

# Experiencing Minorca's Festival of Saint John

By Debi Lander





**M**ention you're going to the Balearic Islands, and you might get a quizzical look. More likely, the four islands will be recognized by their individual names: Mallorca, Ibiza, Minorca and the least well known, Formentera. They lie off the coast of Spain in the western Mediterranean Sea between the mainland and Africa. Catalan and Spanish are the official languages, but many locals understand English.

The Balearics rank as favorite vacations spots for Spaniards and other Europeans. Many tourists from the UK visit annually, but relatively few Americans. The easiest U.S. gateway is through Madrid, and then you can hop a short flight to the islands.

My itinerary began with Ibiza, known as the white island and for its nightclubs. I took a day-trip to under-developed Formentera via ferry. Later, I caught a short flight to Majorca, a fabulous island with great diversity and finally flew to Minorca, just in time to attend the Festes de Sant Joan or Festival of St. John. I landed in Mahon, the current capital city and traveled by minivan toward Ciutadella on the western end, the ancient capital and home of the Festival.

The horse-centric event begins on the Sunday preceding June 24, the day honoring St. John the Baptist and coincides with the summer solstice. That day is known as Sheep Sunday. The event features a robust young man, carefully chosen for the great honor, who portrays the Homo des Be or Sheep Man. He wears a sheepskin, a head-dress bearing a cross and walks barefoot with red crosses painted on his hands and feet. He carries a docile, pampered year-old ram around his shoulders -- all day. (Apparently the sheep is kept



awake at a party throughout the night, and, therefore, the animal sleeps through most of the ceremonies.) The Sheep Man is lead by the Festival Noble (a wealthy man of the town) and Committee of horsemen to begin the events.

The entire festival follows rituals that have been in place for hundreds of years. A week after Sheep Sunday, the Committee (nobleman, priest and flag bearers), followed by chosen horsemen, assemble at Town Hall square. The dark-haired riders wear black tuxedos with tails, black riding pants, white shirts, black bow ties and hats. Most are farmers but they look elegant; many were Antonio Banderas- handsome. The horses, too, are gussied up for the occasion with decorative stars on their foreheads that contain small circular mirrors. My guide told me it was good luck to see yourself reflected in the mirror.

Once assembled, the group makes three tours of the square. At the stroke of 6 p.m. the procession proceeds toward Sant Joan de Missa, a country church on the outskirts of town, about an hour's ride away. Meanwhile local residents and their guests drive to the church and picnic on homemade goodies. Minorca is renown for its excellent cheeses and pastries. By 6:30 p.m., hundreds have

arrived and line the road leading to the church entrance. At 7 p.m., the hand-pulled bells start clanging and continue to ring as some 150 horses and riders solemnly prance, one by one, down the lane. They stop at the church entrance where each receives a blessing from the Bishop. The church priest is the last rider in the pageant, always preceded by a town noble in more formal attire.

The riders leave their horses with assistants who water, feed and clean them while they enter the church for mass. After mass, the riders mount their horses to the return to the city while party-goers flock back and jam into the narrow cobblestone streets and lanes which have been lined with sand. Light bulbs hanging from wires criss-cross the alleys, and banners of red bearing the white cross of Malta drape windows and balconies. As the horsemen re-enter the city, another custom begins: the battle of hazelnuts. (I am not making this up!) The hazelnuts are said to represent kisses thrown from the boys to the girls. Nowadays, the meaning becomes rather obscure as the tossing becomes rather fierce.

During the festivities, residents of the town open their homes to extended family and friends, frequently offering lavish buffets. A warm feeling of friendship and

happiness seems to float in the air. However, tourists just remain in the streets (as it is impolite to crash a party) and enjoy the festival drink of Minorcan-made gin and lemonade. The libation is sold in small plastic cups all around town. Music sweeps through the air and adds to the celebration mayhem.

The night progresses and around 11 p.m. the horses and riders again make three tours of the streets and squares. They also follow an age-old tradition for good luck and call upon certain homes by riding through the doorway, doffing their hats, and entering the ground floor rooms. I found myself shaking my head as I witnessed two horses in one house at the same time!

The nighttime party ramps up and grows wild and crazy as Spaniards cheer: "Bot. Bot." They are begging for the horses to rear up and lift their front two legs and the rider high into the air. The jubilant crowds swarm under the horse trying to keep its chest up. (More good luck if you touch near the horse's heart.) With the streets crammed like Times Square on New Year's Eve, it is imperative to watch where you are in relation to all horses at all times. Viewing all this for the first time is quite overwhelming, but totally thrilling.

Although I didn't stay too late, the party continues all night with the elders and youngest riders retiring before the others. The participants have spent hundreds of hours training their horses and control their mounts with amazing dexterity. These few days in June are the highlight of their year.

The festival continues the next morning with trials of the medieval games; time-tested games of horsemanship you might expect





performed in an arena. But that's not the case in Ciutadella. The games play in the plaza near the harbor where the crowds pack in like crayons in a Crayola box. I could barely move my hands up or down my sides. No announcer is employed to call the masses to attention, just the haunting notes of the flute and drum beats of the Fabioler (herald) on his colorful, pom-pomed drum. (If I thought the night before was frenzied, this scene cranked it up a few more notches.)

One at a time, riders begin to gallop toward a hanging ring that they attempt to capture on their long spear or lance. As they speed forward, the crowd magically parts, like Jesus parting the sea -- and defying the odds, the rider slips through. How this all happens without disaster is like the old Xerox commercial: "A miracle, Brother Dominic." Naturally the crowd roars enthusiastically if the rider captures the ring.

Another set of feats involves two riders who mount their horses so close together the men have their arms around one another's shoulders. They gallop at top speed, attempting to stay as one unit until they cross the finish line. Again, the crowd loudly cheers for the teams. A third game involves the breaking of a shield.



Port of Ibiza



The Church - Sant Joan de Missa





Following the trials, successful competitors are awarded palm canes tied to a silver spoon. Then everyone goes off to lunch featuring -- what else, a little gin and lemonade. Soon the parade again forms at the city church and rounds through the streets. Many children attend the festivities during the day, and at times the horsemen stop to let children pet the animals.

The final contests of the Medieval Games are held in the late afternoon and draw an even larger and more densely packed crowd. I'd have to rank standing in the path of the galloping horses and riders with lances nearly as dangerous as running with the bulls in Pamplona. But like Pamplona, Minorca is Spain, and the people wouldn't have it any other way.

Minorcan horse festivals happen throughout the summer in the other cities on the island, but Ciutadella's Festival of Saint John is the oldest and most famous. Regrettably, I did not see the ending ceremony or fireworks the following night.

If you get the chance to attend, do not miss it. Just don't imbibe too much of the festival drink, be alert and you will have one of the most thrilling memories of your life.

