

I arrived at the island one wintry morning in February 1954.

I was travelling *cubierta*, that is, sleeping fitfully through the night on the wooden deck of the antiquated packet boat, *Rey Jaime Primero*, which was named after a king of Aragon who had, in the early thirteenth century, liberated much of southern Europe – including Ibiza – from Muslim rule.

The cost of living in Spain was half what it was in France, and on Ibiza, the rumour went, one could live for one third the money it took to live in Spain. Twenty-eight months at l'Academie de la Grande Chaumiere – life characterised toward the end of each month by a diet of bread butts given away at bakeries, occasional eggs and lumps of ground horsemeat which I ate raw, and sleepless nights on the benches of Boulevard Raspail – were enough for me. I heeded Ibiza's siren call.

My government cheque took me to Barcelona where I effected an immediate transfer to La Escuela de Bellas Artes and secured an arrangement with a friend to forward my checks to Ibiza, poste restante. A policeman directed me to the offices of Trasmediterranea, where I booked my overnight passage, and at five o'clock in the evening I hauled my old army bag up the gangway and onto the scrubbed, wooden decks of the venerable little steamer which would carry me on the most decisive voyage of my life.

After twelve hours of our swaying headway through Homer's dark, empty sea, a great shadow mysteriously swallowed the ship. A barely perceptible mass, darker than the rest of the night, it had emerged as if by a genie's magic, and lowered over the ship's starboard rail. Dawn was in progress, and, within minutes, this menacing shadow became a wall of stark, somber rock whose crumpled strata made jagged patterns formed by convulsions of the earth's Jurassic age.

Hugging this paleozoic spectacle our little steamer rolled south and then rounded a promontory which revealed a dramatically different panorama. A red-brown rock thrust out of the sea with a lighthouse at its pinnacle, and, beyond the rock, a fairy-land city atop a pyramidal hill. The sun's first rays caused it to glow – unreal – as if it were staring from an illuminated page of a mediaeval manuscript.

We dropped anchor in the middle of the circular harbour. As the vessel's capstans slowly warped her against the mole, I had opportunity to study the improbable world I was about to enter.

Dominating the scene was the medieval city. Massive ramparts, begun by the Romans, girt the rock upon which it was built. Within these fortifications the luminous white walls of houses and public buildings rose in tiers and were crowned by a thirteenth century, collegiate church with a square tower and a castle of austere simplicity.

The lower city spread out beneath the walls to the north and lined a broad esplanade following the harbor quay. Five and six storey buildings, their gleaming facades brocaded by black wrought-iron balconies, stood in a packed phalanx facing

the western edge of the harbour. Beyond them swayed a forest of masts belonging to the fleet of wooden sailing craft and fishing vessels which performed the island's commercial business. The northern and eastern reaches of the harbour consisted of cane fields which yielded to cliffs culminating in the lighthouse.

Beyond the city, to the north and west, rose the gentle mountains of the interior. They were blanketed in green by the pine forests that, millennia before, had contributed the name, Islas Pitiusas (pine islands), to the archipelago formed by Ibiza and its smaller companion, Formentera, visible on the southern horizon.

Once fast against the quay, her creaky gangplank lowered, the *Rey Jaime* came alive. Officials in uniform swarmed aboard. Passengers, with cloth or wicker luggage, collected at the rail. A crowd on the quay fanned out around the gangplank.

The women wore skirts which swept the ground. The men were dressed either in grey or black, their feet clad in the footgear of the island – rope-soled *alpargatas* – and faded black berets capped their leathery sun-burnt faces.

Several two-wheeled carts had pulled up at the edge of the crowd, *burros* standing at rest before them.

At the foot of the gangplank a pair of green-uniformed policemen, wearing shiny black, Napoleonic hats, blocked my way, looked me over, and then nodded for me to proceed. Lugging my US Army bag I walked through the crowd toward a café facing the ship.

A man accosted me. Bare headed, he had the face of a rogue. I knew enough Spanish to hear his Andalusian accent. That we were both foreigners on the island established an instant bond. I'd be looking for a room, he averred knowingly, and wondered how long I was staying. Would I like an apartment? How about a *casa particular*?

"A private house? How much?"

"Three hundred pesetas."

"Per week? I asked incredulously."

"Per month."

This sinister fellow, with hooded, conspiratorial eyes, lifted my bag to his shoulder and beckoned to me to follow. Half an hour later I was standing in a clean, sparsely furnished house with one bedroom, a living room, or *sala*, and a kitchen. It even had a primitive bathroom. It was well within the great Roman walls. The rent was six dollars per month. He brought in the house's owner who lived a few doors down the narrow cobbled road, and I gave over three one hundred peseta notes.

The Andalusian smiled after the owner left. He put out his hand.

"Antonio," he said, introducing himself. "They call me *Antonio Malo* (Bad Antonio). *Es igual*. Come tonight to the waterfront. Pepe Guitarista's bar."

He gave an address and left.

After a meal in the lower city I took his advice. He turned up there toward midnight – seemingly expected by everyone – and, after a drink of cognac, proved himself a gifted singer of *canto hondo*. Thus, swiftly and unexpectedly, I joined a group of young foreigners for the most part newly resident on the island.

Pepe's bar was the gathering spot, because no other bar provided nightly entertainment. Pepe Madrid "*el Guitarista*", was a slight man with a badly crippled leg, he, like Antonio, was Andalusian and played flamenco music – a sound as alien to the islanders as New Orleans dixieland.

Each night of the week clients crowded his bar, occupying every available chair and stool and standing so packed that Pepe's wife, Maria, had to push her way forcibly among the customers, carrying a metal pitcher filled with heavy red wine which she poured without asking into empty, hand-held glasses and received two pesetas (about four cents) per time.

It was a long, low-ceilinged, narrow space penetrating an ancient building beneath the street level. The bar necessarily occupied half the floor space, hence the cramped situation created by a clientele which consisted of about a dozen outlanders like myself and curious islanders, delighted by the exotic entertainment.

Always present was a couple of the municipal guardians of law and order, equable cops who drank along with the rest of us – there was little else for them to do in a virtually crime-free community – and made no effort to prevent the exuberant, amateur entertainment by a woman of exceptional beauty, a young Swiss named Sonia Peter who would leap to the top of a table and dance wildly, her unkempt mane of blond hair lashing about her sun-bronzed shoulders.

When Pepe's limited repertoire of flamenco classics ran out and he began to repeat himself, a young Canadian would take over, blowing syncopated sound out of a dented, patinaed cornet. This young man, Richard Williams, would later have his own dixieland band on an hour-long show every Saturday on the BBC. Today he is famous as the mixed-media animator of the film *Who framed Roger Rabbit?*

Through a nearly impenetrable haze of smoke, we *forasteros* (foreigners) studied each other and then, next morning, met to say hello at a café in the heart of the lower city. Our isolation from island society and the smallness of our number, forced us together for companionship. We were thus exposed to an ethnic and cultural diversity which we could not have known so intimately anywhere else.

We represented many of the nations of Europe as well as America, Japan and India. In the cafés we communicated in Spanish, French, English and German, sometimes badly and sometimes in a crazy mixture of all four. We had in common youthful inquisitiveness and a sense of adventure. But deeper than this was the experience of World War II, which had altered all of us psychologically – and some physically – leaving us with a shared alienation from the world of our parents.

I remember sitting at a table on the waterfront with some other foreigners. A veteran of the Afrikakorps was chuckling over a paperback he was reading in German. He turned to the American sitting next to him and said in English, "I wish you could read this. It says a lot about us, and it says it well." Without vanity the young American, Dick Gardner, said, "thanks, but I don't have to. I wrote it." And, indeed, he

had. A graduate of the University of Washington, Dick had published several novels before he was thirty. And then, as with so many others who had come to Ibiza to write, his literary career wilted after he left.

In the fifties and sixties the island provided an inexplicable magic for young creative people.

What we shared more than anything else was the setting, from which, with whatever amount of money, there was no quick escape. We changed dwellings frequently. There were many apartments and houses available for rent within the walls. Some had better views and other desirable features. Romantics all, we were not seeking luxurious bathtubs and gold-plated spigots, although these did exist. After all, a nobleman of ducal rank lived up there, and there was the bishop, acknowledged ruler of the island, residing in a modest palace befitting his station.

Income finally decided where we'd settle, and when people like me, eager to conserve every peseta, heard of a place with less expensive rent, we shifted into it without delay. Forming the southwestern breakwater of the harbour a natural protrusion escapes the walls and runs out, undefended, to divide the sea from one of the finest small harbours in the western Mediterranean. La Pena (The Rock) resembles the sharp, dorsal tail of some monstrous saurian which aeons earlier had crawled out on land and petrified. The city with its fortifications was built on the beast's mountainous midsection, but no walls protect the reptilian tail, still dragging in the sea. Its tapering length leans outward, creating a beetling cliff hanging precariously over the depths, and houses, that might be older than any within the ramparts, cling like barnacles to the northern side which slopes steeply to the harbour.

No walls were built to protect La Pena, because there was nothing there worth defending. For centuries it had been home to the city's fishing colony which always occupied the lowest status in the urban community.

Sharing the rock with the fisherfolk were the residents of the island's two official brothels. These were hive-like

buildings bigger than the fishermen's houses and located near each other at the lower end which is connected with the esplanade by narrow stairways. This segregation was by no means an accident. La Pena is a natural ghetto, geographically ideal as a quarantine barrio.

It was literally a prison for the prostitutes, who were permitted nowhere else in the city or on the island and needed signed permits for weekly visits to a pharmacy or doctor's office. On these occasions they were required to walk in pairs, wearing dark glasses and never glancing to right or left. A lapse from this demeanour, closely monitored by vigilant townspeople and police, could result in arrest and expulsion from the island.

The ancient arrangement – assuring the city's social immaculacy – ignored an aspect of La Pena which was immediately apparent to us foreign visitors. The cantilevered cliff fronting the sea, and the labyrinth of narrow, cobbled alleys serving it, presented a humble antiquity, haunting for us – visitors from the twentieth century – its beauty lost on the islanders, who regarded the place as a slum.

I soon heard of a small house on the edge of the cliff which was empty and let at much less than what I was paying inside the walled city. Antonio Malo gave me an address and a wink. Go to the old market beneath the main gate of the city. Ask for the fountain. Find *la calle de la Virgen* (the street of the Virgin). Follow it to *Callejon Miranda*. There is a house there. He winked again.

I was familiar with the old market. It lies at the foot of the ramp leading up to the arched entrance through the walls. It was the liveliest part of the city, in the mornings bustling with vendors and shoppers seeking fresh produce from the country. Next to the ramp is the fish market and beyond it a labyrinth beginning with the place of the fountain where women and children came to draw water.

A shrine in a niche marked the entrance of the Street of the Virgin. A small, brightly painted statue represented the mother of God. She was enclosed behind glass which was polished daily, and someone in those days honoured her with

fresh flowers each morning.

After the fountain and the tiny shrine there were one or two shops, and then *la calle* narrowed to the width of a cart and was flanked by three storey houses containing flats. This was the beginning of the Pena, the city's ancient slum.

After walking one third of a kilometre I came to a narrow stairway leading upward on the right. It took me to a road not much wider than a walkway, *Callejon Miranda*, and ahead of me to the left I could hear the sea. I was standing in front of the address Antonio had given me. I fancied that sandalled feet may have smoothed the stones I stood on before Saul of Tarsus was preaching in Rome.

Recessed into the building was a narrow *entrada* considerably more elegant than any others I'd seen in the *barrio*. There was even an electric bell. A short woman in a grey smock admitted me and led me to a small office where a taller woman of forty-five greeted me. She wore a black dress and a gold necklace. Her dark hair was piled on her head and held in place with a comb in the manner of well-born Madrilenas.

When I explained that I'd come about a house, she smiled.

"You must be Felipe, el Americano. I'm Conchita. Let me show you the house."

It was right next door just beyond the building across the *callejon*, and it fronted the cliff above the sea. A door of thick, vertical planks, whitened by centuries of salt wind and rain, flushed with a whitewashed wall. Above the door and to the right was a window or, rather, a recess in the blank, inscrutable facade. Conchita inserted a heavy, corroded implement into an iron-girt hole in the planks. Released by this prototype of a key, the clumsy door swung inward.

Stairs led down into a cave.

Life in the Fifth Arrondissement of Paris had innured me to mediaeval housing, but now my courage flagged. I might have said, "Thank you very much," and departed, but she found a switch and turned on an electric light. It did little to illuminate what I could only compare to a dungeon. Curiosity

and politeness persuaded me to complete the inspection.

The lower part of the house had been quarried centuries before out of the rock. There were, of course, no windows, and the feeble bulb hanging on a cord from the middle of the ceiling completed the impression of a crypt. A further extension into the rock proved to be a tiny kitchen with a stone sink and tap and, next to it, a charcoal pit for cooking. There was neither toilet nor shower.

Conchita must have sensed my mood. Without apology she steered me to a stairway to the right of the entrance which led to the room above. It was pitch black until she forced open a wood shutter on the window. I saw an antique wooden bedstead and a table big enough to accommodate my little Swiss typewriter. I was beginning to see possibilities for the place. Then I looked out the window. It was barred but had no glass. Cold sea air blasted through it.

The opening was no more than a tunnel in the thick Moorish wall, but through it I saw a seascape of incomparable beauty. The magic casement decided me. And the rent was just over one dollar per month.

Conchita handed me the huge key and said she would make me comfortable immediately by sending over a mattress, linen, blankets and cooking utensils. I barely heard her. I sat dazed, wondering what I'd let myself in for. I could cook my own meals over the charcoal pit. I could use the upstairs room for sleeping, reading and writing. And, most important of all, I could save money!

I stared out the window at the slate-green, thrashing sea. In the middle distance several grey-black rocks jutted from the surface. Waves smashed against them sending jets of flashing spume high above the horizon. The low, faint profile of Formentera far to the south divided sea from sky.

Beneath me massive waves bludgeoned the base of the cliff. A rhythmic thunder sent perceptible tremors up through the floor. Through millennia the sea had hollowed out the stone below, so that my house and all the wretched hovels following it – as in some Disneyesque fantasy – were perched out over the sea.

"Oye, Felipe. *Se puede entrar!*" ("Hey, Philip, can I come in?") It was a girl's voice from below, wrenching me out of my muse.

Before I could reply, a mattress was propelling itself up the narrow, bedroom stairs. The mattress deposited itself on the wooden bed, revealing a girl of eighteen with raven hair and a friendly smile, who said, "*Hola*, I'm Carmen." As I greeted her formally, I heard more voices below and girlish giggling.

"*Se puede pasar!*" one of them sang out. They did not wait for my invitation. They crowded down the entrance steps. There were five of them, each bearing domestic articles to furnish my new home.

Carmen led me down the stairs and introduced me to her friends – or workmates, as I now realised. Lidia, Maria-Teresa, Elena, Rosario, and Esperanza. They were modishly dressed and wore makeup. They ranged from eighteen to twenty-five years old. There were no beauties among them, but they radiated an unshy friendliness quite distinct from the severe manner of the island maidens. In two minutes I felt less lonely than I had during my years of vagabondage following the war.

This was to be my home for the next three years. Conchita and her lieutenant, Gloria, would become my close friends. The girls – or their occasional replacements – became my little sisters. They used my house as a kind of retreat, or recreation room, and I never barred them from coming in at any hour, nor did they ever abuse the privilege.

I listened to their chatter and their problems and their stories of life on the mainland. They never talked shop, and they scrubbed my floors, washed my clothes, brought me food, and conferred on me in whatever manner they could a sisterly love which had no other outlet in their miserably circumscribed lives.

To take as my own this tiny family of outcasts, victims of social hypocrisy – virtual slaves economically barred in their ostracism from anything resembling normal society – may seem a bizarre way to enter an alien culture. But I was, myself, a self-appointed outcast. And I had not come to the island to study Ibiza or the Ibizencos. I'd come there because my money would last longer.