

Honeyguide

WILDLIFE HOLIDAYS

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Discovering Menorca History and language notes

A potted history of Menorca

All the Mediterranean pioneers, Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Arabs, Spanish, British and French have held sway here.

The countryside has many prehistoric remains with strange similarities to Sardinia, Sicily and Malta. Stone towers called talayot or talaiot; strange T-shaped monuments called taula; and buildings called naveta because they look like overturned boats. All date from the Bronze Age 2000-200BC. Archaeologists still argue about the original purposes of them. There are relics of Christian churches of the 5th century, but the islands came under Arab domination during the Moslem occupation of Spain.

In 1287, the King of Aragón retook the islands and brought the first Catalan speakers. For most of the 18th century, when sea power became important, Britain occupied Menorca. One British governor, the Ulsterman Richard Kane (1662-1736) was here for 24 years. He is remembered gratefully for improving the roads, developing agriculture and being kind to the natives. He moved the capital from Ciutadella to Maó, because of Maó's splendid harbour, whose attractive buildings owe much to the British period. The local aristocracy stayed in the old capital and when Menorca again got a bishop in 1795, the church in Ciutadella became the cathedral of the island.

There were tragic events during the Spanish civil war. Memories heal with time, and the last thirty years have brought renewed prosperity through tourism.

Language on Menorca

Menorca has two languages, Spanish (Castilian) and Menorquin. The latter is dialect of Catalan, the language of north-eastern Spain. Sixty years ago it was the language of the Republicans, forbidden by Franco, but today Europe encourages minority languages. Road signs use both Menorquin and Spanish; church services may be in either; maps and advertisements mix them, using Menorquin Maó and Ciutadella together with Spanish Mahón and Ciudadela.

Menorquin differs from the Catalan spoken in the other Balearic islands only in some vowel sounds and minor points of grammar. Despite the resemblance of some written words to French, the grammar and pronunciation are closer to Spanish and Italian. Catalan has few guttural sounds; many Spaniards find it soft.

Some Arabic words survive. Around Matchani Gran are several place-names beginning with Bini, 'belonging to the sons of...' from Ben, Arabic for son. In San Climent there are places called Muspta, an Arabic word for farm; while Mount Toro was originally simply Al-Tor, 'the mountain' rather than from the Spanish *toro*, a bull.

Monte Toro from Matchani Gran

Our Discovering Menorca holiday may include visits to the following places:

Mahón

Dominated by its magnificent natural harbour, you can see why it was prized by the military of Spain, France and England. Harbour-side restaurants, warships, the Xoriguer gin distillery (free samples and a shop!) and probably the best place in the Mediterranean to see Audouin's gull provide four varying reasons to visit the harbour.

The town itself slopes from a market square with underground car park down through a network of sometimes narrow streets to the harbour below. Highlights include the large church of Santa María (with luck the massive organ, brought from Austria by Admiral Collingwood during the Napoleonic wars, will be being played); the nearby stately town hall (*ayuntamiento*) with a clock presented by the first British Governor, Richard Kane; and fresh fish and vegetable markets.

The town is also the birth place of mayonnaise.

Es Castell

Close to Mahón, we usually visit Es Castell for a meal one evening. It also goes by the name of Villacarlos and once was Georgetown, the last name from its time as a British army garrison. The former barracks are now a museum and can be seen from the town square – in which there are many Indian bead trees.

Ciudadella

Lying on the far west coast of the island, Ciudadella was the capital of Menorca until the British switched it to Mahón with its better harbour in the 18th century. It's a quieter, more gentle place than Mahón. The main sites are together: the cathedral and various baroque-style buildings in the main square by the small harbour. It's easy to spend an hour or two in the network of streets opposite the cathedral.

Fornells

This is both resort and fishing village on a gentle part of the north coast, the pretty village looking out on the Bay of Fornells.

Torre d'en Gaumés

Just off the Son Bou road is the largest and most varied prehistorical site on Menorca. Drystone structures include a hypostyle court (roof supported by columns); the central supports and roof are intact. So what's it all for? Though you can see the sea, it's too far from shore to be a defensive structure. Probably, like *taulas* and *talayots*, it had religious meaning. Look out for the nettle-tree bushes.

Naveta d'es Tudons

Sited just west of Ciudadella, this naveta – like an upturned boat – is believed to be a prehistoric burial chamber dating from 1000BC. Many bronze ornaments and bones were found during restoration in the 1950s and 1970s. Like most partly restored sites, historians argue about the restoration, but the perhaps surprising end result is the only two-storey prehistoric site on the island and the oldest roofed building in Europe.

Monte Toro

The highest point on the island (357 metres) but an easy climb as the road goes all the way to the top. There are fine views all over the island on a clear day and often birds of prey float past at eye level. Through a courtyard there are a terrace café, gift shop, loos and a compact, neo-classical church. A tablet explains how an Augustine monastery was established here in the 17th Century.

The castle of Santa Agueda

One of the nicest walks on the island takes you up to the top of Santa Agueda, the second highest point on Menorca after Monte Toro, but it's just 274 metres above sea level. The track, past *Cistus* and tree heather, is sometimes beautifully laid, the remains of a Roman road. It leads to what is now just the shell of a castle on the summit, within which there are also the remains of a farmhouse.

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