

GREAT
Menorca
RIDES

WHERE Menorca, in the western Mediterranean Sea
START & FINISH Mahon (also known as Mao)
DISTANCE Officially 207km
WORDS Jon Sparks **PICTURES** Jon Sparks



Photos: Jon Sparks

OFF-ROAD AROUND MENORCA

The Cami de Cavalls is a 200km walking and biking path around the coast of Menorca. Outdoor writer **Jon Sparks** rode it in spring



April is a fine time to go mountain biking on Menorca – warm but not too hot, with an abundance of wild flowers. Many hotels and bars aren't open until the tourist season begins in May, however. This was brought home to me on day two of our island circumnavigation, sitting in the shade of a signboard by a deserted beach at Binimel-la on Menorca's north coast. There was a bar a stone's throw away – closed. We had another 25km of lumpy, technical riding ahead of us, with no guarantee of food or drink when we got there. And we'd already drunk half our water.

Decision time. Options: A, push on anyway; B, cut inland to Ferreries – a similar distance but on lanes and straightforward tracks and with a guarantee of food and drink at the end. Everything argued for B... except

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1)** Sandy track above Platges de Binigaus
- 2)** North of Es Grau, with the tower of Sa Torreta in view

that we'd set our stall out to ride the whole 207km of the Cami de Cavalls.

Sense prevailed. Swallowing our pride, we set off for Ferreries. As soft options go, it wasn't that soft, throwing up a steep climb over the spine of the island. Menorca's hills aren't big, but they are volcanic and abrupt. We'd sucked our Camelbaks dry well before we crested the ridge. A long, spiralling descent, a couple of kilometres of traffic – shocking after the loneliness of the morning – and we could start guzzling lemonade.

COASTAL SINGLETRACK

We still had to get to our booked accommodation in Ciutadella, at the western end of the island. The easy way – 17km – was by the main highway. But the Cicloturisme guide showed a bike route, theoretically



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no further but graded 'Difficult'. After wimping out on the Cami, this seemed like a good way to restore some self-esteem.

It turned out to be great, especially the first third: ancient tracks winding up and down the little hills, laced with knotty roots and equally knotty bedrock, flickering in the dappled light. Then a descent into a cool canyon, green under bulging crags; a slithery kilometre in its bed; then a climb out over slippery slabs. We pushed most of this. After that, empty lanes, tipping generally downhill, took us into the buzz and bustle of Ciutadella – but there were cycle-lanes on most of the streets and Hotel Hesperia Patricia gave our bikes their own room.

We’d booked two nights in Ciutadella, so the next day (day three of our trip) could have been a rest day. It’s not as if day one had been a walk in the park either. A slightly late start from Mahon, an accumulation of short sharp climbs, and more technicality than we’d

IN THE PHOTOS

3) Great riding on the approach to Cala de Sant Esteve

4) Rocky terrain on the trail south of Punta Nati

5) Climbing steps above the beach at Cala Tirant

bargained for, all combined with a missed turning late in the afternoon to mean that we didn’t reach our rest in Fornells until almost eight in the evening.

Our – no, my – big mistake had been underestimating the amount of technical riding, especially on the north coast. Strategically, we’d also have done better to come a week or two later. In May, that bar at Binimej-la would have been open, and we could have found accommodation at Cala Morell, allowing us to split the north coast into three sensible days. As it was, our first day had been 48km with 1,000m of ascent, our second 50km and 1,200m.

CLIFFS AND COVES

For our day three ‘rest’, I suggested a short ride, due north from Ciutadella to Punta Nati then back along the coast-hugging Cami de Cavalls, a grand total of 18km with no major hills. It looked fascinating, too: a bare, cliff-edged, rocky landscape, littered with traditional buildings: most look like ancient burial cairns but are actually livestock shelters.

However, ‘bare’ and ‘rocky’ applied to the riding too. In fact the first 5 or 6km after joining the Cami were probably the most concentrated technical riding on its

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“The sun was out and the blue Med was just below... Later, the trail twisted past orchids and orange groves”



entire length. In sharp contrast, we were then quickly decanted into a sprawling holiday 'development', its main street lined with bars offering John Smiths and Emmerdale. We pedalled harder to escape.

Leaving Ciutadella, we knew things ought to get easier. The southern half of the island is limestone, flatter than the volcanic north and with more villages; even in April, it hadn't been difficult to find places to stay, allowing us to take the south coast in three stages. Heading south to Cap d'Artrutx, we were still rolling through limestone pavement much of the time, but the track itself was all rideable.

At Cap d'Artrutx we took a sharp left onto the south coast proper. The riding continued rocky and often absorbing, occasionally close enough to the cliff edge to add extra spice. A bit of beach-riding at Son Saura, then a forested section, cool and pine-scented. The lovely, sheltered coves at Cala en Turqueta and Cala Macarella gave exciting descents and testing climbs out again; then a final rocky flourish dropped us almost to the door of the Hotel Audax in Cala Galdana.

MARTELLO TOWERS

The next day began by looping inland, mostly on enjoyable singletrack, returning to the coast at Sant Tomas for an easy spin through to Son Bou. The sun was out and the blue Med was thrashing whitely just below us. After Son Bou the trail twisted inland again, taking farm-tracks and field-paths, past orchids and orange groves.

That's the Cami de Cavalls for you: it's not just that every day is different; every hour or half-hour it seems to change. Menorca is a tiny island – its area is about the same as Anglesey – but it has a complex mosaic of habitats, recognised by UNESCO Biosphere status, as well as a long and rich history. Mahon's port is one of the world's great natural harbours and was a strategic prize for the rival empires of Britain, France and Spain.

The island has changed overlords many times and the coast is dotted with Martello Towers and other fortifications. Many of the trails which make up the



DO IT YOURSELF

› We flew with Monarch from Manchester, bikes in cardboard bike boxes (thanks, Biketreks!) which we stashed at the hotel in Mahon. Monarch flies to Menorca year-round. Others, e.g. easyjet, Jet2, FlyBe, Thomas Cook, fly seasonally from various UK airports. Bikes can be hired on the island: try <http://bikemenorca.com/> or <http://www.velosjoan.com/> (website Spanish only). The route is best ridden as a continuous loop, stopping at a different place on the coast each night.



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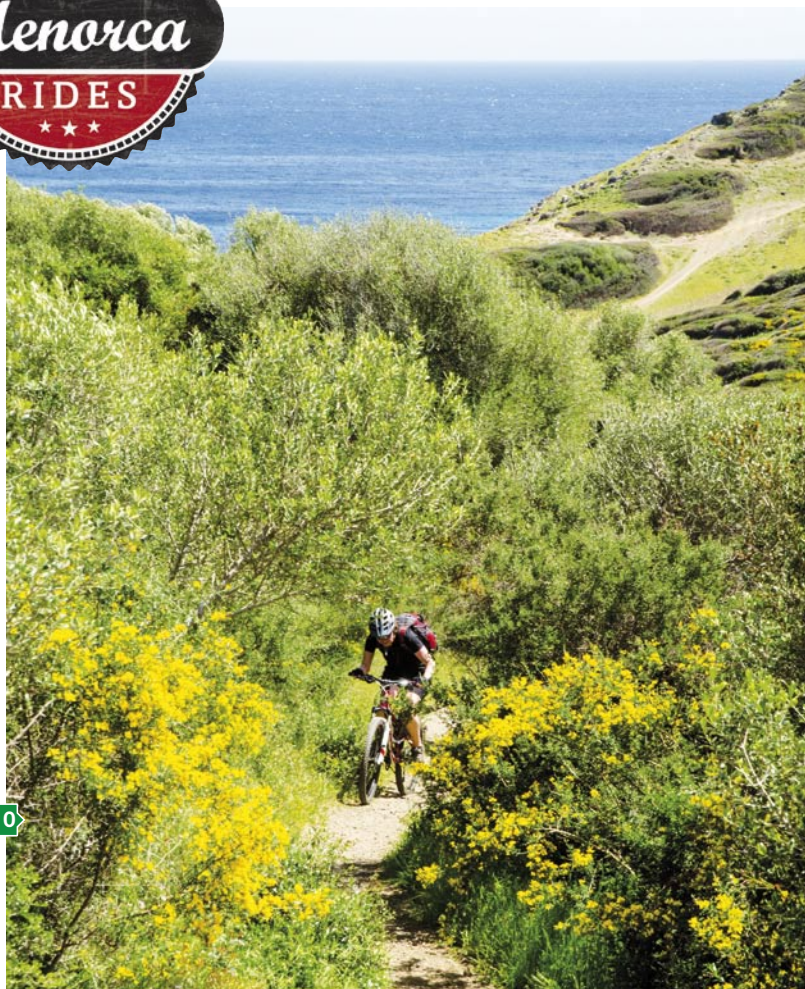


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IN THE PHOTOS

- 6) Easy riding near Punta Prima
- 7) Old port of Ciutadella
- 8) Fun descent to Cala Galdana
- 9) Approaching the defence tower of Alcalfar

GREAT
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› Cami de Cavalls (roughly translated as 'Horses' Way') were used to link these for patrol riders. The route was officially established in the 18th century, fell into neglect during the 20th, and was revived and restored for the benefit of walkers, mountain bikers and equestrians early in the 21st.

OFF THE TOURIST TRACK

Day five ended with a short sharp road climb into Cala En Porter. Day six began, almost as soon as we left town, with a little technical descent. There was more singletrack before the little fishing village of Es Canutells – discreetly touristy but a John Smiths-free zone, thank goodness – with more singletrack to follow on a tantalisingly twisting descent into Binisafuller.

It was mostly road from here to Punta Prima, before the last real stretch of seaside riding as the coast began to swing north. The end was almost in sight and we began to employ delaying tactics, dragging out our picnic lunch on the rocks looking out to Illa de l'Aire, home to unique black lizards.

After Alcalfar the route cut inland again, often confined between dry-stone walls, but there was rocky fun to be had as it tipped down to Cala de Sant Esteve and up back out again, a last singletrack hurrah before joining tarmac for the last few kilometres into Mahon.

It's ironic, of course, that the most memorable day of our Cami de Cavalls trip was the day we didn't do the Cami de Cavalls. It still bugs me. But there's an answer: we'll have to go back. 🌀



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IN THE PHOTOS

10) Climbing away from the coast above Caleta de Binillauti

11) Riding across the beach, Platges de Son Saura

12) Trail above Cala en Turqueta



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FACT FILE
AROUND THE ISLAND

Where: Menorca, in the western Mediterranean

When: Spring and autumn are best.

Accommodation is limited in winter while summer is busy and hot.

Distance: Officially, 207km.

Terrain: Remarkably varied: sandy beaches, rocky coast, wetland, forest, heathland... The riding is at least 60% off-road

Conditions: Mediterranean climate, surprisingly technical trails; novice mountain bikers will learn fast or end up pushing a fair bit.

Getting there/back: Flights from various UK airports. Or regular ferries from Barcelona.

I'm glad I had... A Buff to stop my neck getting burned

I wish I'd had... A wildflower guide

Further info: Official website: www.elcamidecavalls.cat/cami/ includes downloadable guides for smartphones; print version from tourist offices on the island. A guidebook is due from Cicerone Press next year. We had much help from www.walkmenorca.com

