

More of the Mediterranean: Menorca

by Laura Clarkson, PassPorter Guest Contributor

The beautiful island of Menorca is part of the Balearic Islands, located in the Mediterranean Sea, off the south east coast of Spain. It is known for its leather and gin industries, as well as many sites of historical significance, and, of course, it's reputation for excellent seafood.

We are lucky enough to have friends in Menorca, and visit every year. So far, we have managed to uncover more hidden gems every time we visit.

The capital of Mahon boasts the world's second largest natural harbor (after Pearl Harbor) and is a nice place to spend a few hours wandering and checking out the shops -- and taking in the pungent smell of its famous cheese! If you are in the Mahon area take a trip to La Mola, the fortress built in 1850 at the southernmost tip of Spain to prevent the islands from attack by the French and British. The most interesting features are a huge gun, which has never been fired in anger but is fired ceremonially every year, and the underground galleries, a very long corridor of tiny identical rooms featuring an embrasure (arrow slit) in each. They are a little scary as from the mid-point; you can't see where you've come from or where the corridor ends!

The old capital of Menorca is Cuitadella, a pretty town full of tiny confusing streets and beautiful architecture. Each year near the end of June the town celebrates its Festes de Sant Joan, where trained horsemen ride through the crowds demonstrating jousting and other riding feats. If you pat one of the horses it is thought to be good luck (as is one of the horses riding through your house!), so prepare for much jostling! The festival comes with a fun fair in the main square with fairground rides and stalls selling candy. A must if you are at the festival (or in Menorca at all!) is the drink pomada -- a potent but delicious mix of gin and lemon.

The number one "must visit" place for fans of history and spectacular views is Monte Toro. This is the highest point of the island and a convent sits on top. The church here is from the 17th century and a huge statue of Christ adorns the outside.

The island has many sites of archaeological interest, and these are often centered around the mysterious taulas. Taulas are unique to Menorca and are T-shaped stone pillars. Much like Stonehenge in England little is known about how these taulas were erected during the Talaiotic period (between 1000 BC and 300 BC). As they are so huge,

legend says they were tables made for giants. It is not known for a fact what these mystical monuments were used for but there are many theories on the subject. The two most popular being firstly that they were used as part of religion for ritual sacrifice, or secondly, that they were worshiped as stylistic images of bulls - the explanation for this being that many objects in the shape of bulls have been found at some of these historical sites. Regardless of the true purpose, it is interesting to stand beneath a taula and theorize for yourself.

Also of interest and again unique to the island are the navetas - burial chambers in the shape of upturned boats. Probably the best example on the island is the bronze age Naveta des Tudons which you can climb inside and appreciate the vastness within. A word of warning though, this is not for the claustrophobic or those with mobility problems, it can be quite tricky to get out again!

There are many caves on the island, some of which are still accessible, and signs of habitation can be observed. The most unusual as a tourist attraction, however, is Cova den Xoroi in Cala'n Porter. Legend has it that the pirate Xoroi kidnapped a local girl and kept her in his cave for ten years during which time she produced four children. They went undiscovered until Xoroi was tracked back to his cave by his footprints during a heavy snow storm. On realizing his hideout had been revealed, he is said to have thrown himself off the cliff. The tunneling caves have been turned into a nightclub which is open for tourists during the day and can be visited for a small fee, which includes a soda or small beer in the bar.

On our most recent trip, we discovered my favorite historical site so far - a 6th century basilica, Torello, which was only discovered in 1956 by a farmer plowing his field. Part of the altar and baptismal font remains, but the truly incredible part is the mosaic floor which has survived almost intact, and pictures of peacocks and lions can be clearly seen. Visiting Torello also has the advantage of being just next door to Mahon airport so you have the added thrill of watching airplanes taking off over your head!

Menorca really does have something for everyone. History aside, the island boasts magnificent beaches and it is worth taking the time to find one of the quieter coves frequented only by locals and therefore usually quiet. There are also two Aquarock water parks and water sports are offered at some of the beaches.

The tourist season runs from May-October, and the temperatures range from 70-80 degrees F throughout this time. The currency used is the Euro. English is widely spoken in Menorca, with most of the

inhabitants speaking English, Catalan and Spanish.

About The Author: Laura Clarkson is a keen visitor to Menorca with her husband, Andy, and considers it second only to Walt Disney World in places she most likes to be! She loves to spend her Menorcan days scrabbling up cliff sides and into tiny caves and her evenings relaxing with a well deserved pomada.

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