Hotel Cala d’Or. 75 años

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A dream come True

When the Hotel Cala d’Or was inaugurated on the 23rd of June 1935 there barely were half a dozen establishments on the island with the category of Hotel. The rest of the accommodation facilities were named “fondas”, that had a very basic infrastructure and none of the characteristics that back then were considered as a bit comfortable. At the beginning of the XX century the word “hotel” denoted a new type of relationship with the traveller, offering them comfort, a quality surrounding and most importantly a personal relationship with the guest.

In the thirties, when travelling for pleasure was a privilege for the most wealthy, Mallorca was a very attractive destination due to the beauty of it’s landscape, the quality of life and mostly how cheap it was. The island had been published for decades thanks to the testimony of the travellers, mostly adventurous writers and artists that arrived to Mallorca in search of paradise. For over 30 years there had been institutions in charge of promoting and regulating tourism, therefore these adventurers could choose determined destinations knowing to a certain extent what they would find upon their arrival. The most popular locations in Mallorca were Pollença, Sóller, Deià and Valldemossa. However the area that we now know as Cala d’Or was an absolutely unknown territory, with a close to impracticable coast-line.

To Josep Costa I Ferrer, the restless founder of Cala d’Or and driver of the construction of the hotel, this wild landscape that he had first seen from the sea, was no inconvenience. In 1932 he visited the area by land to observe it closely and assess the possibility of

Josep Costa Fundador de Cala d’Or
buying land. In his “Memoria personal de Cala d’Or” (Personal memory of Cala d’Or) Costa explains how he reached the area named “Ses Puntetes” thanks to a friend that accompanied him in his car from Felanitx, 14 kilometres away:

After two hours of ups and downs, potholes and more potholes, when we had crossed Es Carritxó, s’Horta and Calonge, we took the bad road to Cala Llonga, that did not arrive there: we opened some pieces of gates made with almond-trees and left the car to follow a path among high mastics and wild bushes. At the end we met with the house of “Rito”, the only and happy mortal of that paradise […] With each step I was surprised with its beauty and scenes, already seeing what could tomorrow be “Ses Puntetes” : Cala d’Or!

To comprehend the singularity of this place and its history it is necessary to know at least partly the figure of its founder, Josep Costa, as talking only of his life story would deserve a book on its own. Born in Ibiza, Costa was a very curious and social man, with a very wide circle of friends in which there were artists, art collectors and important businessmen that shared his artistic concerns. Raised in Mallorca, that was his place of reference, where he began several projects, besides participating in cultural and artistic activities with the enthusiasm that he always had.

At the age of 20, just settled in Barcelona, he began a long association as cartoonist in various satirical magazines of the time, reaching great popularity due to his corrosive and critical humour. Picarol, one of his popular pseudonyms, was part of the gathering of Els Quatre Gats, where he made friends with Picasso and especially with Santiago Russinyol. He also worked as art and antique dealer Médard Verburgh, pintor i arquitecte de l’hotel
and managed for some years a gallery through which some of the principal painters of the moment exhibited and held for the first time paintings of Picasso in Palma.

In the touristic area, Josep Costa was also a pioneer, in 1929 he edited the first modern touristic guide of the island in Spanish, English and French, published during several decades. He was also a spokesman for the board of directors of Fomento de Turismo de Mallorca during the 40’s, participating in the decisions of this institution that resulted basically in the promotion of the island as a main tourist destination of Spain in the difficult years that followed the Spanish Civil War. However his most important task would be the acquisition of those 10 hectares of land next to the sea.

In January 1933 he officially bought the area known back then as Ses Puntetes, that covered Cala Llonga, Caló de Ses Dones (nowadays Cala d’Or) and Cala Gran. Immediately he gathered a group of friends and proposed that they buy some of the 48 plots that he had drawn and build their houses. This initial group of “founders” was formed by highlighted artists that resided in the island or frequent visitors as the painters Hermen Anglada Camarasa, Olegari Junyent, Sebastià Junyer, Domingo Carles, Lene Schneider and Felipe Bellini, besides businessmen like Miquel Barceló “Cordella”, Clemente Puig, Ramon Balet and Pedro Batlle, the folklorist and touristic entrepreneur Antoni Mulet and the American designer Natacha Rambova, well known in the social circles for being the ex-wife of the very famous actor Rodolfo Valentino.

They all shared with Josep Costa the interest in art, many were collectors, and a restlessness that pushed them to join many quality activities that exposed Mallorca’s Tourist potential.

From the first moment a regulation was written that ruled the type of construction that was allowed and the respectful behaviour of the habitants with the environment. This regulation was then copied by other villages and Cala d’Or became a model and advanced village as it promoted the construction of Ibiza-style houses, as a tribute to his homeland, with local materials and respecting the vegetation in a way so that none of the constructions could be seen from the sea. Before 1937 16 houses had already been built. In an interview, already at the age of 91, Costa described in a very
eloquent way the nature of fellowship that still ruled the village 30 years after the first houses and the hotel were built:

It was my friends. My friends made all this grow, they gave me their confidence, they helped me, bought land, built their houses and never abandoned Cala d’Or. This is all because of my friends.

Besides the group of the “twelve founders”, Costa spread the word among a group of artists well known to him that formed the colony of foreign artists that resided in Ibiza during the previous years to the Civil war. To some he gave a plot, and to all he requested that they would build a house during the next year. This is how the building of the dream that don Pep chased for years building a colony of artists in one of the most beautiful sceneries of the island began. At this point, the well known painter Médard Verburgh, that also resided in Ibiza and moved to Cala d’Or, was key in promoting the new project among his countrymen and managed to get a notorious group of Belgian businessmen and artists to buy some plots. Among these there were Daniel van Craynest, who would be the promoter of the hotel Cala d’Or,
also built in Ibiza-style construction from an original pattern by Verburgh.

In the words of Costa:

The month of April of the year 34 Mr van Craynest arrived to Cala d’Or, an important winemaker from Brussels, with his wife, and I give him the exclusive of building a hotel with at least 30 rooms. After not liking the location I showed him at the end of Punta del pirata – great balcony to the Mare Nostrum – he preferred one next to the sea, touching the “Caló de Ses Dones” and I gave him three plots of land next to a stairway in which at the top there were two pinetrees that now give beauty to the front of the hotel Cala d’Or. In accordance to my conditions, before two years it was open to the public...

The first and difficult years

In fact, in 1934 it was recorded at Santanyi’s town hall the first layouts of the houses, some of them designed by Verburgh. Before 1937 there were already 16 houses built, some of the mentioned founders and others from foreigners who had attended the call of their friends. Among them, Josep Costa highlights in his memories the arrival of “the distinguished english
madame Miss Barlow, who came with her secretary Miss Pilkington and Mrs Raymonde Frin Andrée, of french nationality” building three houses, one of them being the first to have electric power thanks to an italian motor. This illustrious visit, specifically of Mr Barlow, was reflected in the press of the moment, in a note of the newspaper “La Vanguardia”:

Sir Thomas Barlow is in Cala d’Or, particular teacher of Queen Victoria and the King of England Eduard VII. The english and belgium colony accorded a warm welcome to the illustrious guest.

One of the layouts signed by Médard Verburgh was the one for the hotel, though with less rooms than scheduled by Costa: in total 16 -four for the staff. In the original layout none of them had a private bathroom, this privilege would not be possible until the refurbishment and expansion in 1950.

On sunday, the 23rd of June 1935, Mr Van Craynest officialy inaugurated the hotel Cala d’Or. A feast was held that had over 50 people assisting between local and national press representatives, of the commercial and tourist institutions of Mallorca, the mayors of Santanyí and Felanitx, the new citizens of “the settlement”, as it was known by the press, and the guest of honour was the belgian Consul, Mr Galantomini, as deference to the many belgian that populated Cala d’Or, that with time began to be known fondly as “the belgian invasion”. Following the next week, different written media published the news of the event, highlighting the discipline in the architecture:

not having any discordant note in the construction style being dominant the one known as Mediterranean Extreme West, with many winks to the ibiza-style construction, very white, simple lines surrounded by gardens and located in really attractive places.

Regarding the hotel, the newspaper named Ultima Hora made an exhaustive enumeration of the attendees at the event, even detailing the menu that was served:

Having arrived to the hotel, that has very modern facilities, it was visited in detail by the guests. The were offered an appetizer at the bar. After visiting the terraces of the hotel, from which you can view Cala d’Or, they were presented with a dinner of great quality that qualifies as excellent the cuisine of the new hotel, being served the
following menu: Hors d’oeuvre a la Russe, Canaloni Rossini, Saumon Bellavista, Salade Romana, Poulet Condé, Pommes Duquesa, Crema Mantecado, fruits variés, Moka Liqueurs.

During the dessert a speech was made by the owner and manager of the hotel, Mr Craynest, that with gentile phrases of consideration towards Spain and praise of the beauty of Mallorca, dedicated the event to his guests.

From another side, the newspaper Almudaina highlighted:

A pleasant day, as mallorcans and due to its relation with the tourism, we owe to Mr Daniel van Craynest, belgian owner, that on sunday will inaugurate a comfortable hotel that has the name of this magnificent cove […] At the hotel Cala d’Or a splendid menu was served, toasting Mr van Craynest and Mr Galantomini in terms of praise towards Mallorca and fellowship between Spain and Belgium, thanking the assistance to the guests and especially to the press that will give publicity to Cala d’Or, unknown to many […] Ending with a toast and hurrays to the Cove, Belgium, Spain and the Balearic Islands.

Finally, the newspaper ABC highlighted the “Belgium factor” in a brief note:

A group of belgium and mallorquins have built a settlement of villas constructed in Ibiza-style that has been conducted by the Belgium painter and architect Mr Verburgh, the ibizan cartoonist Costa Picarol and the vicepresident of Fomento de turismo de Mallorca Mr Mulet. […] The Belgian Consul Mr Galantomini pronounced a speech praising the spanish-belgian tourism and the fellowship between both countries. In this location the Belgians have already constructed 25 villas that almost constitute a colony of the said country.

Immediately the hotel began to receive an elegant clientele principally related with the Belgian and british residents. It also became the meeting point of the few all-year-round residents, they frequently visited the restaurant and spent evenings at the bar. Taking into account that during those years they did not have running tap water and the electric power was only available a few hours a day, with no telephone lines and no contact with the nearest town Calonge, the neighbours and staff of the hotel were a large family and took advantage of the trips of
ones or others to the city or closest towns to bring groceries or send messages.

Recently completed the first anniversary of the opening of the hotel, the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 was a tragic parentheses in this happy coexistence. Many of the foreigners were obliged to leave to their countries escaping the war, among them the owner and manager of the hotel, van Craynest. As for the Spanish residents, the majority also left Mallorca or at least Cala d’Or, as they joined one or other side, for example the aristocrat Alvaro Urzaiz y Silva, husband of Natacha Rambova, of the group of “the 12 founders”, who was a marine under the orders of Franco.

Little is known about what happened to the hotel during this sad episode, between 1936 and 1939. Some of the older neighbours recall having heard that for a time the hotel was used as quartering for the soldiers of Franco’s side that used Es Fortí as gunpowder storage, the old construction of XVIII century opposite the cove, that would be a strategic point due to its closeness to Porto Cristo, where in August 1936 the landing of the republican troops took place.
They also spoke about one of the first workers of the hotel, that kept all of the silver cutlery and returned it intact to the new owner. Sadly these are stories that have been transmitted from father to son, neighbour to neighbour and there is no written record nor eyewitnesses that could verify to these facts.

However there is a document that allows us to reconstruct the situation of the hotel one year before the end of the war. Though the ongoing war situation, with many impediments to the communications and supplies, the few residents that stayed in Cala d’Or, among which there was Mr Pep Costa, tried to maintain as much as possible their routine and not neglect the state of the village, that had only been inaugurated for a few years and was still developing infrastructures and improvements. In a document of the board of owners of the village of Cala d’Or, dated 30th of May 1938, it is agreed to send a letter to the owner of the hotel requesting him to open or hire the hotel due to the demands and requests of interested people in staying at the hotel. With this data we can deduce that the presence of the soldiers at the hotel was probably limited to the first months of the war and in a way Cala d’Or was still a
stronghold for tranquillity, where you could still think about the presence of travellers.

The beginning of WWII delayed the return to normality of the hotel and information about those years is also confusing. Due to the dramatic European situation the foreigners that abandoned Cala d’Or now could not return and no tourists were arriving. It was the painter Verburgh and his wife Berta who resumed the activities of the hotel, as stated in an interview with their only son Juanito Verburgh. His parents acquired the exploitation rights, as payment of a debt of the owner. Of those tough post-war years we can highlight that the majority of the guests were Spanish, as Franco had closed the borders and travelling to other countries was not possible unless it was done in a clandestine manner. However, a friendly familiar atmosphere was created and little by little the hotel regained a high level clientele, who were the only ones that could afford to go on holidays or on honeymoon in those years of hardship for the majority of spaniards.

Médard Verburgh and family definitively abandoned Mallorca in 1948, though they always kept in touch and their descendents still spend their summer holidays in the same house.

Around 1945 a new stage begins in the management of the hotel, that will establish its settlement as the principal quality accommodation and best restaurant in the area. At some point during the management by Verburgh the property passed into the hands of a merchant of Inca who was in touch with Brussels and he offered to hire it to an experienced hotelier of Pollença. Ignacio Rotger at the time was the manager of the famous hotel Formentor, this was in a way the reference for the project of Cala d’Or. As in previous years Josep Costa relied on the advice of the same landscaper that designed the gardens of the Formentor, Felipe Bellini, in the planning of the new settlement.

While Rotger shared his job between both hotels, he proposed to Francisco Riera, one of the concierges of the Formentor, to establish himself permanently in Cala d’Or to be at the front of the new company. This is how Paco became part of the history of the hotel, and for over a decade was the driver of a welcoming place with an excellent service besides the hardships of the time. It must be taken into account that until the power lines were installed at the
end of the 50’s, a connexion with the flour-mill of Calonge provided them with light during the winter evenings between 4 and half past nine. This limitation inevitably conditioned daily life at the hotel which in the absence of refrigerators or cold-rooms had a garden in a nearby plot of land to provide vegetables, where there also was a pigeon-house, some pigs and hens for supplying the hotel.

The shortage was such that Paco himself was pushed to perform tasks unthinkable for a manager of today, for example he cycled to the town of Campos to buy meat or go out fishing to offer fresh fish to the guests when Madó Martina didn’t arrive by foot from Porto Petro. Paco was also the skilled coordinator of the pig-killing and others that took place at the entrance of the hotel. There is no doubt that the guests of those years had to learn first hand different survival modes being also privileged by having daily fresh foods.

The absence of the supply of electricity didn’t allow the hotel to have a water pump, therefore all the staff –and some times the guests- organised themselves to pump every hour the water that was needed to fill the tanks. Their showers depended on this, therefore they had to say when they wanted to shower in order to have enough water.

Regarding supplies, different people played a major role as link between the paradise-like Cala d’Or and civilization. One of them was Jaume Vallbona, postman of Cala d’Or for 35
years. After retrieving the post that arrived in “the exclusive” (the bus that arrived from Palma) he went to Cala d’Or to hand out the letters with his bicycle. Very little time after the settlement was inaugurated “Jaime”, as he was known, had already become essential. Himself described some years after his job in a very graphic way:

In those years there were no shops in Cala d’Or. Daily I went and came back to Cala d’Or from Calonge. Immediately [the residents at the Cove] wanted to take advantage of my journey to get something from the shops of Calonge, a thing that I did with pleasure because from the beginning and during all the time I spent in Cala d’Or they made me feel very welcome. It slowly began but eventually I got to take groceries to almost all the neighbours of town. They bought me one of those bags to carry milk that I wore as a backpack and I also brought them milk. It got to the point that I was loaded like a mule and the bicycle seemed like a donkey loaded with its saddlebags, because between letters and other things I carried two or three baskets hanged of the handlebars; I couldn’t take more. Afterwards the marchioness of Comillas, that also came to reside in Cala d’Or, presented me with a “Mosquito” because after almost 20 years of work with a bicycle it became quite heavy and almost impossible to continue. I added a trolley to the “Mosquito” and though I still had to pedal in the slopes, I went far better than with the bicycle.

Mail delivery was always in the afternoon, therefore in winter he had to undertake the return journey at night fall. Just before leaving the hotel, that was his last stop, the postman lighted a cigarette and kept it in his mouth all the way to his house as only illumination method.

Rafael from s’Horta was to be another key person some years after. He was in charge of the telephone switchboard. The only way of reaching the hotel was through his telephone, only one in the area, therefore it could be said that his house was the booking department. After each phone call Rafael, who was a blacksmith, got on his bicycle and went to the hotel to pass on the message. At the beginning it was the manager who went to the airport in Mr Ignacio’s car to pick up the guests who had previously informed of their arrival. But due to the increase of arrivals and departures, Rafael was encouraged to buy a second hand car in Felanitx and take care himself of the transportation, a
decision that would be a stepping stone in his career as this would be the start of one of the main transportation companies of Mallorca.

In the 40’s it was not easy nor cheap to buy a car, but who accomplished this, made a good investment, as it was highly demanded by the neighbours to do private services and others. Joan Vellana was one of the first owners of one of these rental cars in Felanitx. Driving his Erskine of the ‘28, bought second hand in 1947, also carried many hotel guests. Already retired, Joan still remembered his first and troubled journey to the airport of Son Bonet with an important guest of the hotel that did not trust that old car and wanted to barter the price of the journey.

They came looking for me from the hotel Cala d’Or on a bicycle and one day they called me to take a guest and his family to the airport. As it was my first visit I stayed to nose around a little bit. A while after I saw how the baggage I had unloaded was taken to a covered airplane and afterwards how my passengers were taken into it. It resulted that this man who was so troubled about paying the run was a minister who was
travelling in his private plane. This anecdote occurred in the year 47 or 48.

These precarious circumstances did not prevent the service being worthy of the category “primera B” that the hotel had at the time. The guests themselves, in their majority Spanish, French and English, collaborated in maintaining this level with touches like assisting to dinner in wearing suits and bow-tie.

The routine of the long winter evenings was marked by the power cut that followed the three warning calls that Manresa sent from Calonge. It was then the time to play cards, guests and neighbours, under the candlelights. As in its beginning the hotel was still the reunion center of the usual residents, where you could always find someone with who you could share a table and have a chat, the place for celebrations, weddings, carnival, new year’s eve...

In 1958 a new and definitive phase began as the exploitation changes hands from Ignacio Rotger to Miquel Nicolau, businessman from Felanitx. In this year the hotel had 40 rooms, of which over half of them had private bathroom and where located in a new wing that was built in the 50’s. The so needed power lines were already installed and the reception had the first telephone of the village, that was for public use. Also the improving of the infrastructures as the expansion of the road to Calonge or the sewerage finally gave to Cala d’Or the independence that it needed regarding the provision of supplies.

However, any progress has its inconvenience. There is no doubt that 79 years after its creation, the town of Cala d’Or has grown greatly and many consider that the initial idea of its founder has been totally distorted with its several expansions and constructions. Even so the original core that surrounded the small cove and Cala Gran still maintains the original spirit of the first years and it still is a pleasure to walk along the quiet streets at evening fall and arrive to the sea through one of the paths between the old ibiza-style houses.

The hotel is still the only non-residential construction in this historic redoubt and has never stoped undertaking improvements and extensions, as much as the surroundings allow to. In 1961 the adjoining villa was bought, Ca’n Trujillo, that underwent extension and adaptation jobs projecting it towards the cove, became part of the hotel with 25 new rooms. During winter of 1984 an important general refurbishment
was undertaken, that included an extension that allowed to reach 71 rooms besides also building the swimming-pool, the beach bar and the renewal and redistribution of the common areas. In that year the hotel receives a new ownership that lasts until today: the Llabrés brothers (Francisco, Miguel and Tolo) acquire half of the main building together with Miquel Nicolau, that becomes owner of the other half (nowadays in hands of his sons Rafael and Juan Pablo). On June 23rd 1987 the Minister of Tourism, Transportation and Communications awards the hotel Cala d’Or with the “Placa al Mérito Turístico” (an important tourism award) as recognition to its labour in promoting a tourism of quality and respect towards the environment in all its refurbishments.

As of today, hotel Cala d’Or, managed by Rafael Nicolau since 1990, combines the merits of being the second oldest coast-line hotel of the islands with an important update in the area of the 2.0 broadcasting, through social networks and specialized networks, as it also extends its services offer with the objective of consolidating its position in the tourist quality scene.
NOTAS

1. Precedían al Cala d’Or el Gran Hotel (1903), el hostal Cuba (1904) y el Ciudad Jardín (1920) en Palma, el Príncipe Alfonso en Cala Major (1906) y el Formentor en Pollença (1929), el único que continúa en funcionamiento en la actualidad.


12. Entrevista a Juanito Verburgh en “Cala d’Or. 75 anys, 1933-2008”, pág 120 (traducción de la autora).


14. Nombre con el que era conocido un modelo de bicicleta con el motor en el manillar.


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