEANS BECAUSE it’s now night two – or perhaps night three, I can’t remember – and we’re at the appropriately named Amnesia nightclub, having arrived here at 1am with our trusty red Volkswagen. This is the club that, from 2008, hosted Manumission, possibly the wildest party in the world, where its meaning – freedom from slavery – was given full expression. That’s why the live sex shows on stage often included a famous sex performer with bright pink hair and a remarkable facility to blow fire out of her tattooed vagina. (I guess you had to be there.)

And, yes, if eroticism is a reaction against people pretending it doesn’t interest them, then take it from me that no one at Amnesia is pretending.

“Hi, where are you from?” I ask the fetching blonde next to me.

“Guess,” I think she says above the doof and din of the music.

“Latvia,” I say, and to this day I’m not exactly sure why I opted for Latvia.

“Where ez that?” she says.

“Near Russia,” I offer.

“Yes, I am from Rha-sh-ahr.”

“Great, want to dance?”

“Don’t go away,” she says, and I don’t, but she does.

Other women hover and smile.

“Hi, where are you from?”

“Rha-sh-ahr.”

I NORMALLY EAT DINNER AT ABOUT 8PM AND GO to bed at about 11pm to read. In Ibiza, I’m sitting down to dinner at 11pm and getting home around 7am. I sleep till 3pm. They say there are gorgeous beaches on this island. In the first three days I only see two of them: one at sunset, the other at the aforementioned beach party.

By day three my circadian rhythms have been so thoroughly remixed that I am dancing and drinking Bloody Marys in the late afternoon at the Blue Marlin restaurant in Cala Jondal Beach, on the island’s south. Yes, I can see a third beach now. I can see beautiful women. I can see a sunbed behind the DJ where it costs €10,000 to sit and listen to the music. My dubious press credentials allow me 15 minutes to perch there for free. Suddenly, I am Roman Abramovich himself. I am Sheikh Ali Baba of Qatar. I am Sylvester



Hello, cheeky: (above) there’s no shortage of exposed flesh in Ibiza.

Stallone. A woman twice my height (and probably half my age) approaches me and smiles.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

“How’s your day?”

“Great, how’s yours?”

“Couldn’t be better. Where are you from?”

“Spain.”

“What’s your name?”

“Rachel.”

I stand up. This is a mistake. I come up to her chest.

“Where are you from?”

“Australia.”

“Nice, don’t go away. I’ll be back. I have to dance.”

Five minutes later she is cavorting on the roof of the restaurant, along with five other long-legged femmes fatales.

Feldon tells me we’re now heading to the Freddy Mercury revival party at the famous Pikes Hotel. He obviously hasn’t understood the deep spiritual connection I’ve just forged with the Spanish dominatrix on the roof.

I am slightly crestfallen, especially when we arrive at Pikes – which has just witnessed its own rebirth as the Ibiza Rocks House – and find many of the women are sporting fake Freddy Mercury moustaches. Still, this is where Freddy Mercury, lead singer of the rock band Queen, once flew all his friends for his 40th birthday, no expense spared. This is where Bon Jovi stayed. And Kylie Minogue. And Elton John, George Michael and Grace Jones. This was – and is – the ultimate rock hotel, opened in the 1970s by the legendary Tony Pike, who’s now 70 and married to wife No.5.

Tonight, naturally, it is rocking to Queen music and my new best friend, Cindy, a master chef from England via Trinidad and Tobago, is regaling me with recipes and tales of the island – slow-cooked Asian ribs for the rich and famous; wild Friday night barbecues in private villas; DJs playing 10-hour sets in secret underground nightclubs.

The mood is exultant. I have forgotten Rachel, my Rooftop Warrior Princess. She was way too tall anyway and, besides, Cindy wants to dance. We dance. She disappears. She comes back again. Now she’s gone once more. Perhaps this is some kind of Caribbean mating ritual?

Queen sing me their song of portent.

Another one bites the dust

Another one bites the dust

And another one gone and another one gone

Another one bites the dust...

AS WITH ANY PARADISE THERE IS OFTEN A “LOST” side, an expulsion from the Garden of Eden. How could Ibiza be any different, given two million tourists now converge on this 570 square kilometre speck of Mediterranean rock each year?

Rival gangs control the lucrative drug trade. Five prominent Ibiza families vie for authority over the major nightclubs and hotels. The town of San Antonio, the old fishing port on the west of the island, has become, during the summer months, a scene of utter debauchery, courtesy mainly of British booze, drugs and sex tourists.

Last August a Liverpool DJ underwent emergency surgery after being stabbed in a San Antonio bar. A number of young tourists, mainly British, have died or been seriously injured after jumping between hotel balconies, or into swimming pools from upper-storey levels. Known as “balconing”, this internet-inspired craze resulted in one young Briton plunging to his death last July from his third-storey apartment. Another man fell from the seventh floor. Presumably both were blind drunk.

Three days before we arrived on the island, 73 Irish, British and Italian nationals were arrested, with police confiscating more than 8½ kilos of cocaine, 7500 ecstasy tablets, a kilo of speed, two kilos of hashish and 3600 capsules of pure MDMA. Enough for three F... Me I’m Famous parties.

Over on nearby Formentera, Manu San Felix, a renowned marine biologist, tells me he’s in a race against time to protect the exquisite but fragile sea grass meadows from being destroyed by boats dropping anchor – and emptying their waste – into the UNESCO-listed turquoise waters. “There are 20,000 people living in boats at any one time in July and August,” he laments. “They don’t see what’s happening under the surface.”

Neither do I, because no sooner have I absorbed this latest ecological threat than I am back at the old port in Ibiza having dinner at Lio nightclub restaurant, where the dark-eyed waitresses whisper Spanish love songs to you while you eat, then turn into dancing divas on stage. If this is what dining like a sybarite means, then, yes, call me a sybarite.

THE NEXT DAY I’M AT A COCKTAIL BAR called Sunset Ashram, drinking vodkas and listening to chill-out music as the ripe red melon of the sun slides into the sea. It was a toss-up whether to come here or go to Yemanja on the rocky southern shores of the island, where the attraction is paella and sangria at day’s end.

Except the days never end in Ibiza – nor the nights, obviously – such are the multitude of pleasures awaiting the visitor. And you don’t have to do the nightclubs. You could happily spend weeks here without ever subjecting yourself to that crush of dancing flesh. You could visit the Saturday markets at Las Dalias in the island’s north, or sail to Formentera on a black-winged, 18-metre yacht. You could eat fresh fish for lunch in a little cove, then swim in water so beautiful it will wash your eyes clean. You could spend all day on “Massage Beach”, then dine at any one of hundreds of fabulous restaurants, before turning in for a decent night’s sleep. That’s right, SLEEP.

Apparently Nostradamus once said (and I’m not sure I believe this) that Ibiza would be the last refuge on earth in the event of Armageddon. After six nights here, I’m wondering if Ibiza may not be the first place to fall, simply because of an overdose of delights. How much pleasure can any one person take? (A lot, by my estimation.)

Remember Bacchus, the god of wine and intoxication? Eventually the Bacchanalian nights got so out of hand they were outlawed by the Roman senate. I’m thinking Ibiza might go the same way if it’s not careful, but, hey, I might just get in one more dance before the music stops.

“Hi, where are you from...?” **GW**

At Lio, dark-eyed waitresses whisper Spanish love songs to you while you eat, then turn into dancing divas on stage. If this is what dining like a sybarite means, then, yes, call me a sybarite.