

# New horizons

With glorious sunshine and blue skies beckoning, our writers head to European gems

## Menorca

Menorca may be one of the smaller Balearic islands (sometimes spelt Minorca and aptly named in contrast to its bigger sister, Majorca), but what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in character and its laid-back, simpler vibe.

We stayed in Es Castell in the Bay of Mahón, on the southeast of the island. Even though there is no sandy beach here, there are lots of lovely restaurants and knick-knack shops and you are not far from the beautiful coves at Punta Prima and Cala Alcaufar.

Menorca has many claims to fame. Its capital Mahón is said to have given its name to mayonnaise and it is known for its sandals and gin. Its wine industry is burgeoning, too. We visited the Binifadet vineyard for a tour of the vines, a wine-making lesson and tasting, along with delicious Menorcan snacks.

The wine theme continued back at our hotel, the Barceló Hamilton, with a grape treatment massage using wine oil from Binifadet. The hotel's U-Wellness spa also provides treatments on its roof. We had an absolutely sublime facial as a soft breeze blew gently around us.

The Hamilton is a great base from which to discover Menorca. We got a water taxi to Mahón and took in the beauty of the island from the water. Mahón itself is very pretty, with accents of its colonial past – the British were here in the 18th century and on and off until 1802. It is a good place to pootle and buy souvenirs, with many shops and restaurants, and is also home to Teatre Principal de Maó, one of Spain's oldest opera houses.

If culture isn't your thing, you can always take to the seas. We spent two hours kayaking. It is not for the claustrophobic, as we manoeuvred

through many narrow openings into caves.

I loved it, though. You get fresh air, exercise and a sense of achievement, which made the sundowner at Cova d'en Xoroi all the more special. This incredible bar cut out of the rock is one of the places to be seen. Book ahead for the spectacular sunset views.

We also watched the sunset from the roof of the Barceló. As an adults-only hotel the peace and quiet takes a bit of getting used to, but not for long. The rooftop has hot tubs with huge Balinese beds and at night the bar comes into its own when everyone emerges in their finery. Drinking, chatting and dancing are on the agenda with "breakfast for dinner" platters of everything from avocado and cheese bagels and mini burgers to smoked salmon sandwiches.

The food here is incredible, as is the bar of the Sa Cova restaurant, and with escalivada with grilled vegetables and white chocolate soup with raspberry sorbet, it's very different from your typical tapas. With full stomachs we retreated to our room, which was bright, super-clean and had everything you need. Which pretty much sums up a weekend break in Menorca.

**Margaret Hussey**



Rooms at Barceló Hamilton Menorca start at £79 per night on a bed and breakfast basis. To book, call +34 971 362 050 or visit [barcelohamiltonmenorca.com](http://barcelohamiltonmenorca.com). Monarch flights from London Gatwick to Menorca start at £39 one way or £70 for a return flight. See [monarch.co.uk](http://monarch.co.uk).



## Umbria, Italy

Our car turned a corner to reveal yet another stretch of unmade bumpy road and my husband Alex and I wondered if we were in the right place as we headed several miles up the steep, wooded Umbrian hillside. Then, just as we were considering turning back, a pair of large wrought-iron gates came into view and swung open to reveal a winding cypress tree-lined driveway and the picture-perfect 14th-century chapel of San Savino.

Now deconsecrated, it has been extended and turned into a luxurious holiday let with a vast swimming pool that overlooks a valley of dense evergreen oaks. The villa is one of a collection of ancient farms and medieval ruins that have been beautifully restored across thousands of hectares of the private Murlo estate. They come with all the privacy and freedom of a self-catering rental, plus the high-end extras you'd want from a top-class hotel – think restaurant, golf course, private butlers and spa treatments.

A housekeeper armed with coffee, cereal, yoghurt and pastries arrived at the villa each morning (and even more fabulously, didn't leave until the washing up was done), while one lunchtime we were taught to make ravioli and tagliatelle by one of the estate's chefs, who then whipped up our efforts into a four-course banquet.

The one difficulty with staying in such an idyllic villa is persuading yourself to leave your cocoon to see the sights. It can feel like tearing yourself away from paradise.

We eased ourselves in gently and hopped on a ferry to cross Lago Trasimeno, one of the largest lakes in Italy, to Isola Maggiore. These days there are only about 30 people living on the island, but in the 13th century St Francis of Assisi spent 40 days there as a hermit.

After a hot climb through olive groves to see the ruins of an ancient Franciscan monastery, we stopped for lunch in the gardens of L'Oso,



a restaurant owned by a local fisherman overlooking the expansive glistening lake.

We then headed for the city of Assisi. While its giant frescoes and fortifications are spectacular, the streets were teeming with tourists, so it was a relief to retreat to the equally enchanting, but quieter, Gubbio nearby. One of the oldest towns in Umbria, it rises dramatically up the hillside and when viewed from the highest piazzas its terracotta roofs blend together like a magic eye puzzle.

Back at the villa on our final night we took a sunset stroll through the estate, where we met skittish fallow deer and a speedy hillside hare, then completed the evening with pizzas from the estate's restaurant, Il Caldaro, and a glass of red from the nearby Lungarotti vineyard.

The remoteness of the villa meant there were no streetlights or passing traffic to disturb our seven month old, Freddie, who slept through the night for the first time since birth.

Now if that isn't the perfect end to a holiday I don't know what is.

**Amy Packer**

Murlo Estate (+39 346 734 3527, [murlo.com](http://murlo.com)) has cottages for two from £125 per night. Villas, with pool, garden, kitchen, concierge service and housekeeping, start at £2,600 for seven nights. Spa treatments and private dining are available. Car hire from Rome Fiumicino Airport is from £8 a day with Rhino Car Hire (0845 508 9845, [rhinocarhire.com](http://rhinocarhire.com)).

## Sicily

Experiencing the delights of Sicily's sublime beaches and dramatic mountains – not to mention the renowned gelato – with my husband George was a heavenly treat.

From the airport we made our way up the coastline towards Taormina and the Grand Hotel Atlantis Bay. This exquisite hotel is built into a cliff, the elegant terraces descending to the crystal-clear water below, and from our balconied room we enjoyed panoramic views of the mountains and azure seas of the Bay of Mazzaro.

The hotel has its own section of seafront where we had a delicious alfresco breakfast followed by a bracing swim out to the hotel's bathing platform to soak up the sun's rays. A speedboat is moored close by, waiting to take guests on excursions to the area's beautiful beaches, coves and sea caves.

Above the bay, the hilltop town of Taormina is accessible by a spectacular cable car ride or a steep walk up 700 steps. Once loved by expatriate artists, writers and intellectuals including DH Lawrence, Oscar Wilde and Ernest Hemingway, today the glamorous town has a cosmopolitan feel and with its cobbled streets lined with designer boutiques, restaurants and gelaterias it's Sicily's answer to the Amalfi coast.

An ancient Greek amphitheatre in the heart of the town dates from the third century BC and remains in use as a concert venue.

South of Taormina the coastline is dominated by the imposing peak of Mount Etna, one of the world's most active volcanoes. Its summit is often shrouded in clouds – or snow in winter – but the lower

slopes are green and lush, peppered with numerous vineyards that produce exceptional red wine, thanks to the unique mineral composition of the volcanic soil.

We explored the area and met Salvatore, a local guide whose family has lived and worked in the shadow of Etna for generations. He took us on a donkey trek around the volcano's lower gradients and regaled us with folk tales.

Next, we travelled to Ispica on the southeast side of the island where we stayed at Relais Torre Marabino, a boutique hotel in the heart of a large organic farm that produces its own wine, olive oil, fruit and honey.

This hotel was originally a Saracen tower and our room had a beautifully rustic feel with tiled floors, a wrought-iron bedstead and elegant, antique wooden furniture. The views from our tall windows were of the lush gardens, the pool and the sea beyond.

From here we were perfectly positioned to visit another jewel in Sicily's crown, the breathtakingly beautiful baroque town of Noto, in the province of Syracuse.

Its outer limits belie Noto's beauty. But put just one foot through the gates of the old town and prepare to be awestruck by the wide flagstone streets, ornate architecture, grand palaces and cathedrals.

The sun was setting as we strolled along the Corso Vittorio Emanuele III, the buildings' honey-coloured sandstone shining with an almost ethereal glow.

And, if all this wasn't enough, Noto is famed for having the best gelato in Italy.

**Victoria Gray**



Sicilian Places offers packages from £1,355pp based on four nights' bed and breakfast at Grand Hotel Atlantis Bay and three nights' bed and breakfast at Relais Torre Marabino, with a week's car hire and return flights from Gatwick to Catania. For bookings or alternative accommodation and flight options, call 01489 866 994 or visit [sicilianplaces.co.uk](http://sicilianplaces.co.uk).

