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July 24, 2005

Ibiza is dancing mad over motorway

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TO revellers who dance the night away at its celebrated clubs, Ibiza is the summer party capital of Europe. In recent weeks, however, the sound of the clubbers' whistles has been joined by the unfamiliar cacophony of public protest.

Plans to carve a six-lane motorway through Ibiza's hilly, richly wooded interior have provoked furious opposition from many inhabitants. Yet the government is pressing on regardless. It insists the road is critical to the tourist industry on which the island's economy depends.

The driving force behind the £275m project — partly funded by the European Union — is Stella Matutes, 32, a councillor in charge of public works. She has described the road, which would run for 12½ miles from Sant Antoni in the west to the airport in the south, as a "matter of life and death" for Ibiza.

Supporters claim it would help cut the high number of accidents — especially those involving party-goers under the influence of drink or drugs who come to grief on winding roads when they emerge from clubs during the morning rush hour.

Such arguments cut little ice with the Plataforma AntiAutopista, an umbrella group opposed to the motorway that drew 17,000 people to a protest rally earlier this month.

The island, which measures 18½ by 12 miles, is dotted with posters declaring in the Catalan dialect No Volem Autopista — We Don't Want the Motorway. The group is challenging the project in the courts.

The protesters have been backed by Jose Padilla, a leading DJ who founded Cafe del Mar, one of the island's most famous bars. He organised a benefit concert at the start of the summer for their campaign.

Roman Polanski, the film director, joined 20 Germans and Spaniards from the arts and media who took out an advertisement in an Ibizan newspaper denouncing "the present construction madness, which threatens to turn this beautiful island into a concrete jungle".

The appeal added: "Ibiza, the island we love so dearly, is about to lose its special charm, its very soul and, as result, its economic future."

Other celebrity residents, such as Jade Jagger, Sir Mick Jagger's jewellery designer daughter, support the project, however. Although she has not spoken publicly, Jagger, who has a house in the north of the island, is said by friends to accept the argument that it could curb deaths on smaller roads.

Juanjo Cardona, 33, one of the founders of the Plataforma Anti-Autopista, said the road was out of all proportion to Ibiza's needs. Although up to 2m people pack the island in high season, the permanent population is just 250,000.

"This road is far too big for Ibiza," he said. "The government should look for other solutions, like promoting public transport."

The expense of the road — critics say it will cost three to four times more per mile than equivalents on the mainland — has also raised eyebrows.

Opponents have muttered darkly about "economic interests" — an apparent reference to Matutes's father, Abel, a former Spanish foreign minister and European commissioner, who is active in the construction industry. The politician turned businessman has denied the family will benefit.

Protesters are encouraged by indications that the government may not be able to afford to complete the motorway. "There are a lot of very important people with an interest in this," said Cardona. "But if it finally looks as if they don't have the money and a lot of people are against it, they might agree to negotiate and build it in another way."

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