



THE WHITE ISLAND

STEPHEN ARMSTRONG

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

The White Island is, and always has been, a magnet for hedonists. Its history reads like a history of pleasure itself. It is also a story of invasions and migrations, of artists and conmen, of drop-outs and love-ins.

The Carthaginians established a cult to their goddess of sex there, and named the island after Bez, their god of dance. Roman centurions in need of a bit of down time between campaigns would go to Ibiza to get their kicks. And over the centuries, cultures around the Med have used the island either as a playground or a dump for the kind of people who didn't quite fit in back home, but who you'd probably quite like to meet at a party...

This is the history of Ibiza, the fantasy island, framed by one long, golden summer where anything can happen - and it usually does.

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The White Island

TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF PLEASURE IN IBIZA

STEPHEN ARMSTRONG

For Georgia

Acknowledgements

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Prologue

It all started when the flames hit the water and floated out into the harbour, as if a dragon were breathing across the sea. I sat with James on the rickety chairs of a steak 'n' eggs and full English breakfast all-night café in Ibiza which was still packed with rollicking families at three in the morning. James was involved in composing a lager-fuelled haiku about the flames and his own family - 'I love these fireworks and I love my wife' - and, filled with the pleasure of the weekend, I had to agree. By any standards, these fireworks were pretty special.

They lit up the towering walls of the immense eighteenth-century fortress that looms over the harbour with an almost magical light. In the flash and bang of the display, you could imagine the castle was under sustained attack from a disorganized wizard whose conjured pyrotechnics bounced around the artificial bay in an absent-minded way while he leafed through his spell book to find the killer incantation.

And there must have been some sort of sorcery involved in this display. It was doing things that fireworks just didn't do. It was even doing things the laws of physics shouldn't allow. Fire fountained down the harbour wall onto the Mediterranean, but it wasn't extinguished. Instead floating flames spread out across the water like a fleet of tiny Chinese junks. And that was just for starters.

Glowing embers flew into the air and danced in patterns around the night sky, as if a minor god were writing his name with multi-coloured sparklers. Devices that seemed to be Catherine wheels suddenly jumped up and flew off

towards the castle walls. Tiny sparks blossomed into opulent flowers in the sky. Dancing, magical lights tripped across the harbour. Whoever was behind this display must have been some sort of practitioner in the dark arts, having swapped his immortal soul for control over the Devil's own elements. He was Gandalf, Willy Wonka and Faust all rolled into one, performing in front of us to the limits of his considerable ability for some nefarious purpose impossible to fathom.

Looking around me at the crowds gathered on the waterfront to ooh and aah at the incandescence, I noticed a strange air of calm Spanish contentment spread across the assembled Anglo-Saxon throng. Being British, they were still cuffing their kids, belching and calling one another names, but there was a note of warm affection in the expletives that flew between strangers. It seemed to me that they were only one insult away from falling on one another's necks and weeping with joy. Although they might want to get their sunburn seen to first.

It made me think how happy the British would be if only we'd been able to shift our rock a few hundred miles south. Perhaps it wasn't too late? With a big saw and some oars? We could ask the Scots to build some sort of giant engine. I mean, they've always been a bit useful in the engineering department. Then we could park up next to Ibiza's tiny coastline and melt into the Balearic vortex of charm. And I don't mean charm as in 'nice smile and quite generous at getting the drinks in', I mean the arcane definition of faerie charm - to bewitch and fascinate as if by supernatural powers.

Take the old town, for instance, which was putting in such sterling service as a backdrop to the maelstrom of airborne explosions. To the ceaseless tide of tourists ebbing and flowing around the Marina it was only an elaborate stage set for the real show of whiz-bangs and sparkles. If they gave it a thought, they probably found it slightly

confusing that the town was also called Ibiza, sharing its name with the island and leading to slightly panicky moments when first gazing on a road sign - IBIZA 10KM. 'But I thought we were already on Ibiza!' (Expats solve the problem by referring to Ibiza Town.)

These careless tourists are missing something. Deep in the foundations of Ibiza's towering cathedral - dedicated, in a curious piece of Ibicenco logic, to Santa María de las Neus, or Mary of the Snows, the patron saint of an island with over three hundred days of unbroken sunshine a year - a dark history lurks. The cathedral was imposed on the ruins of Ibiza's largest mosque by victorious Catalan Christians after they had forced through the citadel's supposedly impenetrable walls. Beneath the fragments of the mosque that remain lies the dust of a Roman temple to Mercury, the messenger of the gods. And beneath that ancient site lies a Carthaginian temple of unknown provenance that belonged to one of the gods beloved of the island's favourite Carthaginian deity, Tanit.

Tanit was the Carthaginian goddess of sexuality, a voluptuous and sensual creature often portrayed sitting cross-legged as if meditating, lightly draped in folded, diaphanous garments that did little to cover her full, womanly figure. She was the first patron goddess of the island and an altogether more earthy protector than Mary of the Snows. The warmth of her tactile reputation, which encouraged a physical ritual of worship more recently imitated in the kind of orgiastic suburban parties that used to excite tabloid readers in the 1970s, was balanced by her other role as the goddess of death.

This sex-and-death duality provided a ready-made propaganda weapon for the Greeks, who hated the Carthaginians. They told stories of human sacrifices to Tanit including children and young virgins, and claimed that her priests practised prostitution from her temples. Tanit's worship is supposed to have died out when the

Romans took Ibiza from the Carthaginians after Ibiza's first conquering son Hannibal failed to sack the eternal city. But in a way she has never left the island.

Guidebooks urge the casual visitor to keep an eye out for Ibiza's many village festivals where a curious local dance, the *ball pagés*, is something of a holiday treat. The dances take place near wells and streams and fountains - anywhere where water flows - and consist of strange, formalized, sexually charged steps that seem, ever so slightly, to resemble flamenco. In fact, these dances pre-date nineteenth-century flamenco by over two thousand years. Essentially they are fertility rites left over from Tanit's rituals of worship, and they hint at the kind of libidinous exchange between man and woman that must have made the weekly service slightly more exciting than the sip of wine and mouthful of wafer Mary's mass offers today.

But Tanit's legacy may be more potent than the tradition of a simple country dance. Cast your eyes back a paragraph or so and see that reference to the Christians storming the supposedly impregnable walls of Ibiza's citadel. Ibiza fell to the Catalans in 1235 after a sustained and brutal campaign that marked the tail end of the expulsion of the Moors. But the conquest of the powerful fortress surrounding the mosque was always going to be a tricky business.

The Catalan army, under Jaume I, had fought its way across the island's two hundred square miles and had left to last the capture of the citadel. The Moorish king who governed it had a reputation as a dogged warrior and, if he held out long enough, could have called in reinforcements from northern Africa. Jaume, not to put too fine a point on it, wasn't looking forward to the battle at all. The king, however, had problems of his own. His brother had fallen in love with a slave girl from the king's harem - a particular favourite for her sensual abilities in the highly specialized skills of the harem - and had fled with her.

The story has two endings, or perhaps it's better to describe them as the same ending with two different explanations. One version has it that the fleeing brother opened a secret entrance to the town and allowed the besieging Catalan forces to flood through undetected. The other has it that the king was so distressed at the loss of his slave girl that he failed to notice the approaching Spanish troops, as he was blinded by his streaming tears.

I prefer the second story, but the evidence supports the first. At least, there is an ancient secret entrance to the town in the Calle de San Ciriaco, now sadly fenced off to the public; and it is rather pushing it to suggest that the king didn't own a handkerchief. Whatever the reason, the Catalans took the town swiftly and the king didn't live long enough to regret falling under the power of this most beautiful sexual servant. Perhaps he thought - just briefly - of the goddess of sex and death as the Catalan steel bit home.

It's probably fair to say that most tourists don't give Tanit a thought when they arrive on the island. As James and I gazed up at the firework finale, however, they were preparing, in their own sweet way, to indulge in rituals of her worship all around us. Couples kissed and courted, either clamped to each other's faces like devouring aliens or just walking and holding hands along the walls of the marina. It felt right and proper that they should look so happy out here. The night was warm and the wind was soft. The music from the cafés was, admittedly, a little relentless with its pounding bass drum, but the mood of the harbour enveloped me slowly. I thought good thoughts about the world, feeling at one with beauty and truth and life and love, and it was in that mood that I heard the story of the Vanishing Boy drifting over from the next-door table.

James had fallen into conversation with a group of bronzed backpackers whose accents, like Ibiza, mixed influences from all over the world. Australia and South

Yorkshire seemed to dominate as they debated how spiritual Ibiza used to be compared to its modern-day reputation for all-out, rampaging, no-prisoners hedonism. One girl in particular was taken with the idea that the island exerted a powerful magnetic force on those who strayed onto its shores. It was as if Ibiza were a kind of Bermuda Triangle of pleasure, and she felt that the legend of the boy who came and stayed illustrated this perfectly.

He was supposed to be a young lad, maybe from a northern town, maybe from Australia, and he'd come to the island with a group of friends. Perhaps it was his brother's stag night, or perhaps it was a summer holiday. Whatever it was, the boy didn't want to go home. He had supped so deeply from the cup of joy that he couldn't imagine returning to his miserable life in a high-rise concrete city with a job that slowly stole his life away. So when his friend went home, the boy, so the story goes, remained in Ibiza. In some accounts he actually lived in a nightclub; in others he headed out to the hills, joined a commune or lived on the beach. He slept during the day, stealing food and drinks and drugs when he came out in the evening. He washed in toilets, picked up discarded jumpers and jackets to dress himself and basically lived a feral existence in the heart of Ibizan clubland. Sometimes you could see him when you went about the town, the girl said, finishing her story. He was the young blond boy with the long, straggly hair who usually danced alone on the podium.

We sat there in silence, James and I, long after the backpackers had departed. We looked out to sea and sipped coffee, and I was in a sort of daze. For some reason the story had a profound effect on me. It seemed at once appealing and repellent. Coming at the end of a rare weekend of unfettered misbehaviour, it forced me to stop and think. About the boy, about the island, but mainly about me.

I'd lived all my life doing the right thing. I'd carefully balanced responsibility with pleasure. However large I lived on Saturday night, I was always at work on Monday morning. Submitting yourself completely to a life of wild, hedonistic joy - it seemed so dangerously irresponsible. Devoting every waking moment to having fun, getting food when you needed it and drinks from the kindness of strangers ... well, how could you? Didn't you need discipline to function? Doesn't the human brain need pain as well as pleasure? Wouldn't you inevitably go mad?

Once, just before I embarked on my GCSEs, I brought home from school a particularly grim report card. My mum, who was a teacher, lost her temper with me. She took me around the house, pointing out all the consumer durables my parents had worked so hard to acquire - the television, the stereo, even the garbage-munching waste disposal unit. We ended our tour in the kitchen. 'How do you think we afforded them?' She was almost shouting. 'We worked for them! You can't sit about all your life and expect these things to just come to you. What do you want from your life, Stephen, eh? What do you want?' I knew she needed an answer that would reassure her, an answer that dripped with ambition or promise, but I couldn't think of one. I felt the pressure of exams and parental expectation sitting on my young shoulders and, miserably, sure that it would only inflame her anger, I told her the truth. 'I want to be happy,' I said. It was the wrong answer. 'Happy!' she screamed at me. 'Happy? Who's happy? No-one's happy. Life isn't about being happy.'

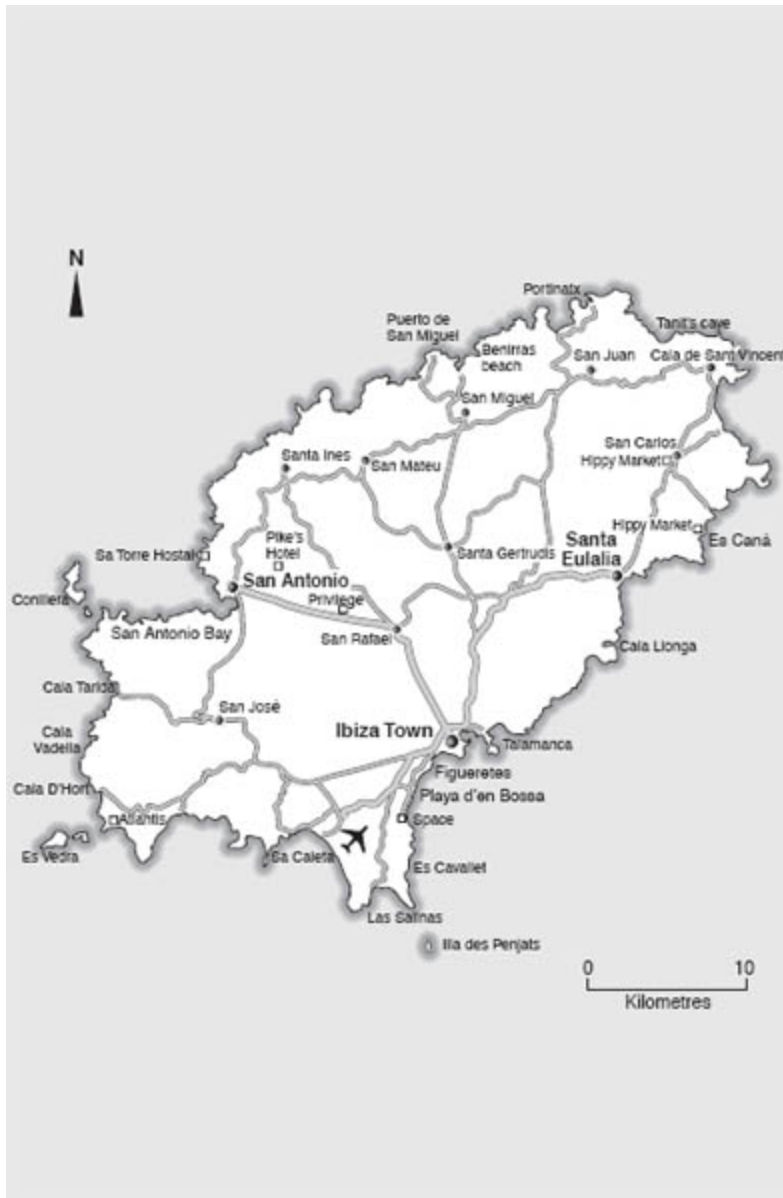
Sitting on Ibiza Town harbour, looking out into the still waters of the Mediterranean - the very waters that barely an hour ago had carried a display of magical fire that drifted across the ancient port like a flotilla of Elven adventurers - I thought, 'Well, Mum, you got me. I fought like the Devil, but in the end you got me. I work hard. I stay

late. I've got a TV. I've got a house. And you know what? You were right. I'm not happy.'

But I felt happy tonight, albeit briefly. I could almost feel rocks being lifted from my shoulders. Ibiza does that to people. When the Carthaginians discovered the island, they knew there was something about the place. They felt it was holy, that it could regenerate damaged people, that it was a haven for the weary and the sick. But they also felt that it was a place of pleasure. They named the island after their god of dancing, Bes, and he sat beside Tanit in the island's esteem. Since then, everyone who has come to Ibiza has found joy and respite. The Romans, the Vandals, the Arabs, the Catalans, Jews fleeing both Spanish and Nazi persecution, Americans fleeing the draft and Brits fleeing, well, Britain - they've all come here and found a smile flitting across their tired, grim faces as their feet touch Ibiza's red soil. They landed as refugees and gradually vanished themselves, drifting into the island, living with the Ibicencos and forgetting the grim reality they left behind.

And the island has always welcomed them. When Spain's Jews fled the inquisitions of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, they found refuge on Ibiza though they were beaten and murdered on Mallorca, just eighty miles to the east. Even today the reckless hedonism of Ibiza's tourists takes place under the cool, considered eyes of the Ibicencos, who smile politely and treat us with great kindness and charm but seem to have their minds on higher things. It feels as if we are all of us, refugees and holidaymakers alike, fourteen-year-old schoolboys on an outward-bound adventure holiday chaperoned indulgently by sixth formers who know far more about life than we ever could. Or perhaps the UFO spotters have it right: perhaps they are kindly aliens who have returned to Earth to show us the error of our ways. Their wisdom is infinite and their patience a lot bigger than that.

Suddenly I knew what I had to do. I wanted to find all the Vanished Boys: the Vietnam vets, the last, defiant hippies, the clubbers who never went home, the actors who came to love and stayed to die and the celebrities who could find some sort of anonymity on an island that doesn't care who you are. I wanted to ask them how they had done it, how they found the life they were now living. Had the island delivered what it had promised? Had my mother been wrong? And, most importantly, was there time for *me* to change? So that's what I did. I went to find them.



CHAPTER 1

The Sea

WHICH IS WHY, a few hours before midnight on a day towards the end of May 2003, I was slumped over the bar on a slightly rusty tramp ferry ploughing its way across the Mediterranean to Ibiza, talking to the barman about Noah.

Taking the ferry to Ibiza had been a matter of necessity. I hadn't been able to get a flight. Every single charter and scheduled flight seat to the island had been taken for the entire three days leading up to the bank holiday weekend. 'It's the war and SARS,' said Julie, the cheery Aussie who was sorting out my tickets. 'Everyone's going to Ibiza instead of Thailand or New York. You could try getting a ferry.'

A ferry ... the thought wandered through my mind. A ferry - but of course! Almost everyone who mattered in the island's history had arrived by boat, from seafaring Phoenicians to 1950s jazzmen and artists. It would be a sort of ritual, a return - nay, a homage - to the island's seafaring past. I would stand on the windswept deck and watch as a dark smudge rose over the horizon, just as those early adventurers had done almost three thousand years ago. Is it a man-of-war? Some dark threat from the depths? No, sir, it's land, by God.

'Book it,' I told her.

'It's a nine-hour journey, overnight, and you dock at six a.m.,' she warned me, and for a moment my resolve wavered. Nine hours? On a boat? Overnight? Six a.m.? But then she told me I'd have to fly out to Barcelona the night

before and my doubts vanished. Twenty-four hours in Barcelona, a city I'd never visited but had always felt would be my natural home. I even supported its football team in a half-hearted sort of way. I didn't check the results or anything, but I liked the fact that the club was owned by the fans and turned down commercial sponsors out of a fierce Catalan pride. My friend Al had once drunk so much absinthe on the Ramblas that he'd imagined a man was kissing his wife and punched him, only to find it was a mirror. That sounded like the kind of town I needed to experience. 'I can get you a hotel near the docks, but it's pretty cheap,' Julie went on, and I almost kissed her. A cheap dockside hotel - let's call it an inn - was something I'd read about in nineteenth-century adventure novels but never dreamed I'd actually stay in. The Ramblas, Barcelona's former red-light district and one of the few places in Europe (alongside Ibiza) you have always been able to buy absinthe, would be just a few hundred yards away. The inn was bound to have a low ceiling and to possess a bar stuffed with swarthy Lascars, if only I knew what they were. It would be the ideal send-off.

'The adventure begins,' I said as I boarded the flight.

Sadly, it was all a grave disappointment. The Ramblas was no densely packed, baroque-style narrow street lined with whores on balconies and gap-toothed anarchists. Instead it was a gallery of overpriced street cafés and the usual collection of portrait-while-you-wait scamsters who operate in the public spaces of every urban centre in the world. Not that Barcelona isn't a beautiful place; it's just that I'd steeled myself for the Limehouse of Sherlock Holmes and instead got a pretty Spanish city with a nice waterfront development. By the time my boat was due to leave, I was happy to climb aboard.

Here's a traveller's tip for you: if you plan to catch a ferry in Barcelona, get a taxi to the ferry terminal. It's difficult to see how much harder they could have made it to

walk there. Fences, blocked streets and a complete absence of signposts meant I began to panic as I grappled my way along the industrial dockside. Short of having the entire staff of Trasmediterránea Ferries shower me with breezeblocks as I picked my way across the eight-lane motorway and building-site debris that surrounded the place, they seemed to have done everything possible to discourage me. When I finally arrived in the vast square concrete building where I was to check in, I was drenched in sweat and eager to get to my cabin to sluice off from my slightly pink flesh the thin layer of dust I'd picked up in the last five minutes.

I'd booked a cabin on Julie's advice. The other option was a seat and, although I'm as ready for cutlass-between-the-teeth adventure as the next man, nine hours tossing and turning on an orange plastic chair when a cabin to myself could be secured for a miserly sum made no sense to me. Thus I proudly stepped up to the cabin check-in and presented the man behind the counter with my ticket and a cheery grin. 'Good evening, my good man,' the grin clearly said, 'I am keen to board your fine vessel and take my place at the captain's table. Here's my paperwork. Let us dispense with the formalities and allow me to carry my dusty rucksack aboard.'

'*Sí. Tú eres ...*' There was a pause as he read my ticket. 'Oh. Armstrong.' He sounded slightly disgusted. 'You want a cabin?' He looked hard at my ticket, which had seemed so legal and reassuring when I'd purchased it in London and had retained its official feel until roughly a minute earlier when it had suddenly begun to look like a strip of carbon paper with red biro marks scrawled on it. 'You have to pay the difference.'

'But I have paid,' I said, trying to convert sterling into euros and looking in my pack for any helpful bits of paper from Southern Ferries, who had issued the ticket in the UK. All I could find was a photocopied sheet offering to sell me

Southern Ferries travel insurance. 'I've paid ...' (Long pause.) 'A hundred and sixty euros ...' (I hadn't, I'd paid a lot less, but maths was never my strong point.)

He looked doubtfully at me and at the ticket then went off and spoke in very rapid Spanish to a group of uniformed men at the back of the office. They all came forward and stood around a computer, typing different things into it and occasionally laughing in a way I found disconcerting. Then he came back and contemptuously wrote out a boarding pass for a cabin. 'Upstairs. Gate one,' he said, and looked over my shoulder at the Spanish Goths behind me.

The boat was a large tramp car ferry that ploughed daily between Barcelona and the Balearics. It was decorated in a functional, institutional white, with basic fittings and metal bulkheads. It was a long way from the *Titanic*. At some point, however, perhaps in the glory days of the 1960s when the route had been one of the most fashionable and glittering in Europe, the boat had taken on certain cruise-ship ambitions. Looking at the map of the craft pinned to the wall outside my cabin, for instance, I noticed that the bar was indicated by a martini glass complete with straw and olive, and that, insanely, there appeared to be a swimming pool on the upper rear deck. (I realize I may not be using the correct technical term for that part of the boat, but I am to sailing what Mikhail Gorbachev was to belly dancing - amusing to look at but you'd rather not get too closely involved.)

Having checked into my cabin - two bunks, warm seawater shower, disinfected toilet; all in all far nicer than my hotel room - I hastened up the metallic, clanging staircase, eager to watch Spain's most fashionable gambolling in the swimming pool's balmy waters. I have to say, I was disappointed. I am, admittedly, a tall man, but had I stretched out inside that pool lengthways my head would have touched one end and my feet the other. Had I tried to swim a single stroke I would probably have knocked myself

unconscious and drowned. Which might have been why the pool had long since been drained.

Expecting more disappointment, I then strolled into the bar and tried to order a martini. Not that I usually drink a triple measure of neat gin with a drop of aromatic fortified wine, but the cocktail glass on that map of the boat still danced in front of my eyes. The barman was a tired-looking Australian, his long, dark hair tied back in a pony tail; he wore a black T-shirt and a long, burgundy apron. He couldn't offer me a martini, he apologized, but he did have a Smirnoff Ice. I refused as politely as I could and opted for a beer.

The ferry was getting ready to cast off. There was some frantic activity on the dock as the last of the lorries chugged across the roll-on ramp. Most of the passengers were either settling in to their cabins or desperately marking out sleeping territory in the lounge using cases and bags in a slightly less gun-totin' version of America's Wild West land grab. The barman was cleaning glasses and, for want of anything better to do, asked me what I thought of Ibiza. Rather weakly, I said I thought it was an interesting place. He paused, looked at me with his head to one side, and smiled slightly. 'If you want my theory,' he said, with a conspiratorial air, 'I reckon Ibiza is where Noah's ark landed.' I must have looked disbelieving, because he began to gabble rapidly through the tenets of his faith.

'Look, the myth of the flood is all about the time when the rock wall at the end of the Mediterranean broke and the Atlantic flooded the huge valley that the Med had been.'

I blinked. This was certainly a favoured interpretation. The Mediterranean used to be a dry valley linking Africa and Europe. At some point, the land bridge connecting Morocco with Spain at the Straits of Gibraltar was breached and the valley became a sea. Cave paintings in

Sicily showing the hunting of bulls and deer on an island too small to support wildlife larger than rabbits attest to the fact that this happened after humans began to paint, although no-one is entirely sure when. The enduring presence of the flood in human mythology – the Greek legend of Deucalion being one example – is thought to be a deep cultural memory of this event. So I felt on safe enough ground to agree.

‘Well,’ the barman continued, ‘the Bible legends all start in Canaan, which is where the Phoenicians came from. Now, the Phoenicians were the first people to discover Ibiza and they did so by following a strongly flowing current just off the coast of North Africa. So think about it. If Noah built his ark near Israel then logically the drift of the currents would mean the first landfall he would make would be Ibiza.’

I stared at him, unsure how to respond. My silence was clearly a common response, because he blushed deeply.

‘It’s not a widely accepted theory,’ he admitted.

I instantly felt bad. ‘No, no, it’s a good theory,’ I told him, ‘really good. I mean, why not Ibiza?’

‘Well, for one thing, it would help explain some of the weird shit about the place.’ He laughed, as if including me in a joke we both knew.

‘Weird shit?’ I asked, but the lorry drivers must have finished securing their loads because twenty of them thundered up to the bar like a wall of irate bull elephants and started ordering inhuman quantities of beer.

With a cheery smile, I shouldered my way through them and found that all the chairs in the bar had been taken. Unwilling to lean against the wall while I finished my Estrella, I clanked back to my cabin, lay down on the bottom bunk and flicked through the handful of guidebooks I’d bought to see if there was any evidence to support the barman’s claims.

It turned out that the Balearics had been part of a chain of mountains that stalked across mainland Spain just south of Valencia then strode out into what is now the Mediterranean. When the Atlantic forced its way in, these lime and sandstone peaks became jaunty little islands nosing above the waves. Thus isolated, they set about creating their own ecosystems. Ecologically, Ibiza and its small offshore sister isle Formentera are actually a sub-unit of the Balearics, known since ancient times as the Pitiuses. Although no-one is 100 per cent certain where the name comes from, it's probably because Ibiza has always been home to the Aleppo pine, and the ancient Greek for pine tree is *pitus*. I started to hunt for any mention of currents from the Levant, but the two strong anti-seasickness pills – 'Warning: may cause drowsiness; do not mix with alcohol' – seemed to be reacting with my beer and my eyes began to close. I rested the book on my chest for just a brief moment ...

I'd wanted to watch the sunrise from the sea. Almost everyone who recorded their arrival on Ibiza by boat, from the American writer Elliot Paul through the Dutch artists and poets in the 1950s to the British actor Denholm Elliott, made sure they were up to observe this moment of romantic intensity. Sadly, the heady mix of cheap Spanish lager and powerful over-the-counter drugs combined to keep me snoring in my bunk until the cabin was filled with a soft golden glow that taunted my sluggardly failure.

After scrubbing down in the salty shower, I rushed up to the highest deck on the boat and watched as the coast of the island came into view. We were chugging slowly towards the old harbour and I could see the vast stone walls of Ibiza's oldest urban centre rising proudly above the docks. This oldest inhabited part of the island is Dalt Vila – the high town. Its walls surround a natural crenellated peak with the rest of the island sliding down and away,

dotted with tree-covered hills and fringed with sandy beaches.

With the crisp early sunlight bathing Dalt Vila's golden walls and the boat throbbing and surging beneath me, the arrival felt strangely magical. It's a common sensation. The Dutch writer Cees Nooteboom spent the 1950s on the island and described arriving in Ibiza Town in his book *The Knight Has Died*:

They drink absinthe and through the bar's portholes the shore draws nearer. Cyril points and points and spits out names: Cala Pada, Punta Arabi, Cap Roig, Cala d'en Serra, Platja de Talamanca. Close by now, a fortress high on a hill, the ship turns slowly round the mole and enters the sheltered harbour. He will never forget the vision of this arrival; caught in a renaissance painting, he gazes, and the bare skull of a town looks back at him, a lofty, triangular mass of white houses with open black eyes, the place of skulls topped by a medieval church, petrified sand.

Spanish teenagers gathered on the deck below me and held hands in awed silence, like children enraptured by a Christmas tree, as we passed the rocky outcrops that form Ibiza's original, natural harbour. Two girls dressed in crumpled black dresses kissed each other passionately. No-one even turned to look.

I looked down at the water surging around the prow. It's hard sometimes, when looking at the beauty of the Med, to imagine the blood that has been spilled in its depths and on its shores. Almost every empire the world has known has lost men to its shallow, warm water. The sea around Ibiza is no exception. Roman war galleys, Barbary corsairs and anarchist battleships had nosed through this very harbour mouth. But, as with the rest of the Mediterranean, it was the Phoenicians who sailed here first.

Ibiza owes the Phoenicians a great deal. They discovered the island, named it and transformed it from a semi-deserted rock into the home of one of the few true cities of Western European antiquity. The Phoenicians - the name means 'purple people' after the dye they extracted from shellfish and used to tint their clothes - were exceptional traders and sailors. They invented the modern alphabet and devised many of today's basic engineering techniques, digging canals where none had succeeded before and piping fresh water from undersea springs to supply their boats. It seems unfair that they don't figure in history's top ten civilizations, but then they didn't conquer and subdue, which seems to be the qualification for greatness. Instead, they were refined, cosmopolitan and peaceful. Peaceful and enormously wealthy. And in the blood-soaked Bronze Age, this made you an incredibly attractive target. The Phoenicians, wandering around the Mediterranean enthusiastically looking to trade with everyone, were like naive tourists carrying expensive video cameras in a violent city park.

They came to Ibiza for one simple reason - tin. Tin was the ancient world's oil. When smelted with copper it created bronze - essential in weaponry, jewellery and farming. Overstretched tin routes were the Achilles heel of any nation's economy and, just like oil today, bloody wars were fought to protect them. The Phoenicians created and controlled most of the tin trade, having found their way out of the Med thousands of years before anyone else and headed as far north as the UK, where they helped the Cornish develop tin mining.

Ibiza has no tin. But it played a vital role in maintaining the tin routes. If you were sailing from Lebanon to Cornwall in the small, square-sailed, oar-powered boats that ploughed the trade routes of the Bronze Age, you would skim the coast of North Africa until you fell south of Sicily and then, just as you came head to head with the

cold, dark currents of water from the Atlantic – currents that could pull your small ship under – you would head north-west on a useful current that would bring you slap-bang into Ibiza. From there, you would hug the coast of Spain as you left the Med and head north to purchase metal from wild-eyed Celts with needlessly scruffy hair.

Until seafarers learned how to handle sails properly in the seventeenth century, all Mediterranean boats were galleys. The problem with a galley was that it was almost entirely filled with people, most of them rowing. There was little room for storage, and what space there was tended to be set aside for the goods the galley was trading. Adding extensive cupboards to store food massively reduced the profitability of the journey, so most galleys rarely went for more than a day without stopping to eat – much like heading out on a long car journey. The Phoenicians stumbled across Ibiza in roughly 700 BC when they were looking for a service station on a tough but necessary sea voyage. They landed and were delighted to find the island hospitable and with no indigenous poisonous snakes or insects. This was important to the Phoenicians, who felt that the unusually safe wildlife indicated something divine at work.

They paid Ibiza their greatest honour by naming it after Bes, their god of safety, protection and (Happy Mondays fans) dance. Ibiza, to the Phoenicians, was Ibosim – ‘the Island of Bes’, I Bes A. The god himself is far, far older than the Phoenician civilization. Some think he began as the deity of pygmy tribes deep in the heart of the African continent. This may be down to his looks. He’s short, bearded and jolly like a cheeky dancing dwarf, and often wears a leopard’s skin wrapped around his shoulders and groin. The Phoenicians almost certainly picked him up from the Egyptians. He first appears in the Egyptian canon around 1500 BC and the Phoenicians start worshipping him some time after that. These purple-clad seafarers had a

jackdaw culture; if they found something they liked – an art form, a way of working leather, or even a god – they would simply absorb it and make it their own. As they did with Bes.

The Egyptians placed the safety of the higher gods into Bes's care. By day, he was a court jester to the likes of Isis and Osiris; by night, he watched over their sleep, scaring away spirits and poisonous beasts by dancing, singing, shouting, clapping his hands and using powerful magic. Gradually, with the Phoenician influence, his role expanded. He began to protect humans as they slept, so by extension he became the god of the bed, then the god of love and sex, and then the god of childbirth. He looked after both mother and baby at this most dangerous of times, and this, coupled with his joyous appearance and beneficent mien, meant that his popularity grew and grew. Eventually, rather like the Hindu god Ganesh today, he became the favourite god of the majority of Egyptian and Phoenician people. His worship was one of the last to be crushed by the spread of Christianity, in AD 391 when the Byzantine emperor Theodosius I closed all pagan temples throughout the Roman Empire.

To some extent Bes's influence on Ibiza outlasted his worship elsewhere. Throughout Roman times, philosophers believed that the soil of Ibiza had strong magical properties against beasts that bit and stung. Greek writers said that snakes couldn't cross a line of the warm red dust from the island's hills. Scattering Ibiza soil around your house, the Roman historian Pliny the Elder wrote, would keep you safe from poisonous creatures. Perhaps when you name something, you give it power. Ibiza seems to have done its best to live up to Bes, whether through the chaotic hedonism of dancing or the eternal sanctuary the place has provided for the troubled and the wandering across the centuries. It's an island of escape and an island of the night.

For the Phoenicians in practical terms, however, it was an island of warehouses. They'd set up a small settlement on the south coast near Sa Caleta to supply their galleys, and this settlement scratched out a basic living until its inhabitants spotted the defensive value of the rock that now hosts Dalt Vila. Fifty years after first landing, the entire settlement moved north and founded a town which they also named Ibiza. The harbour, the port I was sailing into, was first carved out by their skilful hands.

For seven in the morning, this harbour was extremely busy. A lumbering cruise ship had just tied up, and a small flotilla of fishing boats was ploughing past it into the briny to get the day's work started. The ferry captain was acutely aware of the sailors on the cruise ship lining the side of their bridge to watch him bring his vessel alongside the dock. They were whispering and pointing like sarcastic schoolboys watching the fat kid run. Our captain, I'm afraid to say, reacted badly to this pressure and began screaming abuse at his helmsman almost before the docking process began. The poor man panicked and we lurched back and forth like a learner driver attempting a three-point turn while the crew tried to line everything up and dockers waiting with ropes laughed merrily at our feeble struggles.

Finally we disembarked, stepping off the gangplank and onto a wide dockside. This was a step steeped in more contemporary Ibicenco lore. Just down from the ferry dock the café Domino's used to squat, facing out over the harbour. Domino's was the focal point of Ibiza Town's bohemian expat scene in the 1950s and 1960s when artists, writers, actors and the flotsam and jetsam of post-war Europe washed up on the island's dusty shore. Most mornings found Domino's deserted after its fishing clientele had departed for the tuna beds, for the bohos were not early risers. Once a week, however, all Ibiza descended at dawn. Domino's provided a useful vantage point for the hungover artists who watched as the