

Ibiza

A Bohemian Rhapsody

Tourism in the Mediterranean can be a fickle business, with success or failure all too often dictated by unpredictable shifts in culture and taste.

Since the advent of mass tourism in the 1960s, the South of France, the Costa Brava, the Greek Islands, and Turkey have all been the flavor of the summer at one time or another – considered the season's must-go destination for affluent and more budget-conscious travelers alike, and where "beautiful people" flock to be seen.

Such glory years rarely last unless a holiday location can demonstrate the collective wit, foresight, and determination to continually reinvent itself while staying true to its core qualities. That Ibiza has never compromised its reputation for tolerance and openness to change has undoubtedly contributed hugely to its enduring appeal for the millions of tourists who flock there each year – an annual influx seemingly unaffected by economic peaks and troughs – and to developments in fashion, lifestyles, and above all music.

"Ibiza is the only part of the world that I know of where you can still find the wealthy and the laborer, the famous and the unknown, mixing in perfect harmony," says Pepe Rosello, Business Manager of the hugely successful club Space Ibiza, who can claim to have laid the foundations of Ibiza's reputation as the clubbing capital of the world as far back as 1963, when he smuggled the first commercial record player onto the island.

The roots of Ibiza's reputation for tolerance go back much further than the rise of rock'n'roll and 20th-Century counter-culture, however, for it has always enjoyed an unusual amount of autonomy under its successive Roman, Muslim, Catalan, and Spanish rulers. Today it is part of Spain's Balearic Island autonomous community along with Mallorca, Menorca, and its sister island, Formentera



Another great party at Privilege
"the biggest club in the world".

Photo: La Skimel



Elegance served at Nassau,
the newest beach club in Ibiza.

Photo: Nassau Beach Club



Every night has a different
theme at Amnesia.

"Ibiza's image of absolute freedom is not something that has been artificially manufactured," says Pedro Matutes, Managing Director of the upmarket Sirenis hotel chain. "It runs through our history. Property has always been evenly distributed; Jews were never persecuted here, and there are no social differences as there are elsewhere in Spain. These are sociological manifestations of a way of living that have come to define Ibiza."

They have certainly acted as a magnet for a very specific type of visitor. The first Tibetan communities to come out of Dharansala in India were established here and the absence of a class structure, as well as the island's reputation for tolerance, played a big part in attracting the disillusioned veterans of both the Korean and Vietnam wars who set up the original hippy communities in the 1960s. An impressive roll call of celebrities, musicians, writers, designers, and generally free-spirited people have been visiting Ibiza ever since, from Polanski to Versace.

But there is another key element to Ibiza's popularity that can be traced back even further than Roman times, and that is its mystical aura. "They are like magic islands," says Pepa Marí, Consellera of Tourism for Ibiza and Formentera. "It's as if they had an angel looking after them. Ibiza has some marvelous areas that still maintain the magic within them that you wouldn't expect to find on such a small island." It is a source of pride to her that so many people chose to stay on Ibiza on a more permanent basis. "No matter where you come from, you are accepted here and you can just be yourself."

The island's first settlers were the Phoenicians, who believed that the island was blessed by the gods because of its reddish non-volcanic soil and the complete absence of any reptile, animal, insect, or plant that could harm a human being. Archaeological

evidence bears witness that the aristocracy used to bury its dead here for that very reason.

There is also geological testament to Ibiza's special powers – the outlying Isla Es Vedra, or Rock Island, emits the third-highest magnetic force on earth due to an exceptionally high concentration of minerals and metals. This has spawned some interesting myths and theories over the centuries, among the most fanciful of which are that Es Vedra is either the tip of the lost city of Atlantis or the landing place for aliens (the intergalacticos). It may also be behind the prediction of the 15th-Century French astrologer Nostradamus that the peculiar prevailing wind patterns over Ibiza would ensure that it would be the world's sole remaining life-

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supporting environment in the result of the nuclear Armageddon he foresaw.

There are of course more empirical reasons why Ibiza – which since Roman times has, with its neighbor Formentera, been known as Islas Pitiusas or Pine Islands – acts as such a magnet to the millions of tourists who flock there each year. The island is blessed with a natural beauty – not least its 56 'calas' (bays and beaches) – and has some of the clearest waters in the Mediterranean, making it a favorite of both beach lovers and diving and yachting enthusiasts; the Ibiza-Formentera channel is one of the world's busiest recreational boating channels.

Of equal importance is the mix of amenities available in those calas, according to Christian Braun, owner of the Nassau Beach Club on Playa



Photo: David Parega



Foc i Fum perform at Space's famous opening summer party.

Photo: Space

d'en Bossa where sun worshippers can also enjoy a cocktail and seven hours of ambient music each afternoon. "The future is in high-quality tourism," he believes. "Nowadays, there are many people who would prefer to pay a little more for a better service, better food and drinks on a beautiful beach whilst listening to good music." That is not to say that prices should be prohibitive. "It is very important to maintain the right balance so that the island can be appreciated by a hippy as much as a millionaire or the average family," Braun continues.

Significantly, Ibizans have been careful not to kill the goose that has laid this particular golden egg. Despite some construction mistakes in the early days of the tourist boom, around 95% of the island's coastline, as well as much of its interior, is now protected from further development.

In the process, a new eco-tourism movement has sprung up with an increasing number of visitors arriving – not just for the island's renowned nightlife but for the overall natural beauty of the island – who (particularly in the cooler months) spend their days hiking, practicing group yoga, and – in true Ibizan spirit – cleaning up the beaches. "In winter the climate is fantastic for walking and viewing the interior of the island – or even sunbathing!" says Lola Tur, General Secretary of the Camara de Comercio. "We have a top-quality product which is alive the whole year round. It is a place with its own spirit. Ibiza is Ibiza – it's original and makes you feel things that you don't often experience when you travel."

Susanna Sciacovelli, Managing Director of IBATUR, agrees: "Ibiza is an authentic discovery for many who still think that it is only a party place. Ibiza is full of natural beauties, of ancient history and cultures."



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Photo: IBATUR

For it is not just their coastline that Ibiza's inhabitants protect so fiercely. In 1999, UNESCO declared the island a World Heritage Site not merely on account of the pristine condition of its beaches, but for the quality of its cultural heritage and commitment to bio-diversity.

Visitors who want a break from the beaches can explore the Phoenician ruins of Sa Caleta and the Phoenician-Punic cemetery of Puig des Molins; the Renaissance, Arab, and Catalan architecture of old Ibiza; small romantic towns such as Saint Carles, Sant Rafael, and Santa Agnes; and Ses Salines, home to the Posidonia seaweed prairies, the most important underwater ecosystem of the Mediterranean. And those lucky enough to get to Ibiza in February will also have the privilege of enjoying the ceremonial walk under a full moon through the blooming almond trees, an event that has inspired generations of artists and poets.

And then, of course, there's the music. The 'super clubs' of Ibiza are legendary, not just for their size (Privilege is officially the largest dance floor in the world, according to The Guinness Book of Records) but predominantly for the unique atmosphere created by thousands of holidaymakers fresh off the beach partying the night – and frequently the following day – away. There is something for everyone: Hip Hop, R&B, House, Garage, and Drum and Bass, not to mention Retro and Techno.

Ibiza is indisputably the clubbing capital of the world and its music scene has built up an unstoppable "viral" marketing momentum of its own; there are, for instance, currently three times as many video postings on YouTube for Ibiza's music scene than there are for the UK's cult summer music festival Glastonbury, and Ibizan theme nights are commonplace in pubs and clubs across Europe. These days, where Ibiza leads,

others follow, and the best DJs vie for prime spots at the major clubs. There is even a genre of dance music – the Balearic Beat – named after the island.

When it comes to attracting top musicians, Ibiza was punching above its weight long before the terms "house" and even "clubbing" were invented. In the increasingly distant pre-digital age, Joni Mitchell composed at least one track of her seminal Blue album there, Pink Floyd recorded an album, and both Bob Marley and Eric Clapton actually took to the stage; musical creativity is deeply rooted in Ibiza's soil and soul.

Quite what the likes of Joni Mitchell and Pink Floyd would make of Ibiza's night life 40 years on is an interesting question, but as masters of artistic reinvention themselves they would surely appreciate

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its owner Jose Maria Echaniz's constant desire for change. "We keep up to speed with the latest technology in design and lighting so that we can improve year on year," he says.

So how long can Ibiza keep this up? As long as it stays true to itself and looks after its natural assets, Ibiza's attraction will endure, like the magnetic qualities of Es Vedra. "Even though we're in the middle of worldwide crisis, free spirits and party animals don't want to go anywhere else," claims Echaniz. Millions would wholeheartedly agree with him.

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