

Visit to the **Caves of Drach**

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1

The hidden landscape

For centuries caves have been spaces of mystery and silence where the word time acquires a geological dimension. Sculpted throughout millions of years by the action of the water on the rock, they were only dragged out of the millenary darkness by the dim light of a bonfire, a torch or a gas lamp. They are masterpieces of nature in constant growth and can reach colossal sizes, as occurs in the Caves of Drach.

They are located on the southeast coast of Mallorca, in Porto Cristo, an old fishermen's shelter in the district of Manacor, close to the beautiful Cala Murta. It was formed around eleven million years ago during the Tertiary Period, in the Late Miocene Period. There are four large caves connected to each other, with a length of 2.4 kilometres and different chambers that extend to a depth of 25 metres. Inside them, the filtration



Spectacular formation of rebel stalactites.

of water, dragging calcium carbonate, has resulted in an infinite number of stalactites, stalagmites and calcareous masses that form a landscape hidden inside the entrails of the Earth.

In the history of the Caves of Drach, of which there are references since the late 14th century, stands out the names of figures who increased the interest in them and their popularity. Among them features Archduke Lluís Salvador of Austria—nobleman traveller and scholar in love with Mallorca—, who promoted their exploration by researchers such as the Frenchman Édouard-Alfred Martel. Since then new contributions have been made that increase their scientific interest and relevance.

At the end of the 19th century, when the development of sea communications made it easier for people to reach Mallorca, the curiosity of travellers and explorers from around the world was aroused. It became so renowned that decades later it would become a veritable driving force of the island's tourism. Thus, in the 1950s, many newly-wed couples from the mainland peninsula chose the island as a honeymoon destination, a romantic trip that included the visit to the Caves of Drach,

Viewpoint

Between the Baths of Diana and the Enchanted City this viewpoint offers us a splendid panorama.



with concert and boat trip around Lake Martel, even then delicately illuminated by Buigas.

The experience for a 21st-century traveller includes hardly any variations. The magic they experience before the suggestive calcareous forms is exactly the same, spectacular, unforgettable. Today it is the most visited cave in Spain and one of the most frequented in Europe.

The visit includes a tour of galleries with thousands of stalactites and stalagmites of astonishing beauty. Among them are those reflected on Lake Martel, one of the largest underground lakes in the world—117 m long, 30 m wide and a temperature of 17° C—, and which takes the name of the speleologist who coursed it for the first time. It is the setting for a spectacle of light and music that further embellishes, if it were possible, the volumes of the calcareous forms carved by water and time.



The forms of water

The Caves of Drach form part of the Serra de Llevant of Mallorca, a limestone formation of karstic morphology. In the calcareous massifs, the caves are shaped by dissolution of the rock due to the water filtered through the cracks, a process of millions of years that creates formations such as stalactites and stalagmites.

These caves take shape inside some rocks that are aged between 11 and 5.3 million years, formed during the Late Miocene Period, when a warmer climate than now prevailed in the Mediterranean. They are calcareous rocks formed by minerals that can dissolve with the rainwater that penetrates through the cracks or pores of the land. These filtrations cause the formations of cavities, chambers and lakes that are gradually covered with stalactites—formed on the ceiling like small pipes that grow conically—and stalagmites, which emerge from the ground due to the dripping of the stalactites and which sometimes join up forming columns. A slow growth, of between 0.2 and 1.6 millimetres per year.

The route

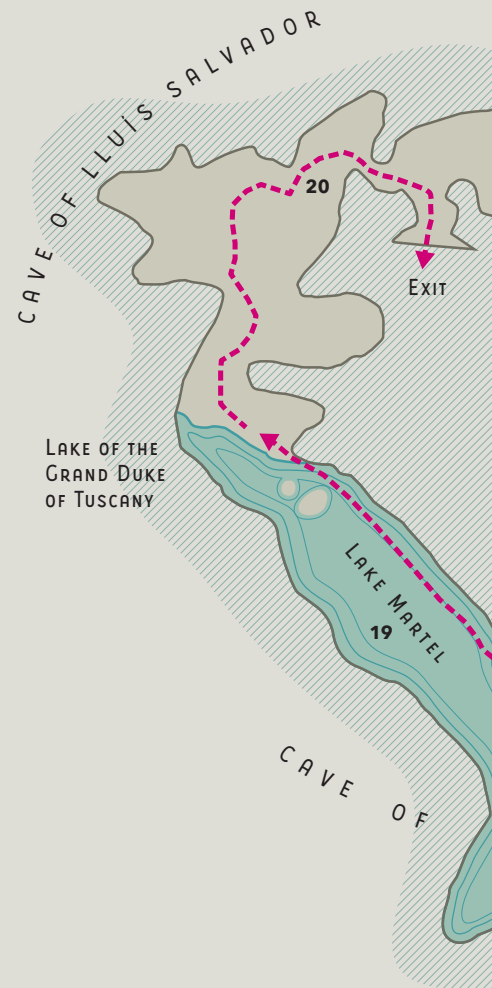
Inside you will not experience any anxiety or danger, since the paths form a comfortable route with steps and perfectly lit up.

It starts via an artificial opening that places us in the Louis Armand Hall, the last to be discovered in 1896. This way we enter what is called the Cave of the French. The descent begins, enjoying the many formations on both sides of the path, and at the end of the stairway we reach the De los Herreros Hall where we can take in the Baths of Diana, a small lake alongside which rises the Flag, a formation in the form of a canvas that combines several colours due to the filtrations of different materials.

Continuing we observe the Castle in Ruins, and a little further ahead the Snowy Mountain, a formation that owes its white colour to the calcium carbonate that the rain filters through the rocks. Continuing the route upwards we reach the Blue Canal, visible on the left, and which owes its name to the transparency of the water, and is in fact an extension of Lake Martel.

Passing through an opening in the wall, we reach the auditorium facing Lake Martel, where the public can sit down and enjoy the short live concert of classical music.

At the end of Lake Martel we enter the cave of Lluís Salvador. The climb starts towards the exit by means of a stairway, being able to appreciate the enormous height of this cave and the large number of formations.



Map with the toponymy established after the exploration by Édouard-Alfred Martel.

The micro-toponymy has experienced numerous changes over the years. Popular fantasy has no limits and continues finding imaginative names for each formation.

- 1 Sala Louis Armand
- 2 The Flag
- 3 Baths of Diana
- 4 Enchanted City
- 5 Broken column
- 6 Passage between columns
- 7 Castle in ruins
- 8 Small lake
- 9 Snowy Mountain
- 10 Hall of the Columns
- 11 Hand or finger
- 12 Buddha
- 13 Blue Canal
- 14 Chandlery
- 15 Bamboo
- 16 The Beach
- 17 The bath of Marie-Antoinette
- 18 Auditorium
- 19 Lake Martel
- 20 The Theatre

Blue Canal

It is difficult to stop contemplating the Blue Canal – a prolongation of Lake Martel–, which invades our retinas with turquoise. The delicate lighting of the caves is the work of Carles Buïgas i Sans, known as “The wizard of light”. In 1934 he lit up corners buried in darkness for millennia.

Transparent waters

White stalactites and canvases like curtains cover the vaulting of the canal. The lighting emphasises the transparency of the water.

Due to the colour we can get an idea of its depth: It is transparent when it is less than one metre in depth, green until 3 metres and blue after reaching 9 metres.



Lake Martel

At the end of the 19th century, an expedition led by Édouard-Alfred Martel coursed the underground waters of this lake for the first time, which they called Miramar in honour of one of the most appreciated properties of the archduke Lluís Salvador. They did it aboard two foldable canvas boats and raised the first planimetry of one of the largest underground lakes in the world: 117 m long, 30 m wide and a temperature of 17° C. Today it bears the name of that French speleologist considered the father of modern speleology.

The visitor Gaston Vuillier already sensed during his visit to the caves, at the end of the 19th century, that music would be a perfect accompaniment to the cave. Decades later, a sublime spectacle of light and music sends us into ecstasies over the formations reflected over Lake Martel.



3

A fascinating history

Earliest information

The first settlers knew part of the Caves of Drach. This is shown in findings such as fragments of Talayotic, Roman and even Arab ceramics, which show a use of the cavern that could date back 3,000 years. A gigantic corridor has been found close to its natural entrance that may have had ritual uses and was connected to a prehistoric settlement, dated in the middle to late Bronze Age (between 1600 and 800 BC). In 1878 some walkers discovered a vase from the Almohad period, possibly used for carrying water in the 13th century.

Although in the Middle Ages there are no specific references, some historians place the first mention of the cave in 1338. This is the date of a text by the governor of the island, Roger de Rovenach, to the mayor of Manacor, in which he informs him of the incursion to a local cave —without specifying the name— that a possible treasure hunter wants to make. This is an activity documented in other caves in Manacor, since at the time it was believed that, before fleeing, the Arabs had hidden gold and precious stones to avoid the Christian conquerors appropriating them.

Engraving by Gaston Vuillier from his publication "Voyage aux îles Baléares" in the magazine *Le Tour du Monde* en 1888.



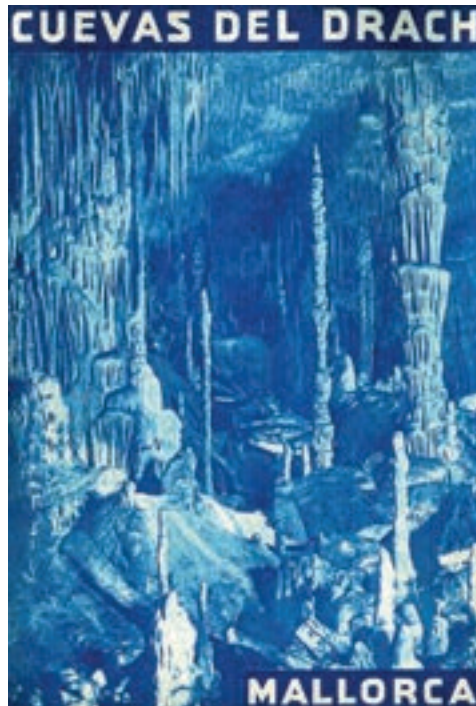
Recent history

Due to Martel's discoveries and the travellers' tales, translated into several languages, the Caves of Drach became the most important tourist cave in Majorca. Tourism began to develop at the same time, and would become the new driving force of the island, and to boost it, in 1905 the Majorca Tourist Board was created, a private association that promoted this promising economic activity.

The entity helped promote the caves as an attraction for visitors, improving communications, publishing pamphlets, albums and posters like those illustrated with watercolours by the Austrian artist Erwin Hubert. As an example of the importance of the caves in the tourist sector of the time, needless to say that, in the 50s, the caves paid the Board an annual protective quota much higher than that of the most prestigious establishments such as the Gran Hotel or the Hotel Formentor.



One of the numerous re-editions (1932) of the original publication (1896) by Martel.



Old promotional leaflets of the caves.

Joan Servera Camps



In 1922, Joan Servera Camps and his wife Àngela Amer Nadal bought Son Moro, the estate of the Moragues family in which the point closest to Porto Cristo, the Tancat de sa Torre, are located the Caves of Drach. The businessman, born in Son Servera, was a law graduate at the University of Barcelona, and between 1927 and 1949, was member of the board of the Majorca Tourist Board. He promoted the conditioning and promotion of the caves, turning them into the main tourist attraction of the Levant region of Majorca and one of the most outstanding attractions of the island. In 1975 he was named Illustrious Son of Manacor.

The family settled in Porto Cristo and directed the work to equip the caves for tourist visits, such as marking out new paths, building steps and the conditioning of the amphitheatre. In the same decade, a new route was opened to tour them, opening up an artificial entrance near to Cala Murta.

A unique stage

In September 1929 the cave was visited by Prince Jaime of Bourbon and Battenberg, second son of King Alfonso XIII and Victoria Eugenia. He led a group that entered the new artificial entrance and heard, for the first time, a concert performed from a boat that moved around Lake Martel. Two years later the regular concerts began, which were held on Mondays and Wednesdays. From that time on, they continue being the perfect combination of nature, excitement and spectacle.

Although the Spanish Civil War (1936 to 1939) represented a break in the tourist activity in Majorca, after these turbulent years it slowly recovered. The visit to the caves was complemented by the organisation of festivals, concerts and ballets. The cave thus became a unique stage for performances by ballerinas such as Ruskaya, Mariemma, Nadine Lang and Ana Paulova and operatic performances led by Miguel Fleta,

The Caves of Drach

Source of inspiration

From their first exploration, the caves have appeared in many books and travel guides. However, their suggestive formations and the mystery that shrouds them have also been the setting of films, literary works and inspiration for musical scores.



Scene from the film *El Verdugo* (1963), by Luis García Berlanga.

Cinema

As well as hosting top-level concerts, such as the performance of the Chant of the Sybil by the children's choir of the *blauets* of Lluç, the Caves of Drach have been the setting for making films. An important landmark in the history of Spanish cinema is *El Verdugo* (The Hangman) (1963), directed by Luis García Berlanga. It offers an odd –and today historic– vision of the cave and of the Majorca of the first tourist boom with an unusual plot: the honeymoon stay of a couple on the island during which the son-in-law is forced to inherit the profession of his father-in-law, which is that of hangman.

The caves also appear in *Tempestad en el alma* (1950), directed by Juan de Orduña and played by José Bódalo; a plot of deaths and persecutions where a mythical Majorcan actor appears, Xesc Forteza, who plays a musician in the boat that transports the star across Lake Martel. Finally, in 2007, Daniel Monzón also included the lake in some scenes of the *The Kovak Box*, starring Timothy Hutton, who embodies a science-fiction writer investigating mysterious suicides.



Literature

In the 70s the British writer Hugh Walters published a science-fiction novel for adolescents set in the cave. And in 2013 *Mariona, Max y la fantástica historia de las Cuevas del Drach* was published, a children's comic by Sandra Martínez and Jaume Balaguer that tells of the adventures of a brother and sister who enter the cave one day with their grandparents.

Music

The cave has also inspired musical scores such as the symphonic poem *La Cova del Drac* (1905) by Miquel Marquès, *Mi visita a las Cuevas del Drach* by Matilde Colom (1934) or *Gnomos del Drach*, by Llorenç Moreç Ferrer, performed on the 21st of June 1953 on Lake Martel.