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Menorca, Where Horses Reign Supreme

by Alex Abella, MHIC Member

Imagine an island filled with all-black stallions and mares, dotted with quaint white villages, surrounded by turquoise waters and kissed by soft Mediterranean breezes, in a renowned ecological refuge, where there are more horses per capita than anywhere around...

"Well, that's our claim anyway," says Mateu Pons, owner of Algendar Rutes, a horse-back excursions outfit in the Spanish island of Menorca, located in the western Mediterranean. "Other people from Europe have come to ride here and made the same claim about their town or region, but none have so many of such a unique breed as we have here."

Indeed, the Purebred Menorca Horse and its island of birth make the most beautiful of couples. It is nothing short of a marriage, a marriage of centuries, an historical marriage, and the stuff that equestrian dreams are made of. This became my unexpected dream vacation this summer.

Dark, handsome, brave and kind, the Menorca Horse is said to be descended from various Spanish island and mainland breeds, as well as from the breeds of the many invaders the centuries brought to this land. To ride the Menorcan Horse through his magical island is to live history, from the crystalline beaches that beckoned Phoenicians, Greeks and Carthaginians, through the still existing cobblestone routes of the Romans, past the influences of Moorish invasions, the kingdoms of Mallorca and Aragon, and beyond the remnants of French and English occupations. The significance of the names of farm estates, the stone walls along the paths, the castles in the distance, and the archaeological wonders, is laid out before you as you ride through on your majestic black stallion. And no, none of this is exaggeration or literary license.

The Menorcan Horse breed as it is today is

thought to be 200 years old, as it has been at the center of the island's holidays and festivities for that long at least. The Feast of St. John, held in June in the castle-topped city of Ciutadella, is the best known, but a stay in Menorca quickly divulges the true connection of the horse to its people: everybody and their cousin reports rearing on a Menorca stallion through the streets during summer festivities in their town! In fact, the traditional and spectacular "bots," in which the horses rear and walk or jump several feet on their hind legs while people reach out to touch them for good luck, is the pride and joy of every Menorcan's memory bank. "Look, this is me riding in the town of Ferreries' festivities, and this is my daughter's girlfriend doing the bot among the people as well," exclaims Biel Febrer, as he shows me videos and pictures on his phone, readily available at the touch of one button.

Febrer works in Menorca's renowned shoe industry and his memories are just as generous and ready and joyful as the original moments. The pride over the horses and the traditions of the island is palpable and infectious in everyone you meet; even our taxi ride to the airport divulged another "bot" rider. Sometimes even children ride in the festivities. "Everyone in Menorca is either from the sea and has a "llaut" (the typical Menorcan boat), or is from the land and has a Menorcan horse. Some families do both!" Mateu Pons proudly exclaimed.

That passion for the heritage of Menorca is how its endangered breed has evolved throughout the centuries, bred by the island's people for battle, for farming, for carriage driving, for festivities and for any task required, with colts kept as studs whenever possible to ensure its future. A breed association was formed in 1988 and a stud book in 2008, and the breed standard today is for an elegant and agile black horse that starts

at about 15.1 hands. The average height I saw on the island was closer to 16 hands and slightly above, and I even got to ride a 17-hand, four-year-old stallion that might as well have been a rocking horse he was so safe. Only those that have been to an auction without their trailer or checkbook will know the relief I felt at having neither handy at that moment, but I cannot deny I'm still dreaming of that horse!

Incredibly sure-footed, they move like agile goats through the frequently rocky Menorcan landscape. Most of the stallions and geldings are worked in Menorcan dressage in traditional Menorcan tack - including a slightly high-cantle saddle to hold you in while you do the "bot" - and all are extensively trail ridden. The breed is also starting to enter classical dressage in Spain and throughout Europe, with their incredibly docile and cooperative temperament being one of their most beloved traits.

Today, several of the island's breeders are working to grow beyond the estimated 3,000 registered horses and there are several trail-riding outfits on the island to familiarize tourists with the breed and the island's history. There is also an exhibition hall, Son Martorellet, that hosts a wonderful weekly show with live music, lights, classical dressage routines, work at liberty, and several demonstrations of Menorcan dressage with the traditional "bots."

If being on a beautiful island is not enough of a magical experience and opportunity to disconnect, imagine being a horseperson on such an island where horses are at the center of life there, to top it all off. Everywhere you drive, fields dotted with black horses. Everyone you speak to, a lover of horses. One cannot possibly live through such a unique experience without dreaming of return, so I'm already planning for an even deeper look into this unique island and its horses next summer. Who's coming with me?



Biel Febrer doing the "bot" at the Ferreries' Annual Festivities

Alex Abella on a four-year-old stallion in Menorcan tack riding on the Cami Cavalls, the historic horse route that traverses Menorca.

The horses at the Son Martorellet show.

