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Charge! And don't spare the pedestrians

The Sant Joan festival is one of the most important - and dangerous - celebrations in Menorca's calendar. Maurice Geller reports

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Picture this. It's hot and dark. An awesome rider in black frock-coat, white breeches and high black boots, with a black tricorne in his hand is rearing up on a superb black horse in the medieval town square at Alayor, towering over an insane throng of people.

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The air is thick with horses and men, sweat, gin, gunpowder and manure. Bands of youths charge about; they have been drinking pomada - gin and lemon - all afternoon. Then, on the edge of the town, in the early evening, a string of local grandees mount up. Maybe two dozen of them, all brilliantly turned out - the men the women amazing with their luminously glossy black hair back tight or great blonde corkscrews flying. And the rippling black steeds, the Menorquin breed, groomed in festival livery. And then it starts - they ride into the crowd, and rear up on their hind legs for the longest time while this dense raving mob is shouting "Jaleo! Jaleo!" and trying to turn them upside down. (Allegedly, they're trying to hold them up, but we know better.)

And so it goes on for hours: they ride into the crowd, round and round the town, down narrow lanes and shuttered streets, half-a-ton of muscle and blood threatening to crush anyone not nimble enough, while constantly baited by marauding gangs. Later there'll be music, food, dancing and fireworks to rock the town half the night. It's a thrilling combination of *épater les bourgeois* and pagan horse cult - and a vivid taste of the mysteries that vibrate below the surface of this supposedly mild holiday island.

Fifteen years later, I'm in a narrow street called Jeronimo while an ancient caixer (rider) is spinning round like a chopper blade and threatening to splatter me against Bishop Marroig's 17th-century palace, before pouring into a sea of people in the majestic Pla de Born, the aristocratic heart of Ciutadella. Welcome to Sant Joan - for many the finest festival in the Mediterranean. I'm in a crowd of 10,000 people and 100 horsemen, I don't hear a British voice or even a Spanish one - it's not just lip service and road signs here: they all speak Menorquin. It's a wonderful rush, swaying with the pack, hearing a random roar erupt from another quarter.

Except, of course, it's not random at all - this whole Midsummer week is bound by hundreds of years of protocol and the mystical streak that pulses beneath it. It begins with the appearance on the Sunday before 24

June of the Hom de Be, a man in sheepskins, carrying a sheep - John the Baptist, it seems, with the Lamb of God, the towering figures whose festivals mark midsummer and midwinter. Then the various caixers representing the different estates, visit the hilltop church of Sant Joan on Midsummer Eve - the one day of the year that it opens - before parading into the town, which parties all day and most of the night.

Then come the jaleos and caragols - cavalcades - again throughout 24 June itself, climaxing as the whole town descends to the waterfront, where the harbour leads into the field of engagement, the Pla de Sant Joan, for what they call the juegos peligrosos - the dangerous games. Right in the middle of the crowd there is racing, jousting, peg sticking with lances at full pelt and on into the night. And the final evening of 25 June is marked with superb fireworks - focs esplenderos - on land and water. Sant Joan is the spectacular opening of the season, and from there on a procession of festivals moves across the face of the island. Every village has its own week of saints and celebrations, music and fireworks and jaleos, culminating in the capital, Mahon, in September.

Menorca sits dead centre of the western Mediterranean. Marseille is to the north, Algiers to the south. West is Valencia and east, Sardinia. Its size and location means it's wet and windy during the winter. In summer it is green and gorgeous. It's hot, but not harsh. The sky is suffused with a golden-yellow glow and the wind that rocks the palms blows away the heaviness of the day. But its position also means that every era and culture has left its trace.

The island is covered with stones. There are navetas, grand Bronze Age chambers like upturned stone boats: in Tudons they found remains of at least 100 bodies, arms encircled with bronze bracelets. There are the talyots, elaborate mounds, often chambered, 30ft high or more, some visible for miles. And the exceptional taulas, unique to Menorca, whacking great limestone blocks formed in giant T-shapes suggesting ritual star-gazing. It's the greatest concentration of prehistoric monuments in the world - more than 1,000 of them by some counts.

The Phoenicians were here, the great merchant adventurers, and their heirs, the Carthaginians, who enlisted the lethal Balearic slingshot artists in the Punic wars against Rome. But they lost, the Romans took Menorca, then came Vandals and Byzantines, Moors - for 300 fruitful years - then Aragon ruled (Turkish pirates permitting) - until the British arrived. It was the harbour that was the attraction - a superb long, deep, clear channel, with the grand clifftop town towering above it. Admiral Byng said there were three safe havens in the Mediterranean: July, August and Mahon. Not that it did him much good. As Macaulay put it: "The Duke of Richelieu, an old fop who had passed his life from 16 to 60 in seducing women for whom he cared not one straw, landed on the island, and succeeded in reducing it." Byng failed to engage the enemy, sailed back to England - and was shot. But the British returned for another 50 years.

From much of the island, you can look across to its sacred centre, Monte Toro. Make this an early mission. Take Cami d'en Kane, the old road from Mahon, which immerses you in deep country (the whole island is a Unesco biosphere). Then comes the thrill of the first close-up of Toro, as it rises from a pattern of numinous green pyramidal hills. At the top is a chapel; legend says a bull hewed a statue of the Virgin out of rock and the mountain was named after the miracle. In fact, it comes from "tor" - like Glastonbury's (it's Arabic for mountain); besides, horses rule here not bulls. And the views? The whole island, almost, is laid out beneath you. To the south is Es Gran Migjorn. To the north is the harbour of Fornells, where the yachties hold up - Menorca offers great sailing - and King Juan Carlos eats caldereta of lobster while the tramuntana whips the windsurfers across the bay. To the west is the peak of Santa Agueda, topped by Roman and Moorish remains. On Toro, sit on the bar's terrace and soak up the vista east and south, out to sea and over Mahon.

And that's where I'll be in September, in the vital, ancient cliff-top city towering above its buzzy harbour, for the Mare de Déu de Gràcia - the fiesta of the Virgin, Our Lady of Grace, Mahon's patron saint, which precedes the autumn equinox. It's four days of action centred on the Plaza del Ayuntamiento. All the streets are jammed for the jaleo and more dazzling equestrian displays: the ensortilla, testing balance and aim; the rompre ses

carotes, or jousting; and the trickiest, and most dangerous, where two riders lock arms and belt down the street together, through the crowds, hoping the horses don't separate. There are sea-going processions up and down the port - and, naturally, rocking all night in the squares and bars. It's a brilliant climax to this extraordinary, curious and, outside the island, all but unknown series of festivals.

GIVE ME THE FACTS

How to get there

Monarch Scheduled (08700 4063 00; www.flymonarch.com) offers return flights from Luton to Menorca from £150.

Doncars (0034 9713 60467; www.doncars.com) offers a week's car hire from €133 (£91).

Where to stay

The Hesperia Patricia (00 34 971 38 5511; www.hesperia-patricia.com), Paseo San Nicolas, Ciutadella de Menorca, offers double rooms from €92 (£63) per night with breakfast.

Further information

Spanish Tourist Office (020-7486 8077; www.spain.info) and www.illesbalears.es

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