

The holiday that changed my life

Simon Schama, Lucy Kellaway and FT writers LIFE & ARTS



Elite Tory donors club holds secret meetings with Johnson

- 'Advisory Board' members mix with PM and chancellor
- Party denies link between cash and government policy

TOM BURGIS, SEBASTIAN PAYNE, KADIMH SHUBER AND GEORGE PARKER

A secretive club for Conservative party donors known as the Advisory Board has been holding regular meetings with Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak.

The club, some of whose members have donated at least £250,000, was developed by Tory co-chair Ben Elliot to connect elite Conservative backers with the prime minister and chancellor. Elliot is a founder of Quintessentially, a "concierge" service for the rich, and the lobbying company Hawthorn Advisors.

The club does not appear in party literature but Tory officials confirmed the Advisory Board "occasionally" meets Johnson and Sunak "for an update on the political landscape".

One person briefed on its activities said it held monthly meetings or conference calls with either of the country's top two ministers. Some members have used those discussions to call for spending cuts and lower taxes, one donor said.

Mohamed Ameri, a businessman and Tory donor, said the club was "like the very elite Quintessentially clients membership: one needs to cough up £250,000 per annum or be a friend of Ben". A person with knowledge of the club said that although giving £250,000 did not guarantee membership it was essentially "a donors group".

Boris Johnson with Ben Elliot, the conservative co-chair who set up the club

David Sliemers/Getty Images



FT Weekend Magazine

Inside Johnson's money network How secretive donor club transformed his party's fortunes

Well-placed Conservatives say that "not everyone" on the Advisory Board had given £250,000 but some had. Eight Conservative party donors wrote cheques of exactly £250,000 in 2020 and three donors have given that amount so far in 2021. But no one contacted by the Financial Times would say whether they were members of the club.

Others said by senior Conservatives to be members of the Advisory Board have not given that amount in the past year but have donated handsomely in the past. The party refuses to discuss the board's membership.

Conservative officials insist the Advisory Board existed before Johnson made

To gain entry to the club 'one needs to cough up £250,000 per annum or be a friend of Ben'

Elliot party co-chair in July 2019 but declined to say when it was set up. "I've never heard of it," said one senior minister from David Cameron's government.

Elliot's supporters say he is "moderating and professionalising" the party's fundraising operation and that also applied to the Advisory Board, which had become more "structured".

One well-placed Tory referred to a "250 club", saying it "is like whisky: you push to see how high you can raise the price". A Conservative spokesman said there was no body called "the 250 club".

The Conservatives say fundraising has no bearing on policy. "Government policy is in no way influenced by the donations the party receives," a spokesman said. "They are entirely separate."

Mind and body

Simone Biles and sporting stress ANALYSIS



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FT MONEY



Errors in service charges leave residents fuming

An FT investigation has revealed widespread errors in service charges. Flaws in the estimated £35bn annual haul of charges across the country can be detected if residents lobby for information and comb receipts, a process often navigable only for those with law and accounting backgrounds. Many believe mistakes are at best the result of ineptitude. Others wonder if sometimes there might be a simpler explanation: fraud.

Obscene and scandalous > PAGE 16

Former adviser to regulators on fraud handed sentence for money laundering

MICHAEL O'DWYER

An anti-money laundering expert has been handed a suspended prison sentence for money laundering offences after allowing his company to be used as a conduit for £850,000 generated by an investment scam.

Dominic Thorncroft, former chair of the Association of UK Payment Institutions, who used to work with lawmakers and regulators to provide anti-money laundering training, had been convicted by a jury in June of several financial crimes.

The 56-year-old was sentenced yesterday to an 18-month suspended prison sentence and ordered to do 250 hours of unpaid work after the conviction on one count of failing to alert authorities to money laundering, one count of breaching money laundering

regulations and four counts of retaining a wrongful credit.

Police began investigating Thorncroft in June 2016 after a laptop recovered in a search of his money transfer business in Peckham revealed the company had received almost £850,000 from more than 60 victims of an investment fraud.

Victims of the fraud were persuaded over the phone to invest in sham money-making schemes. The funds were channelled to China through VSI, the company in which Thorncroft was a shareholder, director and the nominated officer for money laundering issues.

Thorncroft was not part of the initial fraud in 2014 but should have known or suspected that money passing through his business was criminal property, prosecutors said.

"Despite his substantial knowledge and expertise of money laundering,

Thorncroft failed to alert the authorities to the suspicious activity and allowed it to continue," said the Crown Prosecution Service, which brought the case.

Kevin Eaubert, barrister for Thorncroft, told Southwark Crown Court that the defendant's offending was "characterised by incompetence, not deliberation". Thorncroft did not have "a guilty mind or sinister motives", he added.

Sentencing Thorncroft, Judge Perrins said it should have been obvious to him that his company was being used to launder money and that the offences merited a custodial sentence.

In determining Thorncroft's punishment, the judge took into account several mitigating factors and said that the fraud had been "sophisticated and well executed". Thorncroft did not benefit financially from the offences, he said. Additional reporting by Jane Croft

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Travel

Art meets nature in Mallorca



Europe holidays | Can Ferrereta in Santanyi mixes the historic old town, natural surrounds and modern works to impressive – and relaxing – effect, finds *Jan Dalley*

The tea has a subtle, fragrant, slightly smoky tang. I sip it from a delicate bowl, served to me after I emerge blinking into the bright daylight, my senses heightened after two hours of intense and blissful wellness treatment at Can Ferrereta's spa. It is well-named Sa Calma; I feel as if my anxiety nub has been wiped clean.

But I still can't identify the tea. Olive leaves, I'm told, with notes of orange. I never knew you could infuse an olive leaf but it seems this is a piece of magic local to Santanyi, in Mallorca, where the newly opened Can Ferrereta is sited in the centre of the pretty old town.

The tea sipped, and my legs returned to full working order. I wander back towards my room past the giant swimming pool. I am trying to work out how it is possible that newly made gardens could look so established, with cypresses, tall palms, garlanded and ancient oives, clumps of rosemary. Tall grasses that glint silver in the sun; a lemon tree in fruit. Only the small purple bougainvillea just beginning its journey up the sides of the pool's changing rooms, built in stone with a domed roof in the style of traditional Mallorcan shepherds' huts, betrays its youth.

In the next courtyard, where that morning we'd sat for breakfast, you start to appreciate the delicate dance of old and new that has gone to make up this place. The building was once the magnificent townhouse of a noble family, parts dating back far beyond the 17th century, and Baetista architects, based in Palma, have woven contemporary luxury into the ancient fabric lightly.

In the entrance lobby – the front door straight off the street, as was the way in Spain's historic towns – a high, chunky



arch of old sandstone, beautifully restored, announces the age and grandeur of the structure, and parts of a patterned age-old stone floor have been seamlessly wedded to the smooth gloss of contemporary stone, giving a look that's as sleek as can be, with gentle rustic touches that have a can't-fake-it authenticity.

And then to the still more contemporary: in the hallway, at the foot of a curving stone staircase, you immediately see the first of the many works of art that fill Can Ferrereta. It's a sculpture in iron by Josep Maria Riera i Aragó, abstract but with its elegant blades suggestive of

agricultural machinery, and of flight. This was a serious house, it seems to say, where work got done; this is also a place of dreaming, of taking wing.

It's Wednesday, market day in the town, and I set out to explore. The picturesque streets around Santanyi's church, which yesterday were lined with the usual mixture of cafés, bars, cheap-and-cheerful restaurants (most signs in German), have sprouted a small town's-worth of stalls.

A happy half-hour's wandering and browsing takes me through booths selling the normal mixture of craft jewellery, scarves and leather bags, pottery, T-shirts and flip-flops, floaty dresses you know would be a mistake. Nothing very special there. But down the street a little begin the food stalls, a vivid tableau of hams, sausages, fruit and vegetables, fish galeña. I have a sudden longing for a kitchen – really just so that I have a reason to buy some of this glorious produce.

But dreams of my own cooking are immediately quashed by the lingering memory of last night's dinner. At Ocre, Can Ferrereta's main restaurant, I made a real celebration of the fruits of the sea: tuna tartare with mustard and *spaghetti del mar* – samphire – eaten with greedy hunks of *coca*, Mallorcan flatbread, was followed by scorpion fish with cockles and a sauce of oil. Now all I can think is: how soon can I have lunch?

Very soon, as it turns out, as the hotel's poolside bar-restaurant beckons seductively. The pool and its surrounds are huge and, with only 32 rooms here, and an adults-only policy that attracts mainly restrained and casually elegant couples and means you are not going to be dive-bombed by yelling youngsters, there is a sense of space and calm.



Clockwise from main: Santanyi; Can Ferrereta; one of the 32 rooms; a poolside sculpture by Jaume Plensa; the Sa Calma spa. — *AmorLacuna*

Early – but not too early – this morning I had the whole enormous pool to myself, watching the sunlight grow stronger as I swam, picking out the features of another of the hotel's artworks, a giant bronze head by Catalan sculptor Jaume Plensa looming in a flower bed in the shade of an old olive tree, sleek and mysterious as a big cat.

A large lunchtime salad later, I need a walk. I decide to head for the sea. Santanyi has the feel of a seaside town but is in fact six or seven kilometres from the coast, where there is a choice of some of the best beaches of this southern part of Mallorca. For no particular reason, my destination is Cala Santanyi.

Mistake. The road is long, straight and dull, with the fields on each side dusty and bleached by early summer heat.

This part of Mallorca has none of the dramatic mountainous scenery of the north; although I'm sure there's excellent walking to be had, it needs a little more research than I'd bothered with.

Forty hot minutes later, though, the road takes a sudden turn and makes a dip, and I'm in one of those magical *barrencas* typical of the Balearic islands: steep white rocks dotted with dense shady pines and oaks, a glint of blue water ahead. After the heat of the road, the natural cool comes like a shock. And the beach, when I finally reach it, is true to form: high rocks framing a narrow gulch with perfect pale sand leading down to that gleaming, translucent, turquoise water.

But although a long, deep swim restored my temper, I didn't linger. I'll admit it: I am a beach snob. Apartment blocks and sunloungers are not my thing and this beach, even in very early June, is already too crowded for my liking. Perhaps better to seek out the more spacious nearby beaches at Cala Llorbada or S'Amarador, in the Mondragó Natural Park just to the east, or walk the cliffs to find something more private.

Back at Can Ferrereta, the quiet and



cool wrap their soothing arms around me. My suite is enormous – the bathroom, equipped with everything you'd expect of five-star luxury, including a freestanding tub you could almost dive into, would still fit a ping-pong table.

In the bedroom, with soft sofas and a desk in the window looking out to the hills beyond the town, and the cosy dressing room with fireplace, it's pretty impossible to think of something that has not already been thought of. I know because I tried.

Even the information about the artists whose work hangs on the walls is carefully done. The theme here is Spanish art – most pieces are from the collection of the Soldevila Ferrer family who owns this hotel, as well as Hotel Sant Francesc in Palma – and although there are great and familiar names such as Joan Miró, I'm making discoveries.

In my bedroom a large abstract canvas intrigues me, and I've looked at others in the library off the hotel lobby; the artist is Dominica Sánchez – new to me. Photographer Bárbara Vidal has a thoughtful series on the landing above the stairs; geometric works by Manolo Ballesteros catch the eye.

It adds up to an environment I was loath to leave. As for the friendly and fussless staff, who will (and did) organise anything from a rubber band to a PCR test, one of them noticed that I had used only the decaf coffee capsules for the machine in the suite. The next morning, there were twice as many.

Jan Dalley is the FT's arts editor

I / DETAILS

Jan Dalley was a guest of Can Ferrereta (www.canferrereta.com) and tour operator Carrier (www.carrier.co.uk). Carrier offers a seven-night package from £2,490 per person, including business class flights on British Airways from London and private transfers.

Mallorcans open to tourists, though with requirements for vaccination or pre-departure testing varying according to country. For details see safetourism.helloalberts.travel