



The Mediterranean at its bucolic best

ISLAND LIFE: Most of the coast of Menorca is unspoilt by unsightly developments and the beaches are pure and clean

MENORCA, SPAIN

Christopher Jackson

THE steps wind down the cliff face. The waves slap the rock below. A few feet to the right, over the rough wooden rail, is a long drop, a hundred feet or more, to a rocky and watery death. A few, although it's not yet dusk and they've yet to succumb to insobriety, edge along the inside, hugging the cliff face, just in case.

The Cova d'en Xoroi, with its great mustard-coloured cliff face, which swells out like a great chest, is a location that is impressive in itself. That someone had the idea to carve a bar and nightclub into its face, elevates it to the spectacular. That I or no one else in my party had heard of it before tells you how great a secret not only it is, but also the island that it's on. Menorca — the Mediterranean's best kept secret.

We were met earlier that day at Mahon airport by Anne-Marie, our very affable and articulate guide and one of about 5,000 Britons living in Menorca out of a population of less than 100,000, something which is not only reflective of the island's cosmopolitan present, but its past too.

In the 18th Century alone, Menorca changed hands between the French, British and Spanish, who finally repossessed it in 1802, although the British have had a lasting influence that can still be seen to this day. As for the 5,000 British living there — they're

more the Capri pants and Panama hat variety, less the tight denim shorts and luminous vests.

After lunch and some history lessons from Anne-Marie, we visited the Binifadet winery, one of only a few on the island, producing various fine red, whites and rose wines. The roses were very flavoursome and I liked them. But while wine making has decreased and increased over the past century, Menorcans have remained steadfast in their love for another drink — gin. First brought by British sailors, gin, particularly with lemon, is the island's drink of choice.

The next morning we returned to Mahon, the capital. A small city, full of pretty honey-coloured houses with red roofs and yellow shutters, its streets wind down to the harbour where large yachts line the quayside.

After a visit to the Xoriguer distillery, where we not only learned how gin was made but more importantly got to sample some, we boarded a boat to tour Mahon's harbour. At a length of five kilometres and a width of almost 900 metres, it's a natural haven for ships and sailors. It's what made the island so prized by the great naval fleets.

On its northern shore, large white and pink villas are perched among palm trees. Some remarked that it reminded them of Venice, others Miami. On its northern and southern shores are old walls, forts and Martello towers, remnants of the island's well-preserved imperial past, the best example of which is Fort Marlborough, which is just south of the harbour's mouth, replete with redcoats, cannons and all.

Mahon's harbour's waters are very clean

and clear, indeed so is the rest of the island (there are no heavy industries and thus little pollution). You would be hard pressed to find a sweet wrapper on the streets let alone a smudge on the walls — a reflection of the pride that Menorcans have for their island, one that is also reflected in their work, whether it be making gin, cheese (which Menorca is known for), or even just serving food and drinks, all of which is done with full measure, unlike much of the Mediterranean.

For the rest of the day and the one after we could see why they took so much pride in their island. It's idyllic. Like a snake, the rugged coast twists and turns in sharp S-shapes, making development difficult, if not impossible.

Most of the coast is untouched, unspoilt by big unsightly blocks — indeed there are no coast roads, only trails for the healthy and adventurous.

In the few spots that have been touched, like Binebica on the south of the island, the developments are small and for the most part quite quaint, pretty even.

The rugged coastline also means that Menorca's beaches, located in sheltered coves, tend to be small and isolated (and free of crowds). They are also perfectly white (like eggshells) and sandy (and free of rocks), and lapped by clean turquoise waters, the mildness of which not only further enhances the sense of bliss but the bucolic beauty of the surroundings.

As for the food, there wasn't one meal that wasn't excellent. As you would expect seafood is a staple of the island, and sea bream, squid and red mullet are among the most popular dishes, although Menorca's best known seafood dish is lobster stew, the best of which, I was reliably told, can be had in Fornells, a village on the north coast.

On our last day we visited Naveta d'Es Tudons, a carefully restored chamber tomb dating from 1000 BC — a must for anyone with even a passing interest in history.

We visited Ciutadella last. A grand city that swells with imperial buildings, it matches Mahon in size and grandeur. Its hot narrow streets were busy with people going to and from its markets.

The most famous, the fish market, is housed in a distinctive checker board building and is surrounded by butchers selling huge slabs of beef and cured sausages, and bars which spill out on to the street and were full of chatty locals drinking gin and beer and eating toast smeared with chorizo paste.

The beer we had there, just under the eave of the fish market, was the perfect respite from the hot midday sun and perfect end to our trip.

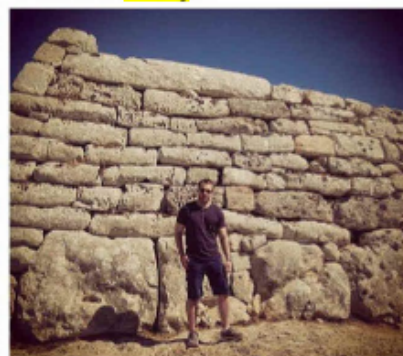
“ *Menorca's beaches, located in sheltered coves, are perfectly white and sandy and lapped by clean turquoise waters* ”

GETTING THERE



Chris travelled with **Sunway**. Prices start from €379pp and €1,359 for a family. September Departures. 2 Star: €379pp based on 7 nights departing the 12th Sept at the 2* Los Lenticos in Calan Forcat. Family (2+2) price from €1359. 3 Star: €589pp based on 7 nights departing the 5th Sept at the 3* Roc Lago Park in Calan Bosch. Family (2+2) price from €1779. 4 Star: €659pp based on 7 nights departing the 5th Sept at the 4* Los Delfines in Calan Forcat. Family (2+2) price from €1786.

*Prices are per person based on two sharing or family of 2 adults and 2 children and include flights, airport transfers, accommodation, all taxes & charges, 20kg checked-in bag per person and services of a **Sunway** Representative. Call **Sunway** on 01-2311800 or visit www.Sunway.ie.



HISTORY: Christopher Jackson at the Naveta d'Es Tudons burial chamber