

BON SOL ANTONIO and ROGER XAMENA

The BON SOL, one of the finest of Mallorca's hotels, was the brain-child of Antonio Xamena, (1910-1996) a Mallorcan who loved the island and wanted to give others opportunities to experience and enjoy its charms as much as he did himself.

The Xamena family originated in Felanitx, a neat, lively town known chiefly as an important centre of the azulejos (blue tile) industry and for the production of wine. The notable architect Guillem Sagrera (1380 - 1454), was born in Felanitx, who's best known work is La Llotja (exchange building) in Palma.

Antonio, son of Martin and Barbara Xamena, attended, "Teatinos" catholic school in Felanitx. He liked reading and made good use of the village library, developing wide ranging interests which included sculpture and painting. Additionally he became interested in gardens, as first in his home village and then all over Mallorca. He came across interesting examples, ranging from those belonging to the most modest village dwellings to the planted courtyards and, including landscaped grounds of palaces.

Antonio became the youngest member of Fomento de Turismo, which arranged walking excursions to all parts of the island, he used these opportunities to explore wild areas as well as cultivated gardens. From these walks emerged an abiding respect for the natural environment and a conviction that, both in gardens and in wilder areas, generally, nature should not be drastically altered so much as be allowed to develop with minimum interference.

Antonio at the age of 7 was the first person from his birthplace to fly, actually on a hydroplane in Porto Colom (the port of Felanitx). There was no landing field on the island. He wanted to see something of the world outside the island and when he at the age of 16, an opportunity arose to attend a football match between the teams of Castellon and Mallorca, played on the Spanish mainland. Together with older friends, he went to Castellon, in the Valencia region, and enjoyed discovering Valencia itself much more than the match, for his interest in football was not great. This was the first of many visits involving travel outside Mallorca. At 19 he inherited a sum of money and thought the best way to invest it would be to spend a month in Paris and so he did.

Antonio's father wanted him to become a farmer but the boy found the work limited for his projects. He liked meeting people and being involved in social activities, so when he was 17, he left Felanitx and began work as a clerk in a tailor's establishment, just at a time when Palma was becoming increasingly popular with French and English travellers. Already having some understanding of the two languages needed for these contacts, he rapidly improved his fluency until he was found to be the only multilingual person in the shop. Consequently while still very young he was made chief clerk and then area manager. These were particularly fortunate promotions as his father died when Antonio was only 19 and he found himself with increased family responsibilities.

He was a popular young man and his career was progressing swiftly but was interrupted by the Spanish Civil War. Shortly after the war was over, he met Roger, daughter of the owner of a small shoe and leather factory who, with his wife, had recently come to Mallorca from Badajoz, Extremadura, in mainland Spain. Antonio and Roger fell in love and soon married.

Antonio now wanted to be more independent in his work and decided, with a friend, Jordi Rossello, to set up a shop in Palma. His friend was a skilled tailor and, putting some money together and borrowing more, they opened up an establishment "ROXA" (Rossello & Xamena) in calle San Miguel.

Antonio and Roger settled in an attractive house that Antonio owned in Palma and for a time there was quite enough to occupy the young couple. They were both very happy but it was not long before new possibilities opened up. "Roxa" , increased its business substantially when they began to make ready-made tailored raincoats, which before had to be ordered and made-to-measure. They proved very popular with the islanders when sudden heavy rain storms occurred. Increasingly prosperous, Antonio found in 1950 that he was in a position to build a house on the South-East coast where he had bought a site in an idyllic location, at Cala D'Or, then a small fishing village.

The house was constructed in two sections, one above the other, each with six bedrooms, as he thought that while living in one half he could rent the other half if they wished.

The young married couple had been in residence for only a short time when Roger soon realized that the distance to the shop only allowed Antonio to be with her at weekends. During a severe rainstorm, a wealthy American (who presumably had not purchased one of their raincoats) sought shelter. As the weather cleared, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the house and its setting ; describing it as his Shangri-la.. Roger instantly offered him the house if Antonio agreed, for a substantial figure which he immediately met. As Antonio was at work she then ran to the nearest telephone, two kilometres away, to check whether he approved of her action he need not have been in any doubt; he certainly did.

Now they were in a position to buy a site in a location near to the capital city.

THE GUEST HOUSE

A key factor in Antonio's enjoyment of the island was his swimming. He loved to dive into the clear water every morning before going to work and became very concerned when the expansion of the harbour made the waters increasingly muddy. Looking for cleaner waters he found them in a small bay at Illetas. From the bay he was able to see a large old villa in a commanding position on the hillside. The location was known as Bendinat and said to have been a property of Castle Bendinat . He made his crucial purchase in 1951.

Although the building was in a poor state of repair, by the following year it had been restored sufficiently for them to move in. Roger liked the new house but found that she was rather lonely during the day, as she had no friends locally, her nearest neighbours were quite a distance away and transport was limited. Antonio reluctant to move from his beloved sea to the bustle of the city, came up with the idea of using the spare accommodation as a guest house, where they would welcome guests as their friends. The new generations of the Xamena family have maintained the same philosophy.

In June 1953 the first guest arrived to stay with them.

At the time the ability to advertise we enjoy nowadays were non existent. Taxi drivers collecting the visitors from the Barcelona - Palma ferry were informed of the opening of the

new guest house and as all who came enjoyed the relaxed and attractive environment created by Antonio and Roger, the taxi-driver-travel-agents had no doubts in recommending the Bonsol to new guests. .

In the second year Errol Flynn stayed for some time at the Bonsol before renting a house nearby. He enjoyed the house and loved sailing in Mallorcan waters and he recommended number of his friends to stay with the Xamena's with whom he maintained a good friendship.

The guest house was becoming well known and after the first two successful years it was extended from the 14 bedrooms with which it opened to 42. Antonio then decided to sell the shop in Palma to his partner and devote himself to the Bonsol. In 1958 the Bonsol was further enlarged to 73 bedrooms.

THE HOTEL

The Hotel had been built on the hill, where both winter sun and summer breezes could be enjoyed to the full ; at that time visitors came to Mallorca, for the mild winter temperatures. At lower levels and near to the sea, conditions could be humid before air conditioning became available.

As the visitor's priorities changed, looking for the beach and summer sun, it became obvious that a sea frontage would be an asset to the Hotel ; further land was purchased in 1957 including the small cove.

In the period 1957-64 the land down to the beach was developed and the garden Villas were built. Development continued and by 1982 the bedroom total in the main Hotel had reached 92. More than 200 steps were needed to link the Hotel with the beach, quite a challenge for the guests. It was decided that lifts were needed. This was a bold decision, with great cost implications, as not only would lift shafts have to be excavated but three long tunnels were projected leading outwards under two roadways and connecting three separate areas of ground. It would be necessary to cut out and remove a large quantity of rock and, to minimise disruption to the Hotel, the work would have to be done slowly in the winter season. The use of explosives was not allowed by the authorities because of the road passing overhead.

This complex work was started in 1969 and not until eleven years later could the tunnels and lifts be connected. Only in 1984 were all the interconnections put into use.

When completed the lifts and the tunnels greatly enhanced the ease of movement within the Hotel complex, which could then be considered as one whole unit.

The construction of the Hotel and its development in so many stages added enormously to its character. Each time a new part was projected Antonio and Roger were able to call on their accumulated knowledge of Hotel provision and to take into account the opinions of numerous guests. They were able to refine ideas used successfully before and to avoid minor problems that had emerged in earlier construction work. Antonio and Roger gained valuable experience and from an early stage were able to work efficiently with their architect. They always endeavoured to maintain the high standards and the generosity of space. Bedrooms were constantly improved, sitting areas made more welcoming and comfortable. They would try sitting in various locations and when, for instance, they decided that more intimate areas would be advantageous, they worked out together how best to subdivide the spaces with piers, partitions or walls.

Antonio would probably have enjoyed himself, and been very successful, as a building contractor, if one may judge from his contributions to the building processes, had he not got so deeply involved in his Hotel.

The couple loved to have paintings around them. Most now adorning the Bonsol were purchased, but many were inherited from an uncle (a priest) who had used his fortune to restore the Monastery of San Salvador in Felanitx and built a beautiful chapel for “Cristo Rey” and received the paintings as a gift of thanks from the Monks. For a number of years before Antonio's inheritance, when he expressed interest in the paintings, they had been stored in a cellar for a long time and needed restoration by a specialist. This took over ten years of restoration-work.

Antonio and Roger, in addition, purchased a wide range of objets d'art in the numerous places that they visited. Some of the most beautiful things were brought from Florence, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Burma, China and Africa. All the pieces were placed by Roger with great care adding richly to the character of the Hotel which always maintained the warmth of the original private villa. Antonio had an eye for masterpieces, Roger had the gift of finding the right place for them in the Bonsol.

THE SEA

Antonio wanted his hotel to relate to the sea very positively. He tried to ensure that every guest would be able to enjoy at least a partial view of the Bay of Palma and he encouraged the atmosphere of the sea to permeate the whole establishment. The sea is a recurring subject in the paintings that he chose or commissioned for the public areas and for the guests own rooms, while the progression of spaces descending seawards became the unifying feature of the buildings of the hotel and of its gardens. Numerous opportunities were provided to enjoy the sea in all its moods, weather by swimming from the small private cove, watching its movements from a location with wide views, or one giving protection in times of inclement weather. Not that Mallorca often suffered the latter.

In the evening the Beach Restaurant and the terrace areas around it became a superb location from which to observe the darkening sea and passing vessels; small fishing boats cruise liners and those splendid ships whose great sails seemed to hold the sunlight long after the time for its setting.

While the Hotel grew from its guest-house origins, Antonio noted changes in hotel design very carefully. The signs were that Mallorca's future prosperity would be largely dependant on tourism but the brash kind of development in some parts of the island did not impress him. He visited America and found the standards of some hotels there were such that they made Mallorca's modern style hotels appear out of date even before their completion. He therefore decided that the Bonsol would stay faithful to its original Mediterranean character.. Anxious that his Hotel should not only reach high standards for guests, he also wanted all improvements and expansions of accommodation to be soundly based in relation to the environment.

Almost from the beginning he worked towards an ecological balance as he was of the opinion that every Hotel and house on the island should assimilate its own waste. Sewage from the Hotel was purified and used to water the garden. This system continued until water recycling became the responsibility of the local authorities. Then it was used to irrigate the local golf

course. Toilet and shower drainage was separated and used for irrigation of the Hotel gardens after treatment. The heat generated by air-conditioning is used to warm swimming pools and preheat the hot water supply. In 1968 solar energy (the first in Mallorca) also contributed to the processes. Almond shell burners, as a renewable source of energy, were used (and still are) for hot water and central heating. Oil burners are only used at peak hours. The whole system achieved remarkable levels of energy efficiency and avoided any pollution of the sea.

THE GARDEN

A man who profoundly respected Nature, Antonio wished to create a garden that maintained its original character, one that was primarily Mallorcan, containing plants and trees that were native to the island and could thrive grow on the soil and among rocks. He coaxed the terrain, as had the Moores, famous for beautiful terracing and skilled control of water movement. Something of this could be seen in the Mallorcan estate of Alfabia (derived from the Arabic Al-Fabi or jar of olives) near Soller.

Foreseeing that masters of the art of stone terracing would become rare, he lavished a large proportion of the available finance on the garden, as he feared that his opportunity would no recur. Retaining walls, flights of steps, planted terraces, and pathways were developed. A team of six men, under the directions of Maestro Jaime Font (the construction manager of the Bonsol), worked on the construction for a period of twenty years,. One maestro Sebastian was so interested in the project and so committed to working on it that he continued past his time of retirement and into his late 70s.

As the gardens came towards completion they encompassed a wide variation of flowers, including large numbers of geraniums which cascaded from the window boxes and terraces of the Hotel and tumbled down the rocks of the lower garden, flowering almost all the year round. But, from the end of the 1980s a butterfly caterpillar decimated the Bonsol's geraniums as it did in the rest of Mallorca. To some extent other flowering succulents have taken their place. There were, and are, many flowering trees, including Mulberry trees with their silk-worms. Ficus (rubber trees) grew profusely and had to be severely pruned quite frequently; lemon and orange trees grew but few thrived in competition with pines of many types from miniature species to the tall growing examples that supported quite happily the generous festoons of ivy. Date Palms grew well bearing substantial crops together with the fir clad Washintonia Palma, and also the Palmito, local to the island and capable of renewing its growth after the most sever fires which not infrequently sweep the mountain areas. Traditionally branches of these were used to make baskets. All these provided attractive foliage as did olive trees and hibiscus shrubs. Rather more unusually perhaps, the Leaven Rose (Oleander or Pink Bay Leaf) Pine, a bushy tree or tree-like bush grew successfully.

The process of creating a garden is rarely smooth, for instance Antonio was fond of the Blue Spruce and planted a hundred of them. Not a single one was successful at Illetas but five were given to a friend who lived in Valdemossa and are now amongst the most spectacular trees in that area.

It can now be seen that the gardens, in their maturity, have a special magic of their own. They are complex and however many visits to them are made they still are capable of providing surprises. Summer brings its brilliance, the maximum contrasts of light to dark, the warmth of stones in sunlight, the coolness of grotto-like areas, but the winter sun brings brings both warmth and sparkle of low angle light reflected from walls of the most varied colours. In

these gardens the shades of green, often as fresh in winter as in spring, enhance the colours of Bougainvillea and other exotic flowers. Trunks of trees large and small, aerial roots, luxurious tendrils of ivy, give to some parts a jungle-like environment, while others are open and sophisticate.

The changing levels, with numerous flights of steps are made more interesting by the manner that they lead, to the various features, such as the cascade and the swimming pools, all of which are made accessible by the lifts and tunnels.

Sometimes the pathways lead to an unknown destination, curving round a tree or outcrop a rock, where shafts of sunlight may at one moment seem to clarify the route and at another make it more mysterious, as when they shine onto parts of the lush growth and through this is seen the blue of the sky, unexpectedly reflected from the surface of water...

It is a garden which displays the most striking contrasts of light form and texture, exploiting the features of trees, shrubs and plants in their relation to soil and rock, stone-walling or paving; it succeeds in providing unusual range of experiences, refreshing the visitor in the special manner that only a fine Mediterranean garden can.

VISITORS TO THE BON SOL

The Bonsol always seems to have been fortunate in its guests. One may wonder a whether Antonio told the taxi drivers the type of visitor that he wanted. They probably judged by appearances and managed to bring only those who had what Agatha Christie described as "excellent Hotel manners" ("Problem at Pollensa Bay" – London 1936)) for there are no recollections of major problems, or even stories of them.

In the early 1930s there were about forty thousand visitors to the island, a number that had tripled by 1950, increasing at an even faster rate so that by 1962 the annual rate passed a million. the increases continued until the late 1990s when the total reached eight millions and stabilised at around that figure. Such a number exceeded the population of some of the smaller European countries, and could not comfortably be absorbed without visual and ecological damage to the coastline, especially in areas close to the capital city and a few other locations that touroperators and developers favoured.

Antonio had anticipated expansion but, like most Mallorcans, he did not expect it to reach such a scale. Towards the end of his life he saw changes in attitude generally, which began to move closer to his own way of thinking. The island authorities introduced very positive measures to protect its character and to safeguard the environment generally. He was pleased to see this, as were many of the islanders. In 2001 the Bonsol received the Government Environmental Award "EMAS" for its contribution towards ecological achievement.

Mallorca is still a wonderful and excellent holiday destination: much of it has changed very little since West described its western section, for instance, as the "most sublime tract of country in Europe" (1) or Sand claimed that the island was one of the most beautiful places on earth. She wrote that it invited and waited for the artist and was "an Eldorado of painting" a place of natural tranquility, like "a green Helvetia under a Calabrian sky, with the solemnity and silence of the Orient." (2) High praise indeed, and if her words can sometimes seem entirely inappropriate in relation to the contemporary island, at other times they seem entirely correct

(1) West p 155. (2) Sand p.29

It was fortunate that Antonio, in working out his schemes for the Bonsol, always aspired to the provision of generous spatial standards as this approach enabled changes and adaptations to be made as he considered necessary.

The main building appears relatively modest in bulk, it is not grand but very approachable, and that is because only a small portion of it can be seen from any single viewpoint. It contains, a great deal of accommodation, including a series of fine rooms : sitting rooms, breakfast, dining and conference rooms, as well as a gymnasium, wellness, changing rooms and ancillary accommodation. All are generous in their scale, attractive in atmosphere and each have a character that is appropriate to its function.

The bedrooms of the Bonsol are attractive and generous, the Hotel, as a whole, the most unusual and intriguing, including, as it does, one of the finest Hotel gardens on the island.

Antonio and Roger Xamena established the Hotel, their family has continued the original policies, and some members of the staff have individually helped maintain the standards by over 25 or even 30 years of service.

Now Martin and Lorraine Xamena and their children, endeavour to bring about further improvements in the complex and to meet the highest standards of the 21st century, maintaining the original character and the fine traditions of the Bonsol.

