

Mountainous Majorca is an unexpected joy, says RODERICK GILCHRIST

CLIMBING mountain paths to the high peaks of the granite Tramuntana mountains guided by donkeys wasn't what I had in mind when I boarded a cheap flight to Majorca.

Isabella was the leader of the pack, followed a tail's length by her young daughters Luna and Alba, with our breathless party in the distance. Donkeys have an advantage when climbing vertically in the rarefied mountain air of this lush Spanish island.

Luckily, lunch had been prepared by our hotel halfway up at a scenic spot by an old stone-walled shepherd's hut, where we could see the Mediterranean glimmering hundreds of feet below. A large table, spread with a snow-white tablecloth, groaned under the weight of local cheeses, ham, fruit and wines. Oxygen might have been more appropriate.

Our lunch had been carried in panniers strapped to saddles across the backs of Isabella, Luna and Alba, so when we caught up with them, they were made a great fuss of. In the intoxicating high altitude of the Tramuntana, exhilarated by the climb (or perhaps the wine), life felt good. I'd imagined a holiday comprising mainly of sand, sea and sangria, but in the end it was all about the donkeys. What a clever idea by La Residencia, our hotel in Deia, to offer this service as an unexpected alternative to more hedonistic pleasures.

La Residencia, or La Res as it's known to returning guests, was once four separate mansions, all grand *fincas*, which lorded it over Deia when the village was a remote peasant outpost on the island's western coast, almost a day's journey from Palma.

Today the hotel Mercedes glides guests from the airport past the bell towers and lemon groves to Deia in 50 minutes.

Richard Branson turned La Residencia into a luxury hotel and sold it to Orient Express. It's a sumptuous retreat for celebrities, and I've seen many a famous face sinking into the hotel's heavy Spanish sofas in cool oak-beamed lounges.

Princess Diana famously took refuge at La Res when her marriage broke up, and Andrew Lloyd Webber hired the whole hotel to celebrate his 60th birthday.

WITH SEPARATE villas linked by secretive stone passageways, Spanish arches and tumbling olive terraces, La Res gives up its secrets slowly. It has a private beach, a great spa, three pools, complimentary yoga and tennis courts.

Deia perches precariously high above the seashore clinging to the Serra de Tramuntana, flanked by pine and cedar forests, olive groves and lemon orchards.

Labyrinthine alleys of stone houses curl up to the 14th-century church with its panorama of the coast tumbling down a stream-fed valley to Cala Deia, the town's shingle beach.

It was here that Deia's most famous resident, British poet Robert Graves, author of *I, Claudius*, swam every night. Graves attracted bohemian followers and movie stars to his villa Ca N'Alluny (The Far House). Ava Gardner gave him the black matador's hat he's often seen wearing in photographs.

Graves's son William has created a museum out of the family home. The desk on which Graves

wrote *I, Claudius*, with all his artefacts of creation — ink, pens, reading glasses, and even the little flint arrowhead he twisted in the palm of his hand when seeking inspiration are all here.

Received opinion is that Majorca has stopped the unchecked concreting of the coast, though if you're after the lobster-red package holiday of Magaluf, turn right when you come out of the airport at Palma.

The island has a six-mile seafront cycle path and beaches as beautiful as the Caribbean, fertile plains and charming fishing ports. It also boasts an awesome Carthusian monastery at Valldemossa, which celebrates Chopin, who wrote the *Raindrop Prelude* while wintering in one of the monk's cells. This is the 200th

anniversary of Chopin's birth, and throughout the summer the monastery is presenting concerts and film shows to record the visit of the consumptive genius who came to the island to recover from TB.

The island was not kind to him. It rained constantly throughout his two-month sojourn at Valldemossa and locals were scandalised by his bohemian, nocturnal lifestyle with the cross-dressing, cigar-smoking French author George Sand.

They eventually made life so intolerable — even refusing to provide him with food — that he was forced to leave in a handcart with pigs.

This is long-forgotten. Today, the tourist board parades a series of Chopin concerts at Valldemossa

and other towns he visited on the island. On this coast stand many grand houses, one owned by the eccentric Archduke Ludwig Salvator of Austria, who bought up large areas of land for wildlife preservation and built a Moorish castle known as S'Estaca. It's now owned by the Hollywood actor Michael Douglas.

Away from the holiday honey spots, Majorca is all sea-green olive groves, perfumed pine forests and further groves full of blood-red oranges, where you'll have only the goats for company.

When it's time to leave, I have fond memories. Swimming in the Calla; touching the keyboard on which Chopin composed; wolfing down an *ensaimada*, the island's savoury speciality of marmalade and custard cake. But it's Isa-

bella and her braying daughters I most recall. Perhaps I was a shepherd in a previous life.

TRAVEL FACTS

EASYJET flies from London to Palma from several British airports, including Gatwick, from £49 return (0905 821 0905, easyjet.com).

La Residencia, Deia Classic, has double rooms from £461 per room per night B&B, Orient Express (0845 077 2222, laresidencia.com, orient-express.com). Mallorca Farmhouses (0845 800 8080, mallorca.co.uk) has villas with pools from £950 to £7,270 a week.



Star sanctuary: La Residencia and (inset) its charming donkeys

Pictures: ALAMY

DEIA TO BE DIFFERENT!