

DALI'S LOCAL LEGACY

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Once known as the St Tropez of Spain, and home to artist Salvador Dali, the Costa Brava village of Cadaques is one of the country's best-kept secrets

If you've ever been to a New Age relaxation class you'll know the score. Close your eyes, imagine the most beautiful place and hold it in your mind as you slowly breathe your way to a temporary nirvana. For me, it's easy – I recall Cadaques in Spain. Specifically, the rear garden of the whitewashed Hotel Playa del Sol, dozing by the pool in the shade of olive groves and simply listening; listening to the other guests' muted conversations (German, French and Dutch, no English), the clink of cutlery as waiters lay lunch tables and the rhythm of the Mediterranean as it laps onto the beach of the little cove opposite.

CADAQUES IS nestled behind three 'walls' of bare, windswept hills, with a population of only 2000, perfectly proportioned beach-front town square, a labyrinth of steep, narrow streets paved with small, irregular-shaped stones, and is dominated by the comparatively huge, white, bright Church of Santa Maria. Here, you are at Spain's most easterly beach resort, not that it's 'resort-like' at all. It's not that the world has completely passed Cadaques by – you can find designer clothes, herbal teas, facials or spend a small fortune on the acclaimed goose liver pâté and fig entrée at Casa Nun. But when it comes to Positano-style sun-lounge and beach umbrella rental, glamorous day spas, state-of-the-art gyms, sophisticated nightclubs or hotels with a Hyatt chain feel, forget it.





Dali's artistic influences can be seen everywhere in Cadaques, especially in many of the cavern-style cafes and bars he used to frequent

A mecca some 30 years ago for artists, hippies and 'beautiful people' fascinated by the town's most famous resident and father of Surrealism, Salvador Dali, who lived at Port Lligat, a short, steep walk away, Cadaques remains largely a word-of-mouth destination and is utterly unspoiled. Surrounded by the rugged terrain of Spain's north-east Costa Brava coast just south of the mountainous French border, the area is reminiscent of the Greek islands before any major tourism operators got to them, but with a more culturally complex feel. There's still an echo from the swinging 1960s when Cadaques (pronounced cad-a-kez) was known as the 'St Tropez of Spain'. Even today it appears that some members of that set have never left.

WALKING TO the town square along the wide, snaking sea wall that runs from one end of the town to the other, you can hear the occasional strain of a Leonard Cohen ballad, smell a whiff of scented candle, look up and see them – older, elegant, women in kaftans sipping wine on their balconies, expensive jewellery gleaming against leathery brown skin.

Walk past the town square and, still right opposite the beach, you'll find where the contemporary Bohemians reside – the former high-ceilinged local casino which is now the Casino café, a favourite of young European backpackers but too full of smoke to attract their parents' generation. Those health-conscious Europeans drive into town, sprint along the sea walls at dawn and dusk or trek into the hills beyond, spookily terraced with dry stone walls but hardly any vegetation since the olive trees were decimated by hurricane-like winds (tramuntana) long ago and the vines wiped out by a phylloxera epidemic in 1883.

LIFE HERE is about ambling to the newsagency for the paper, having coffee, going fishing in brightly painted wooden boats with a local boatman, swimming, sunbathing and choosing a restaurant for the next meal (a place right on the sand, one with a balcony and a view or something in a basement with a long shared table?). The hardest decision after that is whether to brave it and order the regional speciality, paella nigra, Catalonia's





Dali's art lives on at his house in Port Lligat left, on Spain's scenic Costa Brava



seafood paella coloured black by squid ink. At night, locals and tourists alike gather in the town square, attracted by Nutella crêpes and reputedly the best gelati in Spain and to hear local bands (the coblas) play every type of music – including Catalan folk music to get the locals dancing in their traditional way. Visitors quickly get to know who owns what. For instance, the competition between two cave-like restaurants, Casa Tito and Casa Anita, which are separately owned by brothers competing for the title of serving the best grilled fish of the day – generally dorito or sea bass – vegetable frittata and local crème brûlée. The one compulsory tourist drawcard – particularly in 2004 when most of Europe's cultural institutions celebrated the centenary of Dali's birth – is taking the 15-minute walk (no cars allowed) past the Cadaques cemetery to the Salvador Dali

House-Museum at Port Lligat. The house has been left as it was when Dali died in 1989, apart from his books, replaced by fakes to protect them from the summer heat.

BROUGHT UP in the closest regional city, Figueres, Dali had stayed at Cadaques every summer with his family. After falling out with them in 1929 over his eccentric lifestyle, Dali bought a tiny fisherman's hut on the beach at Port Lligat. He and his wife Gala spent at least half of every year there until his death. By then, they'd bought all the surrounding huts, gradually creating an eccentric walled complex of rooms and tantalising spaces decorated with disparate objects – from huge white stuffed swans perched on the library's roof beams to the famous outdoor swimming pool with its plastic 'lips' sofa backed by Pirelli tyres mounted on a whitewashed wall and

fronted by a fountain decorated with kitsch, brightly painted matador figures. Dali's influence on Cadaques extended beyond the people that he attracted, to the very nature and shape of the town itself. Legend has it that the artist exerted a dictatorial influence on property development, forbidding any building above an arbitrary line drawn half way up the hills surrounding the town. While local property developers whinge, the town's admirers thank Dali for "keeping it nice". Add to Cadaques's lack of modern buildings, the lack of marketing by its handful of hotels and the minimal bus services to and from Figueres – the closest train stop from Barcelona – it's no wonder Cadaques remains a stranger to most English speaking tourists, and therefore an irresistible find. ■

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