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Palma on a plate



There are 3,000 places to eat in the Majorcan capital – but Sarah Gilbert knows the best

PALMA'S picturesque Old Town may seem an unlikely destination for a gastronomic getaway but those who fancy a stay in Majorca's capital can take their pick from thousands of places to eat. In fact, thanks to a recent explosion in dining experiences, visitors now have about 3,000 restaurants to choose from.

Creative chefs have been lured to the city by the abundance of fresh produce: seafood, Majorcan black pig, sea salt, olives and almonds. Gourmet markets have sprung up in the charming maze of medieval cobbled streets where visitors are treated to the pungent smell of cheese, herbs and bread.

Palacio Can Marqués, an 18th-Century mansion in the Old Town transformed into a stylish boutique hotel, makes the perfect base for a weekend of gourmet delights.

Beyond the hotel's lobby, with its cathedral-high ceiling and soaring staircase, there are 13 individually decorated suites that mix original features – wood panelling, honey-coloured stone floors, outsized fireplaces – with bold art, custom-made Murano-glass chandeliers, handwoven

Nepalese rugs and tactile velvet furniture.

The courtyard garden is ideal for a chilled glass of cava. Then have dinner under the restaurant's vaulted ceiling, where Belgian chef Cedric Lebon serves up French and Mediterranean classics – a top choice is a three-course meal of onion soup, a succulent sirloin steak and an irresistible Ile Flottante (meringue and cream).

Perfect pastries

If you spot distinctive hexagonal-shaped boxes at Palma Airport and are curious to know what's inside them, you won't find odd-shaped hats but a family-sized ensaimada – Majorca's emblematic pastry.

Ensaïmada are thought to date back to the 17th Century – some historians believe their coiled shape was inspired by Moorish turbans – so where better to try them than at the city's oldest cafe, Ca'n Joan De S'aigo? It first opened its doors in 1700 and – with its ornately tiled floor and marble-topped tables – still exudes an old-fashioned charm. Go for a selection – dusted with icing sugar, topped with apricots and stuffed with pumpkin jam



GOURMET GATEWAY:

The port at Palma, above. Serrano ham at Mercat de l'Olivar, top left, and, left, old-style deli La Pajarita Bomboneria

– and pair them with a cup of hot chocolate so thick you can stand your spoon up in it. The slightly crunchy exterior layers of light, flaky pastry reminded me of a croissant crossed with a brioche.

Tasty tapas

For a modern take on tapas, head to the sleek El Camino. Like its sibling restaurant in London's Soho, Barrafina, you might have to queue for a stool at the long wooden bar, but

where better to nibble on plump-green olives and sip a glass of Majorcan cava? The menu celebrates seasonal Mediterranean produce such as goat's cheese-stuffed zucchini flowers or perfectly grilled octopus in a tangy mojo sauce. Do not miss the divine Tarta de Santiago (almond cake).

La Rosa Vermuteria & Colmado is a retro tapas bar with a twist – and a loyal local following thanks to its long list of vermouths (while this age-old tipple is now often consigned to the back of British drinks cabinets, it's all the rage in Spain). You can't go wrong with a Negroni – a potent mix of vermouth, gin and Campari – served with slivers of iberico ham before tucking into hearty local dishes such as cod croquettes, made-to-order prawn tortilla and milk-fed lamb chops.

To market

Majorcans would shop at the market every day if they could, and at the two-storey Mercat de l'Olivar stalls were piled high with vibrantly coloured fruit, local meats and cheeses. In the fish market, swordfish heads sit among slabs of tuna and you can dine on oysters and sushi, or buy prawns and have them grilled in one of the bars upstairs.

To stock up on gourmet goodies, head to the older and smaller Mercat de Santa Catalina in its namesake seafront neighbourhood. Pick

up Flor de Sal d'es Trenc (sea salt) flavoured with hibiscus for €8, sobrassada sausage, made with indigenous black pig, and €5 jars of ramillete tomatoes – perfect for spreading on bread to create pan con tomate. Smaller still, La Pajarita Bomboneria is an old-school deli that's been in the same family for six generations. As well as hand-crafting speciality charcuterie, they work with local producers such as the artisans behind Cabraboc gin, Cas Misser olive oil and Binigrau wine.

Fabulous fusion

If you want a final fine-dining feast try Fera Restaurant and Bar. Housed in a beautifully restored old palace, the inspired interior combines ancient stone archways, sleek furniture and contemporary art-filled walls. But it's the innovative creations from the Austrian-born chef Simon Petutschnig that really sets it apart. Making full use of the island's bountiful produce – along with the restaurant's organic garden – he artfully blends local and Asian flavours to create what he describes as 'borderless Mediterranean' cuisine.

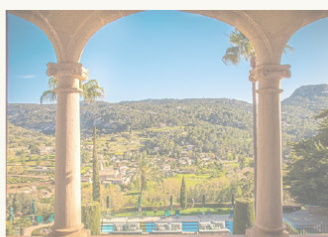
The seven-course 'Art tasting menu' paired with Majorcan wines was as decorative as it was delicious. Sea in an Oyster Shell – an oyster, mussel and organic caviar – came on a bed of volcanic stone with shells, seaweed and waves of dry ice. And flavours shone in dishes such as wagyu beef with textures of potato, apple and parsnip; and the sublime chocolate dessert with bites of brownie, mousse and the Japanese citrus fruit yuzu. Just like Palma, it was a feast for all the senses.

● Sarah Gilbert was a guest of Palacio Can Marqués (palaciocanmarques.com). Suites start from £336 B+B, including private airport transfers. British Airways flies direct to Palma from London, Manchester and Edinburgh. Fares from London start from £51pp return. For more information, see visitpalma.com

...AND A TASTY ALTERNATIVE OUT OF TOWN

AWAY from the city, the Gran Hotel Son Net is a restored 17th Century finca tucked into the velvety green foothills of the Tramuntana Mountains, 30 minutes from Palma Airport.

Rooms feature antique furniture and rich textiles, while the Hockney-blue pool looks out over the pretty village of Puigpunyent. Breakfast on the sun-filled terrace comprised local cheeses, hams and the hotel's own herb-flavoured salt and extra-



virgin olive oil. In the evening, after gin sundowners, chef Sergio Olmedo's tasting menu included scallops, grilled turbot and lamb loin.

DIVINE: The view over the pool at the Gran Hotel Son

● Doubles at Gran Hotel Son Net, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group (slh.com), start from £240 B+B.

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