

Drop-dead gorgeous scenery – and a donkey pal

BY BEVERLEY BYRNE

Arriving at our rendezvous overlooking La Residencia, I find brown-eyed Pancho waiting patiently. Leaving the hotel behind, I follow as he instinctively negotiates the stony switchback trail into the Tramuntana Mountains. As we climb between terraced olive groves, blossoming almond trees and scented pines, the coral-coloured rooftops of Deia disappear, leaving operatic views of Mallorca's sapphire sea and the towering peaks above.

Occasionally, I stroke Pancho's hirsute back, but he plods on regardless, effortlessly toting panniers containing our picnic. Reaching our destination, a sturdy shepherd's hut, we're greeted by La Residencia's chefs who unload the panniers and swiftly prepare a gourmet barbecue. Later, while I enjoy a posh picnic served at a table laid with fine china and white linen, Pancho munches contentedly on a carrot. OK, I admit a date with one of La Residencia's adorable resident donkeys might seem a rather bohemian way to explore Mallorca's wild heart, but it seems to encapsulate all this region has to offer.

Located in Deia, an artist's enclave on Mallorca's rugged, unspoilt north-west coast, La Residencia has, for donkey's years, been a favourite retreat for rock icons, royalty and Hollywood's finest. Formerly owned by Richard Branson and now a star in the Orient Express constellation of hotels, celebrities have flocked here to soak up La Residencia's famous brand of relaxed opulence.

Photos displayed in the reception merely hint at the high-profile personalities one might bump into here. Some, including Lord Lloyd Webber and Mr and Mrs Michael Douglas, who have holiday homes in the area, might be found dining in the hotel's renowned El Olivo restaurant.

Originally comprising two manor houses dating from the 16th and 17th

century, this architectural legacy has been maintained with expansion. Now four handsome fincas are linked by labyrinthine passages, secret courtyards and ornamental terraces festooned with tropical flowers, trees and shrubs. My sumptuous suite, complete with shuttered windows and a private terrace overlooking the white-washed villas of Deia and the embracing Tramuntana mountains,

features original paintings and antique Mallorcan furniture. One of the hotel's three swimming pools shimmers on the terrace below and a short walk leads to tennis courts, a gym, and an award-winning spa, where I indulge in yoga and massages which leave me languid and soporific.

To combat my lethargy, I take a short stroll down the road from La Res-

idencia to Ca n'Alluny. Once the home of writer and poet Robert Graves, who lived here from 1925 until his death in 1985, this handsome stone house is now a museum dedicated to the man and his work. The interior remains much as it was when he and his family were in residence. Eerily, in his study, a box of nibs remain on the surface of his desk together with a tea cup, a magnifying glass and pages of manuscript scored heavily with inky crossings-out. It's as if he's just stepped out of the room to walk Solomon, his Labrador, down to the romantic cove where he enjoyed a daily swim.

Famous friends, from Ava Gardner to Kingsley Amis, arriving in Deia during the 50s and 60s ensured its reputation as an avant-garde artist's colony. But long before this celebrity invasion, the sleepy rural region was already seducing writers, composers and artists.

During the atrocious winter of 1838, Chopin and his mistress George Sand, who described Mallorca as "the painter's El Dorado", plus her two children, took up residence in the Carthusian monastery dominating the town of Valldemossa. It proved a wretched time. For weeks, Chopin holed up in a monk's cell miserably waiting for his piano to arrive from France. Eventually it appeared on a cart dragged by the eponymous Mallorcan donkey. His piano remains on display in the fascinating monastery museum, along with other related artefacts, manuscripts and letters. Exploring these austere surroundings, it's easy to imagine Chopin composing works including the Raindrop Prelude while Sand worked on her less-than-complimentary account of their stay, *A Winter In Mallorca*.

As this year marks the bicentenary of Chopin's birth, the annual music festival, held during August, is another reason to visit this atmospheric town.

These days, it's Hollywood royalty who are promoting this Mallorcan idyll. Valldemossa's cultural centre

was sponsored by Michael Douglas and here I watch him star in a documentary charting the history of the region. Heroically filmed against the backdrop of the Tramuntana Mountains, Douglas reveals he'd expected Mallorca to be nothing more than a tourist trap – but this area, rich in culture, proved him wrong. Together with his first wife, he bought and renovated an historic property on the coast and devoted himself to challenging such negative perceptions.

Of course, Mallorca will always appeal to visitors requiring nothing more than sun, sand and a rollicking good time. But for those seeking tranquillity, tradition and inspiring scenery, there is an alternative. You won't find any straw donkeys in Deia, but at least here, and throughout this ravishing corner of the island, reality is far more satisfying.

THE FACTS

La Residencia will arrange walking tours (with or without donkeys), accompanied hikes and art walks. Lifestyle activities from complimentary yoga, tai-chi and aqua aerobics, together with a wide range of cultural tours, are also available.

Walks on with the donkeys along the nature trail cost 65 euros (from £59) which includes a guide and picnic. Classic double rooms at La Residencia during February and March are priced from 245 euros (from £216) per room per night on a bed and breakfast basis. For further information or to make a booking, visit the website www.hotel-laresidencia.com or call Orient-Express on 0845 077 2222.

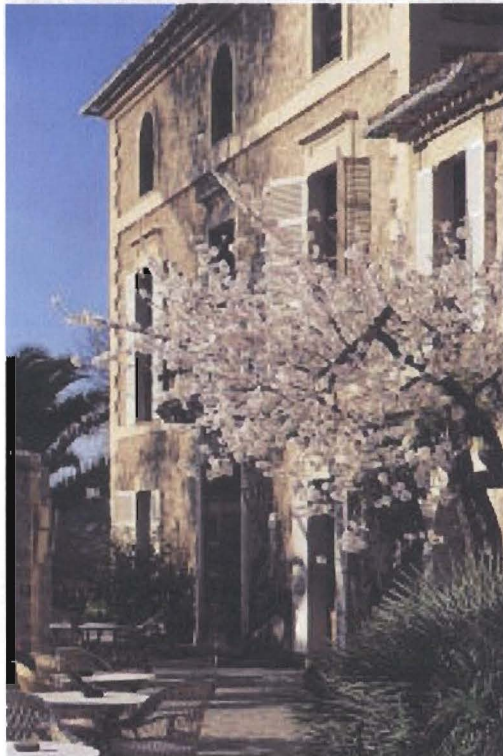
EasyJet fly from Bristol to Palma, Mallorca. The lowest outbound fares during June are from £40.99. For details, visit www.easyjet.com.

'A date with Poncho is a rather bohemian way to explore Mallorca's heart'





The rich and famous, attracted by Deia's calm, can be found at La Residencia Mallorca



Beverly Byrne with Pancho the donkey, top, and La Residencia Mallorca, above, which has been expanded from two manor houses to four handsome fincas, linked by labyrinthine passages, secret courtyards and terraces festooned with flowers

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