

# The deep blue calm

**Ibiza** | Forget the bars and nightclubs – a new trip

offers a very different way to lose yourself on

the White Isle. *Will Hide* takes the plunge

Alessandro Mancini greets me with a hearty handshake and a wide smile. But it is the weeping scab on his forehead that catches my eye. “*Medusa*” he shrugs nonchalantly, and for good measure shows me a matching set of blisters on his shoulder.

The translation from either Italian, Mancini’s native tongue, or Spanish, the language of his adopted home of Ibiza, is the same: jellyfish. Perhaps not the most inspiring word when we were about to embark on a long weekend swimming around the north of the Balearic island. But the native of Rome assured me they’re here one day gone the next.

I was in Ibiza for several reasons. One was that a very-round round number birthday looms for me later this year. And, unlike half of those on my Instagram feed, I’ve never been to “White Isle”: never seen a superstar DJ at Pacha, never watched a sunset at Café del Mar, never downed a Jäger Bomb at Kilties Scottish pub in San Antonio and never been on a raw-juice detox up in the hills.

The main reason, though, was to go sea swimming – something I’ve been doing to relax and get fit for more than a decade – along the relatively undeveloped north coast. This month Mancini is launching new week-long trips in Ibiza for Brighton-based tour operator



Swimtrek. This, though, isn’t a gentle splash in the breaking waves before resuming tanning activities back on land. Swimtrek runs long-distance group swimming trips around the world, including across the Hellespont, from Alcatraz to the mainland, and through the Outer Hebrides.

In Ibiza, individual swims will be about three kilometres every morning and afternoon. Each leg will take an hour and a half to two hours, heading out to sea then along the cliff-lined coast before returning into a cove further along. Slower (or “scenic”) swimmers set off first followed by speedier ones so everyone finishes at the same time.

While hedonistic nightclubs are still going strong in Ibiza, it’s the wellness sector that has seen the biggest growth in recent years. On the island that’s been known as a beacon of positive energy since Roman days, visitors can enjoy everything from yoga holidays and “Worrier to Warrior” natural lifestyle weekends to fat-loss boot camps and sleep retreats. Mancini, 43, moved to Ibiza two and a half years ago with his Australian wife. This was a deliberate shift away from his previous 100-flights-a-year career, helping organise international swimming championships including the Turin and Rio Olympics. Free-diving – he’s been down to 42m – and sea swimming are his passions. In action, it’s easy to see why, with

to our left, Mancini was quick to give me advice on my technique and breathing, advising me to extend my reach, lift my head every second not third stroke and not to gulp air. “Relax, that’s the main thing” he shouted across the water. “We’re here to enjoy ourselves.”

Our second swim was at the sheltered inlet at Cala d’en Serra. We walked down a steep, dusty, untarmacked road, past the shell of an abandoned hotel and left our bags on the ramps of fishermen’s huts by the water’s edge, where young sunbathers gave off a waft of sun tan lotion and cigarettes. We swam unhurriedly for about 500 metres but stopped and turned around when the occasional hypnotic pink jellyfish floating below us turned into a larger bloom. I felt a



rás, a celebrated sunset spot. To get there we hitched a lift in a small sailing boat with another of Mancini’s friends, Pablo Muzio, an Argentine who runs a local food store and catering business with his wife. He gave the impression of a man who was happy to escape the shop. We put-put-putted out from the beach, and found our spot to jump off, under towering cliffs. Here the water was about 50m deep but still warm.

As soon as I went under, the inky darkness was disconcerting. There was nothing to see in the intense blue except eerie stalactites of bright light, and the cacophony of bubbles created when my hands carved into the water. Slowly, I began to relax, but there was a nagging sense of acrophobia that’s hard to con-







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long, languid strokes that cut through water like a hot knife through butter.

Our first outing on a hot September morning was the bay at Cala de Sant Vicent, chosen due to its protection from a northerly wind that had picked

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up overnight. On regular departures guests will be ferried from the base at Portinatx to start points along the picturesque, cove-dotted coast by boat, which will accompany the swims in case anyone gets tired and needs to hop aboard. On this preview, however, we arrived in a sandy-floored Fiat Panda, traversing the sweet-scented woods full of chirping cicadas and hairpin bends that dot the north-east of the island. While families played volleyball on the long, golden beach, we strode into the 26-degree centigrade water.

The water here is kept crystal clear by the filtering properties of meadows of Posidonia Oceanica, a seagrass that spreads around much of the north coast. Immediately after my head went under the water, the usual calming, meditative feeling swept over me as I fell into a rhythmic front crawl, staring down at plump black and white fish who eyed me lethargically as I invaded their world. When we paused under the cliffs

smarting on the back of my leg, but their sting was no worse than a nettle and I made it back to shore without incident.

The next day after breakfast we swam from the beach at Portinatx, around the craggy headland in shallow water towards Cala Xuclar. We were joined by one of Mancini's friends, Francesco Massimeo, a vegan chef who was working at a yoga retreat. "Everyone on Ibiza is either a DJ or a vegan chef" he said, only half joking. An hour and a half later the three of us dried off and hopped in the Panda to drive to the busy "hippy" market at St Joan, which takes place every Sunday. Stalls were selling vegetarian snacks and locally made bracelets and paintings. Shoes were optional among the crowd and we chatted to people who'd come from Scandinavia, Britain, South America and Australia to make Ibiza their home. "These are post-globalisation hippies," said Massimeo as I munched on a bowl of açai and muesli.

Our afternoon dip was in the inky-blue waters of the cove at Caló des Porcs. Here an extended local family sat, picnicking and singing, with the clink of beer bottles serenading us on our way as we donned caps and goggles. In the middle of the bay, just the two of us treading water, I asked Mancini if he ever panicked, swimming alone in the middle of the ocean. "No" flashed back the reply immediately. "It's very calming. It's my place to think. Or to not think."

Our final day was the longest single swim, about 4km, back to Portixol from the coastal tower at Ila Murada, an islet close to the west-facing beach at Benir-



**From top: a Swimtrek group making their way along the north coast of Ibiza; swim guide Alessandro Mancini; Cala d'en Serra, a beach close to the trip's base in Portinatx**

Fundación de Promoción Turística de Ibiza; Will Hide

#### i / DETAILS

Will Hide was a guest of British Airways (ba.com) and Swimtrek (swimtrek.com). Swimtrek runs a range of long-distance swimming trips worldwide; its Ibiza trips cost from £870 per person including accommodation, all meals and guiding but not flights or transfers to and from Portinatx. BA has up to five daily flights from the UK to Ibiza, from about £80 return

vey unless you have stared down into the oblivion of the ocean with, seemingly, nothing else sharing it with you in any direction. Only by stopping occasionally to find the bright pink swim cap of my guide in front and the land to my right did I get a sense of normality.

And perhaps the magnetic energies of Ibiza were having an effect because, as we neared the end of the two-hour swim, I couldn't remember a time recently when I'd felt more calm. We clambered on to the boat moored in a cove. Muzio greeted us with espresso and watermelon. "I love the deep blue. Being in the water gives me a profound sense of happiness that lasts long after I get out" said Mancini.

I agreed. Open water swimming recharges you. In the sea, you can put your brain into suspended animation and swim for hours with none of the mental effort required in a suburban pool lit by strip lighting and with the smell of chlorine hanging in the air. In the deep, enveloping blue of the Mediterranean, the occasional sight of a jellyfish was a small price to pay.

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