

Mallorca's dramatic scenery and benign climate have drawn visitors to her shores for millennia. Legend has it that Circe called sailors to their death from the rocks of her craggy coastline, and many are those who have fallen under her continuing spell.

Mallorca is the largest of the Balearic Islands, an archipelago situated between two worlds: equidistant between Africa and Europe, and with a richly varied history. The Phoenicians built extensive terraces all over the hillsides of the north coast, which the Romans continued to cultivate during their long occupation of the island, producing excellent wines and developing an agricultural system which existed almost unchanged until the latter part of the twentieth century. The North Africans, or Moors, conquered the island and occupied it for more than four hundred years until James I took it back from them by bloody conquest in 1229, destroying the mosque in the capital Mayurqa, and building the cathedral over its foundations. For years the island was an independent kingdom, but in the seventeenth century it became part of Spain, and so it remains today.

Fourteen invader nations have left their mark on the island's society, culture, architecture, cuisine and language. It is a melting pot, a microcosm of a continent contained within its 1,405 square miles. The people are fiercely proud of their heritage, and hold on firmly to their language and customs. Visitors enjoy the many fiestas celebrating important episodes in the island's history, as well as the mild Mediterranean climate, which has allowed the growth of a rich and varied native flora, from the high mountains of the Serra de Tramuntana to the plain of Es Pla and the dry, sandy, coastal regions. In 2012 the Serra de Tramuntana was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and is now protected from development.

Unbeknownst to most of the visitors flocking to the island each year, Mallorca is home to a number of beautiful gardens, from those built in Moorish times, such as Alfabia and Raixa, to many more recent examples. Rainfall in the mountains can be as abundant as sixty inches (1,500mm) per year, but in the dry south the average is barely one third of that, so water-wise gardening is a must. The doyenne of Mediterranean gardening, Heidi Gildemeister, created an exquisite example of a drought-tolerant garden at her home high in the Tramuntana, within the boundaries of the ancient estate of Vall d'Ariant, now home to the Black Vulture Foundation, an organisation for the protection of that avian species. In Mrs Gildemeister's garden native species are sculpted and pruned to make the garden look like a landscaped paradise, and her topiary work on the abundant native mastic (*Pistacia lentiscus*) is both beautiful and effective. The garden is not open to the public, but occasionally the Gildemeisters do allow visitors by special request.

Another interesting and relatively new garden is that of designer H el ene Lindgens and her husband Christian. Just five years old, this is a fine example of what can be achieved using a simple colour palette, for this is a White Garden, designed by H el ene herself with the help of the young garden designer, Andi Lechte. The masses of gaura, roses, convolvulus, lantana and other Mediterranean plantings are set against a backdrop of wild olive trees (*Olea europaea sylvestris*), whose silver-grey leaves create a shimmering effect on sunny days. There is a biomass plant for compost, a generator for electricity, and a black swimming pool to offset the white flowers.

Just down the road is the contrasting garden of Professor Hans and Mrs Gritli Liesenhoff, who have

used the natural contours of the land to create a large park-like garden, through which gravel paths meander gently. In spring, fields of *Lavandula angustifolia* scent the warm air, in autumn a seasonal river bed runs, after the rains, like a torrent between rows of dormant *Iris germanica*, and in summer the green topiary of myriad enormous *Myrtus communis* creates a delightful cool effect next to the pretty wooden shade-house. This is a haven of peace and tranquillity, and everywhere there is evidence of Gritli's interest in the ancient world, in the form of Greek and Roman sculptures and texts.

Not far from here a third truly Mediterranean garden has been lovingly created by the late Marianne and Andrew Beith at their pretty old *finca*. Over the past ten years the landscape has been transformed using only native and Mediterranean plants, and almost all of them entirely unwatered. Andrew took charge of a field of huge, ancient *Opuntia ficus-india*, or prickly pear, which he painstakingly pruned over time to create a 'magic forest' of gnarled giants among which his grandchildren play. He called this eerie place Jurassic Park, and it is an unusual feature of the garden. Apart from a small section of lawn around the pool, the garden is entirely without irrigation, an admirable achievement.

One of the ancient gardens of Spain, Alfabia and its beautiful *finca* still belong today to the Zaforteza family, who have owned them and cared for them for more than six hundred years. Moorish in style, the garden has cascades of water framed by ancient palm trees, fed by springs directly from the high mountains behind. Painstakingly restored to their former glory, the gardens and house are open to the public, and are atmospheric and romantic. There is even an original Arabic inscription still to be seen on the ceiling of the entrance hall, a relic of Moorish occupation over eight hundred years ago.

On the other side of the mountains, in the lush citrus-growing valley of Sóller, is the Sóller Botanical garden. The passion and enthusiasm of its director and his wife are evident as one strolls through the carefully-labelled sections of the gardens, each dedicated to a specific Mediterranean climate area of the world. There is a seed bank and a research centre, making this one of the most important gardens of its type in Europe.

Another interesting place to visit, if one is lucky enough to be invited, is the perfectly-restored private hamlet of Biniagual, in the wine-growing area of Mallorca, near the town of Santa Maria. A village comprising several streets of beautiful, eighteenth-century, dry-stone walled houses, Biniagual is occupied by the workers on the estate, which produces excellent wines, mostly for export to Europe. There are several inter-connecting gardens in different styles, with ancient specimen trees and breath-taking views of mountains to the north. An enormous *Chorisia speciosa* is an impressive sight as one enters the first garden, and later on one comes across an arbour of weeping *Robinia pseudoacacia*.

All across the island are interesting examples of private homes with very personal gardens. These are interesting to visit should an invitation be forthcoming, reflecting the personalities of their owners and offering an insight into what can be achieved in the different parts of the island. Irrigation is mostly from private wells, or occasionally from the municipal supply, which provides good quality water from mountain reservoirs and desalination plants. There is a wealth of gardens to explore on this beautiful island, which explains why Mallorca is fast becoming a popular destination for garden enthusiasts worldwide.

*Sally Beale will be leading the HORTUS tour of Mallorca gardens 19-24 April 2015.*