

Holiday destination image – the problem of assessment

An example developed in Menorca

Angela Phelps

This article describes a method of assessing secondary images of holiday resorts to determine what effect such images have on tourist decision making. Passengers en route to Menorca were provided with a list of attributes from which to build up a word picture. First-time visitors and returning visitors could be separated by discriminant analysis but with a degree of overlap. The results seem to show that the package-holiday product itself is more important than the destination because of the vague place information given in brochures; also that unexpected deviations between reality and preconceived images have negligible effect on holiday enjoyment.

Keywords: Menorca; destination image; decision making

Angela Phelps is Senior Lecturer at the Geography Division, Trent Polytechnic, Clifton Site, Nottingham, UK.

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Diagrams drawn by Linda Clarke.

Much marketing in tourism is designed to attract people to particular places.¹ Tour operators or national tourism offices wish to develop a favourable image of their destinations in order to encourage a desire to visit those places. This raises various questions about the process of creating and applying a secondary image:

- how is the image formed;
- how does it relate to reality;
- how important is a favourable image in influencing choice; and
- do false prior images affect visitor satisfaction?

To answer any of these questions it is first necessary to establish the nature of the secondary image. Perception of place is a highly personal reaction and it is difficult to make satisfactory generalizations. To avoid expensive and time-consuming survey work it is necessary to establish summary methods capable of producing usable results. In this paper a simple method of assessing secondary images based on verbal descriptions is discussed, with a consideration of how the resulting information may be used in studies of marketing.

Secondary image assessment

One problem in assessing secondary images is to establish a valid control, or standard against which to measure impressions of a place.² It is debatable whether this can realistically be termed reality. Experience of a place will result in the formation of a primary image of that place, but the nature of the image will vary with the individual. Thus the primary image of a place formed by a tourist may differ quite substantially from that of a local resident, although both are based on 'real' experience. In this study an attempt is made to assess the secondary images of visitors who are new to a destination, using as a control the primary images presented by visitors familiar with the place returning for a subsequent holiday. A follow-up survey traced some of the first-time visitors on return from their holiday, to assess whether experience had altered their impression of the places visited.

¹R.W. McIntosh, *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*. 4th edition. Wiley, New York, 1984, chapter 9.

²E. Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, Pion, 1976.

Table 1. Use of check list.

	First-time visitors	Returning visitors
Total frequency	686	627
Sample size	48	49
Mean number of words	14	13

Survey

The survey was carried out on the five Fridays in August 1985, the sample being drawn from one aircraft chartered by Marshall Sutton Ltd, flying from East Midlands Airport, UK, to Mahon, in Menorca. The total number of passengers carried on the five flights amounted to 565. Questionnaires were handed to each party as they checked in, and collected as the flight was called for departure (see Appendix 1). In all 102 questionnaires were returned. The mean party size was four (range one to 9), thus it was estimated that the sample represents 74% of the total passengers. Just over half of the respondents had been to Menorca on a previous occasion. The 50 respondents who were on their first trip to Menorca were asked to take part in a follow-up survey; 34 gave an address for contact and 23 (68%) subsequently returned the second questionnaire (see Appendix 2). As Pearce notes image assessments may be highly dependent on the sample of respondents chosen, age and social class being picked out as particularly influential variables.³ In this study the concentration on the clients of a group of companies specializing in self-catering villa holidays helps to control internal variation in the sample. Inevitably visitors to Menorca staying in hotels were under-represented. In this case the practical advantages of restricting the number of companies involved were thought to outweigh the potential source of bias.

Images of Menorca

An attempt was made to produce an image of Menorca as a word picture built up from the use of an attribute list. The list was made up of words that could be used to describe Menorca, the Spanish Islands, other Mediterranean destinations and British resorts. Of the 102 original respondents, five failed to use this check list, so the resulting survey was of 48 first-time visitors and 49 returning visitors.

Frequency count

The initial assessment was based on a frequency count of the words used. One problem became apparent immediately—the returning visitors were a little more selective in their use of words, as shown in Table 1. To remove a possible discrepancy, the following discussion is based on the frequency of each word used expressed as a percentage of the total frequency for each group. Thus in both groups 27 respondents ticked prehistoric ruins; for the first-time visitors this represents 3.8% of the total words used to describe the image of Menorca, whereas for the returning visitors it represents 4.3% of the total words used. In most cases the difference is small, but may indicate important shades of appreciation.

Ranking

Figure 1 shows a ranking of words used, in the order of preference of the first-time visitors. The orders produced by the two groups of visitors show an overall similarity, which is not surprising as they both describe the same place, and a Wilcoxon test showed no significant difference in the sets of scores. Nevertheless, this lack of statistical distinction is due to the fact that the differences balance out, and should not be allowed to obscure the interesting variations that are present. Thus soldiers, strong

³P.L. Pearce, *The Social Psychology of Tourist Behaviour*, Pergamon, Oxford, 1982, p 9.

IMAGES OF MENORCA

RANK ORDER

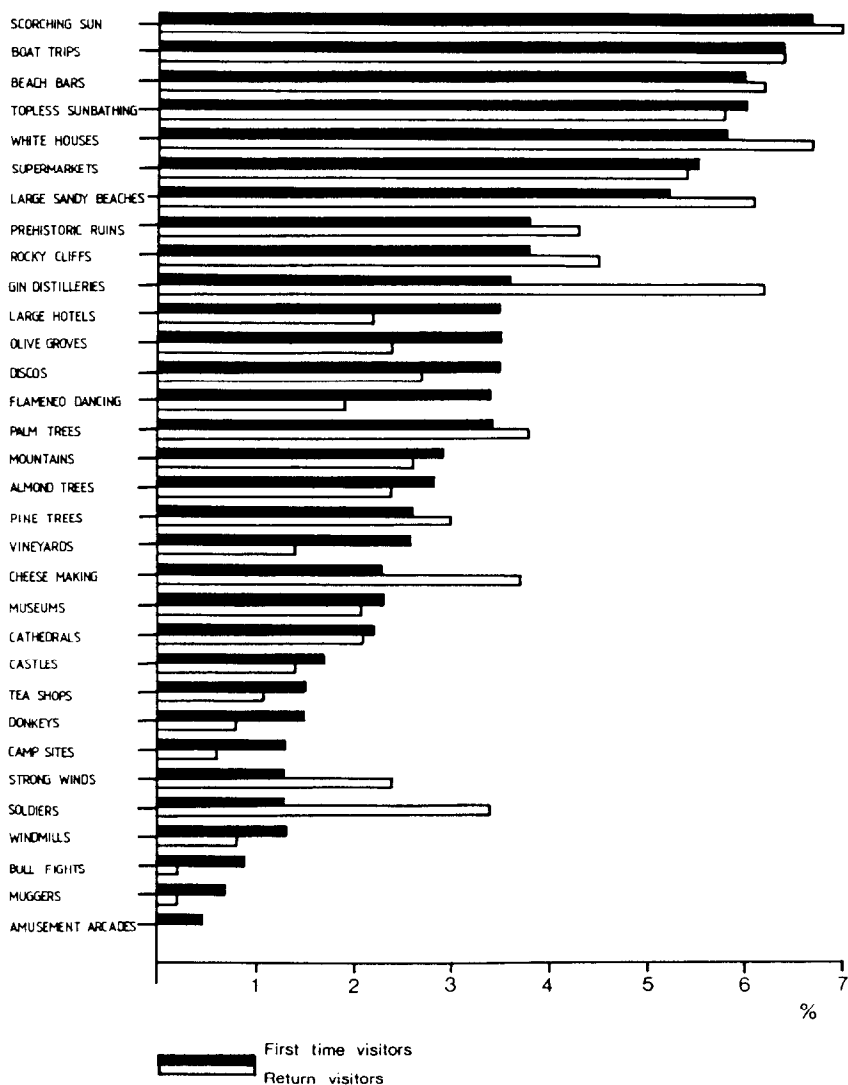


Figure 1. Images of Menorca – rank order.

winds, cheese-making and gin distilleries show a negative difference of more than five rank positions, indicating a greater usage by returning visitors. Large hotels, flamenco dancing, vineyards and olive groves show a positive difference of more than five positions, indicating a greater use by first-time visitors.

When considering the first-time visitors the rank order must indicate the initial image of Menorca, a secondary image based on formal sources such as brochures and guide books, and informal sources such as conversations with friends. The main factors here are scorching sun, boat trips, beach bars, topless sunbathing, white houses, supermarkets and large sandy beaches. Most of these factors also come at the top of the list for returning visitors. However, first-time visitors show other general 'Spanish holiday' factors high on their list, eg large hotels, olive groves, discos and flamenco dancing. Examination of the returning

visitors show these not to be a dominant feature in the primary image of Menorca, with gin distilleries, rocky cliffs, prehistoric ruins and cheese-making taking their place.

Relative frequencies

Figure 2 shows a plot of the relative frequency of words used by both groups. The residuals represent the variations regardless of the number of times the word is used. The diagonal line indicates equal use by both groups, therefore the largest residuals show the greatest differences in the images occurring with gin distilleries, soldiers, strong winds and cheese-making. These features are all more dominant in the image of returning visitors than first-time visitors. Menorca's role as a garrison clearly does not feature in the prior image of new visitors, but to those familiar with the island the number of soldiers, especially in Mahon and Villa Carlos, forms a significant memory recalled by 42% of respondents. The strong winds are rarely mentioned by the brochures—this is a negative climatic feature infrequently experienced in the high season, but sufficiently penetrating when it does occur to be recalled by 32% of the visitors. Clearly the locally made gin, and to a lesser extent cheese, is more within the experience of holidaymakers with 66% and 28% respectively of returning visitors making the association.

When considering words used more frequently by first-time visitors several groupings may be suggested:

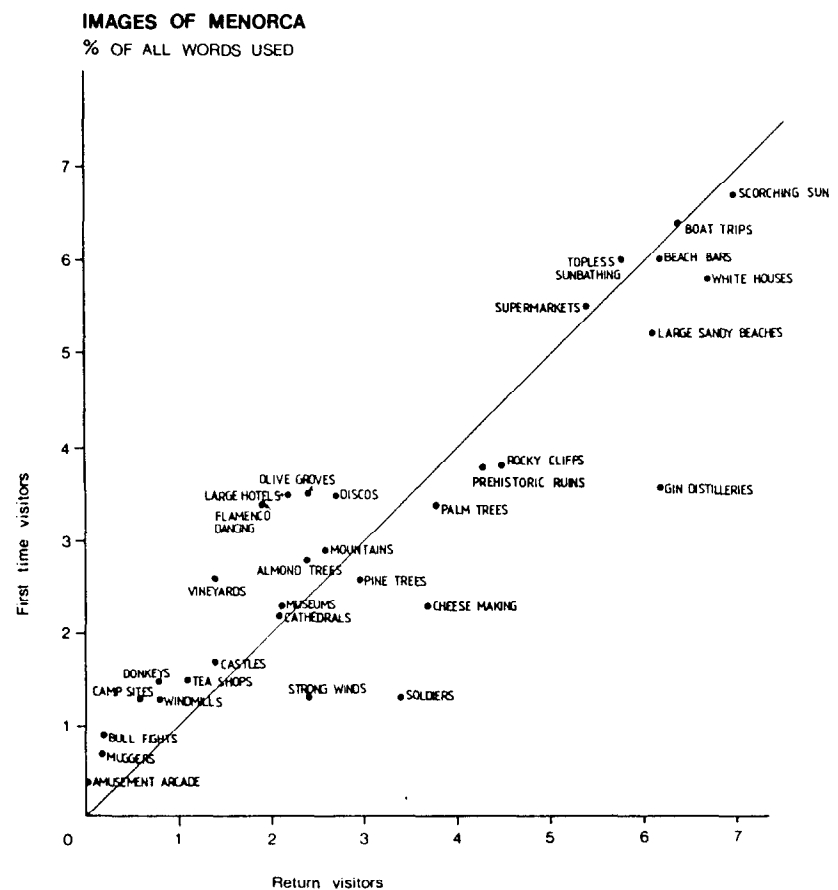


Figure 2. Images of Menorca – % of all words used.

Source: Survey of Menorca visitors 1985, A. Phelps

- words associated with the stereotype Spanish holiday—large hotels, flamenco dancing, bullfights, discos, campsites;
- words associated with Mediterranean islands—olive groves, vineyards, windmills, almond trees; and
- rarely used words associated with British holidays—tea shops, amusement arcades.

Some of the differences are quite small, but even so may reveal significant discrepancies, eg the underestimation of the beaches by first-time visitors. Clearly publicity for Menorca is not getting across the quantity and quality of the beaches that can be found there, a factor that could be taken up to enhance the promoted image.

Discriminant analysis

Although differences in the images presented by first-time and return visitors are discernable, there does seem to be an element of overlap. A discriminant analysis was carried out to identify respondents presenting an atypical image for their group. A discriminant score was computed for each respondent on the basis of the combination of words used (analysis by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences—SPSS). In the resulting plot (Figure 3) the two groups are clearly separated by the pattern of words used, but interestingly seven returning visitors present images more akin to the new visitors, and 10 first-time visitors fall into the group of returning visitors. When the individual questionnaires were examined no conclusive reasons were found but the following observations were made:

- Returning visitors, but scoring as first-time visitors—of seven parties, four had stayed in a hotel on the previous visit and three had not been to Menorca for some years. Hotel-centred holidays may fail to bring out the distinctiveness of a place, with the immediate environs of the hotel dominating the experience, and with less opportunity to encounter the local area. Images may fade with time, especially if intervening visits to other similar places confuse the memory.
- First-time visitors, but scoring as returning visitors—of the 10 parties concerned six had connections with friends who had visited

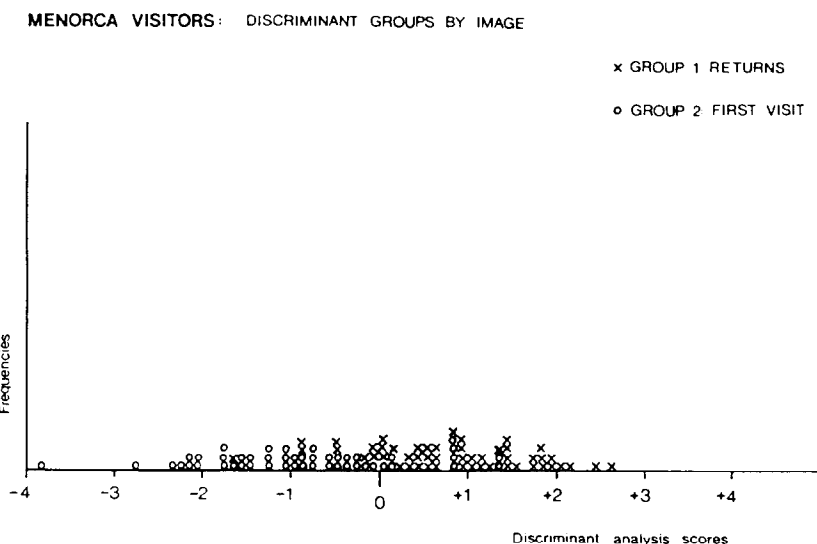


Figure 3. Menorca visitors – discriminant groups by image.

or owned property on the island. It is likely that a more accurate secondary image was formed in conversation, when it is possible to ask questions, than in reading publicity material.

Image and reality

Care needs to be taken over the application of these results. Gray and Herbert carried out a survey on choice of country and remarked with some surprise on the lack of information underlying the decision-making process. Indeed they found a clearer idea of places respondents had no desire to visit.⁴ Nevertheless, it has been suggested that “the larger the difference between image and reality, that is between expectation and experience, the more likely is the tourist to be dissatisfied”.⁵ Despite this, the fact that a proportion of first-time visitors have a rather hazy idea where they are going, does not mean they will not enjoy their holiday, indeed they may be pleasantly surprised by what they find. Most of the comments given in the follow-up survey were complimentary and remarks on unexpected features were usually positive, such as the lack of commercialization and the interesting archaeological remains. Of course experience may be influenced by preconceptions—a visitor expecting to fit Menorca into a general ‘Spanish’ stereotype may be slow to perceive the differences, especially if staying in one of the larger resort hotels. Many of the features leading to the definition of a distinctive character for Menorca result from an appreciation of the countryside and traditional settlements which may not impinge on the experience of visitors spending all their time in a main resort.

Image of resort

New visitors to Menorca were asked what they expected to find in their chosen resort. The majority thought:

- the setting would be pretty (82%);
- the place would be peaceful (86%);
- accommodation would be mainly in villas and apartments (82%);
- the beaches would be sandy (74%);
- the visitors would be mainly families (84%);
- English would be spoken a little (80%); and
- the resort would be part of a traditional settlement (84%).

Although some of these features depend on personal opinion (eg the prettiness of the setting) most have a factual basis that can be verified. Thus the visitors who expected to find a sandy beach at Los Delfinos would clearly be disappointed (see Figure 4). The importance of such inaccuracies in expectations is difficult to evaluate. In the case of the resorts without a beach, the disappointment lead to some sharp criticism of inadequate brochure descriptions, but this was unusual.

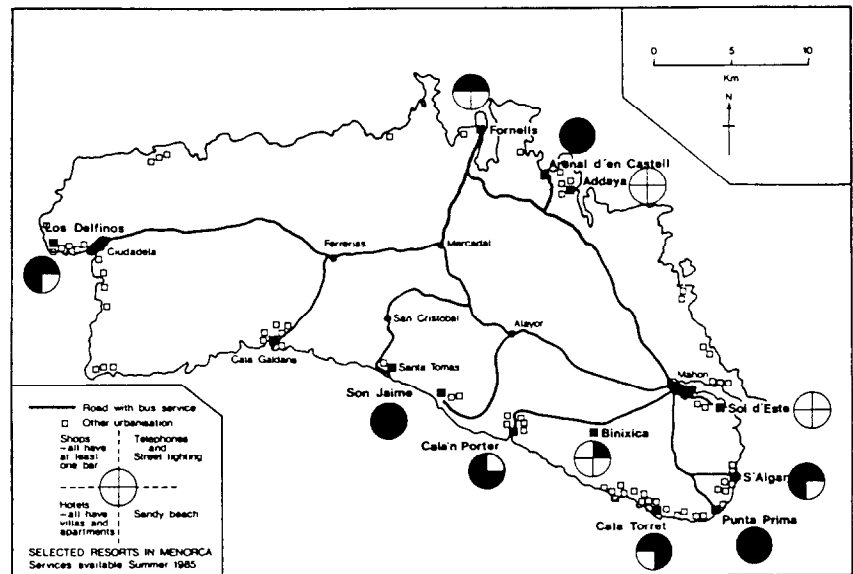
Type of resort

⁴C. Gray and M. Herbert, ‘Choosing a country for a holiday—knowledge versus fantasy’, Paper presented at European Society for Opinion and Market Research Seminar, June 1983.

⁵A. Mathieson and G. Wall, *Tourism: economic, physical and social impacts*, Longman, London, 1982, p 31.

The question of the type of resort raises more difficulties. Although the majority of new visitors expected to be staying in or near traditional settlements, this was also the case (though to a lesser extent—63%) for returning visitors. For example, 14 of the 17 parties returning to S’Algar expected to find a traditional settlement, as did four of the seven parties going to Binibeca, when in fact both these resorts are new ‘urbaniza-

Figure 4. Selected resorts in Menorca: survey of services in the 11 resorts visited by tourists in this study.



ciones'. Although these visitors had been to Menorca before, they would not necessarily have seen the resort selected for 1985 on their previous trip. Even so, it is reasonable to expect a more accurate awareness of place. This inevitably leads to an examination of what is understood by the term 'traditional settlement'. In some cases it would seem that opinions are pre-set by brochure descriptions, taking the form of the mass identities described by Relph as "the most superficial identities of places . . . based on glib and contrived stereotypes created arbitrarily, even synthetically".⁶ Binibeca is described in nearly all the brochures as a "traditional fishing village" or "traditionally styled". This description is clearly remembered, one returning visitor even using the phrase in his response declaring Binibeca to be "a traditional fishing village, changed beyond all recognition". It is true that there are a couple of old boat sheds incorporated into the waterfront area, but otherwise the whole complex has been constructed in the last 20 years. It would seem that in this case the public image is more persuasive than personal observation.

Perhaps a more generally applicable explanation lies in the concept of 'traditional'. No attempt was made to get respondents to define the term, but it would seem to have been used to indicate permanence. In the case of S'Algar, the impression would probably be accepted as a compliment by the designers and a justification of the expense of transporting and replanting mature palm trees.

Impressions after trip

Examination of the responses of first-time visitors after their return shows that the main surprises were in the type of accommodation (several respondents expecting to find more hotels) and in the beaches (three parties expecting to find a sandy beach at S'Algar). The question on noise produced a mixed response, two respondents expecting to find peaceful resorts instead found them busy, and one reported the reverse for S'Algar. This is of course a personal judgment, and much may depend on immediate neighbours. On the whole English was more widely spoken than expected, and the weather was hotter than

⁶Relph, *op cit*, Ref 2, p 58.

expected. Ten parties expected their resort to be part of a traditional settlement when in fact it was entirely modern, but this was not necessarily a disappointment. General comments by new visitors showed the island to be less commercialized and quieter, but with more British people than expected. The countryside was found to be greener, but less populated than expected.

Adequacy of information

When asked if they would have liked more information about the resorts few comments were made, suggesting that most people felt they were adequately informed or at least were not unpleasantly surprised by what they found. One respondent did remark on the wide variation in quality he observed between the resorts, to the disadvantage of Cala'n Porter. It would seem that inaccuracies in expectation do not necessarily lead to disappointment, in fact in some cases quite the reverse. Clearly a number of visitors were delighted with the quality and quantity of the beaches, indicating a surprising shortcoming in a number of the brochures. Some found the resorts pleasantly quiet, having expected 'Palma Nova style' hotel developments. In some cases the inaccuracy may have made the holiday easier (eg the fluency of waiters in English) or had no significant effect.

Discussion

This survey forms an initial step in a larger survey of the importance of image in tourist decision making. It would seem that it is possible to extract an impression of the destination using fairly simple methods. However, a more difficult task is to establish how the image is formed and the importance of false images. Holiday companies promote destinations through the information presented in their brochures.⁷ Although no detailed content analysis was attempted at this stage, superficial examination of the brochures of the companies involved in this survey showed an interesting balance of information. With the exception of Cosmos (only one respondent in this survey) all the companies specialize in self-catering accommodation. In all cases the majority of brochure space is given over to descriptions and pictures of the villas and apartments. The Whites brochure has only three lines on Menorca itself, and a brief paragraph on the two main resorts visited. Jean Harper devotes a page to describing Menorca and has slightly longer passages on the various resorts. The Menco brochure is entirely devoted to accommodation in the Binibeca area but never clearly establishes that Cala Torret and Binibeca are separate places. In all remarkably little place information is given, supporting Burkart's view that "in the package holiday we have a product which is destination-indifferent".⁸ It is therefore not surprising that when asked how important the choice of resort was, most visitors replied that it was relatively unimportant, the main factors in the choice of where to go being the type of accommodation and availability of flights at the required time. There is some agreement here with Hodgson's finding that nearly half inclusive tour buyers do not get their first choice. In this survey travel agents said their clients were more likely to change to a different tour operator than change resort, but had least flexibility on cost and departure airport.⁹

⁷P. Stringer, 'Studies in the socio-economic psychology of tourism', *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol 11, No 1, 1984.

⁸A.J. Burkart, 'Marketing package holidays', *Services Industries Journal*, Vol 4, No 3, 1984.

⁹P. Hodgson, 'Research into the complex nature of the holiday choice process', ESOMAR Seminar, June 1983.

Conclusion

The results of the Menorca survey suggest that the resort is relatively unimportant in the choice of holiday. It seems likely that this is not due to indifference on the part of the visitors, but an inability to distinguish between the various places on offer due to inadequate information. Clearly the companies studied consider the most important factor to be the accommodation, and most of their clients offered no specific criticisms of the brochures. A potentially valuable finding for travel companies is this lack of discrimination between resorts. It may be possible to increase the opportunities for repeat business within the same general destination area by giving greater attention to developing a distinctive image for the different places offered.

Appendix 1

Survey of tourism in Menorca—first questionnaire

Please answer *each* question: you may select an answer from those suggested by ticking the box, or write in your own answer underneath.

- (1) Have you been to Menorca before? Yes ☐
No ☐ → Go on to (2)
- (a) When did you last visit Menorca?
Last year ☐
2 – 3 years ago ☐
longer ago ☐
- (b) Where did you stay on your *last* visit?
Resort.....
- (c) Did you stay in a hotel or apartment?
Hotel ☐ → Go to (2)
Villa/apartment ☐
- (d) Does someone in your family own the villa/apartment? Yes ☐
No ☐
- (e) Will you be going to the same villa or apartment this year?
Yes ☐
No ☐
- (2) Where will you be staying in Menorca?
Resort.....
Hotel.....
or villa/apartment.....
(please give name and/or number if known)
- (3) How long ago did you book this trip? Before Christmas ☐
January – March ☐
since June ☐
How long will you be staying in Menorca? One week ☐
Two weeks ☐
Longer than two weeks ☐
- (4) Do you *expect* to find any of the following in Menorca?
(Please read the list quickly and tick as many items as you like.)
- | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| Bullfights | <input type="checkbox"/> | Boat trips | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Prehistoric ruins | <input type="checkbox"/> | Tea shops | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Pine woods | <input type="checkbox"/> | Beach bars | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Museums/galleries | <input type="checkbox"/> | Donkeys | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Palm trees | <input type="checkbox"/> | Vineyards | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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Amusement		Scorching sun	<input type="checkbox"/>
arcades	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cathedrals	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gin distilleries	<input type="checkbox"/>	Discos	<input type="checkbox"/>
Topless sunbathing	<input type="checkbox"/>	Campsites	<input type="checkbox"/>
Almond trees	<input type="checkbox"/>	Flamenco dancing	<input type="checkbox"/>
Windmills	<input type="checkbox"/>	Olive groves	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cheese-making	<input type="checkbox"/>	Rocky cliffs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Castles	<input type="checkbox"/>	Supermarkets	<input type="checkbox"/>
White houses	<input type="checkbox"/>	Large hotels	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mountains	<input type="checkbox"/>	Strong winds	<input type="checkbox"/>
Muggers	<input type="checkbox"/>	Soldiers	<input type="checkbox"/>
Large sandy beaches	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Is there anything else that comes to mind when you think about Menorca?

.....

.....

- (5) What is your *impression* of the resort you are to visit?
- (a) Do you expect the setting of the resort to
- look pretty, ☐
- dramatic, ☐
- or unremarkable? ☐
- (b) Do you expect the weather to be warm, ☐
- hot, ☐
- dry, ☐
- or humid? ☐
- (c) Do you expect the accommodation in the resort to be
- mainly in hotels, ☐
- mainly purpose-built villas/apartments, ☐
- or mainly in converted houses? ☐
- (d) Do you expect the resort to be lively, ☐
- busy, ☐
- or peaceful? ☐
- (e) Do you expect the resort to be close to, or part of a traditional Menorcan town or village? Yes ☐
- No ☐
- (f) Do you expect the beaches to be sand, ☐
- pebbles, ☐
- or rocky? ☐
- (g) Do you expect the visitors at the resort to be
- mainly young people, ☐
- mainly families, ☐
- or mainly older people? ☐
- (h) Do you expect the local people to speak English
- very well, ☐
- a little, ☐
- or not at all? ☐
- (6) What were the most important reasons for choosing *Menorca* for your holiday?
- (7) In choosing your holiday, how important was the choice of resort?
- very important (nowhere else on Menorca acceptable) ☐
- important, but not essential ☐
- not important (anywhere on Menorca acceptable) ☐
- (8) What were the reasons for your choice of *resort*?

- (9) Where did you first read or hear about Menorca?
- (10) With which travel company did you book your holiday?
- (11) How did you find out about this travel company?
- (12) Where have you heard or read about the *resort* where you will be staying?
- Travel company brochure ☐
- Guide or travel books/articles ☐
- Radio or television programmes ☐
- Friends/relatives ☐
- Anywhere else?
- (13) How many people will be travelling in your party?.....
Please indicate the number in each age group:

	Number
Children	<input type="text"/>
Young adults	<input type="text"/>
Middle aged	<input type="text"/>
Retirement	<input type="text"/>

I hope to carry out a follow-up survey with some visitors to find out how the holiday went. If you would be prepared to fill in another form when you get home, please give your name and where I may write to you.

Name

Street

Town

County

Thank you very much for your help. If you would like to make any comment on the survey or the organization of your holiday, please use the space below.

Appendix 2

Survey of tourism in Menorca—follow-up questionnaire for first-time visitors

- (1) Was there anything about *Menorca* that you found surprising, or did not expect?
- (2) Was there anything about the *resort* where you stayed that you did not expect?
- (3) In the first survey I asked a series of questions about what you expected to find in the *resort*. I would like to repeat these questions to find out what you actually found:
- (a) Was the setting of the resort pretty, ☐
dramatic, ☐
or unremarkable? ☐
- (b) Was the weather warm, ☐
hot, ☐
dry, ☐
or humid? ☐
- (c) Was the accommodation in the resort mainly in hotels, ☐
mainly in purpose-built villas/apartments, ☐
or mainly in converted houses? ☐

- (d) Was the resort lively, ☐
busy, ☐
or peaceful? ☐
- (e) Was the resort close to, or part of a traditional Menorcan town or village? Yes ☐
No ☐
- (f) Were the beaches sandy, ☐
pebbles, ☐
or rocky? ☐
- (g) Were the visitors at the resort mainly young people, ☐
mainly families, ☐
or mainly older people? ☐
- (h) Did the local people speak English very well, ☐
a little, ☐
or not at all? ☐
- (4) Did you find the facilities and services at the resort met all your requirements? Yes ☐ → go to (5)
No ☐
- (a) Which facilities or services were not adequate?
- (5) Did you go on any organized parties or trips outside your resort? Yes ☐
No ☐
- (6) Did you hire a car while on Menorca? Yes ☐
No ☐ → go to (7)
- (a) Did you arrange the hire before leaving England? Yes ☐
No ☐
- (7) Did you buy any maps or guide books? Yes ☐
No ☐ → go to (8)
- (a) Which maps/guides did you find most useful?
- (8) Have you seen a travel company brochure describing your resort? Yes ☐
No ☐ → go to (9)
- (a) Which company?
- (b) Did you find the brochure very helpful, ☐
not very helpful, ☐
or misleading? ☐
(NB please specify any shortcomings in the brochure.)
- (9) Was there anything you would like to have known about the *resort* before you decided to go there?
- (10) If you think of Menorca now, what comes to mind?
- (11) Do you think you might go back to Menorca for another holiday? Yes ☐
No ☐
- (12) Please list any other foreign places you have visited in the last five years?
- (13) Do you have any criticisms of the arrangements for your holiday, or suggestions for improvements?

- (14) Below you will find a list of statements about Menorca. Please indicate how you feel about these statements using the scale and adding comments if you wish, eg if you *strongly agree* that Menorca offers varied and cheap goods for sale tick column 5, if you *disagree* tick column 2.

	(1) Strongly disagree that Menorca offers this	(2) Disagree	(3) Neither agree nor disagree	(4) Agree	(5) Strongly agree that Menorca offers this	Comments
(1) The goods for sale are varied and cheap.						
(2) The food in the restaurants is appetizing.						
(3) A holiday in Menorca is a real adventure.						
(4) There are a range of places of interest to the tourist.						
(5) The scenery is spectacular and wildlife fascinating.						
(6) The social life is lively and exciting for young people.						
(7) The beaches are good for swimming and sunbathing.						
(8) You can get right away from the crowds.						
(9) The local history and culture are of great interest.						
(10) Menorca has a most distinctive character.						