



Child's play

Louay Habib discovered he had two new converts to sailing on his hands on a family holiday to Minorca, even if they did start overtaking Dad...

Jack and Tom are nine and seven and, like many boys of that age, are often found charging around the garden trying to imitate Wayne Rooney and spending a bit too much time on computer games when it's raining. Kids can get bored easily especially during summer holidays so when I suggested we go on a sailing holiday for the first time, they jumped at the chance.

The boys had done a bit of mucking about in boats and had really enjoyed it, but I thought it was high time they had some proper tuition; however I was conscious that it should be fun rather than a training camp. I didn't want to put them off sailing; it was after all a holiday and the experience had to be safe, warm, fun and friendly.

Also it had to be a suitable destination for a non-sailor as well; Jack and Tom's Grandma was coming along too. After thinking long and hard about where to take them, Minorca Sailing was my first choice and after one week there we are already booked up to go again next year.

Rapid arrival

The flight from Gatwick was a doddle, just two hours in the air and First Choice Airlines offer proper meals, entertainment and a comfortable seat. Mahon airport is very modern and well signposted and customs was a breeze. We had

chosen to hire a car for the week which cost about £130, but a bus service does run to and from the resort to the airport and you only really need a car if you want to explore the island. Home to the resort was a rapid four hours, meaning we could leave our front door in the morning and be sailing by the afternoon.

Minorca Sailing is about 25 minutes drive from the airport on the island's north shore at Ses Salines. It is a quiet area although Fornells is just 3km away with many restaurants, bars and a good beach. The hamlet of Ses Salines has a yacht club, a general shop and one bistro-style restaurant. Some of the villas are privately owned but the majority of the dwellings have Minorca Sailing guests staying. The choice of accommodation is huge, from small apartments to large villas, and all within a short walk of the sailing (without going near any busy roads). We stayed in a four bedroom villa with its own pool, a totally walled garden with a pool and eating area and a barbeque patio. Inside was a shower room, ideal for wet clothes and sailors, the kitchen had a dishwasher and washing machine, and the bedrooms had quiet individual air-conditioning units.

Tuition time

Minorca Sailing gets 10 out of 10 for the quality and quantity of the sailing. There is also a very good ratio of guests to instructors and the sailing area is both safe and sometimes challenging. There are over 250 boats and windsurfers; from beginners' boats like Optimists and Picos to asymmetric dinghies like the RS range, 29ers, 49ers and Musto Skiffs. The sailing school offers activities suitable for all ages and abilities, including children and



experienced adults.

The format is basically that the guests choose which type of boats they would like to sail and are then split into classes according to ability. This worked very well. After breakfast at the villa, we would walk down to the dinghies and after dropping the kids off with their class instructor I would then hook up with my own chosen group.

We would meet up again for lunch and repeat the same for the afternoon session. The tutors are all British and have obtained their RYA qualifications, the emphasis is on safety and fun but if you want to really improve your technique, the instructors offer one-on-one tuition at the end of the day which is at no extra cost. Although after two sessions of sailing every day you might be a bit tired!

I was impressed by the ability of some of the guests who were sailing asymmetric dinghies – although some admitted they were enjoying the holiday but had another motive in coming. One particular guest was trying out a Musto Skiff for a week before deciding if he was going to buy one. Just one tip, the high performance dinghies are not as numerous as other classes, and although I didn't hear of anyone who had a problem with getting their first choice, if there is a particular boat you are interested in it may be an idea to have a chat when you book.

The sailing area is Fornells Bay. At about five kilometres long and two kilometres wide with a very narrow channel to the open sea, the bay is almost like a lake. It does not get especially busy, even in peak season, the vast majority of the boats are from Minorca Sailing and there is plenty of room to put all of the classes into different areas.

The wind strength can range from calm to a good 15 knots and the land rises and falls around the bay making for some very changeable conditions which makes you concentrate on sail trim. In general the wind tends to be light in the mornings and building through the afternoon. There is a really good sheltered spot nicknamed

Above Minorca's fleet includes boats suitable for beginners and experienced sailors of all ages.

Right and below The Oppie fleet proved a great introduction to sailing for younger children.



PHOTOS LOUAY HABIB

'Chocolate Bay' because of the sandstone rocks surrounding it. Chocolate Bay is ideal for letting really little sailors out solo for the first time.

Boys own

Tom was in a beginners' class of about eight children, all roughly the same age, with two instructors. Initially they were taught some basic information on dry land and then taken out on mass in two Laser Stratos, they were encouraged to have a go at steering and trimming and were kept occupied by activities such as a treasure hunt for giant floating jigsaw pieces. After two days Tom was on his own in a flotilla of Optimists going through manoeuvres with instructors front and back in separate dinghies.

Now, Tom is a bit too confident and a bit of a

Right The instructors were patient and made sailing lessons fun.



show off, so nothing usually surprises me but I was amazed to see him gybe out of line towards me, chuck his sodden shoes in my boat then two-gybe back into line without so much as a wobble! The instructors had superb skills and were very patient with their young class, the emphasis was on fun and the children always came back with big smiles.

My eldest son Jack is a keen sportsman but at the age of nine he is already able to realise certain dangers that Tom can't, and as a result was not as gung-ho as Tom. But, after a while he relaxed and really started to sail his Topper very well. Jack was in another class of about seven kids, some of the children had already done quite a bit of sailing but I was the proudest father on the dock when I saw him get out on a boat on his own for the first time. Although it was a bit of a struggle for him, he managed to keep up with the more experienced children and was learning the

Below For adults there is racing each day, plus the opportunity for one-on-one tuition as well as group lessons.



rudiments of tacking and gybing with some aplomb. Once again the emphasis was on fun and the instructors were quick to praise the children's efforts. I saw a steady improvement in Jack's abilities over the week and like Tom he made many friends in his group.

Embarrassing dad

Unfortunately, Dad didn't fair quite as well on the first day! I have done a lot of big boat racing but never did any dinghy sailing as a child, (I was into rugby in a big way when I was a nipper) and I am ashamed to say that I didn't take to my Laser Pico very well. In fact if the truth be known I nearly sank it! I switched to a Laser Stratos which was more becoming to my physique.

The week at Minorca Sailing is definitely the longest period I have ever sailed a boat on my own and I must say I really enjoyed the experience; learning to co-ordinate helming with sail trim and feeling how the boatspeed changed was a real eye-opener but the really enjoyable part for me was the freedom of sailing alone, it is something that I have rarely experienced. Also I went sailing two-up with Jack for the first time, he helmed and I crewed and it was a very memorable occasion.

For the very little ones there is also a nursery; right next to the sailing area, meaning that if you visited Minorca Sailing with very young children, you could enjoy the sailing and still be within close call of your loved ones.

Safety conscious

When you mix kids with water, safety is always a primary concern and this is taken very seriously at the resort; all children must wear helmets and buoyancy aids. Adults needn't wear helmets but life vests are a must. The sailing area has virtually no tide and there are some very sheltered spots if the wind does pick up too much. There are numerous safety RIBs out at all times and on one occasion my youngest son's class was brought back by RIB as a precaution when the wind got up a little. All of the children are taught a capsizing drill and the instructors are all RYA-approved.

In the event of a mishap staff with first aid skills are on hand and in the unlikely event of someone needing to see a doctor there is a private clinic 20 minutes drive away at Mahon. I know this first-hand as my youngest Tom had a fight with a palm tree one evening and needed a couple of stitches. The clinic in Mahon was easy to find and all of the staff we met spoke English. It is never nice to see your children get hurt but full marks to the clinic, they did a wonderful job.

My mother, Christine, decided she was not going to sail (although later on she did say she regretted her decision) and spent most mornings reading by the pool and generally relaxing. However, she used the hire car to good effect exploring the island.

Further afield

There are some fantastic beaches dotted around Menorca and high rise apartments are only permitted in major conurbations so virtually all of the beaches are unspoilt. One word of warning: jellyfish can be a problem especially in late summer. There are some stunning vistas on the craggy north coast and some great shopping to be



had in Mahon or Ciudella.

The old capital of Ciudella, which is only half an hour away by car or bus, is worth a visit. The city has a fabulous old quarter studded with unique shops and cafes and there is a fantastic fish and vegetable market to purchase great produce for an evening barbeque.

On the subject of food, there is a whole host of excellent restaurants just a mile away in Fornells but Ses Salines has a gem of a bistro right at the heart of the sailing which becomes something of a meeting point for the evening. The menu is extensive and contains local dishes and simple fare suitable for even the fussiest of children. Meat and pizzas are cooked on an internal wood-burning barbeque and oven, and the wine list is extensive. There is also a large playroom with several games such as air-hockey and a television playing sports channels. The children tend to pile in there after dinner leaving the adults to enjoy conversation over a coffee or something a bit stronger.

Overall

In my opinion, Minorca Sailing is a fantastic location for a sailing holiday, especially if you have children who want to sail; it is only two hours flight from the UK and Fornells Bay is warm and child-friendly. The facilities are excellent with a massive choice of boats and the sailing centre provides well trained and motivated instructors. But don't take my word for it; check out what my children had to say! ■

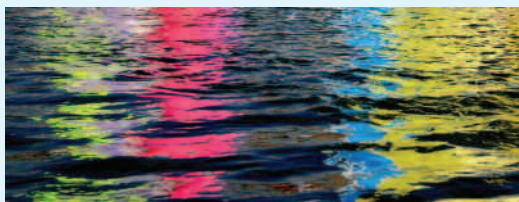
Kids' verdict



Jack (aged 9): My favourite boat was the Stratos but in the Topper or Pico I did capsize once. The food was lovely and I liked garlic mayonnaise on bread. I learnt how to tack and gybe and I learnt the capsize drill. I really enjoyed my holiday.

Tom (aged 7): I had a great holiday at Minorca Sailing, I was a good sailor. I capsized three times and one day we had to get the lifeboat to pick us up as it was a stormy day. I did hiking, it was fun because my teacher put me in the water. It was a shame when we had to go home but I had a nice time.

Far left Seven-year-old Tom was soon confidently gybing around the Bay – all children wear helmets and buoyancy aids when sailing.



Left The children's groups were roughly all of the same age, meaning each youngster made plenty of friends over the week.

PHOTOS LOUAY HABIB