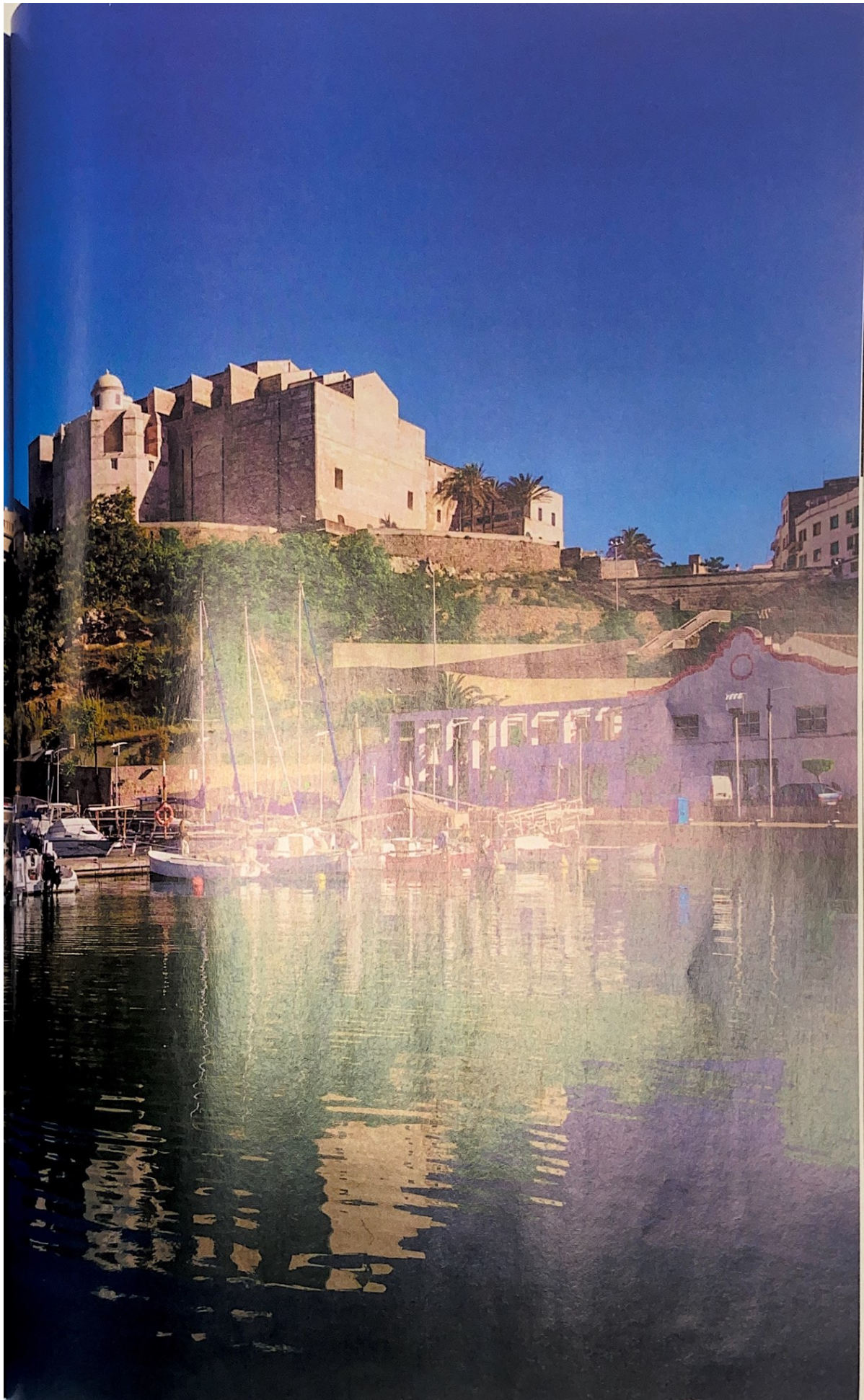


Written in stone

Menorca's archaeological sites, ancient crafts and historic coastal trail offer a little-seen glimpse of early life on an island that has horizons far beyond its beautiful sea views

Words **Eddi Fiegel**



// T he goddess is approaching,” my unofficial guide, Gonzalo, told me as an ogre-like thunderclap broke the silence in what had once been a stone circle. In the centre, two giant limestone slabs, hauled together to form a T-shape, towered over us. A few yards away, amid parched-looking scrubland dotted with wiry juniper trees, stood the base of an ancient watchtower, or *talayot*. As I looked across to the low-slung walls marking a series of dwellings arranged around a central courtyard, the stillness seemed almost haunted by the former inhabitants.

The Talayotic Village of Trepucó has often been described as ‘the Stonehenge of the Balearics’. It’s not hard to see why. Built sometime between 1000 and 700 BC, it sits barely a kilometre south of Mahón, the capital of Menorca, but it’s a far cry from the unspoiled beaches and sandy coves for which the easternmost of Spain’s Balearic Islands is better known.

On this warm, if thundery, early-June afternoon, any sun-seeking tourists were clearly elsewhere, no doubt enjoying the natural beauty of an island designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1993. I was glad to have the site more or less to myself. The exception was Gonzalo, a stocky, youngish chap in a baggy T-shirt and shorts, who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere in

Toulon on the French coast. Here they formed farming communities. Statuettes and vessels found at Menorca’s various sites suggest that they worshipped a bull deity and female fertility gods. It also seems that, like their prehistoric peers at Stonehenge, they were acquainted with the principles of astronomy: many of the island’s early temples were clearly designed around the position of the sun setting in the west.

The museum’s excellent displays detailed the island’s early culture in depth; they also explored Menorca’s subsequent history, explaining how its position in the middle of the Mediterranean made it highly sought after by a string of invaders: Romans, Greeks, French, Spanish and, of course, the British.

Spain may have regained control of the island from the Brits in 1802, but there are still signs of their former occupier’s legacy everywhere, from Martello defence towers and hotels with ‘Nelson’ in their name to Menorca’s locally distilled Xoriguer gin.

That British heritage is particularly evident in Mahón, which rests on a plateau above the largest natural harbour in the Mediterranean (and second deepest in the world). The city is filled with lofty palm trees, British-built 18th-century mansions and 19th-century Art Nouveau townhouses, many with *boinders* (a local take on the British-style bow window). Elsewhere, its cobbled plazas and winding streets are scattered with independ-

“It’s the sheer density and breadth of archaeological sites that makes the island so fascinating”

the site’s small car park and was armed with fascinating but difficult-to-prove tales of the ancient villagers’ rituals. (Pythagoras, the waxing and waning of the moon and the female menstrual cycle all loomed large in his theories.)

Trepucó is just one of over 1,500 archaeological sites liberally dotted across Menorca. At the time of writing, 25 of the Talayotic settlements were being considered for UNESCO World Heritage listing, but Menorca’s extraordinary array of historical sites explore more than prehistory. Some date back to the Roman and early Christian eras, and for a small island, it’s no surprise that Menorca has one of the world’s highest concentrations of archaeological sites.

While standing stones and prehistoric ruins exist in a number of other countries, the island’s early cultures – and the structures they created – have a distinct character. They range from settlements (*poblats*) such as Trepucó to funerary mounds (*navetas*), to the rugged towers, or *talayots* (from the Arabic word *atalaya*, meaning watchtower), that lent their name to the island’s early settlers.

I had come to Menorca to find out more about these early inhabitants, and indeed the island itself. Thankfully, the excellent Museum of Menorca, housed in a cloistered former convent in the heart of Mahón, proved the perfect place to start.

Archaeologists believe that the island’s original inhabitants came from the Gulf of Lion, the coastal region stretching from Catalonia in Spain’s north-east to the cities of Marseille and

ent boutiques selling the kind of Ibiza-chic clothes and jewellery that have become *de rigueur* in many of Spain’s classier coastal towns.

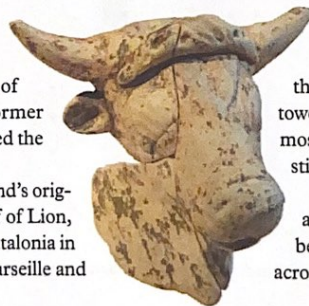
I could easily have whiled away hours at one of Mahón’s quayside pavement cafés, but I was on a quest to go back in time and learn more about the island’s early life.

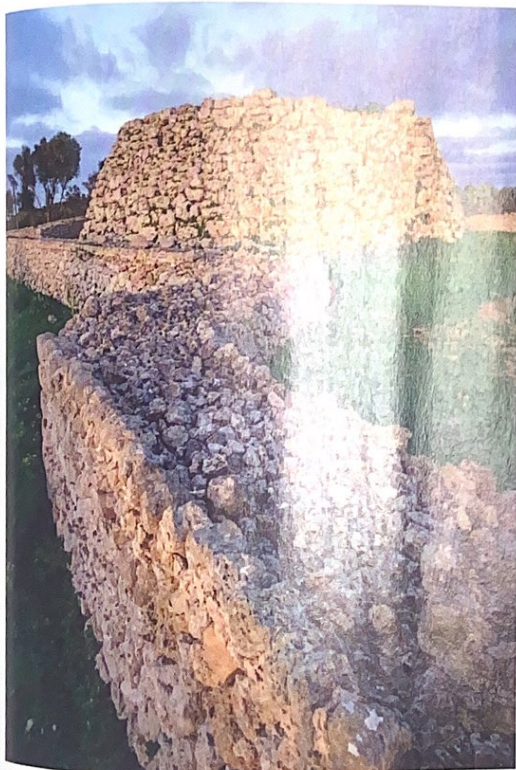
A CURIOUS FIND

The following day, the dark clouds had been replaced by a clear, cornflower-blue sky and I had a new guide to navigate the island’s ancient world – this time prearranged.

Pere, who arrived looking like a Mediterranean-style Indiana Jones, complete with fedora hat and backpack, was to take me on a Jeep tour of some of the island’s lesser-known sites – prehistoric and otherwise. As we approached a small, slightly unprepossessing stretch of privately owned farmland, seemingly just below the flight path of Mahón airport, I couldn’t help feeling that this seemed like an unlikely location for an architectural wonder. However, just a few yards away, not far from a herd of freshly shorn sheep munching on long, dry grass, stood the *Talayot* of Torelló, one of the tallest towers on the island. At its peak, in among the moss peeping out through the stones, I could still see the original doorway and lintel.

“The early peoples would have lit a flame at the top,” Pere explained, “as a warning beacon to communicate with other towers across the island.” ▶





Ancient finds (clockwise from top) The Talayotic settlement of Trepucó is one of the largest on Menorca, spanning an area of nearly 50,000 sqm, and has a great example of a *taula* – a T-shaped megalithic structure similar to those found at the UK's Stonehenge – which are common on the island; the Museum of Menorca lies inside a former convent that was rebuilt during the 17th and 18th centuries; traces of walls, dwellings and *talayots* (towers) can still be seen in Trepucó; an ox head sculpture found on the island; (previous spread) the harbour of island capital Mahón stretches for 5km and is nearly a kilometre wide



A few minutes later, after rummaging amid the cat's cradle of dry grass and purple thistles that carpeted the parched ground, he picked up a small, oval-shaped, terracotta-coloured stone, holding it in the air like a prize. "This is Roman," he declared, "probably from Pompeii."

"How can you be sure?" the sceptic in me wondered aloud. "The black speckles," he replied confidently. "That's unusual, so it's almost certainly from lava."

The idea of such ancient pieces of pottery still lying around centuries after the event seemed extraordinary. But until relatively recently, Menorca's Talayotic sites were not considered to be of that much interest, and their scale and number has meant that the resources to fully excavate them had not been readily available.

It was a different story, however, just a short way down the road at Es Fornàs de Torrelló, an amazingly intact mosaic dating from between the 5th and 7th centuries BC. The mosaic, which features intricate patterns depicting flora, fauna and a large vase, now sits fully protected beneath a large roof and fencing. It would once have covered the entire floor area of a church – or Paleochristian basilica, as the Christian temples of the time are known.

Over the next few hours, we visited several other Talayotic sites, driving through the dramatic valleys of the island's interior. Along the way, we stopped to admire the staggering sea views from Cap de Cavalleria, a remote headland on the northerly tip of Menorca's most rugged stretch of coast. Looking out amid this wonderfully wild landscape, it wasn't hard to imagine what the early islanders themselves would have seen.

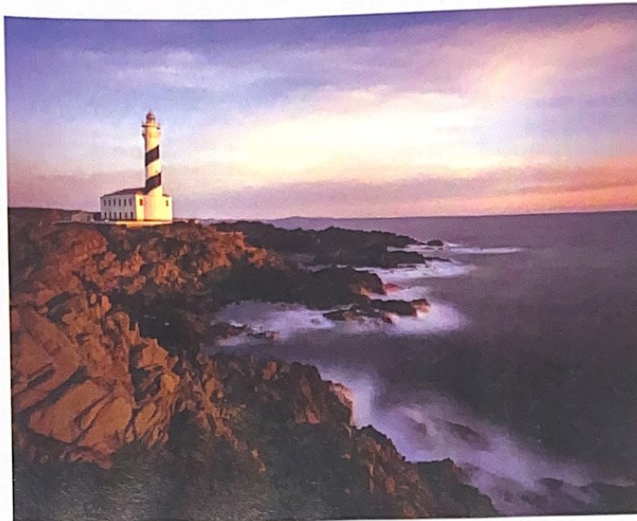
A TASTE OF THE PAST

Having spent my time mainly exploring the east of the island, the next day I headed west, following the central Me-1 road that cuts horizontally across Menorca, linking Mahón in the west to Ciutadella in the east.

If things had felt a little sleepy in Mahón, my drive was no more chaotic. I passed few other cars, and only the occasional posse of hardcore, Lycra-clad cyclists, drawn to the island for its gently undulating terrain, crossed my path. Every kilometre or so, I spied the distinctive purple signposts indicating prehistoric sites with a T-shaped stone. Almost as ubiquitous were signs detouring drivers to the cheese farms for which the island has become famous.

Although Menorca's primary industry is now tourism, this is still a predominantly agricultural country, and at Qesos Binillubet, a small farm in the countryside outside Alaior, I had arranged to meet with Lucia, who represented a cooperative of some 600 of the island's food producers.

Just beyond the large, criss-cross entrance gate made from wild olive wood – a typical feature of the island – were several rather lovely, chocolate-brown horses and foals grazing in a paddock, each of whom the gregarious and charming Lucia knew by name. After introducing me to both the horses and the cows, as well as the production



areas, she explained how cheesemaking has been a feature of the island since the 5th century.

Together, we tasted different types of cheese, each with varying levels of saltiness, tang and bite; she also talked about the number of family businesses (cheese, honey, wine producers) that are now being continued by the younger generations, who are equally committed to both preserving and evolving the island's culinary traditions.

Leaving the farm behind, I briefly detoured south, making my way towards the coast to Torre d'en Galmés, deemed by some to be the island's Talayotic showpiece. Although I had already seen several sites, I was loath to miss this one.

Lying just south of the small town of Alaior, Torre d'en Galmés dates back to 2000 BC and is considered the largest and best-conserved Talayotic site on the island. I stepped into a bucolic landscape of wild olive trees and thistles, and wandered through

a sprawling complex of houses, caves, water tanks and towers. I could almost sense the presence of the village's early dwellers, and the views of the island's southern fringes, which stretched out below me and trickled to the horizon, were almost worth the journey alone.

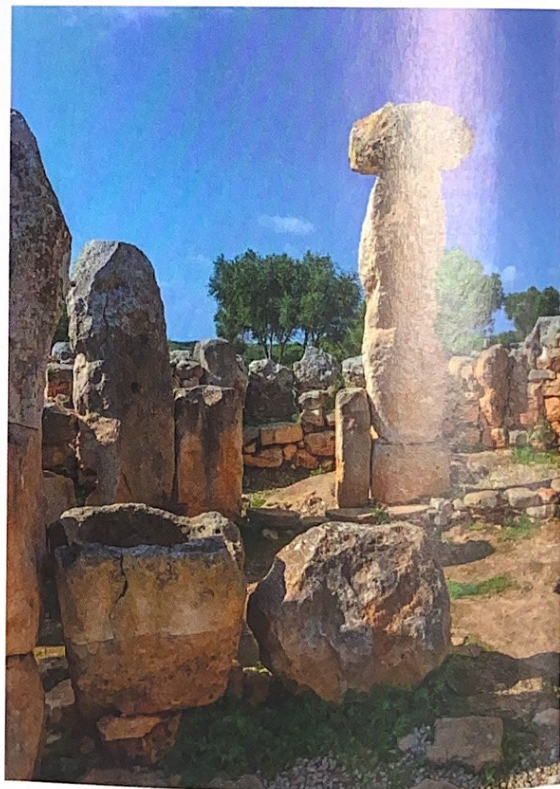
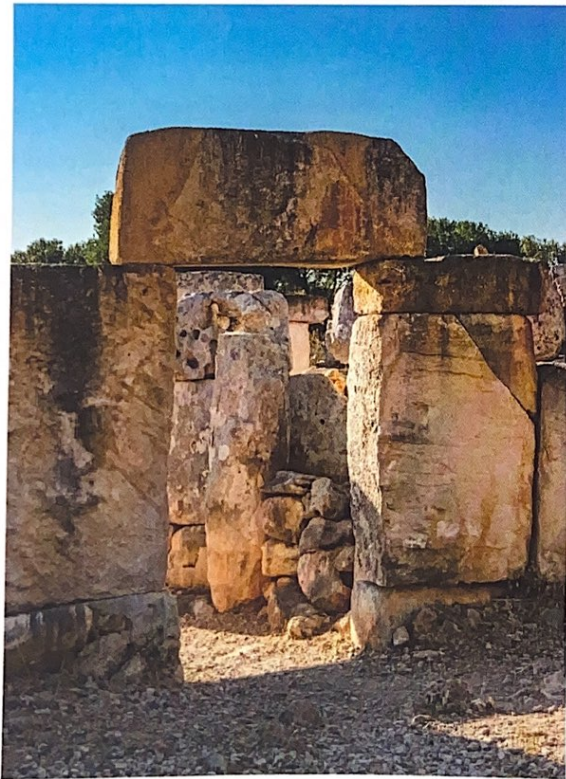
Exploring Menorca's hinterland, you could almost forget that this is an island famous not only for its beaches but also the furtive coves that lie hidden beyond. So, before heading back out on the road, I decided to take a brief detour south to walk a section of the famous Camí de Cavalls coastal path. Spanning some 185km around the island, this historic footpath dates back to the 14th century, when knights on horseback used it to patrol the coast for invaders. Several hundred years on, it is still one of the best ways to see Menorca's coastline.

Starting from the sea-view promenade at Sant Tomàs, I walked west on the path towards the beach at Cala Galdana. Within minutes, the neatly paved trail had ►

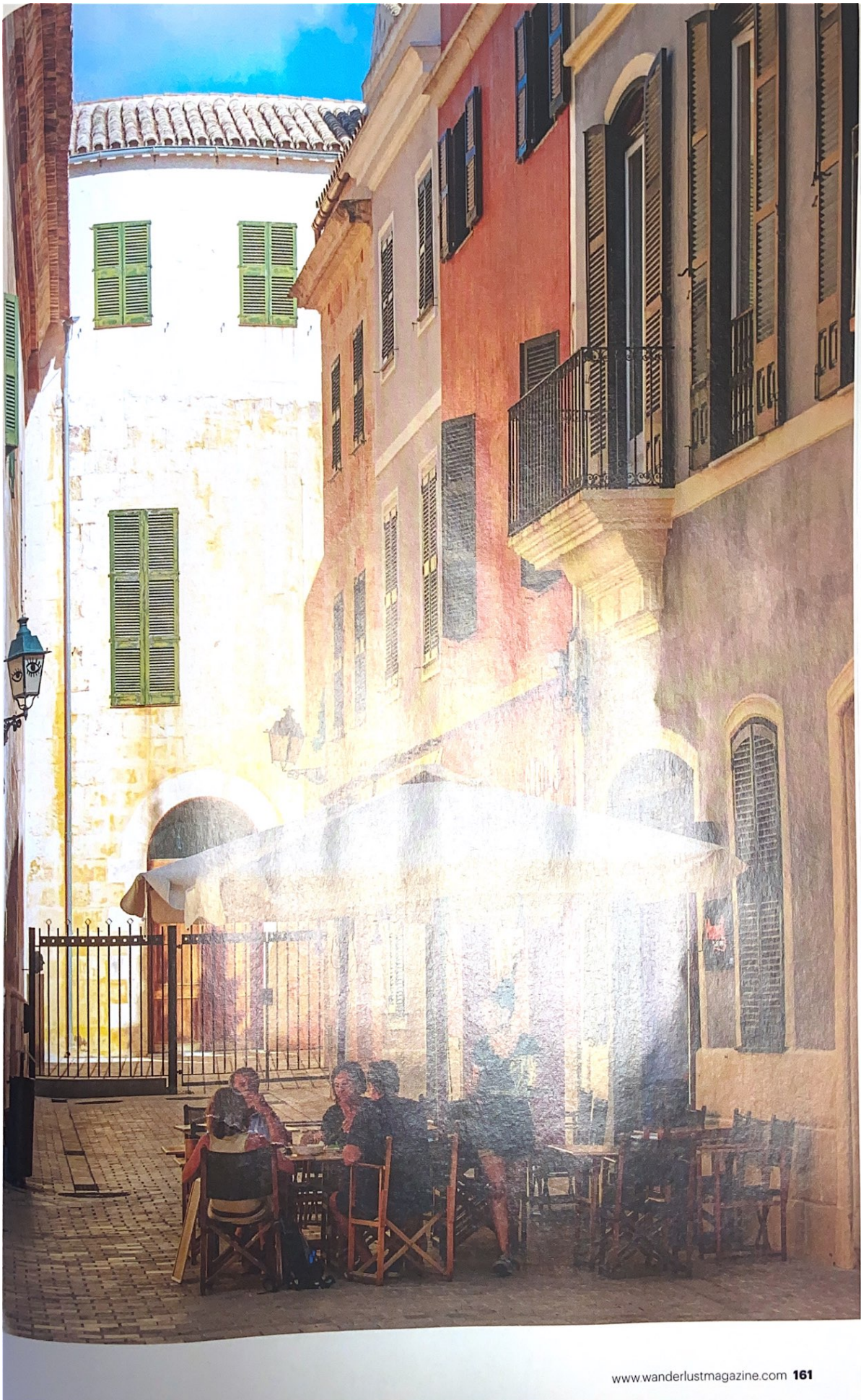
"The Camí de Cavalls footpath dates back to the 14th century, when knights used it to patrol the coast for invaders"

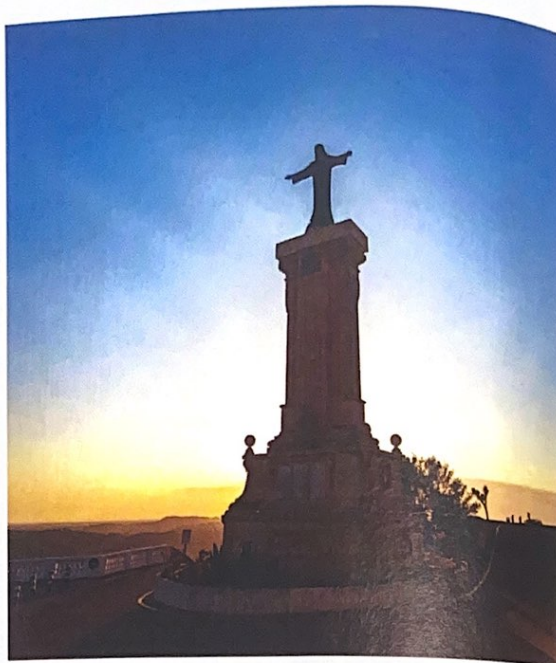
Shining a light on the coast (left page) The cave at Cap de Cavalleria, the most northerly point on Menorca, has spectacular views; (top right) it's worth sticking around on the cape to visit its lighthouse, Faro de Cavalleria, which looms over the cliff edge around 100m above the treacherous waters of the Balearic Sea – some 700 shipwrecks have been documented in this area, giving an inkling as to just how necessary its creation was. The 15m-high building was inaugurated in 1857, making it the oldest lighthouse on the island

SPAIN



Coastal pursuits (clockwise from top left) The Camí de Cavalls trail, which wraps the entire coast of the island for 185km, translates as 'Horse Path' because this modern-day trail actually dates back to the 14th century, when a royal order required the knights of Menorca to patrol the coast on horseback; Ciutadella is riddled with quiet side streets where you can slip into a café and while away a couple of hours; the Talayotic settlement of Torre d'en Galmés is the largest found on the island and is thought to have been occupied until the late Roman era; wandering the site's megalithic buildings thrusts you back in time





given way to a rugged track of sandy, reddish earth that became peppered with wildflowers of whites, yellows and purples, and was lined on one side with juniper trees.

Occasionally, gnarled, white rock formations jutted out from the pathway like animal skulls, and with nobody around but a lone bather out at sea, I couldn't resist wandering down to the shore and sinking my toes into the soft, deep sand.

STANDING ON THE EDGE OF HISTORY

I headed back out on the road the following day and made my way towards the island's centre. The previously flat tarmac had begun to rise, twist and turn. Soon enough, Monte Toro (358m) – Menorca's highest, and only, peak – crept into view, soaring overhead like a deity. At its summit stood a Rio de Janeiro-style statue of Christ, his arms outstretched, seemingly surveying his dominions below. I did the same, admiring the panoramic views of the island and feeling glad that I had made the journey to get here.

Next, I took the opportunity to make a brief stop nearby to visit the sleepy, whitewashed village of Ferreries, where the dark-green shutters of its 19th-century houses were permanently closed – to keep out the heat – and elderly locals chatted over coffee at pavement cafés.

Known mainly as the centre of the island's thriving shoemaking industry – and in particular, the Albarca sandals for which Menorca is known – Ferreries is also home to a small but excellent geology museum. I paid it a short visit before heading back out on the highway, this time to the island's second major city.

Built on the edge of a port, Ciutadella still maintains a sense of grandeur from the days when it was Menorca's capital (until 1722, when the British moved their base of power to Mahón). Winding my way through the narrow, pedestrianised Old Town, I ambled past the impressive Gothic cathedral and grand, 19th-century facades of its plazas, fashioned from the rose-toned sandstone that is such a feature of this part of the island. It was tempting to

stay longer, but history once more beckoned me onwards. For all the modern appeal of Menorca's towns, I had come to explore the island's roots.

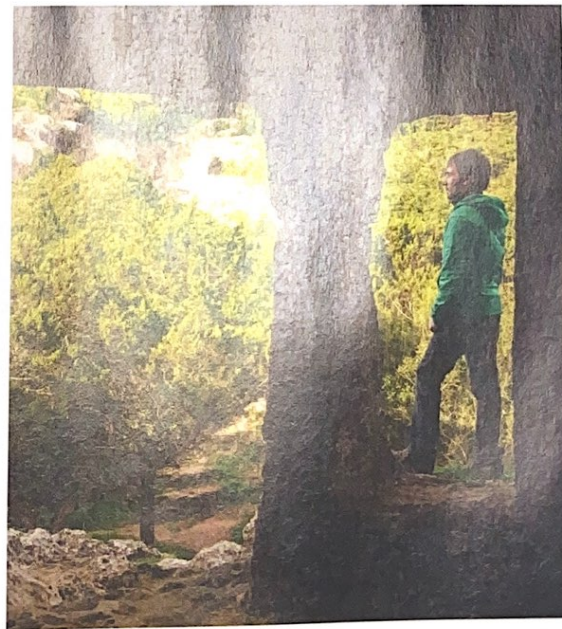
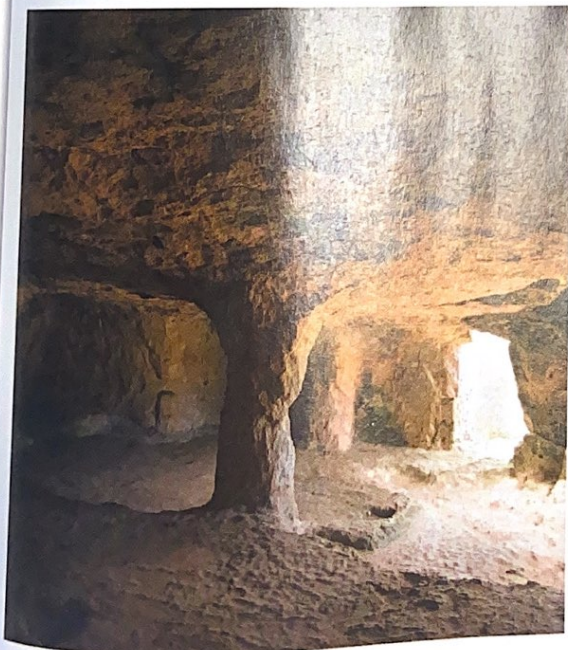
My final destination lay just outside Ciutadella, on the island's rugged north-west coast. It was fitting that it was also somewhere which had been the final resting place for many of the island's original inhabitants.

Arriving at the Necropolis of Cala Morell, as with so many other sites, there was no obvious entrance. Below the road to my right lay the extraordinarily beautiful Cala Morell cove, overhung by reddish-toned cliffs, while high above me, to my left, I could make out large cave openings carved into the rock face.

Menorca's Bronze Age inhabitants had created an extraordinary network of caves that had been used first as homes, complete with windows, doors and deep gutters hewn from the rock, and then later as burial chambers. And so, with nothing but birdsong and the gentle buzz of the odd fly to break the silence, I began clambering my way across dusty, often hefty, boulders, making my way up to the nearest entrance.

Inside, huge and wonderfully cool rooms were supported by pillars hewn from the rock. It was easy to imagine how these spaces would have provided a welcome refuge from the Mediterranean heat. I also felt a sense of respect for the dead, knowing that these caves had later housed burial chambers for entire communities, with everyone receiving the same rites regardless of social standing, age or gender.

Some 3,500 years on, children in Menorca learn about Talayotic culture and the island's long history at school, and now visitors are beginning to discover these sites in increasing numbers. As the sun set slowly over the bay, turning the rugged, coral-toned rocks a glorious golden red, I couldn't help but feel that despite the waves of different invaders over the centuries, it is arguably still the island's earliest inhabitants who have perhaps left the greatest legacy. ▶



The old world (clockwise from far left) Strolling the historic centre (known as Es Born) of Ciutadella reveals medieval streets scattered with palaces, fortresses and churches; a statue of Christ crowns the top of Monte Torro, where you can save your legs by driving to the summit; the Necropolis of Cala Morell has 14 artificial caves that were excavated from the rocky walls of a small ravine to create chambers that were originally used as dwellings by the early peoples of the island before becoming a burial site; carved pillars support the internal chambers; the oldest caves of Cala Morell are small, circular spaces with semi-spherical ceilings



Vital statistics

Capital: Mahón (Maó)

Population: 94,300

Languages: Catalan; Spanish

Time: GMT+2 (GMT+1 Nov–Mar)

International dialling code: +34

Visas: Not required by UK nationals for stays of up to 90 days within a 180-day period; however, Spain has recently changed some of its rules, and all visitors must now hold a UK passport that is valid for a minimum of 3 months to enter.

Money: Euro (€), currently €1.16 to the UK£.



When to go

April–June: Expect warm temperatures (20°C–26°C), plus lower air fares outside of Easter week.

July–August: Temperatures can top 28°C during busy peak season. Avoid if possible.

September: It's still in the upper 20s (°C) but the summer crowds have gone, meaning lower hotel prices and air fares.

October–March: Out of season, the island takes on a different, no less charming character. Even in late December, you'll still feel the warm Mediterranean sun.



Health & safety

There are no health or safety worries, but it is always worth having a free UK Global Health/European Health Insurance Card (GHIC/EHIC).



Getting there & around

The author flew with **Vueling** (vueling.com), which has direct flights to Mahón from London Gatwick from £78 return; these take around 2 hours and 20 minutes. The best way to explore the island is by car. **Avis** (avis.co.uk) has

MENORCA HIGHLIGHTS

1 Museum of Menorca, Mahón

Discover more about the island's prehistoric history, as well as its Roman, Byzantine, Islamic and British eras. There's also portraiture and abstract art up to the mid-20th century. museudemenorca.com

2 Camí de Cavalls

Originally dating back to 1330, the Camí de Cavalls is an ancient bridle path which now forms a superb walking trail (185km) that encircles the island and also veers inland. Parts of the trail are currently being repaved and renovated with funds from the island's Sustainable Tourism Tax. spain.info/en/hiking-trails/cami-de-cavalls-hiking-spain

3 Cala Morell Necropolis

Located just outside Ciutadella, these exceptional caves are one of the must-see sites on the island. Bring sensible walking shoes, plenty of water, and also allow some time to walk down to the cove below.

4 Geology Museum, Ferreries

This small museum offers a fascinating exploration of the island's geology, affording insights into the distinctive colours of the landscape. geologiamentorca.org

5 Jeep safari

If you don't fancy driving the island's more rugged off-piste tracks but still want to see its lesser-known nooks, a Jeep tour with an expert guide is the perfect solution. jeepsafarimenorca.es

6 Cheese farm Binillubet

Menorca is home to award-winning cheese and honey makers, and this co-operative of artisan producers can arrange guided visits to both. sacooperativadelcamp.com/es/67-visitas-guiadas

7 Monte Toro

Menorca's highest peak (365m) offers the best bird's-eye view of the island; plus there is also a 17th-century whitewashed convent and a good restaurant at the top.

8 Torre d'en Galmés

Menorca's largest prehistoric settlement is also one of its most impressive. Don't miss the information centre on the right, just before you get to the site – the two short films that it shows offer a great introduction to the island's history.

9 Talatí de Dalt

Alongside Torre d'en Galmés and Trepucó, Talatí de Dalt is one of the island's major prehistoric settlements. As well as its distinctive T-shaped standing stones, there are also caves and the foundations of various dwellings, all in a rural setting near Mahón.

10 Poblats Talaiòtics de Trepucó

Menorca's answer to Stonehenge is a must-see for anyone interested in the island's early history. **W**

WANDERLUST RECOMMENDS

You don't have to walk all 185km of the Camí de Cavalls trail; you can also just get a taste. Section 14 (Cala Galdana to Sant Tomàs) is especially gorgeous.

rentals from around £301 per week; other car-hire brands are available at the airport.

A return flight from London to Mahón produces **266kg** of carbon per passenger. Wanderlust encourages you to **offset** your **travel footprint** through a reputable provider. For advice on how to find one, visit wanderlust.co.uk/sustainable-travel.

Cost of travel

As with much of Spain, hotels are cheaper if you visit in **low or mid** season. Many restaurants have lunchtime set menus (*menu del día*), but you'll find better value away from the tourist sites.

Accommodation

Menorca has a wide range of stays beyond its resorts, from sea-view palaces to countryside estates. **Gran Meliá Villa Le Blanc**, near Santo Tomás beach, is set in a superb location directly overlooking the shore and captures Menorca's laid-back island vibe while still feeling sumptuously luxurious. There are two outdoor pools (one of which is adults-only) as well as a spa and gym. Doubles from £384pn (room only). melia.com
Hotel Ses Sucreres, Ferreries, has been converted from a small 19th-century townhouse. This eco-friendly, 12-room boutique hotel is conveniently located in the middle of the island and makes a good base if you want to travel both east and west. B&B doubles from £107pn. hotelsessucreres.com

Food & drink

Menorca is awash with good food and natural produce. Look out for *sobrasada* sausage, Mahón cheese and *carquinyolis* – shortbread-like biscuits. The **S'Amarador** restaurant at Villa Le Blanc (melia.com) is an outpost of one of Ciutadella's top eateries and has great sea views. In Mahón, the family-run **Can Joanet** (971 36 03 07) serves exceptional Menorcan specialities. And in Ciutadella, **Cas Cònsol** (casconsolmenorca.com) offers some excellent local dishes.

Further reading & information

The Megalithic European (Element, 2004) by Julian Cope.
www.menorca.es – Tourist board site.
www.illesbalears.travel/en/baleares

The author travelled with support from the **Balearic Islands Tourist Board** (illesbalears.travel/en/baleares)

Rising above (below) Perched atop Monte Toro (365m) is a historic sanctuary and convent. The first references to it appeared in records in 1291, though it was later rebuilt in the 17th century on the site of a Gothic church

