



Menorca is a truly untapped jewel in Spain's crown

Paula Burns explores the secret gem of the Balearic Islands, enjoying a tippie at a winery and a gin distillery, savouring the tapas at exquisite eateries, and soaking up the sounds of the sea at private beaches

Who would ever have imagined that a sun-drenched island in the Mediterranean could be in any way comparable with the West of Ireland. As the sun glistens in the clearest of seas, the landscape of Menorca is coated in lushes of green trees and fields.

Driving through the island, the backdrop of its dry stone walls and dairy farms filled with cows, revives a nostalgia within me for long summer drives in the West.

What sets the island apart from home is quite obviously the weather. It's early June and temperatures are reaching the high 20s.

Menorca is the secret gem of the Balearic Islands and maybe even of Spain. It feels untouched by the tourism mayhem. There are no high-rise apartment blocks clogging the coasts. It's notably quieter, more serene. With a population of just over 90,000 you get a sense of easiness, of an island life where everything moves at a slower pace. There is a tranquillity that lends itself to feeling safe and not having to worry. Menorca is a place to come to unwind and forget the hustle of city life.

If you're in the throws of romance and dream of a sun-kissed, quiet getaway with just the two of you or you have reached your golden years and want a sun holiday without the hassle, Menorca is ideal. Due to its trouble-free, peaceful ambiance, it is also ideal for families.

Having a tippie or two is always a holiday treat. Being able to incorporate a bit of history and

sightseeing into it makes for a great excuse. Wineries are fairly new to the Menorcan landscape as in the past crops have been ruined, but with new, strong vines, they are becoming more popular. The pretty Binifadet winery is a must for a relaxing afternoon.

After a free short-guided tour of the winery the tasting begins on the stunning terrace. With an equally stunning French man at the helm this is paradise. If you're feeling peckish you can also enjoy a meal.

Gin has succumbed to a bad rap over the years. Known as Mother's Ruin, some may be a little apprehensive when it comes to visiting a gin distillery, but fear not, floating out of the distillery will be one of the most memorable moments of your holiday.

A legacy of the 18th century British presence gin is a popular drink of the island. However, only one distillery remains open, Gin Xoriguer in the harbour town of the island's capital Mahon or Mao as known to the locals. Pomada, gin with lemonade, is served in all bars and is very popular amongst the Menorcans.

I will confess I am a gin lover so this was like stepping into my corner of heaven. The gin of Menorca is developed from barley alcohol and is distilled with perfumed wine alcohol and juniper berries. Being distilled from the wine makes the gin smoother and not as dry as British or Irish gins. The piece de resistance is the tasting of an array of flavoured gins. From toffee gin to camomile and aniseed to honey gin, your taste buds will be bursting by the time you leave. I think even those wary of gin will come out pleasantly

surprised.

If all the tasting has brought on a bit of a thirst, the setting of Cova d'en Xoroi is the idyllic way to end a day and enjoy the sunset over the island. The impressive bar-come-nightclub is carved into the beautiful cliff side of the south coast of the island.

The cavern was born from a mythological legend of a pirate who supposedly once inhabited the cliff face. The bar is immersed in secret nooks and crannies, perfect for a secluded drink.

Day beds adorn the cliff side leading to some of the most spectacular views of the island. This a wonderful place for a bit of romance, having a drink while watching the sunset over the vibrant Mediterranean Sea.

Menorca is a fantastic destination if it's all about a family holiday. There are so many activities throughout the island from horse riding to snorkelling to kayaking.

For me as a child visiting the zoo of whatever destination we were at was an integral part of the holiday. The Peculiar Zoo at Lloc de Menorca is a real treat for kids and to be honest adults too. It's not your usual run-of-the mill zoo where touching the animals is forbidden. Here the likes of Lemurs climb trees in the open.

I got the chance to bring the Britney Spears out in me by holding an enormous 30kg albino yellow snake. I was lacking the sexy stage wear and did almost toppled over but I'm sure I would have given Spears a run for her money. The stars of the zoo had to be the owls. They are such striking and fascinating birds of prey. Despite my fear of birds flying distractingly into my face (pigeons are the culprits of this phobia), I bravely held the cutest baby owl. With just a gentle rub of his head he would fall fast asleep.

We were also given a show by a dancing owl, not sure that this was intended but with the shake on his shoulders it seemed as though he was auditioning for *Dancing With The Stars* and was great entertainment. Then came the daddy of the owls, the king, who despite being only 3kg in weight could kill a fox. Luckily he had just eaten so we were fairly safe.

Being able to be tactile with the animals, with assistance of course from the staff, made the visit so enjoyable. Kids would love this, having their picture taken petting a Lemur. That would definitely trump anyone's Monday school news.

In keeping with the animal theme, the Somni equestrian production at Son Martorellet will keep the kids

enthralled. This unusual equestrian art mixes fantasy with a theatrical type horse show. Forget about the image you have of a typical RDS horse show.

This is a musical where horses are the stars. Think a dramatic performance played out along side two operatic singers who are telling the story while the horses ride out to the ring, to dance and move in time with the music.

The most mesmerizing moment being the horses jig to *Riverdance*. Yes, their legs actually jiggled in time with Michael Flatley. It was a rare sight, seeing these majestic animals perform.

While in Menorca I recommend to spend a Saturday doing as the natives do. A walk around the town of Ciutadella is the perfect way to soak up the atmosphere of Menorca.

Walking through the town on a Saturday morning is filled with the sound of the Catalan language, three generations of families strolling the streets meeting friends, buying from the fish and food markets.

As the build up to the Fiesta of San Joan at the end of June begins live music is played in the street creating a carnival feeling. After exploring the town we relaxed for a typical two- to three-hour Menorcan lunch.

This is a must. Menorca is filled with traditional-style restaurants where the dishes of the Mediterranean are cooked to perfection. This tapas style cuisine is the beauty of Spanish culture.

It's relaxing, enjoyable and sociable, something I wish I could continue at home.

When we entered the Restaurant Espai Gastronomic ses Voltes we left behind a bustling town. When we left two hours later, the streets were deserted for the sunny beaches. Menorca has over a hundred natural beaches, one for every day of the summer. There is no coast

road on the island, this is because of the landscape, so as a result, many of the beaches are secluded coves.

Some are accessible such as that at Punta Prima, whereas other beaches can be accessed only by driving and then walking part of the way, so you need to be prepared for the day. But they are worth it. There is nothing better than lying on a secluded beach listening to the waves wash onto the sand. It is the ultimate in relaxation.

Menorca is an untapped jewel. For such a small island that is 16km wide and 56km long, it entices with culture, fine cuisine, unspoilt beaches, and sun.

GETTING THERE

Flights:

Weekly Saturday Chartered BA Flight with Sunway Holidays.

Departs Dublin 13:55 Departs: Mahon 18:45 Prices start from €379pp and €1359 for a family of two adults and 2 children. September Departures.

Accommodation:

2 Star: Price of €379pp is based on 7 nights departing Sept 12 staying at the 2* Los Lenticos in Calan Forcat. Family (2+2) price from €1359.

3 Star: Price of €589pp is based on 7 nights departing Sept 5 staying at the 3* Roc Lago Park in Calan Bosch. Family (2+2) price from €1779.

4 Star: Price of €659pp is based on 7 nights departing Sept 5 staying at the 4* Los Delfines in Calan Forcat. Family (2+2) price from €1786.

What to see:

The sites: Binifadet Winery – Tour and tasting; Gin Xoriguer – Tour and tasting; Son Martorellet – Horse Show; Lloc de Menorca – Peculiar Zoo; Marlborough Fort at Es Castell – Tour of the British Fort; Naveta d'es Tudons at Ciutadella – Megalithic Chamber Tomb; Ciutadella – the town is situated on the western end of Menorca. Visit on a Saturday for fish and food market Mahon – Capital of Menorca. To learn more about the city visit Mahón's Museo de Menorca located in an old convent. Between April and October, it opens from 10am to 2pm and 6pm to 9pm daily, except Sunday evening and all day Monday (mornings only in winter). There is also an a hour long boat trip around the harbour that leaves every hour from across the street to the Gin Xoriguer.

Eating Out:

For traditional Mediterranean cuisine of fresh fish, meat and tapas: Restaurant Latitude 40 – overlooks the harbour at Mahon. Restaurant El Moli de Foc – in Sant Climent outside Mahon. Restaurant Can Bernat des Grau – Mahon Harbour. Restaurant Espai Gas-

tronomic ses Voltes - Ciutadella

Shopping:

Avarca Sandal: Menorca is famous for shoes. They are most proud of the Avarca sandal. Traditionally the soles of the sandal were made from dis-used tyres. They come in mens and ladies with a diverse range of colours and themes. They are available throughout the island.

Pretty Ballerinas: Ballerina pumps are also available. The now must-have shoe of many celebs was founded and are made on the island. Celebs from Kate Moss to Olivia Palermo have been spotted wearing them. Kate Moss went so far as having them as her shoe of choice for her flower girls for her wedding to Jamie Hince. They are available at the Mascaro factory shop in Ferreries.



