



Your on the
Street Reporter



Uyless Black

Foreign Places:
The Mediterranean: Minorca

The Mediterranean

<u>Report</u>	<u>Topic</u>
1	Getting Started
2	Arriving
3	Istanbul
4	Rhodes
5	Crete
6	Malta
7	Sicily
8	Sardinia
9	Minorca
10	Corsica
11	Civitavecchia

The Mediterranean Report Nine: Minorca

Minorca (Menorca) was thought to have been populated by humans about 1,400 BC. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between, and occupations by Iberians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Normans, Byzantians, Moors, pirates, British, and Aragonese (Spanish). Presently, the Spanish are in charge.

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Today, we explored the island of Minorca. Our guide explained Minorca was the second largest island in the Balearic Islands. The largest? Majorca. Our ship tied up at a pier at the city of Mahon, the second deepest harbor in the world. (Pearl Harbor is the deepest). Along the banks of this harbor were hundreds of modern cottages and apartments, such as those seen in Figure 1.

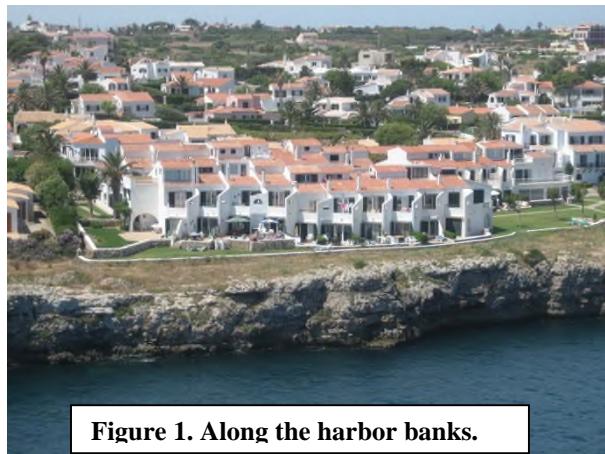


Figure 1. Along the harbor banks.

During this cruise, the World Cup was underway in Germany and *Minerva II* purchased a special package from a satellite company to keep the passengers (mostly European) up to date on their teams. I have tried to understand and appreciate the game of football (soccer), but I have concluded I am a lost cause. If I do not concern myself with the score, watching the players' amazing feats with their feet can be entertaining. But something seems amiss for a game in which the purpose is to win, yet is designed in a way that the contest often ends in a scoreless tie---followed by free kicks to determine the winner.

Son Bou Paleochristian Church

Our first visit was to an old church, located on the south coast of Minorca, and shown in Figure 2. Our guide explained this site was excavated several years ago by a team of archeologists. Before they arrived to begin their diggings, a local paper ran a piece about their project. The newspaper article explained that considerable work was involved in unearthing and separating the ruins from fifteen centuries of accumulated soil, sediment, and extraneous rocks.

To the dismay of the researchers, the local citizens decided to assist with the work. In the spirit of community action, they went to this site, and executed their own version of an archeological excavation. Later, the archeologists arrived to discover more than a few *nonextraneous* rocks had been tossed away from the ruins. Our guide said, "The archeologists arrived, looked at the scene and cried, 'My god! What have you done?'" The diggers answered, 'We wanted to help out!'"



Figure 2. An ancient Christian temple.

In spite of the misdig, the archeologists were able to piece-together these facts:

This ancient temple was built in the late 5th---early 6th centuries. The building has a nave and two side aisles, preceded by a portico and vestibule. The rectangular space at the end of the central nave housed the altar, while the far end of the building was also divided into three parts, with the presbytery in the centre and a sacristy on either side.¹

Impressive. One wonders what other archeological gems could have been unearthed if the natives had not been so helpful.

Adios Red Kites. What's Next?

On our way to another old site, our guide said Minorca was formerly the home to a large population of birds of prey, notably the Red Kite. The Red Kite is now almost extinct on the island. The scientists are not certain about the reasons for the decline, but they hold to three theories. **Theory One:** The killing of the island's rabbits for the Minorcans' suppers led to a decline in the rabbit population and the Red Kite went elsewhere for its food. **Theory Two:** The Red Kite makes its nest in a tree. The cutting of the trees for firewood to cook the rabbits led to a

¹ From a sign at the site.

decline in the tree population, and the Red Kite went elsewhere for its tree. **Theory Three:** A combination of Theories One and Two.

Seems logical. The inhabitants of our earth, including animals, plants, fish, water, reptiles, soil, plants, bushes, birds...even rocks...have developed symbiotic relationships over the past several millions of years. I am hardly a tree hugger, but it makes no sense to me that a sizable portion of our population cannot accept that our actions affect the environment and have consequences, some of which we are beginning to realize are not very pleasant.

It's puzzling. What makes humans think the planet's parts---those vital threads of our lives---are not interrelated and closely tied to one another? Maybe we are too focused on staying indoors and watching TV. But on occasion, we are able to understand that some things on earth are indeed tied together. For example, the television show: "Previously, on 24."

A Minorca Beach

While I am still agile enough to swim, I intend to return to Minorca to take in its beaches, one is shown in Figure 3 (which was adjacent to the old church.) If I grow too old to swim, I'll come back and lie in the sun, absorbing precious rays...rays I am incessantly informed are dangerous to my health. Tell me, what can be dangerous to the health of someone who is already "old," and advancing into "very old?"

...Watch those carbs. They're lethal.

...Stay away from XO. Plays hell with the liver.

....Stay in the shade. Basal cells can morph into melanoma.

...Keep your heart healthy. Spend 50% of your semi-senile years on the treadmill. Spend the other 50% undergoing and recovering from joint replacements---caused by your time on the treadmill.



Figure 3. A beach for the aged and ageless.

At what point in our lives do we say, *It doesn't matter?* The answer is Never. Our nation has a set of old people who are more robust than many other societies. One exception is a community in Italy whose old people's principal intakes are pasta and red wine. Sure, some have gout problems, but they live a long time. Their philosophy is, "Who cares if I am full of gout, if I am also full of wine, not to mention pasta"

I fear my tombstone will read, "He died a healthy man."

Talaiotic Village of Taula de Torralba

Our last visit today was the prehistoric ruins (2,000-1,000 BC) of Taula de Torralba. Along our way to this site, we encountered hundreds of large rock fences, some shown in Figure 4. Our tour guide told us Minorca was known as the Land of Rock Fences. He said the fences were made of stone because stone was more plentiful than wood, which in earlier times, had been used up for cooking rabbits. He also said the fences reduced the force of Minorca's winds and helped restrict soil erosion to within the small pasture surrounded by a fence.

I estimated the typical pasture was around an acre or so in size, and each lot was surrounded by a row of rocks about four feet high. America has its share of stone and rock walls, especially in the eastern countrysides. But an entire island of small parcels of land, divided with rock fences, was impressive. I asked our guide if there were many occasions in which these acreages and fences were altered because of a change in ownership. He replied, "What do you think?"

"I expect not." A new meaning to the saying: cast in stone.

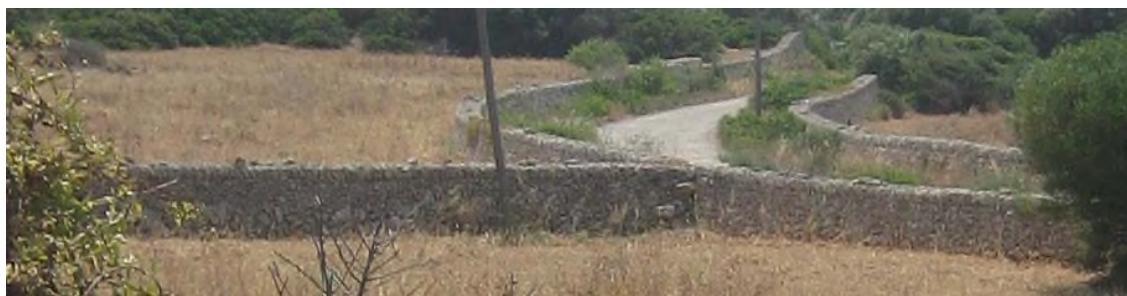


Figure 4. Rock fences.

The Talaiotic Village of Taula de Torralba was yet another interesting pile of rocks. Yet, as with previous ruins, the archeologists have been able to glean a wealth of information from these ruins. To illustrate, we use the structure in Figure 5, known in Spanish, as Recinte de taula de Torralba d'En Solort (Alaior).

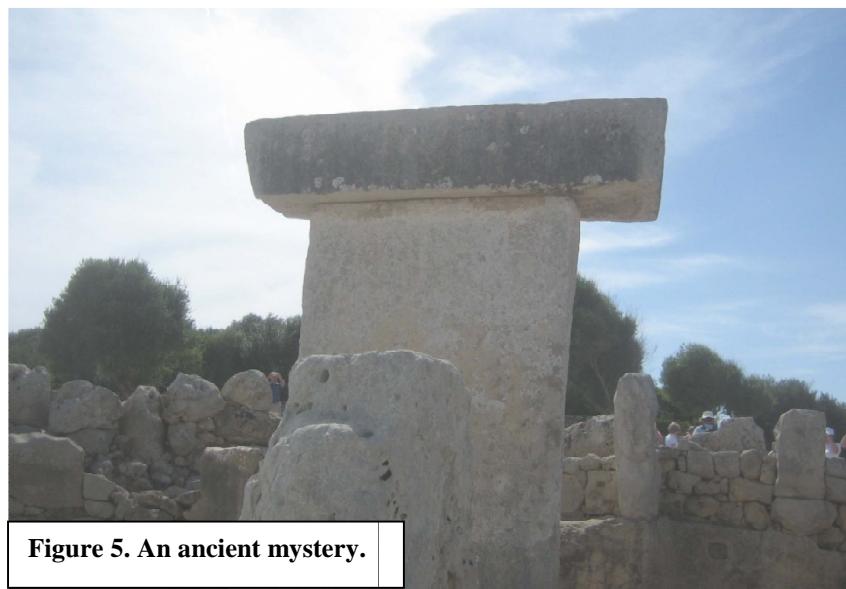


Figure 5. An ancient mystery.

Several theories have been put forth about the function and significance of this structure. Some historians think it was a central place for high priests to evoke their animal sacrifices as part of their religion. Others believe it had religious significance but without animal sacrifices. Another set of experts hold to the idea that it was part of an altar for a fertility goddess. Yet another theory states the stones did nothing more than hold up a roof.

The tour guide, whom I was beginning to recognize as a learned historian, suggested we choose the idea we liked best. He said our theory would be as valid as any of the others. I chose the fertility goddess scenario, as I am not into blood sacrifices and have never been opposed to fertility rites, at least from what I know about them.

An Elegant Guide and a Graceful Historian

During the hour-long trip from Recinte de taula de Torralba d'En Solort (Alaior) to the ship, our tour guide entertained us with amusing anecdotes about the times when the British were in control of the island. One story went as follows: The English painted their houses red to differentiate their homes from the natives' abodes. The natives didn't care for the color and stayed with tans and grays for their domiciles. The Brits imported gin from England to distinguish their drink from the natives' wine. The natives took to the drink, as well as various gin related cocktails. The gin "screwdriver" was a favorite, and the Minorcans called it gin "turn a screw."

Most of this hour of our return to the ship was spent with our guide providing a wonderfully rendered lecture on the history of the Balearic Islands and Minorca. After about twenty minutes of listening to his talk, I checked to see if he was using notes. He was reciting from memory and a fine recitation it was. I thought back to my encounter with the forgetless man yesterday. Our guide would have given Photographic Memory Man a run for his money.

On our departure from the bus, I offered, "You are the best tour guide I've met...a knowledgeable historian to boot."

"Gracias, that keeps me going!"

"Good. My compliment is in lieu of a tip."

He paused. I placed a bill in his hand, "Just kidding. Keep it up."

Dining Out

The four reporters decided for a change of pace today for our dining. The ship was leaving later in the evening, so we took a short walk around Mahon, posed for a few pictures---one of



Reporter Junior and Reporter Juniorette is shown in Figure 6---and stopped off at a café for an unneeded meal. I had some of the best Gazpacho ever....and I'm a Gazpacho cook and gourmet.

If you have a chance, come to Minorca. I intend to spend a more time here. I would like to take another cruise around the Med and visit these countries (and others) again.

Figure 6. Eyes right Al.

But there are many other things to see and places to visit before I kick the bucket. An old Persian saying claims, “Wherever you go, the sky is the same color.” True, but the earth beneath that sky displays almost infinite colors. I want to see more of earth’s hues.