

INLAND TRIPS FROM THE Costa Blanca



Costa Blanca
North

DEREK WORKMAN

Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca

Costa Blanca North

**Discover a Countryside
of Stunning Scenery
and Timeless Pueblos**

Derek Workman

This book is based on Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca, twenty-two detailed excursions throughout eastern Spain that lead you to all the spots you would never find by yourself; wine cellars, waterfalls, hiking paths, magnificent architecture, tranquil rustic hideaways.....and whether you are looking for crazy fiestas or gourmet cuisine, dramatic landscapes or rural luxury, it's all there, with detailed directions to make sure you don't get lost on the way.

As well as all the detailed information contained in the print book, this series of books has taken a step forward. Each has either four or five excursions, which can be experienced either individually or linked to make a longer excursion of up to three days. In addition, and not found in the print version of Inland Trips, full articles telling the stories of towns, events and places of interest, written by the author and previously published in international press, are included at the end of each guided section, creating a combined guide book and travelogue.

Unfortunately, thanks mainly to Covid 19 I have been unable to update this book for a number of years. Places have opened and closed, roads change, signs change, but much will have remained the same. If you would like to visit any of the venues mentioned it is probably advisable to contact them to check opening times, entry fees etc. Hopefully at some point in the future I will be able to update the content, but until that happens please accept my apologies for any inconveniences that may occur, which I sincerely hope will be few and far between.

I hope you enjoy the rides and experiences, and if you would like to read more about my travel experiences on three continents please visit the books page on my website, betterlatethanever.com (or click on the logo below) where you will find a library of books, magazines and photo-books, all totally free to download.



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INTRODUCTION

Since the Scandinavians began their sun-seeking forays into eastern Spain in the early 1960s, the Costa Blanca has become synonymous with miles of golden beaches, almost year-round sun and the relaxed lifestyle that epitomises Mediterranean Spain.

Most of the early visitors never ventured more than a few kilometres from the Mediterranean shore. Those who did were well rewarded. They discovered a region of glorious diversity, from rugged mountains to almost lunar landscapes, and vast areas of natural beauty where the scent of aromatic herbs filled the air and wild flower-lined walks meandered through pine forests.

They stumbled across Neolithic rock paintings, majestic waterfalls, soaring rock faces and deep caves formed over millions of years, and explored picturesque villages where recipes were handed down from generation to generation and the rhythm of life was dictated by the seasons.

Incredibly, this wondrous inland region still exists — and this book is a guide for those who want to experience more of Spanish life than sun, sea and sangría and are ready to jump into a car and visit places where a foreign accent is still a rarity, to explore the narrow cobbled streets of historic mountain villages where the past is in the present, and witness bizarre rural fiestas whose roots go back to pagan times.

The 22 excursions in the series of five ebooks cover the Valencian Community, with a dip into Teruel and Murcia, and are arranged in such a way that you can link excursions to create itineraries for a day, a weekend or longer. Each excursion includes route details as well as information on sights to see and local specialities. The ebook also has general information on driving, a basic vocabulary and hints on the use of the Valencia language.

REGIONAL INFORMATION

Valencia is one of Spain's 17 autonomous regions. Known as the Comunidad de Valencia in *castellano* (Spanish) and as the Comunitat Valenciana in *valenciano* (see Language below), it is made up of three provinces, Castellón in the north, Valencia in the middle, and Alicante in the south, which includes the famous Costa Blanca.

Each capital city takes its name from the province, which can be confusing, but when we mention Castellón, Valencia or Alicante we make it clear whether we are referring to the province or the capital city. The Valencia region is variously referred to in this book as the Comunitat Valenciana or the País de Valencia (its original name from the time of the Reconquista) or the Valencian Community. The Generalidad de Valencia is the governing body that provides services within the region.

LANGUAGE

The use of *valenciano*, which is not a true language but a derivative of Catalan, is the subject of debate throughout the Comunitat Valenciana. The regional Valencian government has adopted *valenciano* as the dominant language in all official documents, and much of the information it provides, including tourist information, is in both *valenciano* and *castellano* or, as we would know it, Spanish. Fortunately, much of it is also in English.

Anyone with a reasonable command of Spanish should get the drift of *valenciano* in its written form and, as almost everyone in the region understands Spanish, should have no problems communicating with the locals.

This ebook has been based on the excellent Mapa Turístico (Tourist Map) provided by the Generalitat Tourist Office which uses the *valenciano* version of the place names (sometimes with its Spanish translation). Nearly all other maps use the Spanish version of the name.

Some of the place names we mention could be slightly different from those seen on road signs. In most cases the names used are those seen while actually on the road at the time of researching the original book, although these are subject to change as many towns are replacing signs with the *valenciano* version of their name.

Thus, the names of Jijona, Játiva and Jalón can become Xixona, Xàtiva and Xaló, while the *ayuntamiento* (town hall) can be called the *ajuntament*. We have tried our best to avoid any confusion by making our route directions as clear as possible. If the name on a sign is slightly different from that on the map or in the book, it's most likely to be the same place.

INFORMATION

In each excursion, addresses are given of tourist offices or town halls where information can be found. The Generalitat produces excellent maps and information leaflets, as does each province and many of the individual town halls. It is always worth asking at both the *ayuntamiento* and the tourist office if the town has both. Many small towns have no information office, but you can usually pick up leaflets from hotels, restaurants and visitor venues. The main website for the region is www.comunitatvalenciana.com. Information about Spain in general, including useful addresses and telephone numbers, can be had by calling 901 300 600 between 8am-9pm seven days a week.

VISITING HOURS

Most national monuments and museums are closed on Mondays. Unless specific opening times are given, it is safest to assume that churches are open only during the times of religious services, usually in the evenings, although if you ask around you may find someone who has a key.

If you are making a special trip to see something, always check opening times beforehand as they can vary from those published, particularly during the summer months when they usually open later in the afternoon and stay open later. Some town halls close at 2pm during the peak summer months of July and August, but no fixed rules apply and it is usually at the individual councils' discretion. Festivos are holidays, whether national ones or associated with each town's fiestas, and normally have the same opening times as Sundays.

TRANSPORT

This ebook is mainly designed for those travelling by car or motorcycle. Public transport, both bus and train, between major towns is usually good although occasionally arrival and departure times can be erratic. Travel between villages is usually by bus, which often runs only once a day.

ON THE ROAD

The Comunidad de Valencia experienced a boom in road construction and it is possible to drive to places that 10 years ago were difficult to get to. The road numbers given in the excursions refer to those actually seen while researching the book, but be warned that some of these numbers could be changed. Thus, you may well find that the road number mentioned in this book is not the one on your map. In some places the road signs display both the old and the new numbers. Take heart: if the road sign says you are travelling in the direction of Dos Aguas and the road is numbered VV3081 while your Michelin tells you it's the CV425, Dos Aguas is still going to be the place you arrive at. You may occasionally come across a country road that is closed for major works, which can sometimes take months. Unfortunately there isn't much you can do other than follow the diversion signs.

Most roads in these excursions are in good condition and even the few that are not are perfectly passable. It is unwise to calculate travelling time by the number of kilometres indicated, especially on mountain roads where progress can be slower than expected.

Driving in Spain is on the right, but be cautious on country roads as some drivers tend to hog the middle of the road. Be especially alert in the early evening, at the time of the *paseo*, when couples and family groups leave their villages to stroll along the country lanes, seemingly unaware of passing traffic.

Drivers and passengers are required to use seat-belts and motorcyclists must wear crash helmets. The police are becoming stricter in their adherence to these laws and fines can be given if offenders are stopped by them. Drink driving laws, similar to those in the UK, are being much more rigorously enforced and there is talk of zero alcohol when driving. Be prepared for youngsters on scooters and motorcycles riding through red traffic lights or overtaking you on the inside.

The Spanish have taken to "sleeping policemen", or speed control bumps, in a big way. They are sometimes signposted and sometimes not, and can vary from a narrow plastic strip (*banda sonora*) to a wide, raised tarmac band (*paso elevado*). The latter are

usually, but not always, alternate red-and-white stripes with the white stripes coming to a point. Approach them with caution as some are dangerously high and there may be a second bump a short distance after the first.

Parking in most Spanish towns and villages can be difficult, especially in the small mountain villages where narrow streets were designed for nothing wider than a donkey with two laden panniers. When visiting these smaller villages, it is advisable to park your car before trying to negotiate the twisting alleyways.

It is wise to observe speed restrictions as speed traps are common and the Guardia Civil highway patrols can impose heavy on-the-spot fines for driving offences. Spain has introduced a stiff penalty for anyone caught using a mobile phone while driving. Be polite with the Guardia Civil and never argue. Accept the situation with as much humour as you can and, if you accept you have committed an offence, pay the fine.. Unless you can prove you are a resident of the country, you will be expected to pay the fine on the spot, although doing so immediately will usually earn you a discount of around thirty percent

If you are touring with your own vehicle, make sure you carry your documents in the car as this is required by Spanish law, though you can take photocopies of your car documents to your local police station and get them stamped and these will be acceptable on the road. If you are visiting from another country, these documents should include international insurance, a bail bond in case of accident (Green Card) and an international driving licence, although for short stays by EEC visitors the national licence is usually sufficient.

You are also required to carry spare light bulbs and fan belt and each car must have two plastic reflective warning triangles to be placed in front of and behind any vehicle immobilised because of a breakdown or accident. By law all drivers must wear reflective waistcoats outside the vehicle when it is stationary because of an accident or breakdown. If your hire car does not include these, ask for them. You may have to pay a small hire charge, but it will undoubtedly be cheaper than the fine incurred if you are caught without one should a breakdown or accident occur.

MAPS

Mapas Turísticos can usually be obtained from any of the Generalitat's tourism offices, although they are much in demand. Repsol produces an annually updated guide with detailed, fold-out maps covering the whole of Spain and tourist and gastronomic information. The maps also have the location of every Repsol filling station clearly marked on them.

SECURITY

The rural areas of Spain suffer lower levels of crime than the coastal resorts but it is still wise to take precautions. Always make sure nothing is left in view in an unattended car. If you are staying in a hotel, leave your luggage there. Spanish law requires that your car documents are always with the vehicle, so make sure the glove compartment is locked. When parking, try to use a guarded car park, though these

may be difficult to find outside large towns. Sometimes you will be waved into a parking space by unofficial parking attendants, known to the locals as 'gorillas', who will expect a small payment. It's advisable to pay them as they will usually keep an eye on your car.

Make photocopies of your passport and other personal documents and leave the originals in the hotel safe, except for your driving licence, the original of which is required if stopped by the police or Guardia Civil (you may also need the original of your passport when cashing traveller's checks). Driving licences, if the new credit-card-sized type with a photo, are usually accepted as proof of identity when using a credit card.

Spain has three main police forces. They are: the *Policía Local*, or "los municipales", who are the local police and carry out most of the minor tasks; the *Policía Nacional*, the national police who are responsible for crime prevention and investigation (both these forces wear blue uniforms); and the *Guardia Civil*, conspicuous by their olive-green uniforms, who are mainly concerned with traffic duties and crime prevention in small towns and rural areas. Do not attempt to photograph any building labelled a "Casa Cuartel". This is a Guardia Civil barracks, which is regarded as a military post, and it is strictly forbidden to photograph them. If you need to go to a police station, ask for the *comisaría*.

EATING OUT

Anyone who thinks Spanish cuisine is restricted to paella will be considerably surprised when they venture into the restaurants of the interior. The menu is often dictated by the seasons or produce that is grown in that particular area. Many local dishes are robust and full of flavours derived from local herbs. Locally bred Spanish lamb has no peer and it is quite common to see such rarities to the British palate as *jabalí* (wild boar) on the menu. But don't spurn the paella, because, as everyone knows, it originated in Valencia and is only one of many excellent rice dishes that will be found on most menus.

The *Comunitat Valenciana* has excellent restaurants to suit every pocket, and a number of associations promote regional cuisine. One to look out for is *Parlant Menjant* (Talking and Eating), *Associació Gastronòmica Muntanya d'Alicant*, to be found in the towns around the Sierra Mariola, the area to the west of Alcoi. The restaurants in this association specialise in the mountain cuisine of the Sierra Mariola and can be recognised by a small blue and white plaque.

The *menú del día* is a splendid Spanish institution. For around €9 you will get a three-course meal including bread, wine and dessert. This is usually only available at lunchtimes, but in some of the smaller towns and villages you can find the same good-value menú available in the evenings. If you wish to eat a la carte ask for *la carta* because *menú* only refers to the *menú del día*, although there will sometimes be a *menú degustación* which is a sampling menu and gives a taste of some of the restaurant's best dishes at a fixed price.

If the restaurant appears to be a little more upmarket and doesn't display a menú del día, ask for it anyway as most restaurants offer one even if all of them do not promote it. Tapas are usually available at all hours. They are of course a very Spanish way of having a snack but they can work out quite expensive if you try to make a meal out of them.

Don't forget that Spaniards eat late, between 2 and 4pm for lunch and from 9pm onwards for dinner. Most restaurants these days, excepting cheaper establishments, accept credit cards, nearly always Visa and Mastercard and less frequently Diners and American Express.

WORTH KNOWING

Spaniards love their weekend trips to the campo, especially to dine *en familia* on Sundays, and if you can go on your trips on weekdays, or where possible avoiding peak holiday periods, you will find hotels, restaurants and roads less crowded. If you can only travel at weekends and peak periods and want to make an overnight stay, it is best to book a hotel, particularly during Easter week.

If you don't want to be tied to restaurants, stock up on a few select items for a picnic. Even the smallest village store will usually have a good selection of ham, cheese, fruit, wine and soft drinks, but don't forget to take drinking cups, a corkscrew and a knife. Remember that these shops will normally close for lunch between 2 and 5pm.

The best months for touring are April to June and September to November. During July and August temperatures can make spending hours in a car an uncomfortable experience and it is not advisable to undertake any long walks in these months. During winter months it can be much colder and wetter than most people expect, especially in the mountain areas, so take along warm, waterproof clothing. Whatever time of the year you are walking, make sure you carry plenty of water.

Spaniards in general are quite tolerant, and casual dress is accepted almost everywhere. But, whereas wandering the streets in nothing but flip-flops and a pair of shorts may be acceptable in coastal resorts, it will not be appreciated in many inland towns and villages — and will be especially frowned upon in places of worship. Also bear in mind that churches in smaller towns and villages often only open during services and you should be very discreet while visiting churches at these times.



SUCCULENT FRUIT AND PRIZE-WINNING WINES

Area: Vall de Pop, west of Benidorm.

Route: Benidorm – Bolulla – Tàrbena – Alcalalí – Xaló (Jalón) – Fontilles – Pedreguer

Distance: 70 kilometres

Taste Valencia's succulent fruit, the prize-winning wines of the Jalón valley, spicy sausages made to an historic Mallorcan recipe — and enjoy the tranquillity of Spain's last sanctuary from a terrible scourge.

From Benidorm take the C3318 to Callosa d'en Sarrià, passing beneath the N332 coastal road, or from the A7 motorway exit at junction 65 to join the N332, travelling in the direction of Alicante, and then take the next exit, following the signs for Callosa, 15 kilometres further on.

When you arrive in the center of Callosa, take the second exit on your right from the roundabout with the new fountain, heading towards Bolulla (5 km away) and Tàrbena on the C3318/CV715.

Passing the Font d'Algar Water Park, the meandering road carries you through orange and *níspero* groves with the foothills of the Sierra de Xorta to your left and the Sierra de Bernia to your right. As the road straightens out, you see the village of Bolulla, a small huddle of houses tucked into the hillside.

Apart from a rumour that Hannibal and his elephants stopped off at Bolulla castle (of which nothing remains) on his ill-fated journey to besiege Rome, Bolulla is of little note historically. Nonetheless it is a pleasant stroll through the narrow streets with nooks and crannies filled with pots of flowers (though, be warned, the streets are so steep they should be fitted with escalators). The alleyway of Canto de Coca overflows with greenery and during summer months is a riot of floribunda.

The affluence of Bolulla comes in part from the groves of *níspero* that surround the village. Known as the loquat in English, the *níspero* is a yellowy-orange fruit about the size of an egg that, when eaten at its prime, is deliciously juicy and sweet. Unfortunately its prime doesn't last very long, but shops throughout the area sell the fruit preserved in a number of ways.

During the picking season from mid-April to early June, as you wander the streets you will see garage and basement doors open to reveal ladies trimming the stalks from the fruit before grading and packing them in boxes, using scissors to snip the stalks being as near to automation as they get.

On the opposite side of the main road is a picnic site with rows of barbecues. Should you have forgotten the salt or need something to nibble at while you wait for the *paella* to cook, in the center of the village is Comestibles Montiel, a choc-a-bloc tiny supermarket that seems to be open at all hours and is run by a delightfully chatty lady who can help you out in fluent French if your Spanish isn't up to scratch.

Return to the main road and continue onward to Tàrbena, the road zig-zagging furiously as you climb. Glance backwards and you see Bolulla sitting like a white pearl set in the deep green of the orange and *níspero* groves. As you get higher these begin to give way to almond trees that surround a scattering of white, beige and pink houses. One km after you pass a viewing point on your left (four kilometres after Bolulla), you enter Tàrbena. The narrow streets make parking difficult, so it's best to leave your car on the edge of the village.

After the banishment of the Moors in the 17th century, Tàrbena was repopulated with 17 families from the island of Mallorca. They brought with them recipes for Mallorcan sausages that later brought fame to Tàrbena. The village still has a reputation for its sausages.

You can buy them at Embutidos Petito on Parada Font del Botó, where a diminutive grandma sells long chains and fat balls of *sobrasada*, a slightly spicy sausage with a creamy texture, *butifarras*, rich black puddings, a mixture of pork, onions and spices, and the rough-textured *blanquet*. Whenever she plonks a sausage on the scales, she will tell you it is "*muy bueno*" — and indeed it is.

In the village square, Casa Pinet styles itself as a Bar-Restaurant-Museo, and justifiably so, as it is packed with an eclectic mix of *objets d'art*, bric-a-brac and memorabilia, much of it related to the Civil War. The restaurant, serving local dishes, is the domain of Jerónimo Pinet, without doubt one of the most colourful characters in the village.

For decades the one-handed Jerónimo (the stories as to how he lost his right hand are many and varied) always dressed from head to foot in black, his head topped off with a beret, and his tongue-in-cheek socialist rantings brought in the crowds. They came not only for the museum and his showmanship but also for the country food, which was excellent. And it still is.

The once-infamous Señor Pinet has mellowed greatly and is now a charming host (minus beret) who still puts specially selected herbs into bottles to make the fiery *hierba* that he offers at the end of the meal, all the while keeping a watchful eye on his museum.

From the Plaça Santa Anna, the small square just above the road that leads to the village cemetery, you get a wonderful view through a cleft in the hillside over the *níspero* groves to Benidorm and the Mediterranean beyond.

From Tàrbena, you drive uphill in the direction of Pego. You pass through a rugged, rocky mountainscape where tiny roads disappear in all directions. On your left the abandoned and disintegrating terraces look like a giant stairway traversing the side of the sierra, while on your right sinuous terraces of almond and olive groves snake around the lower hills.

The views are picture perfect — at least they would be if you could find a place to stop and take a picture along the narrow road that twists and turns relentlessly. Great

swathes of vivid yellow gorse and pale, blushing rock roses line the road and the aroma of rosemary and wild mountain thyme perfumes the air.

As you cross over the Coll de Rates at 780 metres above sea level (eight kilometres after Tàrbena), you see the village of Parcent and the scattered urbanisations of the Jalón valley laid out before you, with orange groves separating the developed areas as they spread down to the sea. As the road descends towards Parcent, it takes you into the Val de Pop.

It was from the rough landscape surrounding the Coll de Rates that, during the last quarter of the 19th century, the bandits El Tona, El Durá, El Mixana and El Sabateret rode out to terrorise the surrounding areas.

The story goes that the last outlaw in the nearby Sierra Bernia was caught in the 1950s. He was not your typical bandit of old who robbed stagecoaches. He would stop a car and force one of the male occupants to exchange clothes with him, and would not be seen again until his "new" outfit had worn out. He was eventually caught but, unfortunately, nothing is recorded of his name or what happened to him after his capture.

The writer Gabril Miró lived in Parcent and there is talk of turning his home into a museum celebrating his work, but for the moment there isn't a great deal to see in the village, although there is a splendid privately owned bodega that produces superb local wines. (*See the article below for more information about the Bodegas Parcent.*)

When the road levels just before Parcent take the first right to Pedreguer and Alcalalí. Shortly after this it joins another road where again you go right. After two kilometres you reach Alcalalí where, just as you enter the village, you will see a small sign for the centre of town to your right (opposite the larger sign to Orba on your left). Just as you turn off the main road you will see parking spaces.

As Alcalalí is a rural wining and dining centre for coastal dwellers, there is no shortage of good restaurants in the area. Even though the development of rural tourism has brought a building boom to the region, Alcalalí itself still feels like a small Spanish town.

The central square, the Plaça de l'Ajuntament, is entered by a low arch that gives it a nice historic feel, even though it wasn't built until 1984. A large tiled plaque to the side of the 18th-century Natividad parish church in the Plaça de l'Ajuntament tells the history of Alcalalí in a dozen lines. The church itself houses the Museo Parroquial San Juan de Ribera.

The restoration of the 15th-century tower opposite the church, all that is left of a baronial palace, aroused mixed feelings amongst the locals. Some thought putting a modern, dark-glazed cupola on top of a medieval stone tower was cultural vandalism while others considered it a tasteful mix of the old and the new.



The tower now houses the municipal archives on the second floor, while the third and fourth floors are home to the Museo de la Pasa (Raisin Museum). This may sound like the ultimate joke museum, but the economic value of the dried grape to the Marina Alta, the region in which the Vall del Pop sits, was massive from Moorish times up to the mid-1900s. In the latter years, ships laden with Valencia raisins would sail from the port of Denia to London and Liverpool and the good old British Co-op had an enormous warehouse in Denia that, while no longer storing raisins, still exists.

The fifth floor of the tower, protected from the elements by its new roof, is poetically called the "Mirador de la Vall del Pop" (Lookout Point of the Vall del Pop), recreating its original role as a watchtower. On this floor is displayed a model of a *riu-rau*, one of the ancient barns typical to this area that comprised a small room where the farmer would sleep during harvest time and a series of open-arched storerooms where grain and grapes would be left to dry.

Returning to the main road (CV720), turn right for Pedreguer and 200 metres later you take another right to Xaló (usually referred to as Jalón). After a short narrow bridge you bear left and enter Xaló/Jalón (some two kilometres from Alcalalí) and see on your left the tourist office that serves the Vall del Pop. There's parking space here.

Xaló, a sleepy little *pueblo* a couple of decades ago, was the first village in the area to be encroached upon when residents, both foreign and Spanish, began the drift away from the coastline. Nevertheless, there are still a number of good reasons to visit Xaló.

Historically speaking, there's little to see except the attractive hexagonal church tower in the village square, but most visitors don't come for history. They come to find a bargain at the Saturday antiques market or to stock up on the local wines that can be bought at excellent prices from one of the numerous *bodegas* along the road in front of the tourist office.

The *Denominación de Origen Vall de Xaló* is famous for its muscatel white wine, *mistela* (sweet muscatel), rosé and full-bodied reds. If you wish, you can sample the wines the Spanish way by drinking from a *porrón*, the glass vessel with a long spout that you hold high in the air to aim an arc of wine into your mouth — or down the front of your shirt if you lack expertise.

Reverse the directions to return to Alcalalí. Once more in Alcalalí, turn left on the CV720, following the sign for Fontilles, and after 200 metres, beside a garage opposite the parking place where you parked earlier, turn right for Orba (5km).

The Jalón valley has the reputation of being overbuilt but, as soon as the road begins to rise, you can see that there's still plenty of greenery, with the Sierra del Carrascal de Parcent creating a backdrop to the white houses.

Two kilometres further on, turn right onto the CV715 for Orba and La Val de Laguar (also known as Vall de Laguart). Bypass the entrance to Orba and shortly after, as you descend a low hill, take the left for Fontilles and Val de Laguar. Two kms later, you arrive at a junction on a bend in a mountain road where you take a left, going uphill.

The road takes you through dramatic cliffs with occasional views of cultivated groves spreading down to the Mediterranean. Look up to your left a few minutes later and you will see a stone wall tracing the contours of the hillside as it surrounds Fontilles, the last remaining leper hospital in Spain.

The last leper hospital in Spain

These days leprosy is easily treated and is usually attended to in a general hospital, but in December, 1901, when a Jesuit priest, Father Carlos Ferris, visited his friend Joaquín Ballester at Tormos, the disease was a scourge that respected neither class nor creed.

Shocked by the living conditions of a leper living nearby, the two friends raised the money to buy the land to create a sanctuary, later to be known as the Sanatorio de San Francisco de Borja-Fontilles. But it wasn't until January, 1909, that the first six patients entered Fontilles, to be attended by the sisters of the Franciscanas de la Inmaculada and by Jesuits of the *Compañía de Jesús*, the two religious orders that tend to the needs of the patients to this day.

As lepers would usually be simply forgotten by their families (there was no medication available until the 1940s), the priests and sisters tried to create as far as possible a family atmosphere in the sanatorium.

Within the stone wall that encircled the sanatorium, the patients learned crafts, and Fontilles became a village in its own right, with a bakery, carpenter's shop, smithy, printing office, bindery, shoemaker, hairdresser, and gardeners. It even had its own theatre, still in use until the late 1990s. Fontilles is still home to 60 people, some of whom have spent most of their lives there.

The architecture of Fontilles demonstrates the architectural styles of Spain, from the grand edifices of the *modernista* period through Art Deco to the ultra-modern design of the Residencia Borja, a recently opened residence for retired people that is bringing new life to Fontilles.

But the essence of the Sanatorio is its peacefulness. As you walk the grounds, you can imagine how comforted those afflicted by this terrible disease must have felt when they arrived somewhere where they would no longer be rejected.

Leave Fontilles and continue uphill. As you rise, you pass through the villages of Campell, Fleix and Benimaurell, none with a population of more than 400 souls. Benimaurell appears to be tucked into the side of the sierra, but as you get closer you realise that it is stuck on the top of a hill of its own.

Keep on through the village, following the signs for the Hotel Alahaur. When you reach the hotel you are as high as the road will take you and, from its car park, your steep drive is rewarded by wonderful views over the hills, crags and almond groves down to the glittering Mediterranean 30 kilometres away.

Another reversal of route and you eventually end up back on the outskirts of Orba (7km). Turn left in the direction of Pego and Ondara, turning right moments later when you see a sign for the Cueva de Benidoleig. At the next set of traffic lights turn right for Benidoleig and Ondara.

Continue through Benidoleig (3km), across the small roundabout in the centre of the village, going in the direction of Pedreguer and the Cuevas de las Calavaras. Just after the km5 mark you see the entrance to the caves on a U-bend (badly signposted, but there is a large sculpture in the car park and a cafeteria to the right of the entrance). The caves lack much of the extravagance found in some others in the Valencia region, but nonetheless still have a charm of their own.

Your footsteps echo off the wooden boardwalk and through the vaulted chasms distorted with rock forms that flow like something designed by Gaudí after a harrowing nightmare. A monstrous stalactite in the Sala de la Campana, that has taken millions of years to form, is now barely 30 centimetres away (i.e. some 2000 years) from the stalagmite growing beneath it. All around, the mottled deep purple and green colouration of the rock gives the impression that prehistoric cavemen have decorated their domain with great pots of paint.

Turn right leaving the Cuevas and 10 minutes later you enter Pedreguer. Follow the signs for Valencia and Alicante (A7/N332) and when you reach the junction with the N332 turn right for Alicante via the coast road and left for Valencia. If you wish to join

the motorway, turn left at this junction and a few minutes later you will see signs for the E15/A7 Autovía to Alicante and Valencia.

WHAT TO SEE

TARBENA:

Restaurante/Museo Casa Pinet, Plaça Mayor. Tel. 96 588 42 29. Open daily except Wednesday from 9am-5pm. Unusual cafeteria/restaurant packed with objets d'art, bric-a-brac and memorabilia of the Civil War. You are not obliged to eat a meal to view the displays covering the restaurant walls, but you would be well advised to do so.

ALCALALI:

Torre Museo, Calle Mayor, 1. Collect key frm Ayuntamiento during offic hours. Entry 1€

Museo Parroquial, housed in the parish church in Plaça de l'Ajuntament. Open during mass times.

XALÓ/JALÓN

Saturday market. Open market held every Saturday morning (approx 9am-2pm) near tourist office on edge of the village. A mixture of antiques and bric-a-brac.

Bodegas. There are a number of *bodegas* in Xaló, most of them on the edge of the village on the Xaló-Alcalalí road (opposite tourist office). Most keep normal shop hours for tasting. The Cooperativa Valenciana Virgen Pobre de Xaló is the main one. Open summer Mon-Fri 9.30am-1.30pm, 4-8pm, Sat 9.30am-2pm, 4-7.30pm, Sun 9.30am-1.30pm; winter Mon-Fri 9.30am-1.30pm, 3-7pm, Sat 9.30am-2pm, 3-6.30pm, Sun 9.30am-1.30pm.

FONTILLES:

Sanatorio de San Francisco de Borja-Fontilles. Open daily. Visitors are welcome to visit the sanatorium grounds. No entrance fee but the sanatorium is grateful for any donations.

BENIDOLEIG:

Cueva de las Calaveras, Ctra. Benidoleig-Pedreguer. Tel. 96 640 42 35. The caves have complex opening hours depending on time of year, weather etc. but are usually: summer 9am-8. pm and winter 9am-6pm. Entry €3.50.

OTHER INFORMATION

XALÒ:

Tourist Information Office. Paseo de la Alameda, s/n. Tel. 96 648 10 17. Open Tues-Sat 9am-2pm



Small But Perfectly Formed Bodegas Parcent

As you walk through the door of Armando Francés' bodega in Parcent, a pretty village just inland from the Costa Blanca, the first thing you see is a bright, slightly out-of-focus photo of baskets overflowing with grapes, set in front of the riu-rau that would later become Bodegas Parcent. The photo is from the tail-end of the 1950's and shows the last grapes that would be turned into *pasas*, the raisins that made the area famous.

The riu-rau is peculiar to the region and is a low building with an arched open front where the grapes were spread and left to dry naturally, although if the weather should turn unseasonably damp the thousands of kilos of them would be dragged inside into the narrow storeroom behind where the drying process would continue with the aid of a large wood-fired stove – and then all dragged back again when the sun came out. The only wine produced in those days would be a couple of casks of Moscatel that each grower would make for his personal use.

Parcent is in the Marina Alta, which rises from the shoreline of Jávea and Dénia to almost three thousand feet above sea-level. The breezes wafting from the Mediterranean create a microclimate which brings out a higher level of acidity and flavour from the grape and produces the intense aroma of the Muscat d'Alexandria, known locally as Moscatel Romano.

With the end of the raisin trade the growers slowly converted to wine making, a number of them achieving the *Dominación de Origen de Alicante*. The D.O. covers fifty-one towns in the province and the wines are recognised as being very fruity, usually using the Bobal, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Tempranillo, Pinot Noir and Monastrell varieties for the reds and Chardonnay, Moscatel Romano, Planta Fina and Merseguera for the whites.

Many would say that the sweet Moscatel is the pride of the area, but when Armando and his sister, Núria, decided to begin producing their wine commercially they decided that they wanted to create something that would be highly personal to them, and not something that would be found on just any supermarket shelf – but it was going to take them a while to get there.

“In 1996 we began making *vinos de calidad*, using grapes grown on our own land, and from the very beginning everything was grown organically and made by hand – all the picking, the pressing, the bottling, the labelling – and it still is. We wanted to make wines that had very personal characteristics, but which could be produced on a regular basis while maintaining their own personalities. When you make wine this way – what we call *vinos d’autor*, artisan produced wines – you can never guarantee that the wine will taste exactly the same one year to the next because we never know what the seasons will bring and how the quality of the grape will be affected, but we worked very hard to ensure that ours would have similar characteristics each year.”

It took almost a decade of experimentation to come up with the range of seven wines that Bodegas Parcent produce, two reds, *La Quintana* and *Comtat de Parcent*, two whites, *Grà D’Or* and *Auro*, the latter judged in a blind tasting in January of 2009 as being the best white wine in the Alicante region, one rosado, *Rosat*, and two liquores, desert wines, *Dolç D’Art*, winner of the national *Baco de Bronze* award in 2004, and *Fruit D’Autor*, a totally original sweet rosado liqueur. All have the coveted D.O de Alicante.

“We only take off 50-55% of the grape juice during the pressing, which gives us a very high quality start to the process which, hopefully, will result in a very good wine in the bottle. When people think of Moscatel they usually think of a sweet wine but with *Grà D’Or* we remove all traces of sweetness during the fermentation and it finishes as a dry wine but with a deep bouquet with a slight hint of jasmine and a long flavour in the mouth.”

With his second white, *Auro*, named after his mother, Armando uses a 50-50 mix of Chardonnay and Moscatel, something not done elsewhere. “There are thousands of 100% Chardonnay’s and 100% Moscatels, but by blending 50-50 we’ve created a totally different wine that has almost tropical aromas of mango and banana that develop in the mouth but don’t have the heaviness that some of those that use one hundred percent of the same grape variety.”

Armando and Núria are quite rightly proud of their wines and don’t want to grow much larger than the 20,000 bottles they produce annually, preferring to maintain the

quality of their passion. And as the village baker who gets up at two each morning, Armando has enough on his plate!

Bodegas Parcent, Plaça del Poble 4, Tel 636 53 66 93, www.bodegasparcent.com





LA SANTISIMA TRINIDAD.

AZULEJOS - Cayetano Soler - Manises

THE ICE MAN COMETH

Area: Inland towns of the Sierra Mariola, Alicante province.

Route: Cocentaina – Agres – Bocairent – Alcoi – Cocentaina

Distance: 66 kilometres

Drive through glorious countryside and discover two medieval gems on a trip that's short on kilometres but long on history.

Cocentaina, where this excursion begins, is a small town five kilometres north of Alcoi (Alcoy on some maps). To get to it coming from the south on the A7 motorway, take exit 67 (just after San Juan) on to the N340 and follow the signs for Xixona and Alcoi. From the north take the N340 at Xàtiva.

At first glance Cocentaina looks like little more than an industrial estate and rarely gets a mention in a tourist guide but, like many other small mountain towns in these parts, an historic heart beats behind all those factories producing textiles and furniture.

Towards the end of the 11th century, Cocentaina was the capital of a large Islamic region that covered the entire northern part of present-day Alicante province. Around the mid-12th century the Christians began their conquest of the town, and in 1258 Jaime I raised his standard as its saviour. Less than 50 years later, in 1304, the Moors of Granada attacked and burned the town, earning the locals the soubriquet of *socarrats*, the scorched ones.

The historic part of Cocentaina is divided into two zones: El Raval, the ancient Moorish neighbourhood whose streets rise in terraces up the hill towards the Ermita Santa Bárbara, and La Vila, the Christian part that contains most of the town's architectural and historical points of interest.

The epicentre of Cocentaina was the Palau Comtal, historic home of the Corella family, whose crest features a woman's head atop the body of a serpent. When the Countess Corella took over the building in the 15th century, she wasn't happy with the 13th-century Gothic appearance and turned it into a Renaissance palace with lots of painted and carved ceilings, ornate tiled floors and columned arches.

(For an extended article about the town, read [A Stroll Around Cocentaina](#), below.)

Continue your trip by returning to the N340 and taking the direction to Valencia on a dual carriageway. After three kilometres take the exit for the C3311 to Muro de Alcoi and Agres (it's the second exit for Muro). At the roundabout at the end of the slip road turn left onto the CV700 signposted Agres where it goes over the N340.

Ignore the first sign for Agres. After the km8 marker turn left by a sign bearing the Costa Blanca logo with tourism symbols and 'Agres' in large letters. Follow the road straight up the hill (it bears left after 200 metres or so but keep straight ahead) and as you top the rise alongside a pillared handrail (just after a row of green rubbish bins) turn hard left. This brings you into a small square beside the Restaurant Pensión Mariola.

Agres is one of those delightful mountain villages of narrow twisting streets, bougainvillea-covered cottages and fountains gushing sparkling mountain water. To get to the Santuario at the top of the village by car, take the first right after the Restaurant Mariola on to Calle Mayor, a very narrow road despite its grand name. When you reach the first square, the Plaza de España, turn right again and immediately turn left after the church. This leads you directly to the Santuario.

The Santuario is dedicated to the Mare de Déu de Agres (Mother of God of Agres) and commemorates a 15th-century miracle. On the night of August 31, 1484, the church of Santa María in Alicante was destroyed by fire. The statue of the Mare de Déu was seen to disappear into the sky. The following day she was discovered near Agres castle by a disabled shepherd, who was instantly and miraculously cured. The Mare de Déu de Agres, now kept in the Franciscan monastery, became the destination for a major pilgrimage, and on September 1 each year her discovery is re-enacted by villagers, the texts handed down from father to son. At other times it is a delightfully peaceful place to sit and ponder awhile.

The Sierra Mariola is rich in flora. Thyme, rosemary, lavender, sage, all make walking in these mountains an aromatic delight to complement the visual pleasures of rockroses and orchids. There are numerous walks around Agres.

If you have time and feel like a bit of a strenuous walk, you can visit one of the most interesting *neveras* (snow caves) in the region.

When you leave the car park in front of the monastery, instead of taking the right fork back down through the village, take the left and follow the sign that says "*Pujada al refugi i caves*", quickly turning left again and up a steep slope. When you reach the top, you are rewarded with stunning views, some of the best in the whole area. You will also find one of the most beautiful *neveras* in the Valencia region, the Cava de Agres (also known as the Cava Arqueda). These snow caves were used to store compacted snow that would later be taken, when it had turned to ice, to the major cities throughout the area.

This beautiful 16th-century construction, which still has the six arched spines that formed the original roof, was last used in 1926. If you are one of the faint-hearted and don't fancy the walk, you can see a model of the *nevera* in the Restaurant Mariola.

From the Santuario, retrace your route to the CV700 and, turning left at the bottom of the village, head in the direction of Alfafara and Ontinyent. When you get to the T-junction of the Ontinyent-Villena road (CV 81), turn left and a couple of minutes later you see the tiered houses of Bocairent on your right, clinging to the side of the hill for dear life.



Bocairent is a weird and wonderful mixture of architectural styles. In the centre of the roundabout at the entrance to the town is a monument with apparently no official title but referred to locally as “the monument to the blanket”. It depicts an angular figure of a man with a heavy plaid blanket draped over his shoulders, a reference to the town’s leading handicraft, although now sadly almost extinct.

Cross the Pont Nou, the bridge that connects the town with the main road, and you soon pass a number of good examples of the wrought ironwork and curved stylism of the *modernista* (Art Nouveau) period. Unfortunately you also pass a number of 1960s excrescences. Eventually, passing under an arch called the Portal de l’Arc de L’Aigua, that looks convincingly Moorish but was built recently, you arrive in the Plaça del Mercat, also known as the Plaça de l’Ajuntament.

Around the square are old houses towering up to eight storeys, like medieval high-rises. It used to be said that in Bocairent the donkeys leaned out of the windows — meander up the steep, narrow cobbled streets from the square and you will see why. What appear from the square to be eight-storey houses are four two-storey houses, one on top of the other. The animals would be kept on the ground floor. Thus a donkey on the ground floor of the top house could poke its head out of what seemed below to be a seventh-storey window. It seems a pity there are no more donkeys left in this part of town to resurrect this bizarre vision.

In lieu of gardens in this rather unusual *pueblo* there are countless balconies, steps and low walls festooned with pots of geraniums, cacti, ferns and all manner of greenery. The further you walk down the steeply raked streets, the more tumbledown

the buildings become. Nothing moves except scuttling cats shocked from a siesta by the ring of your feet on the cobblestones.

In 1843 the town council decided it wanted a bullring but was short of money and there was no level land on which to build it, so the citizens hacked one out of solid rock — from the tiered seating to the underground bullpens — using only pickaxes and chisels. Big enough for 1000 spectators, this Roman-style amphitheatre is now used for musical and cultural events throughout the year.

At a nearby cliff overlooking the Barranc de Fos, 53 inter-connecting caves have been carved out of the rock. No-one knows when they were built or what they were used for, or even why they are called the Moorish Caves because the Moors had nothing to do with them. Just another Bocairent oddity.

Without doubt, Bocairent's outstanding monument is the Verge de L'Assumpció (Virgin of the Assumption) parish church. Begun in the 16th century on the site of an Arab castle, the Gothic-style temple was heavily revamped in the 17th century and is today considered one of Valencia's finest examples of classic baroque.

Return over the Pont Nou to the main road and turn right at the roundabout. At the third roundabout, after two kilometres, reach the Alcoi road by taking the slip road to your right and crossing over the main road. Take the first right and follow it uphill. This route takes you through the picturesque Font Roja, the natural park in the heart of the Sierra Mariola. Rolling pastures, wheat fields and acres of yellow sunflowers make this a delightful ride home in the fading hours of the day.

Keep following the signs for Alcoi. From Alcoi follow the sign for Valencia to go north or Alicante to go south. Both directions are via the N340.

WHAT TO SEE

COCENTAINA:

Palau Comtal, Plaça el Pla. 15th-century palace of the Corella family. Includes the Sala de los Embajadores, Sala Dorada, private chapel, now deconsecrated, and town library in the beautifully restored Gothic Room. Same opening hours as the tourist office. Free entry.

Convento y Monasterio de la Virgen del Milagro, Plaça el Pla (next to Palau Comtal). Beautiful 17th-century church built to commemorate a "miracle" in 1520 when an image of the Virgin is said to have cried tears of blood. (The original image is now in the monastery, but a copy can be seen in the chapel of the Palau.) No access to the convent or monastery, but the church is open daily.

Dolores de la Verge, Calle Mare de Déu del Miracle. The oldest street ceramic plaques in Cocentaina, part of the *circuito urbano de taullels*, the route of tile paintings.

Walks: the tourist office provides a reasonably detailed map and guide to some of the walks in the surrounding hills of Montcabrer.

AGRES:

Santuari Mare de Déu de Agres. Small church housing statue of the Virgin next to the monastery (now used only for groups on religious retreats) on the hill above the village. Opening times vary, especially during the annual fiesta celebrating the arrival of the statue, the focal point being September¹. There are some pleasant walks and a picnic area around the Santuario.

Cava de Agres (also known as the Cava Arqueda). One of the most beautiful *neveras* (snow caves) in the region, with fabulous views over the Sierra Mariola and beyond.

BOCAIRENT :

Verge de l'Assumpció, off Plaça de l'Ajuntament. Stunning baroque church. Houses museum, containing examples of sacred art, including the Sant Blai altar piece by one of Valencia's most famous artists, Joaquín Sorolla, and a chalice by the Florentine sculptor and goldsmith, Benvenuto Cellini. Open briefly on Sundays and fiestas at 12.30pm, after mass.

Plaza de Toros, a 1000-seat bullring carved out of rock. Ask at the tourist office for programme of cultural and musical events. Open daily, noon-2pm and 6pm-7.30pm
Entry €1.20.

Covetes dels Moros, just outside village opposite the medieval part. 53 inter-connecting caves. Open daily, 11am-2pm and 5.30-8.30pm. Entry €1.20 euros

MORE INFORMATION

COCENTAINA:

Tourist office, in entrance to Palau Comtal, Plaça de Pla. Open daily except Sun. 10am-1pm and 5-8pm. Sat. Morning only. (10am-1pm only during August) Tel. 96 559 01 59. If closed you can get information from the town library in the courtyard of the Palau.

AGRES:

Tourist office, Plaza Ramón González, 1. Tel. 96 553 20 71. Open 9.0am-2pm and 5-7. pm Mon-Fri (except Wed.) and 9am-1.30pm Sat.

BOCAIRENT :

Tourist office, Plaça de l'Ajuntament, 2. Tel 96 290 50 62. Open 10am-2pm and 4pm-8pm Mon-Fri, and 10am-2pm Sat and Sun.



A Stroll Around Cocentaina

You could be forgiven for driving straight through Cocentaina, thinking that it was little more than an industrial estate, which is probably why the town rarely rates a mention in most tourist guides. Like many of these small mountain towns though, it hides a surprisingly historic little heart hidden behind all those factory units flogging textiles and furniture.

Cocentaina is a modest town of a little over 11,000 persons, but towards the end of the 11th century it was the capital of a large Islamic region which covered the entire northern part of present-day Alicante province. Around the mid-12th century the Christians began their conquest of the town, and in 1258 Jaime I wandered in as its saviour for God. Less than 50 years later, in 1304, Moslems from Granada attacked and burned Cocentaina, earning the locals the soubriquet of *socarrats*, the scorched ones.

The historic part of the town is divided into two definite zones, El Raval, the ancient Moslem neighbourhood, and La Vila the area inside the walls that protected the Christians from the heathenish Moors. While the streets of El Raval rise in terraces up the hill in the direction of the Ermita Santa Barbara, most of the architectural and historical life lies in La Vila.

The epicentre of Cocentaina was the Palau Comtal, historic home of the Corella family, whose crest features a woman's head atop the body of a serpent, fortunately

lacking an apple, which would at least have got Adam off the hook. When the Countess Corella took over the building she wasn't happy with the Gothic appearance so Renaissance-ised the whole place, with lots of painted and carved ceilings, ornate tiled floors and columned arches. And she did a pretty good job.

The Sala Embajadores is exquisite, with its stunning ceramic tiles and carved panelled ceiling, and the Sala Dorada has a painted ceiling that has to be seen to be believed. Panels depicting the Kings of Navarra (the Countess's family) are surrounded with scenes of the battles between Moors and Christians, the most famous being that of Jaime I sitting on a hilltop prior to his successful invasion of Valencia City.

(A little known historical fact that has yet to make its way into the guidebooks. The small room you enter on your way to the Sala Embajadores used to be a bar until the latter years of the 20th century, known as Sancho's Bar. It was here that the coffee liqueur, now served throughout the Valencian Community, was invented. If you have ever tasted it you will know that some things cannot be forgiven.)

In the cloistered cool below these glorious rooms is the recently installed public library, which must be one of the most beautiful in the region. If the tourist information office is closed you can pick up leaflets here, and if you fancy a read, the library has a small English section. (I picked up a small paperback of 'Tales of Horror' by Bram Stoker, and as I flicked through the pages the words "...and the kitten died immediately." leapt out. Suitably Gothic in what was originally known as the Gothic Room.)

Adjoining the Palau the Convento Y Monasterio de la Virgen del Milagro is a haven of ornate intimacy, the sort of church were people pop in and out for a quick word with the Almighty while doing their shopping. The decoration and artistic embellishment is worthy of a cathedral, tucked into a place that, when packed, could hardly accommodate more than a couple of hundred souls. Like many Spanish churches, ornate paintwork covers large areas of the walls, but here huge sections are painted to imitate irregular stone blocks, the overall effect being of a slightly kitsch rustic church with a nod in the direction of decadence. Fred Flintstone would have felt at home. Fat cherubim sit high up on ledges over the alter, serenading on lute and harp, while their friends hold up the heavy curtain that would otherwise stop the white dove bursting through the gilded sunbeams high on the retablo. This is glorification of the faith done with a sense of humour.

Cocentaina isn't short of magnificent edifices to while away the hours in, but the tiny, twisting streets have a magnificent charm. Sneaky little alleyways lead to dead ends or worn steps that disappear under Moorish high-rises, leading you forward in an Alice in Wonderland sort of way.

The streets are profuse with beautifully painted plaques depicting the lives of saints and religious goings on. Just around the corner from the Iglesia Santa Maria, a small sign at the bottom of a flight of stone steps that lead up to Calle Mare de Déu de

Miracle, warns that '*Paso prohibido para caballerias*' (No horse riders allowed), which seems a little unfair as directly in front of the you is a beautiful tiled panel in praise of 'St Jaime Apostel, Patron de España' vanquishing the scimitar rattling Moorish hordes while seated on a white charger with a cross in one hand and a sword in the other. You'd think this is the very spot where horses would be welcome!

If you go up the steps onto Calle Mare de Déu de Miracle (with or without your horse) and turn left, you will come across the oldest ceramic panels in Cocentaina. They date from the mid-18th century and represent the suffering of the Virgin, giving their name to the street where they are located. Each one is entitled '*Primer dolor*', '*Segund dolor*' etc., and as the number of pains or sufferings increase the Virgin is seen with an additional mighty sword plunged into her breast.

Keeping a watchful eye over the town is the Castillo, a recently restored castle. More a castle tower really, this emblem of Cocentaina was built in the first Gothic military style sometime between the 13th and 14th centuries. You can reach the Castillo by car - if you have the temerity for a near vertical climb. The road begins just by the gate to the Chapel of San Cristobal, or Sant Cristofal, or San Cristoval – all names for the same place – but it might be an idea to just make the most of view from the picnic area around the chapel where you can have your *bocadillo* sitting on stone blocks with a huge stone slab as a table, and with the aroma of rosemary in the air – but it would be advisable to take a cushion!

Cocentaina the sort of place where people wish you 'Bon Dia' in the street (Valenciano is still the main tongue) and if someone sees you studying a map they will offer you directions and probably take you there; where old ladies supplement their pensions by selling fruit from their own orchards outside their front door, and where the library staff are so trusting (all one of them) that they nip out and sit on the step for a fag break without worrying that you'll wander off with Brad Stoker's scary tales. If you ignore the hustle and bustle and industrial architecture that welcomes you to the town, Cocentaina is an oyster worth cracking open to find the little pearl inside.



VILLA CASTRIS DE QUADREEST
PROVINCIA DE ALICANTE

HITTING THE HIGH SPOTS

Area: Mountains west of Benidorm, northern Costa Blanca

Route: Benidorm – Callosa d'en Sarrià – Fonts d'Algar – Guadalest – Penáguila – Quatretondeta – Benidorm

Distance: 122 kilometres

Take a dip in a cool mountain stream before anointing yourself with aromatic oils, delve into a latter-day Moorish bazaar, and get lost in a 200-year old maze.

From Benidorm take the CV70 in the direction of Callosa d'en Sarrià, passing beneath the N332 coastal road. From the A7 motorway, exit at junction 65 to join the N332 in the direction of Alicante and take the next exit, following the signs for Callosa.

When you arrive at Callosa town centre after 15 kilometres, take the second exit on your right from the roundabout with the new fountain on it, heading towards Bolulla and Tàrbena on the C3318. After two kilometres along this winding road, you will see a large sign indicating the Fonts d'Algar. Take the right hand turn beside it. Soon, after a series of parking signs, the road begins to climb and you will see a small wooden booth on your left. This is the entrance to the Fonts, opposite which is a free car park (many of the car parks you pass either belong to bars and restaurants or have to be paid for).

The Fonts d'Algar is a natural park of waterfalls and pools, with tumbling cascades that vary from tiny, tinkling streams at the upper level to the rumbling Cascada del Toll de la Caldera, the waterfall that fills the main pool at the bottom.

From the entrance, visitors pass along wooden walkways and across slatted bridges to reach a set of steps set into the rocks alongside the waterfalls, lined with bamboo, oleander and reeds. As you climb higher, level areas offer natural swimming pools. The higher they get the chillier they become.

If a dip in a cooling mountain stream doesn't tempt you, follow the path alongside the narrow canal on the opposite side of the river until you come to some steps and the Arboretum, a garden full of most of the typical Mediterranean spice plants. Next to this is the Museo del Medio Ambiente (Museum of the Environment) which houses a small collection of aromatic and medicinal herbs and the essences of oils and perfumes made from them, all of which are on sale.

When you leave the Fonts d'Algar, take the road back to Callosa d'en Sarrià, passing through hillsides covered in the lush green foliage of *níspero* (loquat) trees and plastic sheeting. Callosa is one of Spain's main areas for *nísperos*, and the plastic

sheeting is there to protect and force fruit growth. You can buy cans and bottles of *nísperos*, as well as fresh fruit in season, at a small stall at the Fonts d'Algar and in local supermarkets.

When you get to the roundabout in the centre of Callosa, take the road almost directly in front of you (C3313) heading toward Alcoi and Guadalest.

This weaving road carries you through the rugged mountains of the Sierra d'Aitana, the highest in the province of Alicante. You are entering the Guadalest Valley, whose 18-kilometre length is covered in Mediterranean pine, holm oak, maple, ash and yew, as well as *nísperos*, apples, cherries, pears, olives, oranges, lemons and figs. It is a hunter's paradise, with an abundance of rabbit (a major part of the local cuisine), and wild boar. A wide variety of wild herbs go into the making of *hierbas*, a herbal liqueur for which every home and restaurant has its own recipe.

Shortly after leaving Callosa, on your left is a recently opened motorcycle museum, where more than 100 *motos* and motorbike/sidecar combinations are on display, the result of 25 years of collecting.

Stay on this road and it will bring you to the hilltop village of Guadalest, which, in 2002, stole the crown from the Prado Museum in Madrid for being the most visited tourist destination in Spain. And it shows. There is not a single business in this tiny village of only 200 permanent residents that is not involved in removing the euro from the pockets of its visitors. But what redeems this eagle's nest of a *pueblo* is that it really is extremely pretty, and most of the souvenirs on sale here are of good quality.

Guadalest is split into two parts by the Puerta de San José, an imposing wooden door and narrow passageway hewn through solid rock. The upper part of the village is what used to be the fortress where the Christian population lived. As you exit the tunnel going into the fortified village, directly in front of you is the Casa Orduña. Originally the palace of the Orduña family, it is now the Municipal Museum and entrance to the Castillo de San José.

The Orduñas were the most influential family in the town from the mid-18th until the early 20th century, and the building is a delightful example of a wealthy 19th-century home.

Climb the metal stairway to the heights of the castle and Spain's highest cemetery. The views from this eyrie are spectacular, with forested and terraced mountains and valleys sloping down to the sea and the reservoir that feeds the towns on the coastal plain far below.

Below the Puerta de San José are the narrow streets of the *Arrabal*, the Moorish quarter. This resembles the bazaar of old for most of the commercial activity of modern-day Guadalest is conducted in these crowded streets. You can buy fine-quality leather handbags and tasteful knick-knacks for the home or choose from 12 different varieties of the local honey and a wide range of honey-based products.

Return to the main road and head once more in the direction of Alcoi. The scenery on this winding mountain road is dramatic: glowering mountains, olive groves, high crags and pine forests, pockmarked with tiny mountain villages and scattered houses seemingly dropped into inaccessible places.

Most of these villages will have restaurants serving wholesome regional cuisine with such favourites as *conejo al alioli* (rabbit in garlic mayonnaise), *verdura al horno* (oven-baked vegetables), *arrós amb fesols i penques* (rice with broad beans and artichoke stems), or *pilotes de farina de dacsa* (meatballs in corn flour). Just as mouth-watering are the local sweetmeats, *patissets d'ámetalla*, *almendrado*, or *caruinyoles*, almond-based pastry soft or hard.

Continuing on the C3313, at Confrides, three kilometres further, on a tight left-hand bend you see a shop which was once the excellent restaurant El Rincón Olvidado (The Forgotten Corner). So famous did the restaurant's home-made jams and sauces become that the owners closed the eating place and took up sauce production full-time. The shop also stocks regionally made products.

Several kilometres further on a sign to the left directs you to Alcoleja and Vila Joiosa (exactly opposite the sign at the entrance to the village of Benasau.) Beside this sign is a smaller one for Jardín de Santos, a recently restored 19th-century formal garden. Take this turn, and after two kilometres of twisting road turn right at a junction with the CV781. Within a few kilometres a large sign on the right directs you down a rough track to the garden.

The Jardín de Santos was laid out as a summer retreat by one Joaquín Rico, an apt name for a 19th-century aristocrat who had amassed a fortune in South America, (*rico* means rich in Spanish). Neglected for many years, it was eventually handed over to the local community and has been restored to its delightful former glory. On your left as you pass through the arched cast-iron entrance gate is a summer house painted glowing bright blue, and just beyond a fountain plays in a large rectangular pond.

When in private hands, the local hoi-polloi were only allowed to visit the gardens on one day a year, but now visitors can promenade under the shady arbour bordering the pond, admiring the *jardineras* (large pots for plants) of geraniums and ferns that top stone columns, and the palms, chestnut, yew and magnolia trees. A grotto provides a romantic touch and an antique maze with a central Lebanon spruce has been replanted to the original design.

Beside the gardens is a recreation area with barbecues, and if you want to stretch your legs you can follow the *ruta fitoclimática*, a 45-minute walk offering information on the different species of flora in the area and the results of climatic change on natural environment.

After a rather busy start to this excursion, the second half is more relaxing, with a drive that reveals the incredible variety of scenery in this part of the Alicante mountains.



Pick up the road to Alcoi once more. You are now driving through the high valleys of the Sierra de Serrella and the rugged mountains you passed through half an hour ago are replaced by beautiful rolling acres of cultivated farmland, interrupted by the occasional *masía*, a large farmhouse with walled courtyard. Some are in ruins but others have been restored to become beautiful *casas rurales*, such as Mas de Pau on your right shortly after you leave Penáguila. Ancient watchtowers dot the skyline above the pine-covered slopes that rise up from the wide valley floor.

You drive through Benifallim and when you reach the T-junction with the N340 you turn right in the direction of Alcoi. Just over one kilometre further, turn right on the C70/A160 towards Benilloba, 11 kilometres away, and Callosa d'en Sarrià.

As you begin to climb, Alcoi is spread out to your left. Not exactly a thing of beauty, but its claim to fame is that it celebrates the most important Moors and Christians fiesta in Spain, and is one of the main cities manufacturing the gorgeously ornate costumes used in this fiesta throughout the country.

As you drop down into Penella, five kilometres from the N340, a ruined tower (all that is left of Penella castle) stands guard over the village, while in the distance the restored castle of Cocentaina stands like a nipple on the fulsome bosom of the hill overlooking that town.

Passing through Benilloba, just after the km9 marker, a left-hand turn puts you on the C710, the road to Millena and Gorga. When you reach the main junction in Gorga (a sign indicates 'Millena 2 km' straight ahead), turn right and immediately right again, almost doubling back on yourself to go in the direction of Quatretondeta. You know

you are on the right road when about 200 metres after the turn the road narrows briefly to one-car width and passes between two buildings, one of them a pharmacy.

You now leave the softness of the rolling uplands and enter a dramatic moonscape of tumbling gorges, where olive trees hang on for dear life to the narrow terraces running to the edges of sheer drops. Grey and haggard as the terrain sometimes looks, it has a rugged beauty all its own.

When you get to the T-junction in Fachega, turn right and drive the 10 kilometres to Castell de Castells. Turn right just before the bridge as you enter Castells (you will see a playground on the right). Drive 12 kilometres through pleasant and varied scenery to a T-junction, where you turn right for Tàrbena and Callosa d'en Sarrià to return to Benidorm.

WHAT TO SEE

CALLOSA D'EN SARRIÀ:

Fonts d'Algar. Natural waterfalls and swimming pools. Open daily, Apr-Sep 9am-5pm, Jul-Aug 9am-8pm, Oct-Mar 10am-5.30pm. Entry Apr-Sep adults €3, children (under 12) €1.17, Oct-Mar adults €2, children €1.50. Price of admission includes entry to Arboretum, a garden full of typical Mediterranean spice plants, and Museo del Medio Ambiente, which houses collection of aromatic and medicinal herbs, and oil and perfume essences made from them. Open times as Fonts.

Motorcycle Museum. Ctra Callosa-Guadalest, km7. Tel. 96 588 21 97. Winter 10.30am-6pm, summer 10.30am-7.30pm, closed Sat. €3. Sometimes closes earlier if weather is poor.

GUADALEST.

Guadalest has about 10 museums of one sort or another, displaying everything from antique toys and miniature dolls' houses and *belenes* (nativity scenes) to microscopic sculptures of such things as a flea riding a bike. Surprisingly enough, most are quite interesting.

Casa Orduña, Municipal Museum, Calle Iglesia, 2. Open daily Apr-Sep 10.15am-9pm, Oct-Mar 10.30am-5.30pm. Entry adults €3.50, children €1.50. A reproduction of 19th-century family life using furnishings supplied by the Orduña family. The top floor has a small gallery with exhibitions changing every two months. Access to the castle is through the Casa Orduña and included in the price.

Museo Etnológico, Calle Iglesia, 1. A small, interesting museum housed in an original cottage, displaying scenes of everyday rural life. Information cards in a variety of languages. Open daily (except Sat in winter) Apr-Sep 10am-8pm, Oct-Mar 10am-6pm. Entry free, although it is polite to make a small donation to running costs, a €2 donation is requested to visit the exhibition of antique firearms.

Museo de Tortura Medieval, Calle Honda, 2. Open daily Apr-Sep 10.30am-9pm Oct-Mar 10.30 am-6pm. Entry adults €3, children €2. Mixture of original and reproduction torture instruments. Information plaques in Spanish and English.

Museum of Salt and Pepper Shakers, Avenida de Alicante 2. Open daily 10.30am-7.30pm. Entrance €3, children under 12 free. Tel. 96 611 2064

Barco Solar, a delightful hour-long ride on a solar powered boat on the reservoir. €6.
Tel. 636 037 910.

Penáguila:

Jardín de Santos. 19th-century garden with pool, maze and grotto, on the C3313 just before village. Open Sat/Sun/holidays 11am-2pm, 4-6pm. Entry €1. Short opening hours, but a delight to visit and a surprise for garden-lovers.

MORE INFORMATION

CALLOSA D'EN SARRIÀ

Tourist Information office, Calle Sant Antoni, 2. Tel. 96 588 01 53. Mon-Fri 8am-3pm

GUADALEST:

Information Office (in main car park). Tel. 96 588 52 98. Open daily 11am-2pm and 3-7pm,

PENÁGUILA

Ayuntamiento, Plaça l'Esglesia,1. Tel. 96 551 30 01. Mon, Wed and Thu 9am-2pm and 5-8pm.



Taken with a Pinch of Salt The Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum, Guadalest

The next time you knock over a salt cellar and throw a pinch of the salt that spills over your left shoulder to ward off bad luck, bear in mind that those few white grains would at one time have formed part of someone's wages. And besides, that thing with the holes in the top is called a salt shaker, not a salt cellar.

It's amazing the things you learn when you least expect it. I'm getting an in-depth lecture about the world of salt, salt and pepper shakers, and salt cellars from Andrea Ludden and her son Alex, at their delightfully idiosyncratic Salt and Pepper Shaker Museum in Guadalest. And jolly interesting it is.

"Salt is much more important in our lives and history than most people think," says Alex. "The word *salarium*, salary, comes from the fact that Roman soldiers were paid part of their income in salt. It's also thought that the word 'soldier' itself comes from the Latin *sal dare*, to give salt. If you look at common phrases such as 'the salt of the earth', 'he's not worth his salt', 'below the salt', etc. you can get an idea of how important salt was." And it still is, because without salt in our diet we couldn't survive.

Far from being just a wacky Belgian lady with a fetish for salt shakers, Andrea's collection began from a totally different direction than something simply to display on the shelves in her kitchen. As an archaeologist she had spent many years working in

South America, where her main interest had been in how people travelled and communicated.

"The salt trade was of major importance, not only because of its commercial value but also because it allowed foods to be preserved, letting people travel much greater distances than they could without having preserved foods, never knowing what fresh foods would be available," Andrea tells me. "But pepper was also important, and records show that when the Gauls invade Rome they demanded twenty thousand pounds of pepper as part of the ransom."

As we wander around the museum I find it hard to believe that the twenty-thousand pair display of fat chefs, ruby red tomatoes, guardsmen in bear skins, The Beatles, Santa's feet sticking out of a chimney, pistols and potatoes, a copy of the salt and pepper shaker cufflinks that Lady Diana wore, (which, fortunately, are sealed, or their contents would have sprayed everywhere when she shook hands), have any other reason for coming together than simply being someone's idea of being collectable – but they do.

"When we moved to the States there was no work in archaeology so I began to look at social anthropology," continues Andrea. It's often by looking at the apparently more mundane articles in everyday life that you can build up a broad picture of a specific period. And that's what Andrea began to do.

"There's almost nothing you can imagine that hasn't been copied as a salt and pepper shaker, and many of them reflect the designs, the colours, the preoccupations of the period. For example, a cooker from the 1940's will look totally different from the cookers of the 1990's, and it's through using these differences and the materials they were made of that we can get an idea of how people lived at any given time."

It wasn't until the 1920's, when Chicago-based Morton Salt added magnesium carbonate to their product, that it was possible to pour salt from a sealed container. From this moment the salt shaker was born. Prior to that, small bowls or containers, usually with a spoon, had been used at the table, (the original salt cellar), as salt has a tendency to attract moisture and become lumpy.

"Morton's development was the beginning of the salt shaker, but funnily enough, it was the automobile that led to them becoming collectable items," continues Alex. "It was because people could travel more freely, either for work or on vacation, that the souvenir industry came about. Salt and pepper shakers were cheap, easy to carry and colourful and made ideal gifts. Imagine you lived in an isolated village somewhere and your son or daughter brought you a set in the shape of the Golden Gate Bridge when they came on their annual visit home. It wouldn't get used, it would be carefully kept as a decorative item. That's how, in the main, many of the early collections began."

The hey-day of salt and pepper shaker production was between the 1920s and 60s, with those made from plastic in the 50s and 60s being of special interest to some people. "Plastic is breakable, so fewer of those examples exist, and there are specialist collectors that pay highly for models from that period." But the world of salt and pepper shakers and cellars knows no boundaries; from the Cellini *Saliera*, cast in solid

gold (and sometimes referred to as the 'Mona Lisa of Sculpture'), insured for \$6million, to the prosaic plastic red pepper, a steal at only 75 centimos at the local Chinese shop, there's something for everyone.

Andrea's collection of over forty thousand pairs, half in Guadalest and half in their museum in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, started by the simple purchase of a pepper mill at a garage sale, shortly after the family moved to the US – but it didn't work!

"That first one didn't work, so I bought a couple more. I used to stand them on the window ledge of my kitchen, and neighbours thought I was building a collection. Nothing could have been further from my mind! They began to bring me some beautiful ones, and eventually I had about 14,000 on shelves all over the house, even in the bedrooms. One day my husband said, "Andrea, you either find somewhere to put these things or it's a divorce!" So we decided to create a museum."

Some of the best museums I've come across have come about because of someone's wish to show their collection to the world; the unique Playing Card Museum in Oropesa, the Shoe Museum in Elda, the curious travelling collection of potties from Torremolinos. "I think a museum like ours is different from a big municipal institution because it deals with things on a very personal basis. Even though there are so many shakers, you begin to recognise ones your grandmother used to have, or you saw when you went on vacation somewhere, or you gave as a gift once. People come back over and over again and think that we are adding to the displays, but we aren't, it's just that they didn't see them first time around."

Displaying the almost endless selection of models in no mean feat, but Andrea has an excellent eye for how it should be done. "It's almost impossible to categorise them, because you can work by style, age, subject matter, colour etc, but I try and do it to combine all these elements at the same time. I have a very visual memory, and I can walk into an antique shop or go to a garage sale and know instantly if I see one for sale that I have in the collection or not, even if it is just the salt or pepper shaker and not a pair.

And will the collection ever end? "Never! It's the hunt I love, the hope that I'll find something different, something special. And 'special' doesn't necessarily mean the most ornate or the most expensive, it can be something quite simple that I fall in love with the moment I see it."

So the next time you see a museum that's full of the weird and wonderful, don't immediately think, "What on earth is someone collecting this lot for?" because it might be yet another delve into social anthropology and not someone's bizarre obsession – but there again, it just might!



SWEET-TOOTH COUNTRY

Area: Inland North of Alicante

Route: Aigües – Torremanzanas – Xixona - Busot

Distance: 85 kilometres

Bless the bread in a pagan ritual with the villagers of Torremanzanas and indulge your sweet tooth in Xixona, the home of Spain's favourite Christmas treat.

As you leave the N332 coastal road just north of El Campello, taking the CV775 to Aigües, you enter pleasant rolling countryside largely undisturbed by cultivation, although the terraced slopes that date back to Moorish times speak of a different agricultural history. After nine kilometres you enter the pleasant little village of Aigües, or Aguas de Busot as it is also known, at the foot of the Sierra de Cabecó d'Or, so called because of rumours of pockets of gold waiting to be discovered.

The few streets of the tiny village were once on the banks of a great river (which gave the town its name) and formed the southern border of the kingdom of Valencia. At various times belonging to Murcia, Castille and Aragon, Aigües has had a chequered history and very little is known about the origin of the spa that brought the village fame.

As you enter, take the small road that goes off to your left in front of a row of painted terraced houses (it looks as if you are going straight ahead as the main road curves to the right). As you reach the junction you will see a sign for the Banys de Busot and a few moments later the beautiful buildings of the *balneario* (spa), now in a very dilapidated condition.

In the early 19th century, during the building of the luxurious Hotel Miramar that dominated the *balneario*, equestrian paddocks, Arab arches and coins bearing the bust of Julius Caesar crowned with laurel were discovered, demonstrating that visitors bathed in these waters centuries ago.

The Marchioness of Bosch, Countess of Torrellano, acquired the baths in 1816 and set about creating a spa which, when the government categorised establishments offering waters of medicinal value, was recorded as one of the top five in the whole of Spain.

The last word in architecture and hygiene, the magnificent Hotel Miramar, grandly described as 'that salutiferous establishment offering the most attractive perspective', catered for the cream of society where '250 people could lodge decently or in great luxury'. Elegance and simplicity, comfort and hygiene were the sovereign rules.

The spa gradually acquired a casino, parks, dairy and woods, swimming pools and a solarium and, in 1844, its then proprietor, the Count of Casas Rojas, added further baths and 33 small houses in which to lodge families.

'Taking the waters' fell out of fashion and the state took over operations at the end of the Civil War, converted the spa into a sanatorium for people afflicted with tuberculosis. By the mid 1960s, the waters had run dry and the aged building was abandoned and left to fall into ruin.

Nonetheless, the Baños de Busot are an impressive sight and worth visiting. But be careful. There are signs around warning you not to enter as the building is in a dangerous condition. It is easy to see the layout of the grounds and wonder at its past magnificence from *outside* the protective fence.

Follow the rough track around the *balneario* and it will bring you into the village. Apart from the parish church, a Moorish tower and the antique and craft fair held in the main street on the first Sunday of every month, there is not much to see or do.

Continuing the trip, return to the junction where the track from the spa meets the main road and take the sharp left on the A180 in the direction of Relleu, 16 kilometres away.

This is a lovely ride as the road snakes its way up the pleasantly rough hills of the Cabezón de Oro. As you climb the slope around the km17 marker, look to your right for Mas Blanch, a wonderfully restored *masía* whose turrets stand out proudly against the ragged edges of the Sierra Aitana. Sadly, although restored, it seems to have been abandoned and is inhabited only by pigeons.

When you arrive at Relleu there are parking spaces on your right as you enter the village. Relleu, like most of these mountain villages, has a grand church, a hermitage and a ruined castle, but that is not all. If you take the street opposite the door of the San Jaime Apóstel church and follow it all the way to the bottom, you will come across a tiny *palacio* on the side of a small gorge where once a river flowed. Though of no great cultural or historical significance, it's a pretty sight looking like a doll's house and guaranteed to raise a smile as you wander the shady streets.

To leave Relleu, follow the road through the village for two minutes or so. Immediately after a sharp left-hand bend on the edge of the village take a road to the left with a sign indicating Torremanzanas 14 kilometres away. This road takes you around the back of Relleu, where you will see the ruins of the Arab fortress sticking up like a row of ill-kept teeth, just after which another road to the left also directs you to Torremanzanas.

The landscape changes as you drive over the Sierra de la Grana. The slopes are still terraced but more rugged and with occasional almond groves and a number of ruined houses built up against the rock face. Signs along the road warn drivers of falling rocks. Major rock slides are rare, but you will often see a scattering of small rocks on the road, especially after rain.

The hearty food— *pericana*, a dish of cod and peppers, *cocido de pelotas*, stew with dumplings and *pelotas de maíz*, corn dumplings, to name just a few local dishes — reflects the colder temperatures in this mountainous zone. Famous for its *turrón*, the area is also known for its honey and *yemas*, a sweet made from egg yolk.



As you approach the km7 marker, the scenic views delight you on both sides of the road. There are small houses hidden in the pine-covered mountainside to your left and tiers of olive and almond groves to your right. The road straightens out and the drive is much smoother through the upland valley for a kilometre or so until you begin the slow curving descent to Torremanzanas.

The small town takes its name from an ancient fortified Almohad tower. Just as you enter the village, you can see on your right a rather strange and more modern fortification, the Villa Edelmira, a fortified *masía* or farm house. Immediately after this you will see parking spaces to your right.

One of the oldest and most unique fiestas in Spain is that of *Pa Beneit*, the Festival of the Blessing of the Bread, celebrated as part of the Fiesta de San Gregorio in the small mountain *pueblo* of Torremanzanas, thirty-seven kilometres north of Alicante. The roots of the Festival are thought to date back to the pagan rites of Egyptian times, when cakes of the god Isis and water from the river Nile were blessed and distributed amongst the people. Brought to Spain by the Romans, the tradition was maintained during the Moorish occupation, and in the case of Torremanzanas, embraced by the villagers when they adopted Saint Gregory as their patron saint.

Cardinal Gregorio Ostiense was despatched to Spain during the eleventh century by Pope Benedict IX to rid the country of a plague of locusts that had caused devastation in the regions of Navarra and La Rioja. Legend has it that he accomplished this by preaching to the locusts and sprinkling the affected areas with water. Two centuries later he was declared a saint. In the seventeenth century a further plague came to the land and it is said that the locusts were driven from Torremanzanas in 1658 using water blessed in the Saint's name. From that day Saint Gregory became the patron saint of the town. Uniquely, the townspeople blended paganism and Christianity by incorporating the blessing of the bread as part of their religious devotions during the fiesta.

For five days in early May the villagers pay homage to Saint Gregory, but before the fiesta begins a number of young men called *llumeners* (Valenciano for the one who lights the way) are chosen. They each select a young lady called a *clavariesa* and for the first two days the groups of men and women are involved in separate activities. During the fiesta the men wear the traditional farmer's black trousers and waistcoat with white shirt, while the girls wear the long dress and embroidered shawl of the working woman.

The parade for the blessing of the bread takes place on the morning of the third day, when the *llumeners*, escorted by the town band, visit the homes of their ladies and escort them to the town square. The *clavariesas* wear the traditional long white skirt and beautifully embroidered shawls, and perched precariously on each head is a large round loaf of sweet bread. The loaves, which weigh between six and eight kilos, rest on a *llibrell*, a padded support which is draped with hand embroidered organdie and topped off with a bouquet of flowers. The procession assembles in front of the *ajuntmient*, from where the priest leads them through the narrow streets to the Church of St Gregory. When the bread has received the blessing by being anointed with holy water it is distributed amongst the parishioners, in the event that it should be needed at a time of sickness or necessity.

The highlight of the fiesta is the fourth day, dedicated to Saint Gregory, when the whole population takes part in a giant feast, eaten at tables spread though the town. An enormous pig is slaughtered which the townspeople share, along with an immense paella measuring three metres in diameter.

Follow the one-way signs through the *pueblo* and at the end of the main street follow the road over a bridge on the left that will take you up a hill to a T-junction. Turn left here for Xixona, 16 kilometres away. When you reach the N340, cross over and follow the signs for Xixona. This will lead you on to the N340 but you exit almost immediately.

Known as *La Cuna de Turrón* (The Cradle of Turrón), Xixona is a town with a sweet heart whose fortunes are built on the twin delights of nougat and ice-cream. From the beginning of September the surrounding area is filled with the sound of trees being whacked with long poles as the almonds that go to make the traditional Christmas treat are knocked from the trees. The production season lasts only until December but around 8 per cent of the town's population are employed in the turrón industry.

Turrón, Xixona's famous Christmas treat.

To describe *turrón* as simply nougat is rather inadequate as a number of different types are produced in a wide variety of flavours. Textures can be brittle and crunchy, smooth and creamy and the flavours would remind people from Arab countries of *halva*. In fact, it was 15th-century Moors and Jews who began producing the famous Christmas treat adored by Spaniards.

In its traditional form, *turrón* is a blend of sugar, almonds, orange blossom, egg white and honey from bees that have dined solely on rosemary. The two main varieties are Alicante, the nougat you are most likely to recognise, and Jijona, a softer, sweeter variety. Different types require different almonds. Marzipan and egg yolk are added to make the softer *turrón* but it is claimed that colouring or preservatives are never used.

Even though it is now a major industry and has been for more than 200 years, the best *turrón* is still blended by hand, after which it is fed through a rolling mill to achieve the standard thickness and blocked shape. El Lobo's 1880 brand is said to be one of the most luxurious. These days, large quantities of *turrón* from Xixona are exported worldwide.

At first view the town has a rather untidy, uncared for look and the elegance of the wide Avenida Constitución comes as something of a surprise. At its lower end there are some delightful *modernista* (Art Nouveau) buildings and the town hall, with its ornate blue-and-gold tiles and painted griffons, catches the eye.

You can visit the Museo del Turrón just outside the town or wander around a few narrow streets displaying tiled images of the saints they are named after, but the real reason for visiting Xixona is to sample its mainstay, which you can do at any number of shops and factories.

From Xixona, take the road to Alicante and when you see a sign for Busot, turn left (this is the road you will be on if you have visited the turrón museum), following the country road until you see a sign for the Coves del Canelobre (Caves of the Candelabra).

You'll see why the caves get their name as soon as you enter for the millennia of dripping water have created strange, often whimsical forms. The fine acoustics of the interior, one of the highest cave vaults in Spain, has led to the caves hosting musical concerts, especially in the summer months.

Go back to the Busot road, turning right to return to the coast.

WHAT TO SEE

AIGÜES:

Baños de Busot, semi-derelict 19th-century spa.

Iglesia Paroquial, dedicated to St Francis of Assisi, with a 17th-century altar-piece painted by Antonio Vallanueva.

Torre Morisco, 14th-century Moorish tower.

TORREMANZANAS:

La Casa Alta, Calle del Castell. 13th-century Almohad tower.

El Pou de la Neu del Rontonar, ice cave and **El Brull**, waterfalls and natural pools. Two points of interest to be visited on walks from the village. Inaccessible by car.

Parque Municipal. Attractive park with picnic facilities, barbecues and children's playground.

Pa Beneit, the festival of the blessing of the bread. The parade of loaves is especially worth seeing. Takes place around May 9. Confirm dates with the town hall.

Sunday Market, in the main street.

XIXONA:

Museo del Turrón, Polígono Industrial Ciudad del Turrón, Carretera Xixona-Busot, km1 (4km from town centre off the Alicante road). Tel. 96 561 02 25. Displays of turrón-making through history. Open daily 10am-7pm (1pm on Sat/Sun/holidays). Guided tours every hour, including visit to modern production plant. Entry €1. Leaflets in English. Most of the turrón factories are open to visits and tastings.

MORE INFORMATION

AIGÜES:

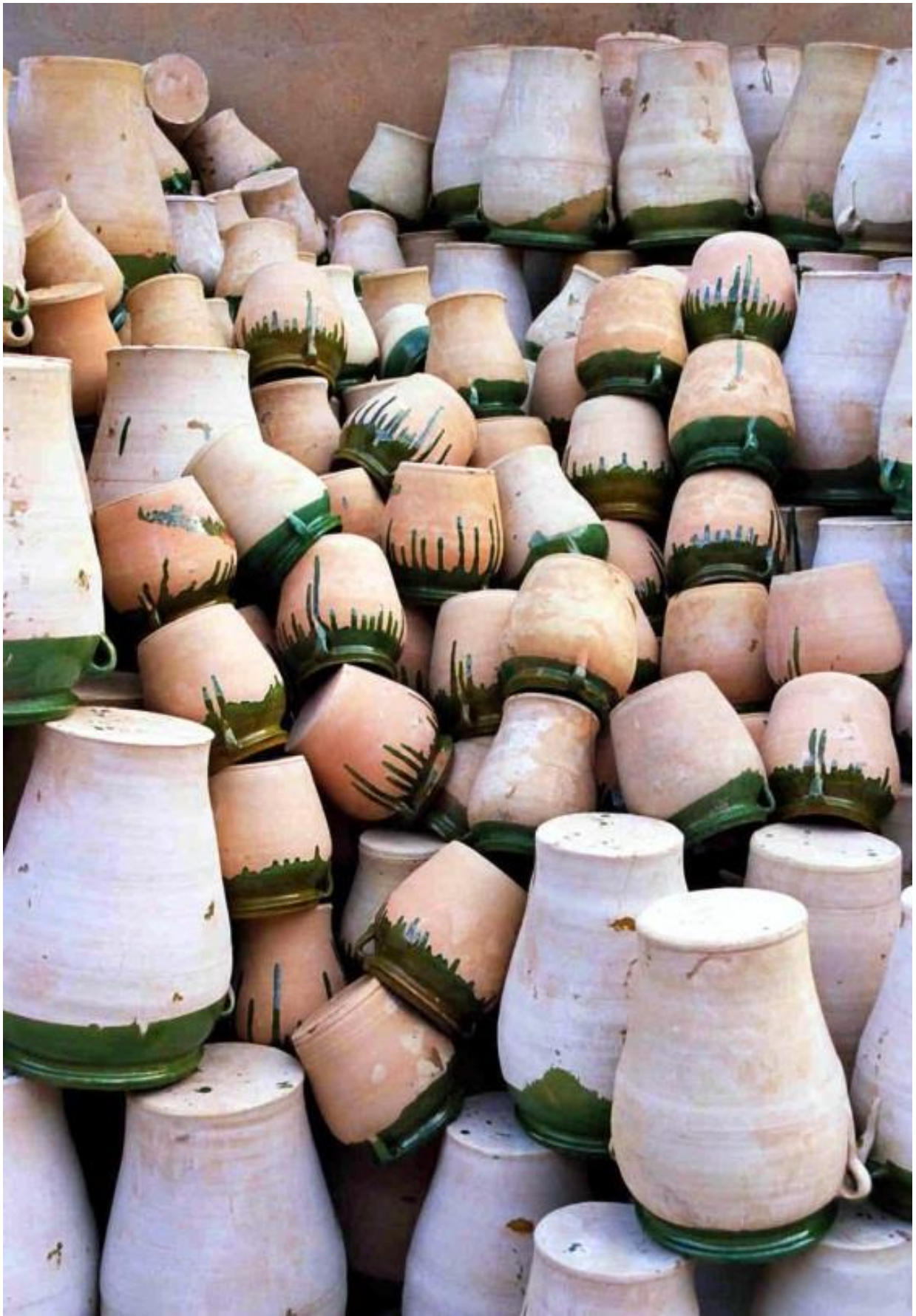
Ayuntamiento, Calle Pintor José Vila, 1. Tel. 96 569 00 61. Open 11am-2pm.

TORREMANZANAS:

Ayuntamiento, Avenida de Espanya. Tel. 96 561 90 51. Open 8.30am-2pm.

XIXONA:

Ayuntamiento, Avenida de la Constitución, 6. Tel. 96 561 00 80. Open 8am-2pm.



TIN TOYS AND KEYS TO THE KINGDOMS

Area: High Vinalopó, Alicante province

Route: Ibi – Banyeres de Mariola – Biar

Distance: 128 kilometres

Mountain beauty combined with mouth-watering cuisine and the splendid Alicante wines make this an excursion to savour as you travel highlands once the scene of ferocious disputes between Castilla and Aragon.

From the coastal motorway (the A70 as it bypasses Alicante) take the A36 towards Alcoi, Castalla and Ibi, passing Sant Vicent del Raspeig. When you exit from the A36, follow the signs for Alcoi and Banyeres until you join a dual carriageway in the middle of Ibi. Stay on this road (following the signs for the Ajuntament and Museu de Joguet) until you get to the top of a gentle rise and you see a Repsol garage on your left beside a set of traffic lights.

To take this left you first have to take the short slip road on the right just before the traffic lights and cross over the main road and go down the other side of the garage. This leads you to the Ajuntament (town hall), beyond which you see the blue-tiled dome of a church. The Museu de Joguet (toy museum) is just behind the church, but it is advisable to park near the town hall as it is difficult near the museum. Also the road by which you will be leaving Ibi is directly opposite the Ajuntament.

Ibi's wealth rests on plastics these days, but at the turn of the 19th century the town owed its existence to agriculture and ice cream, the latter made from snow gathered from the surrounding mountaintops and sold throughout the region.

The tinsmiths of Rafael Paya kept the town supplied with cans and ladles, lamps and candlesticks. Then, in 1905, his three sons, Vicente, Pascual and Ismael, founded La Sin Rival – Paya Hermanos factory (Paya Brothers, Without Rival) that eventually came to supply more than half the toys in Spain.

With the factory's closure in the early 1980s, the Fundació Paya was formed and the company's collection of tin toys — including clockwork railways, whizzing jugglers, big-wheeled prams and mechanised motorbikes — was donated to the town. It is now on display in the Museu del Joguet, housed in the beautiful 18th-century villa of the Pérez family, where you can also buy hand-made replicas made from original Paya patterns.

(You can read the story of Paya Hermanos and their tin toy factory in Toy Town Memory Lane, below.)

Leave Ibi by the road opposite the Ajuntament. Soon you will enter the Parque Natural del Carrascar de la Font Roja. Gentle pine-covered hills give way to cornfields

and sunflowers, disappearing into the distance among regimented olive groves and the occasional small field of low blue/grey lavender bushes.

The park has one of the best-preserved Mediterranean forests in Valencia, with oak, yew, flowering ash and kermes oak. Wild boar, genets, wild cats and badgers roam free while Bonelli's eagles and golden eagles, vultures and eagle owls prowl the sky.

At the new road junction 10 kilometres from Ibi, bear left on the C795 to Banyeres (the town's full name is Banyeres de Mariola and you will see references to both names). Dusty roads lead off into the park at regular intervals, many of them leading to picnic areas.

You are entering the High Vinalopó, a beautiful mountainous region, ideal for walkers and nature lovers. The area's cuisine — featuring such hearty dishes as *arroz con conejo* (rice with rabbit) and *gazpacho de coca con liebre*, a thick, almost pasta-like dish made with noodles and hare, a world away from the chilled *gazpacho* of Andalusia — provides sturdy sustenance for the local farm workers.

Aromatic herbs are found in abundance on the mountainsides and feature heavily in the local cooking. In most of the villages in these parts you can treat yourself to sweet potato pie and almond cakes, and sweets made with wine and liqueurs. There is no shortage of excellent restaurants on this excursion.

Locally produced *turrón* (a type of nougat), *peladillas* (sugared almonds) and *miel de romero* (rosemary honey) carry the special label specifying *denominación de origen* that guarantees a high standard of quality. A separate D.O. also verifies the quality of the table grapes grown in the High Vinalopó, some of the best in Spain and almost always those used to pop into the mouth at the 12 strokes of midnight that bring in the New Year.

The High Vinalopó is one of the major wine-producing regions of Mediterranean Europe. When Ferdinand Magellan set off on his circumnavigation of the globe he took Alicante wine with him, making it the first wine to make it around the world. Rumour has it that the Sun King, Louis XIV of France, spurned his own country's *vin rouge* and drank Alicante wine on his deathbed.

After a sudden right-hand twist in the road 20 kilometres from Ibi, you see Banyeres castle, keeping watch over the steep streets of the town. The castle was part of a chain of fortifications (Los Castillos de Vinalopó) that played their part in skirmishes between the Castilians and the Aragonese, when they laid claim to these lands during the 12th and 13th centuries.

The first paper mill in Alicante province was opened in Banyeres in 1779, although records show that paper had been produced in the town since the end of the 14th century. A charming museum, the Museu Molí Paperer, is housed in the Villa Rosario, a small palace set in a park of the same name on the edge of town. The museum, unique in the Valencia Community, charts the history of paper-making since its origins

in China in 105 BC and its introduction to Europe via Xàtiva in Valencia province. It has a whole section devoted entirely to cigarette papers.



Nearby, the Museo Arqueológico occupies the 17th-century Torre Font Bona, a defensive tower dating from the 15th to 16th centuries that contains local artefacts from the Iberian, Roman, Islamic and Christian periods. A short drive from the town centre is a leisure area beside the Vinalopó river called the Molí l'Ombria, an ideal spot for a stroll or picnic.

A warming and sometimes fiery digestive

Almost every mountain restaurant in these parts will offer you a glass of *herbero* (also called *hierbas*), a warming and sometimes fiery digestive. Each has its own recipe handed down from generation to generation, which usually consists of a mixture of medicinal herbs such as thyme and camomile macerated in sweet anisette.

Most of these concoctions are delicately referred to as *clandestino* (unlicensed). The sole producer of legal *herbero* in the area is Fabricación Artesanal de Licores de Hierbas Rufo, and their premises can be found in what is little more than a garage at Calle Penya Roja, 10.

Three generations of the Rufo family have been making *herbero*, using between 15 and 20 different herbs to create the range of four flavours the small shop has on offer. The shop is open to the public mornings only from Monday to Friday (Tel. 96 556 63 33/606 61 29 57).

Leave Banyeres and head for Villena and Ontinyent, joining the CV81 a kilometre out of Banyeres heading towards Villena. As you travel the arrow-straight road, in front of you the towering blue cupola of Beneixama's San Juan Bautista church rises from the plain, accompanied by its twin towers and large clock. In Beneixama you can also visit the 12th-century Torre de Negret and the 18th-century Ermita de la Divana Aurora (the chapel of the Holy Dawn), which was built by Valencian sculptor Josep Esteve and is thought to have pagan origins.

At a roundabout take the CV81 to Villena. A few minutes later you come to another roundabout that directs you to Cañada, a village that lives mainly from fruit-farming and a small industry of textiles and leather. Here you can buy a fresh white cheese called *queso tierno*, made from a mixture of goat and cow's milk, and Terreta Rosé wine, made exclusively in the village from the *monastrell* grape.

Cañada is best known for the mystery play enacted every January 6 and 7 since 1764 and grandly titled *La venida y adoración de los Santos Reyes Magos al Niño Jesús* (the coming and adoration of the Child Jesus by the Three Kings). There are only 18 main roles, but almost the whole of the village joins in as shepherds and villagers. On the first day, Epiphany, historically the day when children were given their presents long before Christmas Day was celebrated nationally, the Three Kings come from different parts of the village to meet at the *belén* (crib) to present their gifts. On the following day they re-enact the flight to Egypt and Herod's massacre of the innocents.

In the parish church, in the heart of the village, hangs a painting entitled "*El rey San Luis de Francia*" by the famous 19th-century Valencia painter Joaquín Sorolla.

Leave Cañada by Calle Mayor that passes in front of the church. Cross a road with a Stop sign and, when you reach a junction at the edge of the village, turn right (a sign for Beneixama points to the left but there is none for Biar to the right).

A seven-kilometre rural drive from Cañada on the CV807 brings you to Biar, said to have one of the best-preserved 16 to 18th-century building heritages in the Valencia region. The name of the town originates from Roman times when it was called Apiarium (beehive), as it was one of the most important areas for honey in eastern Spain due to the abundance of flavoursome mountain herbs.

If you have the energy to climb up to the castle through steep winding streets from the Plaza de la Constitución (the town square), you will be rewarded with glorious views of the Vall de Vinalopó. The Torre de Homenaje (the castle keep) is one of the most important in the region and one of only three in Spain with ribbed vaulting on its arches (on the second storey) that intertwine to form a rosette in the middle of the vault, a feature that dates it to the second half of the 12th century.

The lower two floors are of Islamic design, while the third is a 15th-century addition, built at the same time as the double bailey that protects its southern face. A plaque inside the keep, placed there when it was conquered for Aragon by Jaime I in 1245, declares in Latin "Only the king has two keys", signalling his dominion over both warring factions.

Biar's 15th-century parish church, La Asunción de la Virgen, has a Levantine-Plateresque façade, much weathered by the centuries but still highly impressive. Inside, the Shrine of the Communion is one of the leading examples of Churrigueresque Baroque. Just off the square on Calle Mayor is the little Museo Municipal.

Modern-day Biar lives on the production of dolls, blankets, and hand-forged metalwork, including gates, verandas, bed heads and balconies, which are still made in the traditional way. Small-scale ceramics factories, which have been a major part of Biar's economy since the 18th century, produce everything from vases, dishes and bowls to flower pots, draining boards and large earthenware jugs.

Leaving Biar by the A210 to Castalla, after seven kilometres you join the A36, which bypasses Castalla. The road splits shortly after, one route going to Alicante and the south and the other to Alcoi and the north.

WHAT TO SEE

BANYERES DE MARIOLA

Castillo, one of a chain of castles involved in skirmishes between Castilla and Aragon in the 12th and 13th centuries. Open Sun, 11am-dusk. The **Moors and Christians Museum** within the castle is open by appointment with the town hall.

Museu Molí Paperer, Parque Villa Rosario. Tel 96 556 77 70. Paper mill museum. Open Tue-Sun, 11am-1pm, 5-7pm. Free entry.

Museo Arqueológico, Torre Font Bona. Tel 96 656 78 96. Open Tue-Sun, 1-2pm, 7-9pm. Free entry.

BIAR:

Castillo, 12th-century castle with one of the most important keeps in the region. Open Tues-Fri 11am-1pm, Sat 10am-2pm, 4-6pm, Sun 10am-2pm. Entry €1. (Please note: as the ground within the castle walls is very uneven, it is advisable to wear sensible shoes.)

Museo Municipal (Museo Etnográfico), a small museum displaying local artefacts. Calle Mayor, s/n. Open Tues-Sat noon-2pm, 6-8pm, Sun noon-2pm. Free entry.

Iglesia Parroquial, 15th-century parish church in the Plaza de la Constitución.

Acueducto Ojival. 17th-century aqueduct on the edge of town in the direction of Banyeres.

Cerámica Maestre, Camino de la Virgen s/n. Tel. 96 581 00 62. Pottery with public viewing, Mon-Fri 9.30am-1pm, 3-8pm, Sat 9.30am-1.30pm, Sun 11am-1.30pm.

MORE INFORMATION

IBI:

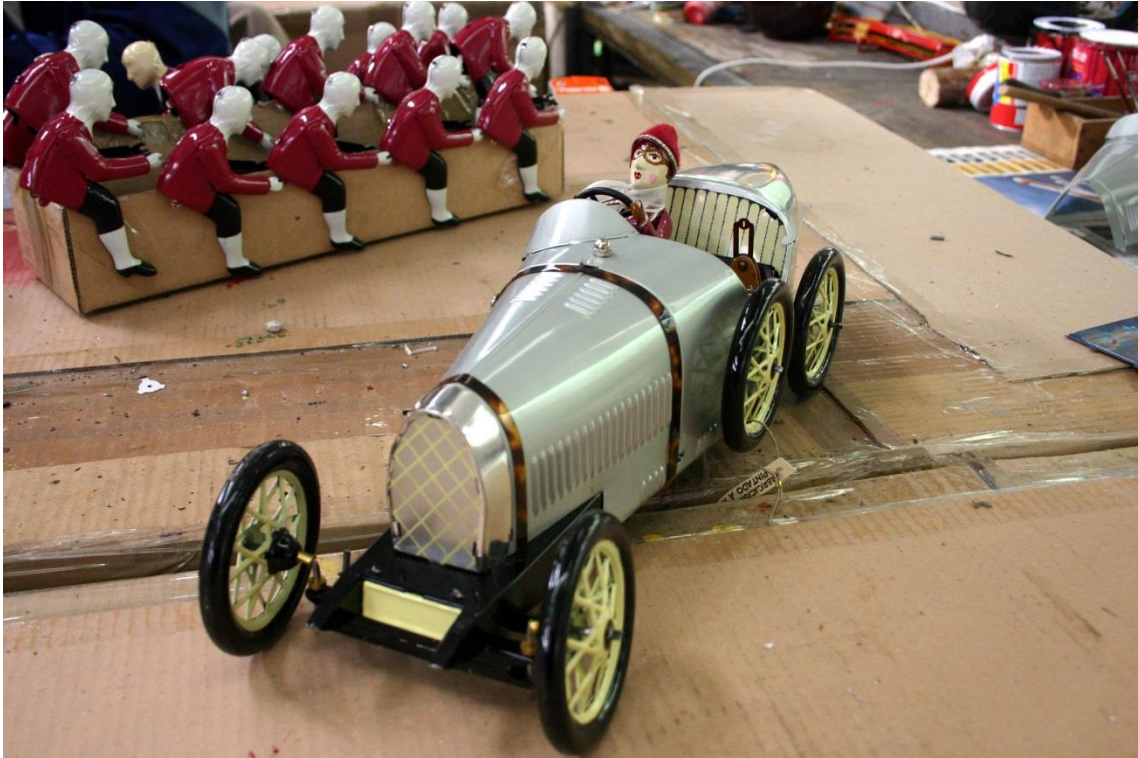
Ayuntamiento, Calle Les Eres, 48. Tel. 96 555 24 55. Web page www.ibirural.com
Open Mon-Fri 8am-2pm.

BANYERES:

Ajuntament, Plaça del Ajuntament, s/n. Tel. 96 656 73 15. Open Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm.

BIAR :

Tourist Information Office, Avda de Villena, 2. Tel 96 581 11 77. Web page www.biar.es or www.biarrual.es. Open Tue-Sat, 8.30am-2.30pm,



Toy Town Memory Lane Tin Toy Making in Ibi

At the turn of the twentieth century the small Alicante town of Ibi owed its existence to agriculture and ice cream, the latter made from snow gathered from the surrounding mountain-tops and carried to the coastal towns to refresh the parched palates of holidaymakers. The tinsmiths of Rafael Paya kept the town supplied with cans and ladles, lamps and candlesticks, but the family workshop was destined to become the Santa Claus of Spain, or to be more exact, and in keeping with Spanish tradition, the Three Kings.

In 1905 the three Paya sons, Vicente, Pascual and Ismael, founded the factory that became the most important manufacturer of tin toys in Spain, 'La Sin Rival - Paya Hermanos'. Before the factory was started the family had been making a few toys, mainly horses and carriages, to keep the kids of the town quiet, but it was a visit by a

representative of a German manufacturer that convinced the brothers that there was a future to be made in keeping kids quiet nationally.

The step from small town toy maker to major manufacturer came as a result of the First World War (and it's a curious feature of Paya's development that, one way or another, wars have worked to its benefit). When the rest of Europe turned its metal working factories over to munitions, Paya was able to expand and take up the slack in the toy business. Even though Spain was never in the top league of manufacturers compared with Germany, France and Great Britain, those war years helped fuel the boom for Ibi, which continued until the Civil War. This time it was the turn of the Spanish factories to concentrate on the war effort, and Paya produced knives, bullets and other munitions for the Republican cause. (It also kept its finger in the tin toy pie by making a Republican militiaman, a sort of early Action Man). When hostilities ceased, the Paya family had an up-to-the-minute factory which, with the outbreak of World War II, once again allowed it to take advantage of the dearth of toys being made in other European countries.

Eventually Paya, and the factories which grew from it, supplied sixty percent of the toys in Spain, but it was the crisis of the early eighties, when the market was flooded with cheap 'yellow toys' (as they are referred to locally), toys from Japan, China and Korea, that forced Paya to shut up shop.

When the protracted financial wranglings over the demise of Paya came to an end, the judge presiding over the distribution of assets declared that the land owned by the company was to be disposed of to pay outstanding bank loans, while the machinery was to be given to the workers to deal with as they saw fit. Fortunately, eighty percent of the original tin toy moulds and patterns still existed, even though Paya had converted totally to plastics production in the 1950s, and in 1986 a co-operative was formed to re-introduce the making of tin toys to Ibi.

Visiting the factory now is like visiting Father Christmas' toy works when all the elves have all been laid off. Row after row of monstrous looking machinery, interspersed with mounds of antiquated moulds and dyes vie for space with hundreds of boxes with a wheel-less, unpainted train body, a dumpy car shape or the curved roof of a railway tunnel nailed to them to show what's stored inside. In a long Dickensian workroom, lit by low-slung fluorescent lights, six people assemble the cogs, wheels and brightly painted parts, where two decades ago over one hundred worked.

Lino Vila is the factory manager who presides over a total workforce of fifteen, and whilst this might seem a pale shadow of the seven hundred who once worked here, he's optimistic that the young people they are now employing will have a secure future. "When we started we weren't sure what the market would be like so we tried to sell the toys as interior design items. That didn't work, but what we did find was that there is strong collectors' market. It's small, but because everything we make comes from original designs and is completely hand-made, we're beginning to get a good part of that specialist market."

Each model is produced in limited editions of 5,000, and every one is given a numbered certificate of authenticity. "It's strange to think of them as mini-works of art," comments Vila, "but that's how our clients think of them, and not just for their visual beauty either, but as something which was highly advanced technology at the time they were originally made." The factory currently has eighty models in production, but a large archive will keep them going for years to come. The latest to go into production is a model of Isadora Duncan, the famous dancer of the early 1900's, driving a wonderful long-nosed Bugatti (perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek, given that she was strangled when she was dragged from the back of an open-topped car in Nice when her long scarf caught around the rear wheels).

When the Paya factory closed, the Fundacio Paya was formed and its collection of tin toys donated to the town. They now form the basis of a collection of childhood fantasies; clockwork railways, whizzing jugglers, big-wheeled prams and mechanised motorbikes. José Pascual Sellés is the curator of the Mueso de Jugete, the toy museum, housed in the beautiful historic villa of the Los Perez family, tucked in the corner of the church square. "It's strange to think," he says, "but it was that closure that took Paya back to making tin toys, using the same designs that made them and Ibi famous."

These days people tend to think of tin toys in a nostalgic, under-the-Victorian-Christmas-tree sort of way, but they were in fact the Gameboys of yesteryear. "These were highly complex and sophisticated pieces of engineering, particularly when you consider the sort of handling they had to take," says José. The tiny spindles and spiky cogs would be pushed and shoved over stone or wooden floors, and clockwork mechanisms would be wound to breaking point. "They weren't cheap either, only the better class of family with good spending power could afford them." (The same could probably be said for the hand-made reproductions on sale in the museum. At close to 35 euros for a tiny wind-up duck, and 450 for Isadora in her Bugatti, there's pretty little likelihood of the kiddiwinkies getting their hands on them.)

A walk around the museum isn't just a wander into childhood memories, it's a design history lesson in miniature. The canvas covered horse and cart of 1910, the Coupe de Ville cabriolet of 1925; Bugatti's 1930 racer with the boat-shaped back, and the sleek, bright red Packard convertible from 1950. Transatlantic liners, zeppelins and battleships; Modernista kitchen ranges and Deco garden furniture; footballers in twenties kit, suitcase-lugging students in thirties high-fashion, and daring travellers in motorbike mufti - the history of the early twentieth century stamped out in tin and painted in glorious Technicolor.

Technology aside, whenever a new model is delivered to the toy museum José Sellés feels it's a special day. "I always say that the three kings have come early." The buyers of today might look on their new toy as an investment, but José still likes to give each one a try behind closed office doors. "The feeling as I wind the key and watch a fat little duck waddle across my desk, or see a fancy sportscar zoom across the floor is wonderful." It must be a marvellous job being boss of your own whizzing, rattling, clanking toy box.

A globe is centered in the background, partially obscured by a horizontal banner. The banner has a textured, light-colored surface.

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