

Menorca in Autumn

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

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

Departs

October

Focus

All-round Natural History

Grading

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

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code ESP40)

Highlights

- Migrant birds on their way south
- Europe's only sedentary population of Egyptian Vulture (60 breeding pairs)
- Opportunity to visit a ringing station to see birds being ringed and released
- Purple Swamphen and Ferruginous Duck among a wealth of wetland birds
- Osprey, Booted Eagle and Peregrine seen frequently



Small Copper



Booted Eagle



View from El Toro



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Introduction

The base for this holiday is a splendid 18th century Menorcan Farmhouse, Matchani Gran. 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.

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.

Day 1

Matchani Gran

Today we will fly direct to Mahon (Mao in the Menorquin language, which is now being used increasingly), and then board our vehicle for the short drive to our accommodation, which is a converted 18th Century farmhouse in extensive grounds. Depending on our flight times we should have time for lunch, followed by a walk around the tracks and fields surrounding the hotel. We will also have an opportunity to meet the resident sheep, donkeys and horses belonging to the hotel owners.

Day 2

Matchani Gran



After breakfast this morning we will drive to the northernmost point of the island, Cap de Cavalleria. This rocky headland is home to many and Blue Rock Thrushes, as well as Peregrines and Kestrels. Its position often makes it the first landfall for migrants on their way south, and if our visit coincides with the right conditions the bushes just inland from the Cape could hold large numbers of birds. The vegetation here consists largely of plants which are well adapted to living in this often windswept environment, and any botanists in the group will find plenty to interest them. We will spend some time exploring the Cape itself and the approaches to it, before driving to our next destination, Tirant Marsh.

Depending on the amount of rainfall recently we should see various species of wildfowl and waders, probably including Wigeon, Shoveler, Gadwall, Green and Common Sandpipers and Greenshank. Water Pipits are seen frequently here in October, and this is an especially good area for Booted Eagles, with up to ten being seen in the air together at times. After spending some time at the Marsh, we will move on to the beach at Cala Tirant

where we will have our picnic lunch overlooking the dunes, where there are often plenty of migrant birds in the scrubby vegetation.

After lunch we should have time for a refreshment stop in the attractive village of Fornells, before driving to an area of disused saltpans just outside the village, where we may see Kentish, Ringed and Little Ringed Plovers amongst other waders, and perhaps a few Greater Flamingoes. Unfortunately it is possible that this area will be inaccessible if the water level on the approach is very high, which it sometimes is. If that is the case, we will substitute an alternative location – probably Cala en Porter on the south coast, where there is a pleasant walk along the edge of a wooded valley which can be good for warblers and also butterflies, while Common, Pallid and Alpine Swifts are often seen overhead. We will spend some time here before heading back to our accommodation, where some may wish to make use of the swimming pool before our evening meal.

Day 3

Matchani Gran

Today we will head to the attractive village of Sa Mesquida, just north of Mahon. We will meet with two local bird ringers who will show us how they catch and ring birds as part of a long-term study. We will have the opportunity to see birds at very close quarters, and the methods of ageing and sexing the birds will be explained to us. Afterwards we can walk down onto the beach through the sand dunes to look for migrant birds.

This afternoon we will drive to Mahon where we will have our picnic lunch by the harbour, and then we will board a glass-bottomed boat for a tour of the harbour which was of huge strategic importance in years gone by. Today it is still a busy commercial port, and also provides shelter for private yachts and pleasure craft, although many buildings from the British and French occupations of the island can still be seen. The tour passes the British naval headquarters, the isolation hospital on one of the islands, as well as several fortified areas built to protect the harbour from invaders. The water should be clear enough for us to view the seabed through the glass bottom, and as well as marine life there is the possibility of seeing various gulls and terns, including Audouin's Gull at close quarters, plus Blue Rock Thrush, Booted Eagles and Kingfishers.

Finally today we should have time to drive to El Toro, the highest point on the island, from which there are superb panoramic views of more than half of Menorca. It is also an excellent place from which to scan for soaring raptors and to find migrant birds sheltering in the vegetation below the car park.

Day 4

Matchani Gran

This morning we will first of all head towards Mongofre Nou, a large area of disused saltpans surrounded by typical saltmarsh vegetation. Depending on the water levels this can be an excellent area for waders and wildfowl, with species such as Greenshank, Green and Common Sandpiper and Avocet being seen frequently, as well as Greater Flamingoes occasionally. Ospreys visit regularly to feed on the large fish which inhabit the open areas of water.



Osprey

Next we will drive to the extensive lagoons at S' es Grau where we will have our picnic lunch. This whole area of scrub and wetlands was intended to be a massive holiday development, with golf courses, high rise apartment blocks etc etc, but the island government stepped in and stopped the project, declaring the area a national park. Today there are a few houses which were built before the development was stopped, but the rest of the area has been allowed to regenerate, becoming rich in plant and bird life. There are a couple of hides and some viewing screens overlooking the main lagoon, which is visited by thousands of wildfowl at this time of year, notably Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Shoveler and Teal. Literally hundreds of Little Grebes can be seen here, occasionally joined by a handful of Black-necked Grebes, while Coots often

number into the thousands. There are walks of varying length along the tracks surrounding the lagoon and there are also a couple of hides. On warm days in October there will still be butterflies such as Cleopatra, Clouded Yellow and various blues, and dragonflies including Lesser Emperor, Migrant Hawker and Scarlet Darter. There is a small visitor centre which we can visit, where there is a permanent exhibition explaining the wildlife of the area, and the area around this centre is particularly good for migrant birds, especially Robin and Black Redstart.

Before returning to the hotel there should be time to visit the small resort of Es Grau where we can have a refreshment break overlooking the attractive quiet bay and beach.

Day 5

Matchani Gran



Egyptian Vulture

Our first stop this morning will be at the resort of Cala Galdana on the south coast. Avoiding the main tourist area, which should be fairly quiet anyway at this time of the year, we will park close to the southern end of the Algendar Gorge. This gorge is home to Egyptian Vultures and Booted Eagles and although the vulture colony will have dispersed by now, the birds remain in the area and are often to be seen soaring overhead. The area just outside the gorge is excellent for

butterflies, with Painted Lady, Clouded Yellow, Common Blue, Brown Argus amongst others being seen in good numbers.

Depending on how the time is going, we will either have our lunch here or at our next destination, Son Bou. Here we will first of all park close to the beach and have a quick look at the edge of the dunes where Audouin's Gulls are often to be found, and then move on to the far end of the village where we will have a walk along a track which overlooks an area of wet grassland and open water. We can expect to see various species of egrets, waders and wildfowl here, in addition to Purple Swamphen, a normally shy, retiring bird which often feeds right out in the open here. Glossy Ibis has been a regular visitor recently, and Marsh Harriers can be seen quartering the reedbeds.

Day 6

Matchani Gran

Today we will travel to the far north-west of the island, to the rocky headland at Punta Nati. This is a good area to see Blue Rock Thrush, and there may also be migrant Wheatears and Black Redstarts. Egyptian Vultures and occasionally Peregrines can also be seen here, but one of the main attractions is the presence of most of the island's population of Stone Curlew, which gather here for the winter, having left their breeding areas in various parts of the island, including the grounds of our hotel.

After spending some time at Punta Nati we will visit the upper end of the Algendar Gorge, the lower end of which we saw yesterday at Cala Galdana. This is a deep, sheltered gorge which can hold decent numbers of migrant warblers, especially Blackcap, plus lots of Robins, and also has a number of specialist plants which thrive in the sheltered, damp conditions which are found in some places. Here we are close to the Egyptian Vulture colony, and there should be plenty of them to be seen, including this year's young which will be on the wing by now.

Day 7

Matchani Gran

This morning we will first of all visit a wetland area near the resort of Son Parc in the north-east of the island. From a viewpoint on a hillside we should be able to see various ducks and grebes, including Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard, Gadwall and Little Grebe. Marsh Harriers are usually to be seen quartering the reedbeds, and Ospreys frequently visit to feed on the abundant fish. There should be migrant passerines in the scrub surrounding the pools, while Firecrests, which are resident here, can sometimes be seen in the pine trees immediately around our viewpoint.

We will then retrace our steps to the car park, perhaps spending a short time looking in the scrub adjacent to the beach for migrants. Our picnic today will be at Sa Roca, a wooded area more or less in the centre of the island which can be good for butterflies and dragonflies, and after spending some time here we should have plenty of time to visit the prehistoric site at Torralba near Alaior which was occupied from around 1,000BC. Some of the buildings have been sympathetically restored to some extent, but most remain exactly as they were abandoned almost 2,000 years ago.



Cleopatra

Day 8

London

Today we must say goodbye to the island of Menorca. Depending on the flight times there may be an opportunity for a final walk around the grounds of the hotel before heading to the airport for our flights home.

Tour 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 quite rough, especially on the northern coast. It can also be 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, and our hotel has a pool.

Food & accommodation included in the price

All accommodation and meals are included throughout the holiday. Wine is also included with the evening meals at the Matchani Gran.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests or connecting/regional flights, at the time of booking.