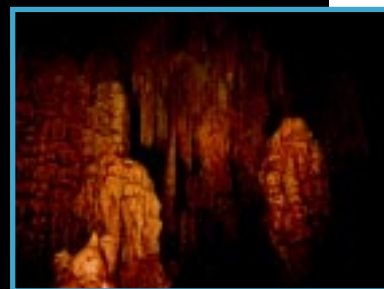


Menorcan Vision



story: Nigel Spike

A holiday to the Balearic island of Menorca was everything Nigel Spike had hoped it would be. Not only a well positioned dive centre, but warm water diving, scenic dive sites, on hand cafés and underwater caverns ...

WITH A less frenetic reputation than big brother Majorca, Menorca has all the advantages of weather, easy access - and good diving.

Playa Blanca, in the north west of the island, is a quiet, 'low rise' resort where everything essential (bars and restaurants etc) can be found within easy walking distance. We didn't bother booking a car (the pre-booked minibus transfer from the airport was impeccable), however the island itself is well worth exploring, particularly for those with a penchant for impressive ancient villages and structures.

The dive centre Dive Cala Blanca is superbly positioned on the edge of the bay; down a few steps and you're in sheltered water that shelves gently to around 10 metres before opening out to give access to more dive sites. The walls of the cove are well worth a look on a gentle potter when recovering from the culture shock of being able to see more than a few metres ahead of you, and being - what's that word again? - warm! Also there's something deeply relaxing about finishing a dive, de-kitting, and then staggering a few metres to slump in the shade of a café awning for a reviving coffee.

The bay really comes to life on a night dive: the octopodes are out for a walk, the cuttlefish are hunting and, for me, the highlight - barracuda, herding the shoals of anchovies into the shallows. They are intent enough on hunting to allow you to keep up with them at close range to try to photograph them - although my shot of one in the act of striking a fish was a bit of an abject failure. Altogether, an amazing dive, and in only a few metres of water.

Other dives rely on a trip in the venerable minibus, where the air conditioning depends on people remembering to wind the windows down. Typically, a short walk and jump entry gives access to underwater scenery that reflects the limestone underpinning of the island - arches, swim-throughs, tunnels and caves set back into the cliffs.

Depth hounds are likely to be

disappointed; all the life and interest is concentrated at or around the cliffs, with acres of eelgrass shelving into the deep water. But with superb light effects, a real feeling of exploration, and loads of photographic opportunities on extended (my longest was 90 minutes), relaxed dives, who needs to exceed 20m?

While all the dive sites offer a great deal of interest, mention must be made of what is generally accepted to be the best dive in the Balearics - the underwater cavern at Pont D'en Gil. Not for the unfit, demanding a hot, long walk in full kit before scrambling down a cliff path to reach the blessed relief of the water, it is well worth the effort. If the cave was accessible above the water line, tourists would be beating a path to its entrance; it would be mobbed by hundreds gawking in awe at the rock formations.

As it is, the only access is a dive to the entrance in a few metres before surfacing in a long cavern, drifting along gently in the fresh air that percolates down through the rock, trying to take in all the stunning formations of stalagmites and stalactites that make up the roof and walls in a series of vivid tableaux. There is no danger of claustrophobia - the place is just too big for that - only a sense of mind-blowing wonder. Once out of the cave you can enjoy photographing all the nudibranchs that festoon the walls of the prominent arch that is such a feature of the landscape.

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Under Spanish law, all diving has to be escorted, but Steve, Chris and Kim have the happy knack of arranging groups and sites to reflect experience, making sure every diver gets the most out of their stay. You won't beat their air consumption and, far from being a burden, their knowledge of the terrain and enthusiastic interest in the underwater life are positive aids to a good experience, every dive. Certainly, some of the exits in a cliff-dominated coast are hard to pick out for the

inexperienced: having someone who knows the (only) easy way out of the water is a distinct advantage!

All diving is on air, typically with steel 12L tanks. Full equipment is available for hire: costs are, obviously, less if you bring your own kit.

For more information about the dive centre Nigel used you can view their website at: www.divecalablanca.com



Images: p16 - stalagmites & stalactites at Pont d'en Gil (main photo & inserts); p17 - divers in hole; this page (clockwise from top left): mating nudibranchs; octopus; mediterranean fan worm; vibrant sea slug; pyjama nudibranch.