

Palma De Mallorca:

Enchanting Aura of Moors and Art Galleries

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“You were asking about the traces of the Moors! Look at this courtyard and the arch before you. They are a legacy from the Moors and these make a great background for the many art galleries that proliferate the old city of Palma de Mallorca”, Nicole our guide said as if in a dream as she went on to talk about Palma’s art galleries, seemingly her joy of life.

As we moved along I thought to myself, “The ghosts of the Moors who once called Palma are still all around.” The narrow paved spotlessly clean streets lined with cafes, houses with heavy wooden doors and wrought iron gates, and patios with stone staircases and Moorish arches, and lined with plants were a living reminder of the city’s Arab heritage. Even though the Moors (the European name for the Arabs in the Iberian Peninsula) were

defeated in 1229 and enslaved by Jaime I, King of Valencia and Aragon, their legacy remains – now an integral part of Spanish culture. It is as if the Arabs came to enrich the Spanish landscape then faded away into history.

Palma, the capital of both the island of Mallorca and the Balearic Islands, was established as the Roman city of Palmaria then later renamed by the Arabs as Madina Mayurca. Today its inhabitants simply call it,

Ciudad (city). Its population of some 375,000 is more than half of all the inhabitants of the Balearic Islands. Set on the seductive bay, Bahia de Palma, the city is lively and cosmopolitan. Even though it has become a vibrant modern city, its old quarter (the old Arab town) has managed to retain its ancient aura and charm. Foreign visitors flock into the city in large numbers, in the main, to experience the historic flavour of this venerable quarter. ▶



La Lonja

لا لونيا

The still evident Moorish façade of the old city as well as the modern tourist facilities have combined to create for Palma a holiday destination par excellence. Most tourists especially from cruise ships always begin by exploring the old city, once surrounded by defensive walls, parts of which remain –some renovated. In its maze of alleyways and tiny streets with their Moorish heritage, travellers can enjoy the atmosphere of the Middle Ages. A good number of these streets fan out from Sa Seu, Palma’s Cathedral constructed on the site of a former mosque which itself was erected on the remains of a Roman temple.

Like most tourists, after walking the streets we began our exploration of the main sites at the Cathedral, considered to be one of the world’s finest and largest Gothic structures as well as the most magnificent monument in the city. The Cathedral incorporates in its bell-tower the minaret of the former mosque and its svelte 21.47 m (70.5 ft) columns makes the Cathedral the second-highest Gothic cathedral in Europe. Also striking is the rose window over the main altar that measures 11.5m (38 ft) in diameter and has 97 sq m (116 sq y) of surface area and 1,236 stained panes. Enhancing its interior is the touch of Gaudi who worked for ten years to beautify it.

Edging the Cathedral, we rested a while in Parc de la Mar with its impressive fountains and sculptures admiring the next-door

Almudaina Palace, once the seat of the Moorish rulers and located next door to the Cathedral. With its walls rising proudly above the defensive ramparts of the medieval quarter, this splendid palace/fortress, which still contains a small Arab Bath, offers a panoramic view of Palma’s harbour. In the Middle Ages it was used as a Royal Palace and today it is the official residence of the King of Spain when he visits Palma. It is also the home of the Museum of National Heritage and houses the Harbour Office of the Balearic Islands.

A five-minute walk from the Almudaina we reached the Arab Baths, hidden away on a tiny street. Dating from the 10th century and surrounded by well-tended gardens, they are the only complete structure remaining from Arab times and believed to have been part of a nobleman’s house. The tepidarium has a dome in the shape of a half orange, with 25 round shafts for sunlight, supported by a dozen columns. After the Christians invaded and conquered Mallorca, they obliterated almost every possible sign of Arab/Muslim architecture and settlement. The Baths remain the last testimony of more than 300 years of Arab/Muslim presence on the island. They are popular with visitors and continue to generate much historic interest.

After visiting the old city’s most important monuments we continued our meandering in the former Arab Quarter. It seemed that

around every corner there was some reminder of the Moorish or Medieval eras. In every conversation Nicole would always end up talking about the art galleries in Mallorca. As we walked along after the tour, Nicole explained, “Here in Palma we love art. Our city has more art galleries per capita than any place else in the world.”

Like the writer who wrote after exploring the old city, ‘The Arab Quarter is stylish, sophisticated, intimate and exudes subtle Moorish influences yet bursting with life’, we had an exciting and fulfilling day rambling through this venerable Quarter. Of the 12 million tourists who travel annually to the Balearic Islands, 10 million pass through Palma making it the most popular tourist destination in Europe.

Palma remains today an attractive and prosperous city as it was in the days of the Moors. Jaime I, the conqueror of the city, described it as ‘the most beautiful city that he had ever seen’ and to many of its inhabitants it remains so today. In the words of an acquaintance, “I love my city. It’s beautiful! It’s the best place in Spain to live!” ▶



Café in the Arab Quarter

مقهى في الحي العربي



Grand Hotel - Arab Quarter - الحي العربي

IF YOU GO

Facts about Palma:

- 1) Buses leave Palma's airport every 15 minutes for the city centre (Plaza España). Also taxi service is excellent.
- 2) Palma offers an excellent mix of hotels, culture, history, gastronomy, shopping.
- 3) Palma has no beaches in the city. The nearest beaches are Ca'n Pastills to the east and Cala Mayor to the west – both about 4 km (2.5 mi) away. The best beaches are Magalluf and Palma Vova to the west of the island and Alcudia on the north coast.
- 4) Pearls are the gifts to buy while visiting Palma. Mallorquin pearls, manufactured in the town of Manacor, are world famous.
- 5) The favourite Mallorquin sweet is ensaimada – a spiral-shaped bun.
- 6) Leaving a small tip is customary - in restaurants and hotels, from 5-10% of the cost of food.
- 7) Palma has 17 art galleries mostly in the old town. ■



Arab Quarter

الحي العربي



Arab baths

الحمامات العربية

Other Site to See in Palma

Bellver Castle, a 14th century Gothic structure that is the only totally circular castle in Spain with a fine view of the city and bay. It was once a royal residence and now houses the Palma History Museum.

La Lonja, a 15th century Catalan Gothic structure, containing fine sculptures.

Museu de Mallorca, a converted 15th century palace containing archaeological finds.

Town Hall, a 17th century structure that is full of character and charm.

Basilica of San Francisco, a 13th century church famous as the resting place of Ramon Llull, Spain's loved philosopher, scholar and teacher.

Gran Hotel, Palma's first luxury hotel opened in 1903. Restored by the Fundacio la Caixa and reopened in 1993 as an art gallery.

Where To Stay

There are over a thousand hotels in Mallorca catering to all tastes. One of the top hotels in Palma to stay is Castillo Son Vida, situated in a castle of medieval origin, surrounded by 500 hectares of subtropical parkland and with magnificent views of the bay of Palma, the hotel is a 5-star top luxury abode. For hotels in Palma see Website: www.mallorcahotelguide.com – Mallorca

For Further Information

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