

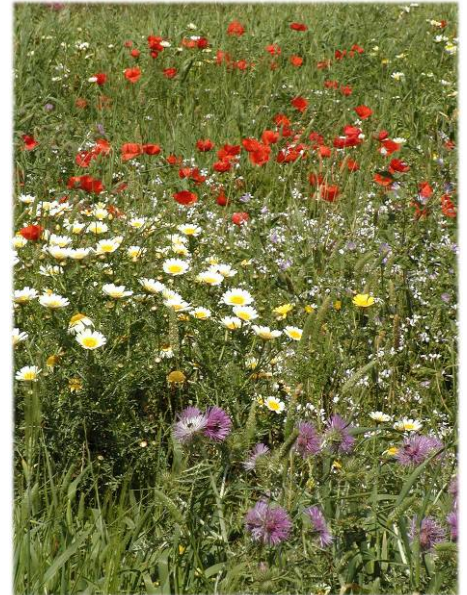
Menorca

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

2010

Outline itinerary

- Day 1** Fly Mahon and transfer to Matchani Gran
- Day 2/7** Daily birdwatching and botanical excursions all over Menorca from our base near Mahon
- Day 8** Fly London



Dates

Friday 30th April – Friday 7th May 2010

Cost

£1,295 (London/London); £1,175 (Mahon/Mahon)

Single room supplement

£140

Grading

Day walks only, all straightforward (and optional).
Grade A/B

Focus

Birds and plants



Images by Peter Dunn



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

The base for this holiday is a splendid 18th century Menorcan Farmhouse, Matchani Gran, lovingly restored by our friendly hosts, Shaun and Jenny Murphy. Set in ten hectares of unspoilt countryside, with a large outdoor swimming pool, this is a most relaxed setting.

As Menorca is only some 30 miles long and 12 miles wide, it is possible to reach most parts of the island from this delightful base quickly and easily. The road system primarily links the major settlements, leaving large areas of the island accessible only on foot. Days will usually begin with a short drive, followed by a walking excursion to areas of interest for their bird and plant life, returning to the house by road at the end of the afternoon. Sometimes days may be split, with perhaps short stops during the outward or return journeys or visits to more than one locality during a single day. Considerable flexibility in the programme will be possible: clearly, the interest of particular localities may vary according to such things as the season and the weather and the programme may be varied to take account of these and other factors.

UNESCO recently declared Menorca a Biosphere Reserve, envisaging that large parts of the island should be protected as either Areas of Special Natural Interest or Areas of Rural Landscape Interest. The island has suffered much less from tourist development than the other large Balearic Islands (Mallorca and Ibiza) and further development began to be restricted a number of years ago. Coupled with the fact that this is the wettest of the Balearic Islands, with correspondingly lush vegetation, this makes Menorca one of the most rewarding places in the western Mediterranean for those with an interest in birds, flowers and the natural environment.

It is more or less impossible to visit Menorca without coming across some of the prehistoric remains with which the island is liberally scattered. It has, in fact, the greatest concentration of stone prehistoric structures to be found anywhere on earth. Some have now been cleared and excavated, sometimes also restored, but many remain more or less overgrown. We shall certainly see some of them during our stay on the island, if only because they are often good places to look for plants. Several different kinds of structures exist: the oldest, dating from around 2,000 BC, are cave dwellings carved in cliffs. Slightly more recent are the T-shaped megaliths called taulas, assumed to have had some kind of religious significance, and the tapering towers of boulders, either solid or hollow inside, called talayots.

Unfortunately very little is known about Menorca during the period when these ancient stone structures were in use. Its written history only really begins during the Roman period. It was incorporated into the Roman Empire in AD 123. It is known that prior to this Menorcans, famous for their skills with the sling-shot, had played an important role in the Carthaginian army. There is even a legend that Hannibal was born in Menorca.

After the Romans, Menorca fell under the domination first of the Vandals and then of the Byzantines. Then followed a long period of Moslem rule, at first as part of the Caliphate of Cordoba and later as part of an independent Balearic kingdom. Not until the thirteenth century were the Moslems expelled and Menorca

incorporated into the kingdom of Catalonia and Aragon. Though its subsequent history became more settled, as an island in a sea where piracy was often a major problem and many powers struggled for naval supremacy it continued to suffer raids and occupations. In 1558 the Turks razed Ciutadella and carried its inhabitants into slavery in Constantinople.

The magnificent natural harbour of Mahon gave the island great strategic importance. In 1708, during the War of Spanish Succession, the English occupied the island and it remained under their control until 1756. It was the failure of Admiral Byng to bring relief to the defending British forces that led to his execution 'pour encourager les autres', as Voltaire famously commented. The French occupation lasted only a few years, however, and Menorca was returned to Britain in 1763. Not until 1802 did it finally pass to Spain. One probable legacy of the period as a major British naval base is the gin which continues to be distilled on the island.

Day 1

Friday

Matchani Gran

Today we board our flight direct to Mahon (regional departures are available from around the UK – please contact us or state your preference upon booking) and transfer to our accommodation for the week which is a short drive away. Depending on flight times, we will have plenty of time to settle in and begin our explorations of the pretty countryside nearby.

Day 2

Saturday

Matchani Gran

This morning, and every morning, weather permitting, we will offer the chance of a pre-breakfast walk around the area immediately surrounding the hotel. Stone Curlews breed in the nearby fields, and there are usually migrant warblers and flycatchers to be seen along the tree-lined entrance road. Hoopoes and Turtle Doves are usually to be seen on the power lines, and larks and pipits abound in the grassy fields, which are kept clipped by the resident sheep and donkeys.

Setting off after breakfast, our first stop today will be the marsh and water meadows at Tirant. Dependant on the winter rains, this is the only habitat of its kind on the island. The short grass affords excellent views of herons, storks and egrets if there is enough water, and any muddy edges should produce waders. Booted Eagles and harriers hunt the adjacent land. In the extensive dunes immediately behind the beach of Cala Tirant, Kentish Plovers and Bee-eaters breed. Other likely sightings include Black-winged Stilt, various sandpipers and other waders, Little Grebe, egrets and several species of warbler. There is a rich flora growing on the dunes, and tortoises may be encountered here. After spending a couple of hours wandering slowly along the track through the wetlands and exploring the dunes, we will rejoin our minibus near the beach where we will stop for our picnic lunch.

After lunch we will visit the Cap de Cavalleria. This promontory, covered with low scrub, hosts many of the specialised cushion plants of the Balearic Islands and is the most northerly point on the island. Shearwaters, both Balearic and Cory's, can often be seen from the headland, and many migrants pass northwards along it at the period of our visit, with the resident Egyptian Vultures patrolling the cliffs. From the small car park at the lighthouse we will explore the rocky habitat to find many of the endemic plants including the small violet 'daisy' *Senecio rodriguezii*, named after the Menorquin otonist Juan Joaquin Rodriguez. To finish the day we will visit the archeological

museum at Santa Teresa where a small café serves refreshments and the surrounding pine trees sometimes hold migrants, before we head back to Matchani Gran for dinner.

Day 3

Sunday

Matchani Gran

The south coast of Menorca contrasts sharply with the north. It is warmer and more extensively wooded, with higher cliffs broken by a series of sheltered coves, often backed by damp gorges which are a haven for both birds and plants. Today we shall drive to Cala Santa Galdana, one of the more developed coastal sites, which nevertheless has much of interest, including one of the most accessible sites for the cliff-dwelling endemic *Hippocrepis balearica*. We shall soon leave the hotels and cafés of the resort behind us, taking a footpath along the coast to the west, winding among pine woods and scrub. The flora is wonderful, with many orchid species - at the time of our visit, large numbers of Pyramidal Orchids should be in flower. Interestingly, there is much variation in the colour of the flowers of this orchid here, with white and many shades of pink all occurring in a beautiful mixture. Asphodels and gladioli are also extremely common, and there is a good chance of finding the endemic *Lotus tetraphyllus*. Many warblers should be encountered, especially the common Sardinian Warbler, Cetti's Warbler (much more often heard than seen) and perhaps also Dartford Warbler. Alpine and Pallid Swifts nest on the cliffs all along this coast and Woodchat Shrikes are common around the edges of woodland. We shall be unlucky if we do not see Hoopoes during the day (but if we do not, there will be other opportunities as they are common in most parts of the island).

If time permits we can follow the path as far as the delightful cove of Cala Macarella, where there is a café which is likely to be open at the period of our visit, although this will be dependent on how much time we spend observing and photographing the wildlife in the woods above Cala Galdana.

Retracing our steps back to the minibus, we will drive the short distance to the entrance to Gorge d'Algendar, where we will have a rest and eat our picnic lunch. We will then walk along the wooded gorge where Booted Eagles may be displaying and family parties of Egyptian Vultures ride the thermals. This is also 'nightingale city' with birds calling from every corner. The small stream that runs through the gorge is usually choked with vegetation but with luck we may see species of herons and even kingfishers here. Once out of the gorge there should be time to stock-up on liquids at one of the local cafes before heading slowly back to Matchani Gran.

Day 4

Monday

Matchani Gran

Son Parc on the east coast of the island has one of Menorca's undisturbed true marshes with tall reed surrounding the freshwater pool. There are a number of ways to view the pool depending on the light and the weather and we could see the secretive Purple Gallinule and Moustached Warbler here. Great Reed Warblers sing from the reeds and green Tree Frogs call from the surrounding habitat. A walk through thick forest will enable us to get a better view of the marsh and then we continue over the hill back to our starting point. The parasitic Cytinus can be found around its host Cistus here and as we 'break out' of the woodland and onto a headland heath habitat, Dartford Warblers scald from the scrub.

We will take out picnic lunch back at the minibus before heading back towards the centre of the island, spending the afternoon visiting flowering fields and maybe calling in at Menorca's highest hill, Monte Toro (358 metres). We can

drive to the top, where there is a 17th century religious sanctuary. If the weather is good, there are excellent views over more or less the whole of Menorca. Birding from the café terrace can produce close views of Alpine Swifts and Egyptian Vultures, and occasionally Firecrests in the surrounding pine trees.

Day 5

Tuesday

Matchani Gran

Today we intend to visit a private nature reserve in the northeast of the island. This reserve centres around a set of disused salt pans which are secured by a fence at the end of a long track. The drive down the track will disturb feeding birds and the rock formations look like bubbling lava.

The salt pans are the best place on the island to see wading birds. Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plover breed here but migrant stints and sandpipers are also regular, and there is a good chance of seeing an Osprey fishing in the areas of open water. Dragonflies abound and Ladder Snake could be encountered on the paths.

After a satisfying morning at the salt pans we will head to Cap de Favaritx, a rocky promontory at the eastern extremity of the island. Stops en-route may produce Broad-leafed Birthwort and the hillsides are covered with Tree Spurge. Lunch at the Cap usually attracts the attention of the local population of Audouin's Gull and there is chance to see Kentish and Little Ringed Plovers breeding alongside the brackish pools. There will be chance to walk along tracks into the dry surroundings in search of birds and plants before we retrace our steps to the minibus. Depending on the time, we may have a further visit to Tirant Marsh on the way back to Matchani Gran.

Day 6

Wednesday

Matchani Gran

This morning we will drive the full length of the island towards Cuitadella on the west coast. Along the way, we will take the opportunity to visit at least one of the prehistoric sites for which Menorca is internationally known. As well as the historical interest, there are usually various plants to see at these sites, as well as Thekla Lark, Tawny Pipit and Quail, although we shall be extremely lucky to actually see the latter species.

To the north of Cuitadella is the rocky headland of Punta Nati. This is a very good area for Blue Rock Thrush and Short-toed Larks, and a large colony of swifts (Common and Pallid) nest on the cliffs. This area is also home to the island's (and probably the Mediterranean's!) largest colony of Cory's Shearwater, and the birds are often seen offshore here.

Next we will drive to the most famous prehistoric site on the island, the Navetta des Tudons, which is a large burial chamber shaped like an upturned boat. After our lunch, we will stroll around the area, which is very good for Red Kites, Ravens and Booted Eagles soaring overhead, whilst Woodchat Shrikes, Hoopoes and various warblers can be seen in the bushes and on the rocks.

After a fairly full day, we will head back to Matchani Gran, perhaps with a refreshment stop along the way if time permits.

Day 7

Thursday

Matchani Gran

For our final excursion we return to the south coast, driving first to Son Bou. The marshes are one of the best places on the island to see Cattle Egrets, which are currently expanding their range. A nesting colony of Moustached Warblers was also discovered here a few years ago. Purple Herons are often present and perhaps also Squacco Herons and Little Egrets. Marsh Harriers often fly over the marshes and Egyptian Vultures may be seen in this area. There are little terrapins in the water-courses of the marshes, though they are usually difficult to spot. If we are lucky we may find that the local ornithologists are carrying out ringing sessions to monitor the birds in the reed beds so we might be able to see Great Reed and Moustached Warblers at close range. We can picnic near the beach on some wooden tables and the local beach cafés sell good refreshing drinks. Again Audouin's Gulls are close by and Cory's Shearwaters wheel offshore.

Day 8

Friday

London

Sadly our time on the island ends today and we travel from Matchani Gran to the airport nearby, before the return flight to Britain.

Trek Grading

All the walking involved in this tour will be day walks and will be optional. The holiday grade is A. The island is rocky and terrain may be very rough, especially on the northern coast. It can also be very muddy after rain. There are no very high hills on Menorca, but short steep slopes are by no means uncommon. The walks are generally quite short and generous time has been allowed so that they can be taken at a slow pace, with plenty of time to look at plants and birds and enjoy the beauty of this lovely island. Some of them are circuits, with possible shorter routes for those who do not wish to walk the full distance.

Weather

At the period of our visit the weather should mainly be warm, dry and sunny, but one wet day during the week can be expected and more are not impossible. Maximum daily temperatures should be in the mid-20s Celsius, but will be lower on wet or windy days. The sun will be hot and protection against it will be needed, especially during excursions with limited shade. The sea temperature will still be rather cool, probably too cool to encourage swimming but swimming costumes may be a good idea as the beaches are great areas to cool off after a walk..

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included throughout the holiday. Wine is also included during the 6 evenings when the evening meal is taken at Matchani Gran. On Sunday evenings the staff have a night off and we will instead eat at a local restaurant.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this tour, you will need to read the Naturetrek brochure and booking conditions carefully and then complete and return a booking form (found in the back of the brochure or on our website, www.naturetrek.co.uk), together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost, plus the insurance premium in full if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, or should you have any questions about the tour, please call us on 01962 733051.