

# Tennis Academy of Mallorca

AFTER THE LONG HOT SUMMER NORMALITY HAS RETURNED TO MALLORCA AND THE ISLAND'S FRIENDLIEST TENNIS CENTRE.



After the mayhem of July and August, life is back to normal in the Balearics. The kids are back in school and when they are out of school they are pelting tennis balls at each other at Mallorca's renowned Tennis Academy in Paguera. Every weekday from 4.30pm to 8pm and weekends children descend on the 15 clay courts of Paguera. Leaps and fist pumpings are now common place as youngsters attempt to emulate their new found hero Rafa Nadal.

Former Turkish Grand Slam player, Ali Yenilmez, runs the academy and has noticed the increased interest in tennis that has accompanied the rise of Mallorca's home grown star. 'There's no doubt tennis is more popular since Rafa won The French Open, not only in Mallorca but all over Europe. He's inspired not just the kids but adults as well. The spirit he brings to the game is fantastic.'

Ali grew up in the old European quarter of Istanbul. He began playing at the city's Hilton Hotel where he earned pocket money as a ball boy after school and at weekends. At the age of ten he entered Istanbul's famous tennis academy, TED, and developed into Turkey's youngest number one and Davis Cup player, at the age of 16.

Ali was based in Hamburg from the age of 19 from where he toured the world. In 1985 Ali began coaching, working with top international junior players, including Andreu Medvedev and Yevgeny Kafelnikov. In 1999 Ali and his wife Valerie, with two small children, decided to move from Hamburg to somewhere warmer. 'An opportunity came up here in Mallorca and it seemed the right choice. The great thing about Mallorca is that I don't feel like a foreigner. I feel at home. That was very important in the decision for me and my wife, who is half French, half American, to move here.'

Since arriving in Mallorca Ali has embarked on building the most friendly tennis club with his pro team Hernan, José Luis, and Tomás. Both Jose Luis and Tomás are former Balearic number ones. Tomás only 22, having beaten Rafa Nadal on the Balearic junior circuit. Hernan is Spanish but grew up in Argentina, and has 15 years of coaching experience, having trained some of Argentina's top junior players. We offer the opportunity for everyone to become a tennis player, young or old, says Ali. 'Of course for children with great tennis aspirations it's best if they start as young as possible, but for adults the most important thing is to come down, play and have fun. Tennis is a social game and many English people who have

moved to Mallorca come here to meet people and of course it keeps you in good shape at the same time.'

The Tennis Academy Mallorca, unlike many tennis clubs, is open to everybody. You can drop in for an individual or group lesson. Women tend to meet on Tuesday mornings where they can come along for a group lesson from 10 to 11, play against each other from 11 to 12, and have coffee and a gossip after. Or, if you wish, you can just hire a court like Boris Becker and Tommy Haas frequently do. There is also the option to join the Club; there are seven teams, adults and juniors that compete all over the island. The juniors are divided into beginners, advanced and tournament players. The tournament players compete on the Balearic circuit made up of between 300 and 400 players.

Within the academy there is also the very social International Tennis Club that plays three times a week. Eleven nationalities make up the club; some are regulars others just come and play when they're here on holiday. The age range of the club members ranges from early 30's to the 80's, although they would like to have more younger players. It was set up by British Wimbledon veteran Bob Hay 20 years ago. Unfortunately he died four years ago but, since his death, Liz Bluff has taken over. 'The setting is the best place for tennis on this side of the island, you don't feel you're in a factory,' says Liz. Ali's great, everybody adores him, he's so good with the kids and he is such a good trainer. All the trainers are absolutely super. And everybody's so friendly and appreciative.'

During Easter and Summer the academy hosts tennis camps for adults and children. Besides tennis, the children also participate in a range of activities including swimming, football, and learning a foreign language, be it German, English or Spanish.

The academy is beautifully situated, tucked away amid the trees of Paguera with the mountains as a backdrop and the beach just a five-minute walk away. Along with the 15 clay courts, the complex contains 2 swimming pools, a beach soccer field, and apartments to rent; ideal for the great number of visitors from around Europe who come to the academy to train with the Pro Team.

Ali is also a sport psychologist, trained by famous American psychologist to the stars, Jim Loeh, whose clients have included Andre Agassi, Carl Lewis, Pete Sampras and Michael Jordan. The academy however doesn't just cater to Mallorca's future Rafas, it caters to everybody, including children with special needs. 'With motor skill exercises the improvement in co-ordination and concentration is phenomenal,' says Ali. 'It really helps to build the children's confidence coming here playing against each other.'

The Tennis Academy Mallorca is holding an Open Day on October the 15th from 2pm-5pm. So, if you're tempted to be shown a few strokes by Ali and his team, and hit a few tennis balls, be sure to pay the very welcoming club a visit. ■

By Melanie Jones

