

July 11, 2005

Six-Lane Highways for the Mediterranean Island of Ibiza

By Olaf Ihlau

The Balearic island of Ibiza has long been an idyllic beach getaway free of mass development. But plans for six-lane highways, golf courses and urbanization projects on the island have many questioning whether paradise will soon be lost.

There's a war raging in the almost unbearable heat enveloping the Spanish island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean. Sweating and enveloped by the ear-splitting noise of drums and whistles, thousands of environmentalists and vacationers are squeezing their way through the boulevards of Ibiza City to protest the conservative island council's current construction fever. Fifteen opposition groups have written a manifesto against the "destructive machinery" of the government of the Balearic Islands. The document's title? "Our Territory is on the Verge of Being Dealt a Deadly Blow."

But the vocabulary of war is not just the exclusive province of the protesters. Stella Matutes, 32, the island's attractive and quick-witted councilwoman in charge of streets and public construction, also talks about "life or death." Citing the public good and wielding a law dating from the Franco dictatorship, she has already pushed through over 500 mandatory property expropriations in an effort to string a series of new mega-highways -- ranging from three to six lanes wide -- across the island. And she wants to do it within 18 months. Why is she in such a hurry? Because that's when structural subsidies -- allocated under the European Union's "Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion," which has earmarked a total of €12 billion for infrastructure, transportation and traffic for Spain since 2000 -- are set to expire.

Mini-island facing mega-development

Matutes's goal is increased tourism. Her conservative team believes that Ibiza can only prevail in the competition for Mediterranean tourists if it has the right infrastructure: an island without traffic jams, and with shiny new marinas and golf courses. The island's modernizers have joined forces with big business to make the dream a reality.

But their dream is others' nightmare. Environmentalists, organized in a group called "Plataforma Antiautopista" ("Platform Anti-highway") have come together with opposition parties in the fear that "the megalomania in concrete" -- as they call the highway plan -- will scare away most of the island's two million annual tourists. Unlike its much larger sister island of Mallorca, Ibiza, they argue, is a tiny place that could easily be overwhelmed by the new ribbons of asphalt, the 60 new urbanization projects, the harbor expansions and the golf courses.

After all, at its longest, this sunny, 570 square kilometer party island measures all of 35 kilometers. Given such short distances, it seems fair to ask why Ibiza needs costly high-speed roads with tunnels and interchanges -- including the pricy, €31-million-per-kilometer airport access road. Many of the island's 16,000 foreign residents, most of them Germans, are skeptical. Mail-order giant Michael Otto, former race car driver Niki Lauda, actor Tom Hanks, director Roman Polanski, Jade Jagger, Jil Sander, soccer stars Zinedine Zidane and Figo -- all are worried about the future of their refuges on an island known for its charm and spirit.

"It's all nonsense," says Stella Matutes. "We continue to have the lowest level of urbanization of all

of Spain's tourist centers." The councilwoman's father, Abel Matutes, 64, even seeks to justify the road construction project by claiming that it will help save lives. Ibiza needs the highways, he argues, because "we have the highest accident rate in all of Spain." Many of the victims are tourists who drive home under the influence after spending the evening in one of the island's many nightclubs. But would wider roads help them?

"Old Goat" stands to profit

It's hardly a coincidence that Abel Matutes's conglomerate of companies stands to benefit from the construction projects. Matutes, a former Spanish foreign minister, is the godfather of Ibiza. There is hardly anything on the island that his clan doesn't own or control: the line of hotels on Playa d'en Bossa, nine Balearia ferryboats, many pieces of property, as well as quarries, construction companies, asphalt factories, the Santa Gertrudis dairy farm, and even Europe's largest disco palaces, "Space" and "Privilege."

Matutes's ancestors immigrated to the Balearic Islands, for centuries a tolerant haven, from the Spanish mainland during the Inquisition. His grandfather, a wealthy banker, brought power to Ibiza in 1905 in the form of a generator made by the German firm Otto/Deutz, "two years before Mallorca," Matutes proudly adds. "Our family has always stood for a dynamic economy."

He seems unperturbed by the fact that the demonstrators have mocked him on their placards as an "old goat" and "shark." It doesn't even seem to bother him that he's referred to as the Godfather. "People know that I do things for them," he says coolly. "If I am, then I'm a good godfather." He doesn't need Ibiza to make his millions, he says. "I make them with my hotels in the Caribbean." Matutes, who was once a member of the European Commission in charge of the credit and investment portfolio -- a position he leveraged into benefits for the Balearic Island chain that Ibiza belongs to -- likewise has vast holdings in the Caribbean.

Life or death -- the holy war for the future of Ibiza is in full swing. And that's not a good thing for the aura of this sunny island, where many are firm believers in the supposed future vision of astrologist and prophet of doom Nostradamus. Ibiza, the oracle said is "mankind's last refuge from the great fire."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan