

The isle of Majorca lies some 200 miles east of the coast of Spain, on the same latitude as Valencia. It compares roughly in size with Wiltshire. The inhabitants are Spanish-speaking (the Catalan variety); at the height of the tourist season natives are outnumbered by visitors concentrated along a 15 mile stretch of Palma Bay, either side of the old city. This coastal stretch presents an almost continuous vista of economic architecture; cheaply built and closely packed.

Fortunately the tourist disease has not become rampant much beyond Palma Bay, except for sporadic outbreaks, and the remaining island is genuinely attractive. In contrast to the relatively low altitude of the greater part of the island, the west coast is markedly defined by a 40 mile mountain chain running SW-NE. The highest point is Puig Mayor (1445m), spoiled by a summit radar station, and the rock in this area is predominantly a limestone conglomerate forming large areas of barren lapiaz in which cave entrances are frequently visible.

The only prior knowledge of caves was that there were some! Island maps were obtained which clearly marked the location of the show-caves, and it was to these that we paid prime attention, quickly putting as much distance as we could between ourselves and our hotel at El Arenal. Three SAET (Fiat) 850 hire cars achieved this function in spite of some monstrous navigational errors; the first of which ended in us joining the local militia in a coastal fort. Most roads on Majorca are the wrong ones, and all other drivers are madmen (so it was alleged).

Porto Cristo, on the east coast, is central for the well-known Cuevas del Drach and the smaller Cuevas del Hams. Drach was a good appetiser with profusely decorated grottoes and passages (mostly dry formations), culminating at a large lake where several parties assembled on benches for a preamble in four tongues from the No.1 guide, followed by instant darkness to enhance an electric sunrise effect over the lake to a music accompaniment. Boats provided an alternative to walking around the lake on the way out.

Cuevas del Hams was a much quieter affair. We were the only visitors and the guide was very friendly, allowing photography. Again, formations were profuse but markedly less dry, the cave consisting of interlinked grottoes with a lake of saline water linked to the sea, 2km away. One striking feature, admired to the sound of camera shutters and weegee amazement, was a helictite and straws grotto. Exit was made via a large shakehole.

Driving north along the coast for a few miles brought us to Cuevas de Arta, where a huge arch, into which ascends a flight of steps, forms an impressive entrance in a cliff-face against the sea. Stal columns are perhaps the most notable feature of this cave; some around 60 feet high. Considerable areas of formation in the entrance were covered with a black bacterial film which was attributed to generation during a period of ideal climatic conditions a few hundred years ago, but the growth is now .....

..... apparently dormant. One particularly fine chamber boasted a kind of son et lumière with coloured lights and achoral work of a Wagnerian(?) origin.

Not far from Arta a small cave entrance was noticed in a hillside near the coast road. The wagon train ground to a halt, finally spilling its human cargo, who took off up the hill. Staggering match-blind around a chamber was little fun and a swift return to the cars was made to find rope for a pitch which had been located. The large chamber, which had some once attractive formations, was explored on a more rational footing but the pitch remained the only likely lead. It was, for about 35ft., into a second chamber with good formations and holes to crawl about in; not much of a cave, but tackle was used.

A journey to the mountainous west coast gave us the opportunity to visit what I thought was the best show-cave, Cuevas de Campanet, situated at the northern end of the mountains, near Pollensa. Again the whole cave was in the form of linked grottoes and crammed with stal, but was cleaner and had more sparkle about it than others and appears to have been discovered more recently. A continuo of soft piped music became quite acceptable and the guide chose to say very little.

Taking the coast road going south-west we followed a somewhat tortuous path, varying in width, and with stretches of removable surface, through some very striking (at times very nearly) limestone and coastal scenery. A brief stop was made at Escorca to look at a large cave entrance in an area of deeply incised gorges. Here, we succeeded in moving a local caballero to shouting the Spanish equivalent of "get off my land"; some did, and some didn't. Those that didn't, managed to reach the cave and explore for a couple of hundred yards.

During the remainder of the drive many entrances were seen, but it was obvious that a lot of local knowledge and something better than a road map would be a prerequisite to any serious caving. Further south the roads degenerated; wide yellow to narrow, narrow yellow to white. A navigational error forced at least one car to press on to the bitter end, through Bamaibufar and around the south extremity, before returning via Palma.

In all, the four day excursion was a worthwhile venture. For a flight and hotel cost of £24 it can't be bad! Normally, not very high on the list of desirable caving areas, the sheer novelty, cheap alcohol and low cost is an attraction. Flight time, Bristol to Palma - 2 hours, is less than it takes me to get to Mendip. Current trends in cheap package holidays will continue to offer attractive prices for more distant destinations, Start saving now!

("Rumour has it Tony is now planning a cheap ALL-IN trip to the clubs-sorry caves- of Paris, including the Grotte Bergère, and will be seeking out a few addresses of interest to future expeditions.")