

Escape: Short haul

Most head to the island's beaches — but the flora, fauna and forests are sublime, too

GO WILD IN MENORCA

by **SIMON HEPTINSTALL**

MIND your heads, nature's coming in! says our driver. The open-top Land Rover is scrapping under low-hanging fruit trees down a rough track deep in a Menorcan forest.

We reach up from our seats to pick apples, figs and what locals call 'strawberry tree fruit' (with a sweet pink centre inside a coarse skin). Foraged fruit makes for a perfect dessert after a picnic lunch of Spanish tortillas and Menorcan sausages.

And it shows me a different side to this wonderful Balearic island, better known for its more than 100 beaches.

But then, it dawns on me. The secret to Menorca's 21st-century appeal is something most tourists haven't really noticed.

A Unesco 'biosphere reserve' covers most of the island. It's strictly enforced with planning restrictions that would be considered draconian anywhere else.

There are tight controls on artificial lighting,



Picture: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

with Menorca proud to be declared a 'dark sky reserve'. And anyone daring to do up an old cottage or farmhouse is forced to retain all traditional features such as dry-stone walls, curved wooden gates and shuttered windows.

It sounds tough for inhabitants, but for visitors, it means pottering around Menorca is a delight. There are miles of rolling green fields, pristine forests and a handful of whitewashed towns and villages.

There's only one major road across the middle of the 30-mile-long island, linking the two major settlements, Mahon and Ciutadella. Everywhere else you drive on country lanes, winding between crumbling stone walls and wildflowers.

I take a tour in one of Jeep Safari Menorca's nine open-top Land Rovers. My bush-hatted guide, Peter, is a former estate

agent who had a major life-change after becoming obsessed with the island's archaeology. His tour includes clambering up ancient stone towers and into 5,000-year-old tombs to show that Menorca has the world's highest concentration of prehistoric monuments (about two per square kilometre).

Peter spectacularly demonstrates the traditional Menorcan warrior's skill of slingshotting a stone at 200mph into a distant wall, as well as how to make the highly prized local Mahon cheese (after introducing me to some of Menorca's enormous population of 10,000 cows). He constantly points out sumptuous wildlife along the way, including eagles, vultures, lizards, butterflies and orchids.

Those tough planning restrictions have helped the island become a sanctuary for flora and fauna. It's a third of the size of Wales but has 900 types of wildflowers, 230 different birds and 30 kinds of butterflies.

Peter's grand finale is helping me hike to the summit of the spectacular Son Fideu ravine and suddenly yelling at the top of his voice to demonstrate the echo.

On this highly protected island it's challenging to open a hotel. So my accommodation at the recently launched Son Vell comes as something of a surprise. It's based around a 250-year-old farm that has been meticulously converted.

It's pricey, but with its sunken stone shower rooms, triple-sized beds and rough brick floors, the Spanish family owners have



Spanish safari: Mahon (top) and seeing the wildlife on a jeep tour

done a perfect job of keeping the style and architecture intact.

For the trendily energetic there are yoga sessions on the shoreline and even on paddleboards, or horseback excursions along the nearby coast path. We borrow the hotel's bicycles to pedal through bumpy olive orchards to the nearest beach: a rocky cove we have all to ourselves.

Later, we walk along the coast path to one of the island's best known beaches, the horseshoe bay of Cala Macarella. The water is so clear here that, from the cliffs, moored boats seem to float in mid-air. I eat fresh grilled fish at its beach cafe, Suzy's — one of only a handful permitted on the whole island.

Anywhere else, the authorities would have built a wider road to reach one of their most famous beaches. On the eco-island of Menorca they did the opposite, banning cars to reduce pollution. Now you can only reach Macarella during the summer by walking a mile or taking the bus. That's true dedication to the eco ideal.

TRAVEL FACTS

Land Rover tours (jeepsafarimenorca.es) from £564 for up to eight people. Stay at Son Vell (westigecollection.com/son-vell/) from £670 per night for two.

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