

MINORCA



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MINORCA IS THE EASTERNMOST ISLAND OF THE BALEARIC ARCHIPELAGO, IN THE MEDITERRANEAN, SOUTH OF THE GULF OF LYONS AND CLOSE TO THE COAST OF CATALONIA AND VALENCIA. THE EASTERNMOST AND, WITHOUT DOUBT, THE LEAST WELL-KNOWN OUTSIDE OUR BORDERS.

JAUME SUBIRANA AUTHOR

If the visitor approaches Minorca by plane, he will immediately sense the fascinating attraction of the land that awaits him. Seen from the air, the kidney-bean shaped island at our feet is like a scale model representation of a Mediterranean world of measured contrast, clean and light, a complete country laid out in miniature before us. In fact, the surface area of Minorca is not much more than 700 square kilometres (less than 900 square miles), a bit bigger than Singapore, but a tenth the size of Corsica and ten thousand times smaller than Australia. Minorca is the easternmost island of the Balearic archipelago, in the Mediter-

anean, south of the Gulf of Lyons and close to the coast of Catalonia and the *País Valencià*. The easternmost and, without doubt, the least well-known of the archipelago, outside our borders. Far from the massive tourist exploitation of Majorca and the flashy "inness" of Ibiza, Minorca is an island which, more than tourists, attracts fans, people who become fascinated by the colours of the Minorcan land and sea, who fall in love time and again with the gentle curves of its landscape, the smoothness of its language and the tranquil pace of the island life. From the air, one's gaze is immediately drawn towards the delicate outline where

the island meets the Mediterranean, the sea with the richest history. The beauty of the Minorcan coastline is wild and rugged. There are wide, open beaches of fine sand, like Son Bou or Sant Tomàs, in the south, and other more sheltered beaches, like l'Arenal d'en Castell of Santa Galdana (the most beautiful on the island according to the Minorcans), all popular with the tourists. However, lovers of a more original sea or coast can launch themselves into a passionate affair with the hundreds of little coves, some of them still inaccessible by road, where the sunlight bursts upon the water in fantastic greens and blues, where swimming,



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island alternate with the characteristic agricultural landscape, with its fields and the dry-stone walls that have divided them up for generations, and gradually disappear as we approach the airport, in the south. In their place, we see fig trees and wild olive.

The slightly more than fifty thousand inhabitants of Minorca are scattered amongst two cities (Ciutadella, in the west, the first one we saw from the plane on our way from the peninsula, and Mahon, at the easternmost tip of the island), a series of small towns (Alaior, white and flat; es Mercadal, at the foot of the Toro; industrial Ferreries...) and the many *llocs* (farmhouses) that are scattered over the island, examples of a unique rural architecture that has attracted the attention of specialists. Mahon is the administrative capital, Ciutadella the episcopal see and historic capital. Minorca's history is as long and rich as that of the sea that surrounds it. The abundance of megalithic monuments (*taules*, *navetes*, *talaiots*...) has led people to refer to it as a huge "open air museum" and is ample indication of the *talaiot* culture that flourished from the last centuries of the second millennium before Christ until the arrival of the Romans, with contacts with the Phoenicians and Greeks towards the seventh century. Then came Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, the Moorish occupation and, in 1287, the Catalan conquest (to commemorate the event, the 17th January, the day of Saint Anthony, the island's patron saint, has been declared "festival of the people of Minorca" by the present island council.) During the sixteenth century, the island had to defend itself from the Turks, and in 1712, under the treaty of Utrecht, it became part of the British Empire. In the eighteenth century, it was successively occupied by English, French, English,

walking or sunbathing can be enjoyed in peace and almost total solitude. Seen from above, the natural harbours of Fornells and Mahon are quite impressive. The latter, with a length of five and a half kilometres and an average width of 700 metres, is one of the most important in the Mediterranean. So, too, are the capes of Cavalleria and Favàritx, both on the north coast, the most rugged, from which sunset or sunrise present memorable spectacles. Like the coast, the interior of the island is full of surprises. The land is gently undulating, with the Toro, the Minorcan ceiling (350 metres), right in the middle. The view from here is superb, on a clear afternoon you can easily make out the two chief regions of the island: Tramuntana, in the north, green and hilly, and Migjorn, in the south, sloping gently down towards the southern coast, furrowed by little brooks and streams. The climate is maritime Mediterranean, temperate and regional as regards wind and rain (the dominant wind is the popular *tramuntana*, from the north). The patches of dense pine and oakwood of the centre and north of the

Spanish, English again and, finally and definitively, by the Spanish in 1802. The sixty-six years of British domination left the island, amongst other things, the villa where Admiral Nelson stayed (and, they say, Lady Hamilton), a gin-drinking tradition, a lot of words assimilated by Minorcan and a peculiarly British flavour to the architecture of the towns, here in the middle of the Mediterranean.

Walking round the island's towns, in the country (fresh and green at the end of winter, the colour of earth and rock in late summer) it is easy to see why so many people envy it. Each of the defining elements that go to make up *sa roqueta* (popular name for Minorca, meaning little rock) is yet another segment of the mosaic. The sea, the climate, the *tramuntana*, its history and the footprints of different civilizations, the architecture, the islanders' lilting speech, the fresh fish, the lobster *caldereta*, the cheese, the *sobrassada* (a kind of blood sausage), the gin and the pastries. A beautiful little mosaic, anchored in the middle of the Mediterranean. A miniature civilization. ●

