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Reigning Men

Menorca, the forgotten jewel of the Balearics, attracts its share of summer romantics. **IAIN MAYHEW** is happy to be one of them...

THERE are hayricks stacked behind drystone walls and cows grazing in meadows.

Down at the local pub there's cricket on the telly and if you're rude enough to peer through the bay windows of smart Georgian townhouses you'll probably see someone pouring their first gin and tonic of the day. This could be a bucolic scene from the shires. And, in a way, it is.

Britain ruled the tiny island of Menorca for 71 years back in the 18th century and left behind all sorts of useful things. Friesian cows, for a start, and clover to feed them on. Apple and plum trees were shipped in from Kent orchards and labourers set to work building fine colonial houses, an aqueduct and a good road linking the island's two main towns.

A lot of this was self-interest, of course. Menorca was an important Mediterranean naval base for Britain's burgeoning fleet (Admiral Nelson spent much of his time here) and the garrison had to be fed, housed and watered.

Well, not watered exactly. At one stage the island's Governor outlawed prostitution, which meant he had a lot of grumpy sailors wandering the streets of Mahon, the capital and main port. To stop any mutinous rumblings (and protect the honour of the island's sheep) he imported shiploads of

juniper berries and set up a gin factory. Soon the jolly tars were staggering around the streets of Mahon and harmlessly fighting among themselves. They make the same gin to this day - you should bring some home.

Today, Menorca quietly goes about its business as the unsung heroine of Spain's Balearic Islands. Smaller than its brasher neighbours Ibiza and Majorca, it has avoided much of their excessive development and remains an island of rolling hills, lush fields, pretty villages and spotless sandy beaches.

Some 60% of foreign holiday-makers to the island are Brits. Many of these are families who enjoy the safe, shallow waters of the Med, the island's reasonable prices and a flight time of under two hours from the UK.

Here's a guide...

WHERE TO STAY:

The horseshoe bay of Cala Galdana on the south coast is one of the most photographed on the island. Steep pine-clad cliffs tumble down to a white-sand beach, backed by a small marina and a few shops, apartments, bars and restaurants.

The only fly in this otherwise balmy ointment is a monstrous, 60s-style hotel sitting on the beach. The one good reason for staying here, it seems to me, is you can't see it from the outside.

I stayed at the Hotel Audax (www.rtmhotels.com), a much

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OLD WORLD CHARM: A Mahon street

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PICTURE
PERFECT:
The bay
of Cala
Galdana





The isle of love

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 45

more attractive proposition, tucked into a corner of the bay. There's a spa, two pools, two excellent restaurants serving different menus every night and a cafe-bar with live music. You can reach the beach (with sunbeds for about £4.30 a day) via a bridge over a small river outside the hotel.

The other main resorts on this side of the island include Son Bou - with a huge beach backed by sand dunes - Cala en Porter, Sant Tomas, S'Algar and Binibeca. All are family-friendly, with gently shelving beaches, fairly-priced hotels and self-catering apart-

ments. And you are only a short trek from some spooky prehistoric sites.

The north of the island is more rugged, with a constant wind. However, the little fishing town of Fornells is a delightful place with a lagoon, marina and a safe beach.

WHAT TO SEE:

The island's capital, Mahon - or Mao, as it is known, is home to some dazzling Georgian architecture, museums, leafy squares and old churches. The Golden Farm, a manor house at the northern end of the town, overlooks the harbour and was the home of Nelson in 1799. Legend has it that it was also a love nest for

his mistress, Emma Hamilton.

The port itself is one of the deepest

natural harbours in the world, which is why it was so important to the British. You can take a boat trip out to some of the old fortifications.

Don't miss the central Plaza Espana, which offers splendid views of the both the bay and harbour. It is reached via a winding flight of steps from the pier. The plaza itself features a general market as well as a fresh fish market on most mornings.

The Iglesia de Santa Maria la Major was founded in 1287 by King Alfonso III and was restored in 1772.

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It houses a unique organ with more than 3,000 pipes, which Admiral Collingwood brought to Mahon during the Napoleonic wars. The instrument is put through its paces at an annual show each summer.

If you're not driving, pop into the original Xoriguer Gin Distillery near the harbour. You get an interesting tour and you can sample some of the stuff at the end. The distillery is open Monday to Friday from 8am to 7pm, and on Saturdays from 9am to 1pm.

On the far west of the island, Menorca's other main town - and its former capital - is Ciutadella. It is a bustling place with old palaces built of pink sandstone, markets and narrow cobbled streets. Settle down with a beer in the Placa des Pins, a shady square filled with pine trees, and simply watch the world go by.

● ● ● GETTING THERE

The Co-operative Travel has now launched its own tour operation with its very first Summer Holidays brochure. The new brochure offers seasonal getaways to all the most popular destinations, including the Balearics, Canaries, mainland Portugal, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Florida and Mexico.

Highlights of the programme include free child places, family-friendly daytime flights for the majority of departures, 20kg luggage allowance as standard on all flights and a choice of regional airport departures with low-flight supplements.

The 4* Hotel Audax Spa in Cala Galdana is one of the hotels featured in the brochure. Seven nights on half-board is priced from £479 per person including transfers and flights with Monarch Airlines from Gatwick, Manchester or Birmingham.

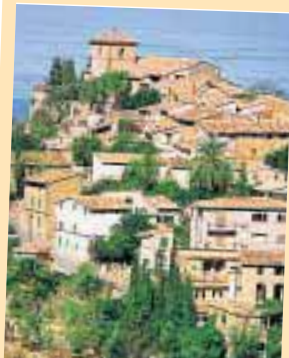
For a copy of the Summer Holidays brochure or for further information, visit any Co-operative Travel branch, visit on at www.co-operativetravel.co.uk or call 0844 335 6439.



GOLDEN SANDS: A busy beach in Ibiza



WATCHING THE WORLD: Majorca cafe



ON THE ROOF: A view over Majorca

Neighbourhood watch

HOW does Menorca compare to her noisier neighbours? Well, they're all pretty nice. For more details on the Balearic Islands, contact the Spanish Tourist Office in the UK on 020 7486 8077 or visit www.spain.info/uk.

MAJORCA

The Mediterranean's most popular island, Majorca, is also one of the most beautiful. Away from the bucket-and-spade resorts of Magaluf and Palma Nova, you'll find imposing mountain ranges, sleepy Spanish villages and secluded coves.

Set in the Tramuntana Mountains is the ancient monastery at Lluc. It was founded when a shepherd boy named Lluc (Luke) stumbled across a painted statuette of the Virgin Mary. He took it home and eventually threw it away, but it was later rediscovered by a monk who heard celestial voices.

The monastery was established as a result and the place today has a charm and grace in its magnificent setting, despite the coach parties, that makes it well worth a visit. Admission is also free, which probably makes it one of the island's bargains.

From Lluc it's a 30-minute drive to the town of Soller, a laid-back place that is an ideal base for exploring the mountains. It's a town of sandstone mansions, with narrow alleyways and a main square, the Placa Constitucio, which is ringed by bars and restaurants.

From here catch an old tram to Puerto Soller, a beautiful horseshoe-shaped bay with a pleasant beach. You can take boat trips around Majorca's western coast or enjoy a scenic walk west to the lighthouse which guards the rugged cliffs of Cap Gros. Be here at sunset to capture some of the most spectacular views on the island.

Once you've hiked, biked, or driven your way through all this spectacular

scenery, the capital, Palma, is worth a stay. It's one of the most underrated cities in the Med, full of character, chic boutique hotels and sandy beaches barely a 10-minute drive away.

The city's magnificent cathedral, which dates from the 13th Century and overlooks the harbour, is what most people come here to see. But the rest of the city, with its broad tree-lined boulevards, old mansions, narrow streets, fine restaurants and lively tapas bars is worth exploring.

If you are eating out try Forn De St Joan, a truly superb tapas bar and



CRAZY NIGHTS: Ibiza

restaurant found near the Placa de la Reina in the centre of town.

There are loads of restaurants around the Placa Llotja – in the shadow of the old corn exchange – as well as at least three Irish bars nearby if you get a little homesick.

GETTING THERE: Thomson offers seven nights at the Santa Lucia in Palma Nova, Majorca, on a half-board basis from £444 per person based on two sharing. Departing on July 27 from Gatwick, the price includes return flights, accommodation, transfers and all taxes and charges. For more details and or to book visit www.thomson.co.uk or call 0871 231 5595.

IBIZA

Stand at the top of Ibiza Town – the Dalt Vila – on a balmy summer's evening and you'll get a whiff of what this charming island is all about. And it's not just the expensive perfumes and after-shaves and the aroma of cooking from the restaurants below.

Built in the 16th Century to protect the island from pirates, the town's ramparts lead to a maze of narrow cobbled alleyways and squares lined with Renaissance mansions which still bear the original coats of arms above their doorways. There's a Carthaginian temple, a Moorish mosque, a Dominican convent and, at the back of town, a Necropolis founded by the Phoenicians in the 7th Century BC.

In the 1970s the Hippies turned up on a cloud of exotic smoking materials and turned the place into a Mecca for the study of, well, their own navels really. Then the music scene arrived and clubbers from all over the world were lured to the island by strobe lighting, foam parties, big-name DJs and small-time b&b's where they never actually slept.

But that's really only half the story. Today, families holiday on the island's 80-odd beaches, staying at good-value hotels or apartments which have loads of activities for kids.

Resorts such as Portinatx, San Miguel and Santa Eulalia are high on the list for families. Meanwhile, couples find boutique hotels where they can relax in the sunshine or walks through pine forests. And as for the clubbers? Well, they'll be there until the fat lady gets up on stage with the mike. But you don't have to join in.

GETTING THERE: First Choice offers seven nights all-inclusive at the Club Galeon Hotel in Puerto San Miguel from £499 per person based on two adults sharing and departing from Gatwick on July 22. For further details, visit www.firstchoice.co.uk or call 0871 664 9020.

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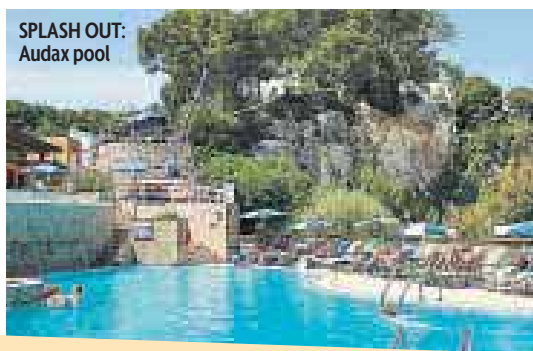


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**SHORE
THING:**
Galdana
Beach



SPLASH OUT:
Audax pool



HOT SPOT:
Hotel Audax