

Tour de Mallorca

As I'd done each morning for the last five days I walked north from the hotel entrance to the intersection of la avenida Jaume and la calle Mallorca to hail a taxi. "Buenos dias, Cala Mayor por favor." The taxis here are cool little Peugeots, black and vanilla and comfortable. Our route took us down to the waterfront and west in front of the long arc of hotels, restaurants, and discos that face south across the harbor to the open Mediterranean beyond. Being early on Sunday the side walks were quiet the storefronts still closed, their roll down shutters secure for another few hours. After a brief stretch of expressway (or freeway if you hail from California) we looped off the exit and crossed west to a winding route with gift shops, bars, and cafes of a slightly tackier and grubbier persuasion - and were quickly out front of the motorcycle rental shop. "Novecientos cincuenta pesetas por favor" "Si." I rustle through my jean pockets and produce a one thousand denomination bill, "Gracis senior, adios."

All the cool bikes had been reserved so I settled on a simple Yamaha 250 road bike, cherry red fuel tank, "easy rider" slung seat with matching handle bar arrangement. I lashed my day pack to the small rack and was soon growling up the narrow streets of Cala Mayor seeking a back way out to the roads leading north to Valldemossa. Some back tracking and false starts with one-way streets soon had me up over the steep ridge and into the interior of the island. The mountains I was headed for show as 4,000 feet on the map I'd purchased the day before. In the distance now, they loomed huge looking so like the mountains of our southwest. The brief run along the rural roads took me through olive groves and small farms bounded on all sides by dusty stone walls, here and there one of the old windmills looking all the world like those from Don Quiote - hey? not "like" them, them! Mallorca is small so sooner than I anticipated I

entered a narley cut in the rock of the mountains, the road rising between giant outcroppings. In seconds the air chilled, I braced against the cold, my thin summer shirt still cracking and snapping in the slipstream. Before I could react there opened a terraced farm to the left of the road, its central hacienda bright in the sun, a blaze of bougainvillea cascading off the portico, its structure sharing all the colors of the soil and rock of this place. Cedar and pine adding rich green, the leaves of olive trees flashing their pale undersides in the freshening breeze - to be assaulted like this so quickly, the drama again reminding me of California - the dry rugged terrain brilliant beneath a cloudless October sky. The road wound its way up the eastern edge of the valley to the exquisite village of Valldemossa, spread across a small hanging bowl in the mountain tops. As I rumbled into its center the Mediterranean was visible near to the north and more distance to the south. The old Monastery was postcard ready, its bell tower casting long shadows in the morning light. I stashed the bike and walked its grounds, artists still setting out their works in anticipation of the days tourists. The village nestled close, its streets narrow, its steps home to tended potted plants, their green so beautiful against the stone. As I shopped an open market in the main square (found a nice little carbon steel paring knife for my friend Holand) the first of the day's huge tour buses arrived pouring its contents onto the once peaceful streets - time to move.

The road quickly passed from the village and began descending as it approached the northern coast. I took the road east and it quickly fell into the twists and turns of the craggy island coastline soon opening to a panorama that forced me to leave the road, put the kick stand down, and just gaze in slack jawed amazement - huge rugged rock promontories plunging into the sea, to the distant west a stone tower rising from the scrub, its Spanish tile old, its cross stoic bearing towards the sea. The road hugged this coarse shore leading through small villages

and eventually to Port de Soller where Chopin once lived. I enjoyed a wonderful vegetable paella at a small harborside cafe, lots of German and English tourists. Thus rested, I struck out upon back roads seeking places not on my map and was drawn up a raven of working farms, goats along the roadside beneath the olive trees, switching back and around and always up, the views back down to the port getting more dramatic with each turn. Soon I was amid clouds boiling up over the high cliffs - memories of the way fog rolled down off the ridge range above Sausalito in California. The dwindling road finally broke through a notch and began to descend improving as it went, emptying soon onto the main highway leading east from the Port. Cool - just where I was headed!

This new bigger road (two small lanes rather than one cart path) had wider turns and clean blacktop that made for comfortably high speeds. Cars were few as the road climbed higher and higher, two thousand, three thousand - the high country of Mallorca. The terrain soon became as rugged as I'd ever seen, giant rock cliffs towering over, even above, the road and chasms plummeting off below. The thump of the little Yamaha, the smell of the sea wind, cedar, olive - the stone crags against the blue blue sky. The road climbing up the face of the last mountain but clearly not fast enough to go over or around - one last turn and into a tunnel right through the rock, breaking out on the far side onto a high flat plateau. I was lured left again to the coast, the area referred to on the map as Torrent de Pareis. I thought I'd been on windy roads before but what I now encountered made all others seem gentle boulevards. The road entered a vertical world. The rock, terra firma itself turned sideways. The ridiculous goat path of a road clinging on by its fingertips, looping falling, back around, down, under. I'm barely believing this road exists at all when I overtake a huge tour bus swinging wide across a switchback, its back end hanging out over the precipice the driver nonchalantly forcing the on

coming car to back up out of the turn! And so begins the twelve mile decent to the sea.

Frazzled and tired I ride the last turn and pull up at a pristine harbor protected by towering rocks rising perpendicular from the sea. A tiny beach, perhaps twenty yards wide and ten deep occupies the back of the harbor, surrounded by terraced restaurants and cafes stepping back and up from the emerald waters. Happy to be on foot and off the bike I soon found a shady spot for a much looked forward to nap. When I awoke the clock said 4:30 which meant I had to turn toward the ride back across the island to Palma. Fortunately the climb back up to the main road was far less of a nail biter and in short order I was on over the range and on to the valley floor for the high speed run back to Cayo Mayor.

Post script – passed the evening watching World Cup Rugby at the hotel, my middle-aging body already feeling the soreness of a day in the saddle (the first in ? 20 years!)

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