

# Sea of the Gods



CASABLANCA is a false start. An honest journey along the western Mediterranean should start at the rock of Jebel Musa, which, along Gibraltar on the opposite shore, marks the true beginning of the *Mare Nostrum*.

But Casablanca, which is on the Atlantic Ocean, defies geography and feels as Mediterranean as Morocco's northern coast.

The sea here has none of the cold quality and steely waters full of empty oyster shells that mark Europe's Atlantic shores. The light is a kaleidoscope of yellows and oranges, with the same dazzling warmth of the Mediterranean, only amplified by the stark whiteness of the houses that honour the city's name—Casablanca, the White House.

Except that the houses came a long while after the name. Once a haven for pirates, the city—then called Anfa—was razed by the Portuguese, who renamed it *Casa Blanca*. The name stuck even when the conquerors changed and

Casablanca became a thriving port under early-20<sup>th</sup>-century French rule.

And it is the French Casablanca of Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman that owns the world's collective imagination: a city of sin and intrigue, nights and shadows, which has very little to do with the real one, quite possibly because the film was actually shot in Arizona and California.

Today's Casablanca, by contrast, is a sun-filled city of children running along the seashore, traffic-clogged thoroughfares and bustling seafood restaurants, all dwarfed by the powerful outline of the Hassan II mosque.

The effect is deliberate. Determined to build a mosque to beat Rome's St Peter's, Morocco's late king, Hassan II, spearheaded one of the most ambitious projects in modern religious architecture—one that took seven years and 10,000 men to complete.

The mosque, which could fit St Peter's in its prayer hall, stands on an

outcrop of land snatched from the sea, a beacon for both sailors and the faithful. Its minaret, which is the highest in the world at 689ft, echoes Marrakech's historic Kutubiyah mosque, but with the grandeur that only technology and a French architect can add. Its *zillij*—mosaics of brilliant blue, jade, ochre and white—form fantastical flowers in the eye of the unbeliever. And the carved wood ceilings and plaster mouldings look like intricately embroidered lace—until the retractable roof opens and the marble pillars soar straight towards the sky and God.

'We often forget that the Mediterranean is not just a Catholic sea,' says sailing author Rod Heikell. 'It's an amalgamation of East and West. All sorts of practices, in religion as well as cuisine, came from Lebanon, Syria, Turkey.'

## Set sail to Spain

Past Jebel Musa, along the Spanish coast, the Mediterranean's religious

**Carla Passino** explores the western Mediterranean in the wake of religion, myth and medieval sailors



*Casablanca is a sun-filled city of children running along the seashore, traffic-clogged thoroughfares and bustling restaurants*

icons—old churches, crumbling Roman temples—increasingly share the seafloor with those shrines to modern living that are boats and second homes. And if this blend of the spiritual and the venal sounds disturbing to Puritan-touched Britain, it is also quintessentially Mediterranean.

'The trade routes that ran through the Mediterranean basin brought culture as well as commerce,' says Mediterranean scholar Predrag Matvejevic. 'It is in this way that the Mediterranean acquired the ideas of democracy and *polis*; Greek philosophy, where man reflects on his being; and the three great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.'

Maybe the new trade route of tourism and retirement will bring new ideas along the tree-shaded villas, swanky (and sometimes ugly) developments, and busy marinas that dot the shores from Marbella to Catalonia. So far, however, it is mainly bringing plenty of boats. Up north in Calafat, near Barcelona, the thicket of masts

*(Above):* Sardinia's striking coastline has many watch towers dotted along it

*(Above right):* the imposing Hassan II mosque in Casablanca

*(Right):* Casablanca's striking white houses contrast deeply with the blue of the sea





*In its tumbling ascent from waterfront to hills, Barcelona brings together the colours of Marseilles and a hint of Paris*

becomes so dense that it screens the cluster of stylish, whitewashed houses perched atop the port. It is a vivid testament to the renewed enthusiasm for boating that is gripping Spain.

'About five years ago boating was very primitive, but the Spanish have started to learn,' says Diego Torres, a yachtsman who lives in Barcelona.

Or perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that Spaniards are rediscovering their maritime heritage. The country's relationship with the sea has deep roots. It was a Spanish fleet that reached the Americas and, in the Middle Ages, Barcelona battled Genoa and Venice for Mediterranean hegemony—quite an achievement considering that the city had no harbour until 1477.

Today, Barcelona sucks in water through the pincer-like embrace of the port and the old fishermen's village of Barceloneta. Approaching the city from the sea, the coastline breaks down into the austere shape of the Royal Shipyards; the jumble of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century buildings surrounding it; and the vast Cristobal Colon esplanade at the end of the Ramblas, with the skyscrapers of the Olympic City and the hill of the Montjuic looming on either side.

In its tumbling ascent from water-

front to hills, Barcelona brings together the colours of Marseilles, the shadows of Genoa and just a hint of Paris in the floral dreams of the Eixample's modernist boulevards. And memories of Naples in Barceloneta—the only corner of the city that is wrapped in water—where a mingled scent of sea and fish imbues the small 18<sup>th</sup>-century streets, and a maze of clothes hanging in the breeze belies the neighbourhood's military layout.

But it is in the landlocked Born that the Mediterranean really comes alive. The wind brings in its scent, sneaking along the dark *carrers* and gaining strength in the odd square that cuts through them. It crops up in the few palms that take up a corner of Carrer Mirallers; in the sun flooding the Passeig del Born; and, as Mediterranean spirituality resurfaces triumphant, in the spires of Santa Maria del Mar. Built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by local merchants, shipbuilders and seafarers, Santa Maria is grey and austere, with the same sober elegance of the local Penedés wines. As Spanish author Ildefonso Falcones writes in his *Catedral del Mar*, it is really 'the church of the people, like a large Catalan farmhouse, with the light of the Mediterranean as its supreme ele-

## CONQUER THE HIGH SEAS

The author of numerous pilots on the Mediterranean Sea, Rod Heikell is a revered name among sailing enthusiasts. A former historian, he has been cruising the Med for 25 years, and is as attracted by its history as by its waters. 'This was the hub of the world when, in the UK, people were living in mud huts,' he says.

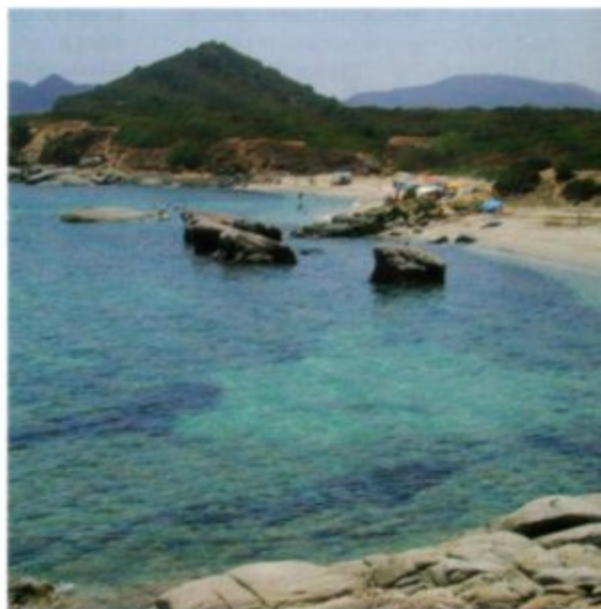
Although Mr Heikell has a soft spot for Cartagena—'like Barcelona 15 years ago'—and for Barcelona's 'fabulous' Port Vell, his favourite stretch of the Mediterranean starts in Sardinia and Corsica. 'They make up the best cruising around the Med,' he says. 'Some ports of Sardinia have a very Aragonese feel, especially Alguer, where you can get great paella. And you can see the

lovely cork trees from the sea.'

Smaller Corsica, further north, remains a boating paradise, despite reports of growing local resentment towards second-home owners.

'I particularly like Bonifacio,' Mr Heikell says. 'When you are going in, you can hardly see it, it disappears into the cliffs. Then suddenly it opens out in front of you.'

And, of course, there's Malta. 'It's not so much a cruising area as a place to spend winter,' says Mr Heikell. 'It's the comfort factor, because it's a former English colony. And it has good food of that quirky English/international/Italian variety. It's a strange little outpost in the middle of the Sicily channel.'





(Facing page): inviting Sardinian coves and a view of Cagliari's church-encrusted summit (Above): looking across Barcelona's impressive skyline to the sea, which more and more Spaniards are learning to sail on

ment of differentiation'.

The church's entrance marks the Aragonese victory over the kingdom of Sardinia—rather fittingly, because it was from the shores straight down from Santa Maria that Catalan warships set sail to subdue the Italian island.

### Sun-scorched Sardinia

Looking at the vast lump of wind-beaten, sun-burned old rocks that make up Sardinia, it is perhaps surprising that the Aragonese kept going at it for more than 80 years. Its grains, salt and odd bit of coral barely justified their perseverance, but a geographical accident had placed the island right in the middle of their Mediterranean ambitions, which stretched from Barcelona to Athens.

Until Sardinia fell in 1409, Aragonese sailors would have breathed a sigh of relief at sighting Cagliari's St Pancras tower, a sign that they were nearing their one stronghold on the island.

A slim column reaching towards the sky, St Pancras remains Cagliari's first signpost from the sea. The cloud of pink-infused sand at its feet takes longer to unravel, but finally resolves

into an architectural journey where the restrained *Umbertino* palazzi of the harbour front turn into bulky *Ottocento* bastions and slender medieval towers as the eye ascends towards a church-encrusted summit.

As it befits a former Spanish colony, Cagliari swims in churches. The most fascinating of them lies just outside the city along the western coast. Devoted to one of Sardinia's few martyrs, the tiny Chiesa di Sant'Efisio is a place of contrasts: the tremulous dance of a candle against a pitch-dark interior; the musty wafts of incense against the scent of the sun-scorched bushes nearby; and the warm silhouette of golden stone against the sharp, inexorable, piercing blue of the sea.

In this, Sant'Efisio, like Cagliari itself, is an anomaly. The rest of Sardinia has always eyed the Mediterranean with suspicion. Italian author Sergio Frau believes that some devastating calamity, maybe a 'slap by Poseidon', forced the islanders to move inward thousands of years ago, and left a legacy of fear and mistrust towards the sea.

'I have a gut feeling that a great civi-

## EXPLORING THE SPANISH MED

Spanish yachtsman Diego Torres recommends a selection of bays and coves in Catalonia and the Balearics:

- Girona, Figueres and Cadaqués in the Costa Brava
- Sitges, south of Barcelona
- The north coast of Ibiza
- Caribbean-like Illetes in Formentera
- Celebrity-studded Espalmador, also in Formentera

lisation suddenly sought refuge inland, leaving the shores to mosquitoes and invaders,' he says.

Traces of this cataclysm also lead Mr Frau to believe that Sardinia is Plato's Atlantis, the fabled island set beyond the Pillars of Hercules.

'The Sicilian Channel, which swiftly goes from 6m to 1800m is a treacherous stretch of sea that fits Greek descriptions of the Pillars,' he says. 'And, beyond it, the Greeks said there was

## International Mediterranean

an island symmetric to the Caucasus, which was the island of Atlas. If you measure from the Caucasus to Delphi and to Delphi westward, you end up in Sardinia.

### Magnificent Malta

If Sardinia is Atlantis and the Pillars are in Sicily, small, isolated Malta becomes the border between Greece and Phoenicia, the ancient powers which shared the Mediterranean before Rome arrived on the scene.

It is fitting, because the Maltese archipelago, stranded between East and West, is a natural frontier. It shows in its unforgiving land, parched bare under a sun that is no longer European, but not quite African; in the formidable stronghold that is Birgu's Fort St Angelo, pitted against hundreds of Islamic attacks; and, most of all, in the golden bastions of La Valletta, rising sharply from the sea.

The man who ordered Valletta built, Jean Parisot de la Valette, held off a Turkish siege in 1565, setting 10,000 soldiers against an invading army of more than 48,000. Perhaps because of

this, his last act before dying was to lay the first stone of a fortified city that would make Malta impregnable.

Although time has softened Valletta into a Baroque concoction of deep honey and pale friezes, oddly infused with the genteel feel of a mellow Bognor Regis, some corners still look the fierce part that La Valette conceived for it.

The lucid pattern of its streets, laid out in a military-efficient grid, the bulk of its bastions, the saints' statues that pepper nearly every palazzo are a sharp reminder that the city once was the last bulwark of Christianity.

And its fortress-like Co-Cathedral of Saint John—so severe outside, so richly golden inside—still feels like God's last outpost in the East, just like Casablanca's Hassan II mosque, some 1,200 miles west, is Allah's last one in the West.

But then the church's last bell tolls over waters that glitter as hard as step cut diamonds. Gods, warring men and ancient mariners all vanish into the encroaching darkness. And the Mediterranean remains alone in the night.



(Left): a historic palazzo nestles into a Maltese hillside (Below left): flying the flag on a hill-top Castillo for sale in the Costa Brava



## On the Market

**Few developments** come with royal backing, but Le Jardin de Fleur, in Saidia, on Morocco's Mediterranean coast, is among them. Part of a tourism development plan supported by King Mohammed VI, it will have 129 villas and 250 apartments set in lush subtropical gardens. Prices start from €101,000 for apartments (Saffron Villas: 01635-253121).

**Set in 42 acres** near Sant Felix Guixols, close to Barcelona, Can Guardiola is 'one of the best properties on the Costa Brava', according to selling agent Lucas Fox. Painstakingly renovated, it blends original features—such as painted ceilings—with modern cons, such as under floor heating. Price on application (Lucas Fox: 00 34 933 56 89).



**Salvador Dali's** fans will appreciate this fisherman's house, which is set close to the maestro's former home (now a museum). 'On the terrace, you can feel the spirit of Dali's art,' say selling agents Engel & Völkers.

Even the less artistically-minded will enjoy the house's views over sea, boats and beach, which are only 50 yards away. The asking price is €2.2m (00 34 972 45 64 40).



**Castle living** has an appeal of its own—especially when the castle dates from the 12th century and comes with a museum, a large library and an excellent wine cellar. Set in two and a half acres of landscaped gardens

at the top of a hill, this spectacular five-bedroom Castillo affords uninterrupted views across the Costa Brava from its picturesque tower. For all this, agents Engel & Völkers are seeking offers in excess of €7m (00 34 972 45 64 40).

**One of Italy's** most famous architects, Massimiliano Fuksas, is designing the look of a new development near one of Sardinia's most prestigious golf courses, Is Molas. The Is Molas Golf Club, a 30-minute drive from Cagliari airport, has hosted the Italian open four times. Now, some 200 designer villas will be scattered along its 27-hole course. Owners will also have access to a planned 18-hole course and a private beach. For prices and further information on the development, please contact Knight Frank (020-7629 8171).

**Frank Salt** is selling a historic palazzo in Wardija, which affords far-reaching views over both of Malta's coastlines. An opulent home set in more than two acres of gardens, swimming pool and ponds, it has five bedrooms and three 'stately' rooms to entertain, as well as a separate cottage. The price is only available on application to Frank Salt (020-7935 5333).