





Off of Spain's southeastern coastline the Balearic Islands lay clustered under the intense Mediterranean sunshine. These four islands do not get as much attention as mainland Seville or Barcelona, and while they are popular with Europeans, the Balearics are off the international tourism map. While these petite islands may not be for everyone, if you are after a personal experience with Spanish horse culture and lazy days spent by the translucent Mediterranean's calm seaside, then book your flight to Minorca and prepare to be impressed.

THE HORSE FESTIVALS OF SPAIN

by Regina W. Bryan

Book your flight to Minorca and prepare to be impressed.

The Caixers (riders) still wear the same costume of black coats and white pants that have been a tradition for 600 years.

The city of Mao is all decorated for their horse festival, which is held in September.



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A visit to Minorca is gorgeous from April on (it's a bit chilly in the winter months), but to see Minorcan horses in their entire festive splendor, you must come from June to September when summertime parties take the center stage. The Minorcan Patron Saint horse festivals begin on one side of the Island in Minorca's largest city, Ciutadella, on the summer solstice, or "San Juan", from the 23rd-24th of June. This is one of the wildest parties on the Mediterranean no matter where you are, and certainly Minorca is no exception. Along the Spanish Med, San Juan is celebrated with fireworks, music, dinners and all night bonfire parties on the beach where the young and old partake in debauchery. On Minorca Island the same is true, but the holiday is also celebrated with horses, riders, elaborate horse parades and lots of icy gin and lemon.

While the festival of San Juan goes back much further, the Minorcan tradition of riding horses for this important festival began around the 14th century. In the past, the riders of these beautiful coal-black Minorcan horses represented different classes in Minorcan society such as the church, the nobility, the craftsmen, and important farmers from the northern and southern limits of the city. The rest of the riders consisted of villagers of all ages, from nine to ninety, usually men. Together these riders, or "Caixers", as they are called on the Island, make up a beautiful parade of horse, rider, and true Minorcan tradition.

Today this same custom carries on with few changes in the last 600 years. The Caixers still wear the same costume of black coats and white pants detailed with ribbons and decorated with vibrant carnation flowers. While the Caixers are handsome, it is the horses that steal the show. Exquisitely muscular, with round eyes and long proportions, the Minorcan horse has an elegant and potent look to it. With its sleek coat, the Minorcan is one of the only completely black European horse breeds. Though other horses can participate in the summer festivals, most of the horses used are Minorcan, a breed which became official in 1989.



The port of Ciutadella.

Besides being a real beauty, the Minorcan is agile, energetic, and has a graceful elegance, which is important as it dances through the city streets. It is customary during the island parades for Minorcan horses to walk on their hind legs while the Caixers hold on tight and parade-goers attempt to pat these horses' chests, an act which is said to bring good luck. Not surprisingly, many people who try to attempt to pet the dancing Minorcans are injured each year, sometimes fatally. Not unlike the running of the bulls in other parts of Spain, on Minorca it seems you can show off how brave you are by how closely a hoof grazes your cheek. My advice is to stay back from the Minorcans, and enjoy them from a distance.

Like most festivals in Spain, San Juan goes all day and all night. People flock from all corners of Spain and Europe to visit Ciutadella on this holiday, and it is by far the most crowded and rambunctious of the Minorcan horse festivals. If you go to San Juan, expect crowds, high prices and lots of 'pomada' (a typical gin and lemon drink). However, if you are not much for parties, then why not go to one of the eleven other Minorcan horse festivals that occur after the big blow-out in Ciutadella? These smaller festivals feature the same horses and Caixers but are more local and a lot less chaotic. It's also easier to get a good look at the Minorcan horses in smaller villages such as Alaior (August 15 and 16) or even Mahón city (September 7 to 9).



Minorca's largest city – Ciutadella.

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There are many opportunities for horse trekking on the island.

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After partying with the townspeople at one of the many horse festivals, you may want to sample some more of what the island has to offer. Not to be missed is Minorca's famous cheese and specialty gin. The Islands have a cheese-making history extending into prehistoric times and today, locals continue crafting this artisan brine-soaked delicacy called Mahón Cheese, which you'll be able to sample anywhere on the island. There are three Mahón cheese varieties to taste: the young cheese or tierno, the mature and buttery semi-curados, and the sharp, yellow Mahón curado, the driest of the bunch. If you are especially intrigued by Minorcan cheese, you may want to go on the Coinga cheese factory tour for a look at how this old-fashioned staple is made.

Unlike the rest of Spain, where wine is the drink of choice, Minorca's signature beverage is gin. This is because the island, with its strategic Mediterranean position, has been conquered throughout history by just about everyone, the English included. When the English overtook Minorca in 1708 they brought gin with them and the tradition stuck. These days Minorca

produces its own special gin, which is available in stores and at bars throughout the island. Minorca was also occupied by the French, and as the legend goes, the true origin of Mayonnaise is from Minorca's city of Mahón. It was there in 1756 that Duke Louis-François-Armand du Plessis requested a special sauce to go with his dinner and was served the first version of Mayo. While Mayonnaise is no more popular in Minorca than it is anywhere else, it is a good idea to try the island's similar Alioli, which is a garlic-mayo.

When booking a place to stay on the Island, you have a couple of options. Bunking in a city-center hotel is smart if you are visiting for Ciutadella's San Juan or if you don't plan to rent a car. However, some of the prime areas of the Island are only accessed by car or motorcycle so renting a car gets my vote, especially for longer stays. Minorca is charming because of its quaint white villages tucked into coves and abounding natural beauty, so staying in a short-term apartment rental or in a boutique hotel on a secluded beach or in the sage and lavender-covered countryside is the way to go.

Fabulous digs? Hands-down the prize goes to the boutique hotel, Sant Joan de Binissaida, a rural manor house dating back to 1287. On twelve hectares planted with pine, wild olive trees and crops, Sant Joan de Binissaida is an agro-tourism establishment where visitors get an up close look at the Minorcan way of life in a luxurious setting. Sant Joan de Binissaida also has animals on the property including sheep and Minorcan horses. A model hotel for sustainable tourism, Sant Joan de Binissaida is eco-friendly and uses produce grown onsite in its restaurant, which serves Mediterranean cuisine. This hotel makes a good base for seeing the Mahón horse festivals in September, and is just a ten minute walk from San Esteve Cove and a fifteen minute drive to many sandy swimming beaches (€130 to €260 a night).

Horses are so much a part of the culture on Minorca that aside from the Patron Saint festivals there are many other horse-related activities open to visitors.

The curious may want to pop into Son Martorellet Ranch where guided tours and dressage shows are held a couple times a week. If you are up for some riding, consider a day trip with Cavalls Son Àngel which offers rides on the Island's northern coastline, or with one of the many other companies which take visitors through the Island's Bio-Reserve or along the ancient horse track that circles the perimeter of Minorca, called Camí de Cavalls.

With so much to see on Minorca, visitors could easily spend a week on this sweet Mediterranean Island. Having lived now in Spain for four years and after traveling most of the Iberian Peninsula, I keep coming back to the Balearic Islands and to Minorca. It's the relaxed pace, natural allure, fresh cuisine and unique traditions that draw me in – the Minorcan horses and their colorful Caixers are just another added perk on an Island that overflows with enchantment.



One of the many beautiful coves of the island.



There are several villages on the island where one can leisurely stroll, dine, and shop.

Resources

Dates for Minorcan Horse Festival:

- Ciutadella city: June 23 and 24
- Es Mercadal village: July 18 and 19
- Fornells village: July 25 and 26
- Es Castell village: July 24 to 26
- Es Migjorn Gran village: August 1 and 2
- Llucmaçanes village: August 8 and 9
- Alaior village: August 15 and 16
- Sant Climent village: August 22 and 23
- Ferrieres village: August 23 to 25
- Sant Lluís village: August 29 and 30
- Maó city: 7 to 9 of September

Mahón Cheese Tour: Coinga Factory

Easily reached by car, Coinga is located in Alaior near Migjorn Gran, halfway between Ciutadella and Mahón on the ME-1 highway. Cars and motorcycles can be rented on the island.

Hotel:

<http://santjoan.binissaida.com/en>
Camí de Binissaida 108 07720
Es Castell Minorca, Minorca

Ranch:

www.sonmartorellet.com

Riding Trips:

Cavalls Son Angel
www.cavallssonangel.com/?id=&lang=en