

INLAND TRIPS FROM THE  
**Costa Blanca**  
Valencia South



DEREK WORKMAN

# **Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca**

**Valencia South**

**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](http://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.

### 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](http://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 book 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.

## LET US KNOW

We welcome your help in keeping this guide book as up to date as possible. If you come across any mistakes please let us know. We shall take it into account when preparing the next edition. Send your suggestions to: [derek@spainuncovered.net](mailto:derek@spainuncovered.net)



## LABYRINTH OF THE FULL MOON

**Area:** Canal de Navarrés, Macizo del Caroig, north Alicante province

**Route:** Sumacàrcer – Navarrés – Bicorp – Anna – Enguera – Moixent.

**Distance:** 120 kilometres

*Enter the mountainous heart of the Valencia region where a vast subterranean reservoir feeds verdant forests and a wonderland of lakes, mountain pools and towering cascades.*

From the N340, the inland autoroute which passes close to Xàtiva and runs north to Valencia, take exit number 855 for Alcàntera del Xúquer. This is the third exit north of the one for Xàtiva (junctions on this road are marked by the kilometre number and not sequentially).

As you leave the motorway, follow the signs for Alcàntera del Xúquer and Sumacàrcer. At the next junction (barely a km further on), turn right on the VP3072 and follow the signs for Càrcer and Sumacàrcer.

Almost immediately you enter Alcàntera del Xúquer and just as rapidly find yourself in Càrcer. You pass through the ubiquitous orange groves of Valencia as you travel gently over low-lying hills. Turn right at the roundabout (VP 3072) just after the km5 mark. Four kilometres later, as you turn a bend, you see ahead on the terraced hillside the pretty cemetery of Sumacàrcer, with its hexagonal turrets and row of plane trees. One kilometre further on, you reach the village itself. Follow the signs for Navarrés, 10 kilometres away, on the road snaking up the pine-covered hill behind Sumacàrcer.

The road levels out after two kilometres and you travel through stately, greyish-green olive groves interspersed with the brighter green of almond trees. The earth, when newly turned, is a deep brick red that glows with fecundity.

You are entering the Macizo del Caroig, dubbed with the poetic name of the "labyrinth of the full moon". The rivers Friale, Grande, Cazuma and Ludey flow through a picturesque landscape of lakes, ravines and waterfalls, where water-courses disappear underground, popping up now and again, to finally reappear when they reach the river Escalona.

The diversity of this beautiful region has made it an important centre of rural activities, from climbing, mountainbiking, canoeing, fishing, trekking, horse riding and swimming to leisure walks and studying the profusion of cave paintings that go back to Neolithic times.

The local gastronomy reflects the hardness of life here, with such dishes as *mojete arriero* (spicy cod-and-tomato stew) and *olla con pelotas* (a rich stew with dumplings). You will also find dishes of delicious chanterelle mushrooms, picked from

the mountainsides and known locally as *pebrazons*, and savoury tomato, red pepper and bacon tortas, a kind of Valencian pizza. For those with a sweet tooth there are *rollets d'aiguardent*, liqueur-filled rolls.

This area is the domain of *los caliqueños*, hand-rolled cigars sold in brown-paper-wrapped bundles of 20 for the ridiculous price of €2.50, if you know where to look. The Canal de Navarrés (the valley in which most of the villages are situated) was historically the centre of tobacco-growing in the Valencian Community, and the workers used to take leaves home to “roll their own”.

These days most of the tobacco is brought from Granada, but the *caliqueños* have become a cottage industry and for every small cigar-producing factory there are a thousand homes making these lumpy, slightly curving smokes — totally illegally. However, this contraband trade is largely ignored and, if you ask politely, most of the cafes will sell you a pack, usually from under the counter or from a store cupboard, but never on open display.

The villages of the Canal de Navarrés are rarely beautiful and, apart from the usual church and sanctuary, have little to offer the history buff. Visitors to this area usually come for the water, the walks and spectacular scenery.

The town of Navarrés shows its Arab origin in the narrow streets of the old town at the foot of the hill, crowned by the shrine dedicated to the Cristo de la Salud (the Christ of Good Health). From the courtyard of the *ermita* you can look over expanses of flowers grown commercially around the town, which have caused Navarrés to be dubbed “the little Spanish Holland”.

Leaving Navarrés on VV3071 in the direction of Quesa and Bicorp, the road dips and dives as it enters the mountains, a rough but attractive countryside. You breast a rise at the km14 marker (four kilometres after leaving Navarrés) and Quesa lies in the valley before you. Apart from stopping at the town hall to pick up information (and a good little map of the area) or at the Museum of Contemporary Art if you are there at the weekend, Quesa has little to offer except for Los Charcos (The Ponds), a delightful picnic and camping area, an eight-kilometre drive from the village.

Drive through Quesa and, at the roundabout just outside the village, take the second exit for the Camino los Charcos. After two kilometres, you come to a Y-junction. Take the left fork, uphill. The narrow road soon levels out for a pretty, meandering drive through pine and carob trees. Pocket-sized orange and almond groves grow in the reddish earth of the eroded hillsides.

As you reach Los Charcos, a wooden sign directs you to a campsite to the right and Los Charcos to the left. You drop down into a recreation area with a kiddies playground, picnic areas and barbeques set alongside the clear, tinkling waters and calm shallow pools of “The Ponds”, inhabited by shoals of small fish and the occasional fat striped frog.



Way-marked walks guide you through a landscape of lavender, spurge flax, oleanders and mountain ash and past the Abrigo de Voro, a rock shelter where prehistoric Levante rock paintings depict archery scenes.

On your return trip, as you crest a rise two kilometres from Los Charcos, the valley opens out to your left with a beautiful patchwork of cultivation. Back at the roundabout at Quesa, the VV3071 takes you towards Bicorp.

Near the km18 marker, as you drop into a valley, note the curious colour scheme: the deep purplish-red rock of the hillsides graduates into a greyish yellow. You cross a long bridge and climb the other side of the valley. Down to your left among the fruit groves you will see a series of boxes on poles. These are beehives, providing the honey for which the area is renowned.

Three kilometres later, Bicorp appears on your right. Take a look at the row of cottages on the edge of the ravine; you will notice that the backs of two of them have actually tumbled down the precipice. And that's probably the most interesting feature of Bicorp.

However, along a track on your left just before you get to Bicorp is the Cueva de la Araña (Spider's Cave), said to be the most important collection of prehistoric cave paintings in Spain (the last two kilometres are inaccessible by car).

Proclaimed a World Heritage site, the cave paintings show men (or women) collecting honey — the only illustration of prehistoric honey collection in Spain. There are other paintings in caves in the area and expert guides are available to explain their meaning for you.

Retrace your route from Bicorp through Navarrés, following the VV3076 to Bolbaite and Chella. Three kilometres after Navarrés, you come to Playamonte, a recreation area built around a small lake.

Four kilometres further on you reach Chella, where a group of experts are studying the claim that the blue-and-white tiled cupola of the parish church, the Virgen de Gracia, was designed by the famous architect Antoni Gaudí. If it was, it will surprise a lot of people as it looks just like any number of cupolas in the Valencia region. But time, and the experts, will tell.

Climb to the lookout at the top of the town and you have a glorious view over the surrounding valley, with finely ordered orange groves and vineyards looking like a neatly sewn quilt. The *chellinos*, as the locals are known, have christened this spot Paraíso. There is not a sound except for the water cascading from El Salto, a waterfall that tumbles 30 metres into the deep green pool below.

Mouldering at the bottom of the gorge is the ruin of an old electricity station that generated power from the force of the falls. Now little more than four creeper-covered walls, it is home for a herd of goats whose owner cultivates the fan-shaped garden laid out in front of the main entrance.

Four kilometres down the road (still on the VV3076) lies Anna, a delightful village with a liquid appeal. A multitude of fountains bubble and cascade in the hills and valleys surrounding the pueblo. The most important of them, as far as Anna itself is concerned, is the Albufera, a half-kilometre drive from the edge of town. You can find it by taking the right turn just after the Fiat service station, in front of the log cabin Tourist Office.

The Albufera is a spring-fed lake whose water filters underground to irrigate the fields surrounding the village. The island in the middle of the lake, called El Merendero, is home to families of ducks and geese. You can hire a boat for closer inspection. The lake, surrounded by willow and poplar trees, has picnic benches and peaceful areas for a doze in the sun. A delightful spot to while away an hour or two on a balmy summer's day.

Return to the main road and turn right, and, after one kilometre, you come to a roundabout indicating Enguera is five kilometres away on the CV590. Along the arrow-straight road, you pass the modern, elegant Hotel Fuente Lucena, seemingly stuck in the middle of nowhere, next to a factory, but with lovely views over the valley.

Shortly after you enter Enguera, a left turn up the side of a blue Cepsa garage takes you into the centre of town. There's parking in town, but it's probably best to park on the main road and walk the couple of minutes into the centre.

Enguera is a pretty little place of narrow streets and shady squares where elderly gentlemen pass the hours in relaxed conversation. Going as far back as the 11th century, the castle was incorporated into the Crown of Aragon in 1244. But little more than a century later, in 1365, it was destroyed by the order of Pedro IV, who considered it too much of a threat to the security of his kingdom.

It's still possible to see many fine examples of the houses known locally as *heredades*, two-storey buildings with a corral, the homes of the 18th and 19th-century bourgeoisie who made their money in the wool trade. These days the town's fortunes are based on wrought iron, furniture and olive oil. In San Miguel church, part of the Carmelite convent, there are paintings by Carnelo and Segrelles and an anonymous altarpiece attributed to the so-called Maestro de Enguera.

Return to the main road and follow the CV590 in the direction of Ayora. It's a peaceful ride through a gently rolling, unirrigated landscape, with the occasional cornfield adding a rich green or golden hue, depending on the time of year you pass through.

As you approach the km36 marker, to your right you will see a stone cairn with a weathered board stuck on a metal pole alongside a rough track. (It's directly opposite a white-and-blue arrowed sign indicating a bend.) The sign reading Cuco Magno (on maps it is sometimes referred to as Cuco Montanyola) directs you to one of the unusual 19th-century circular houses that rural workers used during harvest time to avoid having to trek back to their village. Don't drive up the track as the surface is very bumpy with lots of sharp stones. You can park the car on a small patch of land beside the road. From there it's only a five-minute walk.

As you walk through the dry moorland, the air is filled with the scent of rosemary and wild mountain thyme and you see small bushes of white rock rose. The arched entrance to the *cuco* is through stout walls almost two metres thick and made of layered flat stones. The ceiling is beautifully constructed with thinner stones tapering to a central peak. The only fittings are a dry sink and a small fireplace. Dozens of these *cucos* are scattered throughout the Sierra de Enguera.

Returning to your car, carry on for another seven kilometres until, just after the km29 marker, you turn left on the VV3055 (marked as CV589 on Michelin maps) for Navalón. A large yellow sign warns you the narrow road is in bad condition and you should drive carefully (*carretera estrecha, firme en mal estado, circulen con precaución*). Despite the warning, the road is no better or worse than many you will encounter on these trips and is, in fact, a very pretty drive through rolling countryside.

After four kilometres you will pass the tiny village of Navalón de Abajo and, one kilometre further, Navalón de Arriba (Lower and Upper Navalón). Continue towards Moixent. After about four kilometres, as you climb a hill, a sign to your left advertises El Teulet, Centre d'Ecoturisme i Formació. The centre, a little over a kilometre's drive down a metalled road, focuses on environmental training, but also has way-marked walks, a small farm and rest areas.

Back on the main road, the road begins to wend its way down to Moixent. To end the excursion, follow the signs for Valencia for the north and Albacete for the south. The latter connects with the N330 autoroute for Alicante. For Benidorm and the central Costa Blanca, follow the signs for Ontinyent, where you return to the coast via Alcoi and the Guadalest valley.



## WHAT TO SEE

The Canal de Navarrés has many rivers, waterfalls and pools usually only accessible by footpaths, many of which are way-marked. Check tourist information offices for details of walks and also for routes to see the many cave paintings (*pinturas rupestres*).

### QUESA:

**Museo Alberto Hernández y Mercedes Rubio**, on the left immediately after the sign for Quesa as you enter the village. Tel. 96 225 60 01. Museum of contemporary/romantic art. Open Sat/Sun 11am-1pm.

**Los Charcos**, 8km from village. Recreation area with freshwater pools, picnic area, playground and way-marked footpaths to view cave paintings. Open all year.

**Fiesta La Reserva**, the stew festival. In 1690, an epidemic wiped out the whole of Quesa's population except for one family, who lived on stew and slowly repopulated the village. To commemorate the event, on February 14 each year all visitors are served *caldero*, a hearty stew.

### BICORP:

**Cueva de la Araña**. World Heritage site of prehistoric cave paintings. 12 kms from village, last two kilometres only accessible on foot. Two local experts give free guided tours of the caves, in Spanish only. Contact Loli on 657 190 668 or Paco on 670 446 508.

### CHELLA:

**Mirador del Salto**, viewing point for El Salto waterfall and surrounding valley.

**La Virgen de Gracia**, parish church with cupola allegedly designed by Antoni Gaudí.

### ANNA:

**La Inmaculada**, 17th-century parish church with baroque altar-piece and paintings of the same period.

**La Albufera**, small boating lake with picnic area. Boat hire Easter-Nov only.

### ENGUERA:

**Convento de Carmelitas Descalzas**, 17th-century convent.

**Ruinas del Castillo**, ruins of the 13th-century castle.

**Cuco de Mago** (Montanyola), 19th-century round agricultural worker's house, 11 kms from town in direction Navalón.

(There are a number of caves and relics of Iberian settlements in the area but only accessible on foot).

## MORE INFORMATION

### NAVARRÉS:

**Ayuntamiento**, Calle de la Iglesia, 2. Tel. 96 226 60 01. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

### QUESA:

**Ayuntamiento**, Calle Hernán Cortés, 4. Tel 96 225 60 01. Open Mon-Fri noon- 2pm.

**BICORP:**

Ayuntamiento, Calle Iglesia, 11. Tel. 96 226 91 10. Open Mon-Fri 8am-2pm.

**ANNA:**

Tourist Information Office, Calle Mayor, s/n. Tel. 96 221 01 36. Open daily 10am-2pm.

**ENGUERA:**

Asociación para la Promoción Socio Económica Macizo del Caroig, Casa de Cultura, Plaza Manuel Toslá, s/n. Tel. 96 222 48 16. Web page [www.turcaroig.com](http://www.turcaroig.com)

Agencia del Desarrollo Local – Enguera, Plaza de las Palmeras, Bajo. Tel. 96 222 47 61.





## PITCHFORK CENTRE OF THE WORLD

**Area:** Valle de Ayora, western Valencia

**Route:** Picassent – Dos Aguas – Cofrentes – Jalance –  
Jarfuel – Ayora – Moixent

**Distance:** 162 kilometres

*Enter the land of honey, hearty country stews and long-pronged wooden pitchforks — and take the waters beside an inactive volcano.*

From the A7 autoroute to the south of Valencia, exit at the junction for Silla, Alcacer (Alcàsser on some maps) and Picassent. Ignore a sign for Toris and Picassent to the right on a roundabout and take the second road to Picassent and the centre of town. You will see signs for both Turis and Toris (it's the same place). At the next roundabout turn right and cross a bridge into the town.

By the bridge are small sculptures of an aged man and woman on pedestals. These are probably the most interesting thing you will see in Picassent, apart from a nice church façade, so drive on through orange groves with a scattering of houses and low-lying hills ahead, following the signs for Turis (VP3065).

At the next junction, in front of the Venta Cabrera, take the road for Montserrat and Montroi. Go straight through Montserrat to the next roundabout where you turn left and soon enter Montroi. Follow the signs for Real de Montroi and Tavernes de la Valldigna (CV50).

You leave Montroi by a long bridge at the other end of which Real de Montroi begins. At the first set of traffic lights turn right for Dos Aguas. Almost immediately is a dog-leg, left and right, signposted Dos Aguas (VV3081).

After two kilometres, you begin to leave suburbia behind as you climb through orange groves. There are pleasant views over the cultivated valley to your right, but you soon enter a landscape of softly rolling hills.

Near the km7 marker, you pass the Colonia Fuente Real, a tiny group of whitewashed houses that look all but abandoned, with a miniature church and square.

Broad, beautiful vistas open up as the mountain road rises and you pass between the Sierra del Ave to the right and the Sierra del Caballón to the left. Soon a twist in the road reveals the village of Dos Aguas, set like a disorderly pile of sugar cubes on a hillside. Sadly, close up the village doesn't match its prettiness when seen from a distance.

At Dos Aguas turn right for Buñol, up the right-hand side of Mesón Lepanto. The rickety rural road is perfectly passable and takes you through glorious mountainscapes, along possibly one of the most beautiful valleys in the Valencia region.

After some almond groves, you come to a roundabout. Turn left for Cortes de Pallas along a long straight stretch of well-made road. Head straight across the next junction for Venta de Gaeta (seven kilometres) and the N330 (26 kilometres). Although a large yellow sign warns *carretera estrecha, circular con precaución* (narrow road, drive with care), the road is well made and it's a lovely drive through pine trees with stirring vistas of the Muela de Cortes Nature Reserve to your left.

You are almost as high as you can get in the Comunitat Valenciana. Gentle hills covered in pine forests stretch as far as the eye can see, broken occasionally by rugged grey crags. This is the Sierra de Martés with typically Mediterranean vegetation: pine trees, rosemary, thyme, rock roses, broom and esparto. In other parts of this mountainous region you can also see juniper and kermes oak.

At Venta Gaeta, a tiny pueblo, the view suddenly changes to a shallow valley of cornfields, almond trees and vineyards, where goatherds tend enormous flocks, which provide the delicious roast kid's leg. This area also provides some of the finest peaches in the region.

After Venta Gaeta comes Los Herreros — blink and you'll miss it — followed by more tiny villages. At a T-junction with the N330, turn left for Cofrentes (12 kilometres). You are now in the Valle de Ayora. This road, historically an important north-south communication route, once marked the border between Christian and Muslim territories.

Vineyards become more common but there are beautiful broad vistas of pine forests, marred only by the two vast cooling towers of the nuclear power station at Cofrentes, a mere blip in the otherwise stunning scenery.

As you drop down to Cofrentes, you see its castle standing four-square on a rocky promontory above the village and, as you get nearer, you pass a large wetland, the confluence of the rivers Júcar and Cabriel. On the opposite side of the valley to the much-restored Arab castle is Mount Agrás, an extinct volcano.

Entering Cofrentes is tricky. As you pass under a narrow stone bridge, the entrance to the village is a sharp left, too tight to make the turn. Keep going and turn around a little bit further on to come back and take the narrow road which crosses over the bridge. Follow signs for the Ayuntamiento and the Mirador.

The Mirador, a paved area with a fountain, offers splendid views of the valley. At the foot of the castle is a small tourist office. The castle itself is closed for the foreseeable future, undergoing major restoration.

Most people come to Cofrentes to take the waters at the spa of Los Hervideros (The Boilers). Go back to the main road and, just as you are about to leave the village, a sign in front of the Guardia Civil barracks indicates Casa Ibáñez and the Balneario (four kilometres). As you turn right, look to your right for a grand view of the castle. Built in 1908, the Balneario de Los Hervideros is almost a village in modernista style, with a hotel, cottages, gardens, swimming pools, sports centre, minigolf, supermarket, chapel, a theatre, hairdresser and gift shop.

The scent of pine trees fills the air and aged ladies and gentlemen sit in the shade playing cards after their treatments in the baths. You can also see them walking along the byways aided by stout bamboo walking sticks.

Volcanic activity keeps the water at a constantly warm temperature (the nearby volcano is extinct). The salts and minerals in the water are said to be beneficial for those suffering from rheumatics and locomotive problems, while taking a tippie will also do your digestive system a power of good. You can even have a top-to-toe beauty treatment of vapourisation, hydro-massage, body peeling and power-shower, among other pamperings.

Back in Cofrentes, turn right for Ayora (25 kilometres). After two kilometres, take a right to Jalance (2.5 kilometres) on the old N330 (you are on the new bypass). As you enter the village, the first thing you see is the tower of the new Hotel La Valle, a grand chateau-like building.

From Jalance's ruined 11th-century castle, you get wonderful views of the Ayora valley. If you are there at a weekend or during August, you can visit the Cueva de Don Juan, a 60,000-cubic-metre cave at the end of a 12-kilometre drive through a ravine that cuts into the Júcar valley.

The village has the main tourist office for the area. Look out for signs as you drive through the town as it is tucked up a narrow street below the castle.

The Ayora valley is well known for its hearty country cuisine and gives its name to the famous *gazpacho ayorinos*, a rabbit and chicken stew with wafer-thin pasta. Each town in the valley has its own version of the dish. *Calducho*, a stew of chicken breast, mushrooms, tomato and cured ham, is a speciality of Jarafuel, while Cofrentes offers *olla cofrentina*, stewed pork, potatoes, pinto beans and cardoons (a vegetable of the thistle family) and in Jalance they serve up *ajotono*, mashed potato, cod and tomatoes. For desert you could be offered *grullos*, honey cakes, or *aguamiel*, baked pumpkin slices with honey.

A few minutes after leaving Jalance, you rejoin the new N330, continuing toward Ayora (17 kilometres). Next stop is Jarafuel, whose main claim to fame is that it is the Spanish centre (and therefore probably the world's) for the production of the *horca*, a long-pronged wooden pitchfork

#### Wooden pitchforks and walking sticks

In the plantations around Jarafuel the *almez* (hackberry), a flexible tree peculiar to this region, is carefully cultivated so that its growth takes on the required shape for the *horca*, a long-pronged wooden pitchfork. Four thinner branches sprout from the main branch which is harvested and baked in an oven to remove the bark. Then it is bound with flat lengths of wood and round stones and left to dry for a couple of months so that it retains the distinctive curved pitchfork shape.

Jarafuel is also a major producer of *bastones* (walking sticks) in every conceivable shape and size, including those made from a tree root whose handles are carved into



the shape of lions, elephants, horses and other animals, their heads and limbs following the particular growth of each individual root.

Among several small factories, Bastones Martínez on Calle Juan XXIII has a huge selection. If you can get a glimpse into the factory, you will see a strange assortment of Heath Robinson machinery that bends, strips, straightens, carves and sands the bastones and horcas.

As you travel on down the N330, you are skirting the westward edge of the Valencia region as it rubs shoulders with Castilla-La Mancha. This area is Spain's principal producer of honey, especially those with orange and rosemary flavours. *Uniflora* indicates a honey's flavour is derived from only one flower and *milflores* that the bees have visited a variety of flowers.

Ten kilometres south of Jarafuel is Ayora, with 5,000 inhabitants, half the population of the entire valley. Entering past small cornfields and tall crops of maize, and the first thing you see is the castle keeping a watchful eye over the low-rise town.

The castle, more formally known as the Palacio Fortaleza del Duque del Infantado, can be reached by taking one of the steep streets from the Plaza Mayor, the prettiest route being via Calle San Nicolás, where all the houses are whitewashed and feature a band of blue outlining the door and window frames.

La Asunción parish church has an impressive 16th-century altarpiece, the Tablas de Yáñez de Almedina and the Milagro del Ángel (Angel's Miracle) by Vicente López.

Honey has been produced in the Valle de Ayora since time immemorial. From 1344 to 1747 the quality of its production was governed by the Ordenanzas Municipales del Valle de Ayora. These days the Sociedad Cooperativa Apícola de España watches over the artisan production that still uses many time-honoured methods. If you want to know everything there is to know about honey, visit Ayora during the last two weeks of October for the Corte de La Miel (Honey Festival). Honey and honey products can be bought at shops throughout the valley.

To complete the excursion, you have a delightful drive through the Sierra Enguera. Leaving Ayora in the direction of Almansa, on your left you will see a hermitage on a slight rise with a cross under a cupola in front of it. Turn left here for Enguera (CV590). You pass immediately into a landscape of dark, dusky-pink earth and undulating, almond-clad hills.

At the junction with the CV593 for Navalón and Moixent, turn right. Don't worry about the *carretera estrecha* (narrow road) sign, as this road is perfectly adequate.

Near Moixent you access the A35 autoroute. Follow the signs for Valencia for the north and Albacete for the west. For Benidorm and the central Costa Blanca, follow the signs for Ontinyent, whence you return to the coast via Alcoi and the Guadalest valley. For Alicante you can first head towards Almansa before taking the A31 south.

## WHAT TO SEE

### **Cofrentes:**

**Castillo.** The castle is closed for major restoration.

**Balneario de Los Hervideros.** Tel. 96 274 74 01 and 96 189 40 25. Spa offering a wide range of medicinal and therapeutic water treatments. Open daily. Closed Dec 19-Feb 24.

### **Jalance:**

**Castillo.** 11th-century castle with stunning views of the Ayora valley. Free entry.

Cueva de Don Juan. Huge cave in the Júcar valley. Open Sat/Sun 10am-2pm. Open daily during the month of August, same hours. Entry 3€

### **Jarafuel:**

Bastones Martínez, Calle Juan XXIII, 12. Tel. 96 219 81 25. Manufacture of wooden pitchforks and walking sticks. Large showroom with extensive display.



**Ayora:**

Nuestra Señora de la Asunción. Parish church.

Palacio Fortaleza del Duque del Infantado. Castle ruins.

**MORE INFORMATION****Cofrentes:**

**Oficina de Turismo**, Plaza la Iglesia. Tel. 96 189 4316. Open Mon-Fri 10am-1pm.



## PUPPETS, BONFIRES AND CHURCH BELLS

**Area:** Sierra Grossa, north-west of Benidorm

**Route:** Canals – Moixent – Ontinyent – Albaida

**Distance:** 55 kilometres

*Visit the highest church bell tower in Valencia, the town with the biggest bonfire fiesta in Spain and a unique puppet museum that hosts the annual International Puppet Fair.*

Approach on the inland Valencia-Albacete autoroute N340/A35 and, where it passes just west of Xàtiva, take the exit for Canals.

Canals is a pleasantly busy little town, a mixture of modern and historical. As you wander the streets of the old town, look out for the tiled plaques high on the walls with dedications to the saints.

Canals has two main claims to fame. It is the birthplace of the Borja Pope Calixto III and the Guinness Book of Records declares it builds Spain's biggest *foguera* (bonfire).

In the early hours of the Día de la Inmaculada (December 8) a single pine trunk is erected in the Plaza Mayor and in the days leading up to the Día de la Foguera (January 16) a huge, perfectly tapered conical bonfire is built with a circular base 11 metres in diameter. They say 1200 cubic metres of wood are used in its construction and it is covered in green pine boughs. The celebration is dedicated to San Antonio Abad.

The town is also proud of the huge sycamore called La Lloca that has provided shade for generations of townsfolk in the Plaza Pont del Riu. A few streets away on the Plaça Mercat, the aptly named Casino Gran, a stylish modernista building, was erected in 1930, funded by a big win on the lottery. In its great open interior, murals line the walls depicting scenes from town life, including the building of the *foguera*.

Leaving Canals, you can see a tower that once formed part of the palace in which Alfonso de Borja, later Pope Calixto III, was born on the last day of December, 1378. Follow the green-and-yellow signs for Oratorio and Torre that take you back to the main road you came in on. A few minutes after leaving the town centre, take a right turn towards Montesa (VV2085) and almost immediately turn left down a narrow street, still following the green-and-yellow signs. Moments later, you see the heavily restored 19-metre high tower on your right. Unfortunately the tower is closed to the public.

To continue, go to the top of this one-way street, turn left and left again, back on to the main road. Within moments you will see the Tanatorio, just after which is a set of traffic lights where you turn left. This takes you back to the road to Montesa.

As you crest a slight rise, you see over the orange groves the ruins of Montesa's castle rising from a great rock, all that is left of the physical and spiritual home of the religious-military order that took its name from the small town that sits below it. There is little else to detain you in Montesa.

When you reach the junction with the N430 autoroute, follow the signs for Albacete and Alicante. You are travelling through the narrow strip of land known as La Costera, with the Sierra Plana to your right and the Sierra Grosa to your left. Fourteen kilometres further on, take the exit for Moixent (CV589). You will also see a large sign for La Bastida, an ancient Iberian town.

The road runs parallel to the N340 for about two kilometres. At a small roundabout in front of the empty Hotel Restaurant La Perla, turn left here towards the town centre, passing immediately under the autoroute. At a second roundabout, large letters leave you in no doubt that you have arrived at Moixent. Bear right, following signs for the centre.

You pass over a bridge reaching another roundabout with a statue of the Guerrero de Moixent, an Iberian warrior, in the centre. Turn right at this roundabout in the direction of Fontaneres dels Alforins (VP2012).

Enjoy a picturesque ride through almond groves, grape vines and pretty rolling hills. Soon you see the grand *masías*, beautiful houses built by the wealthy of Alicante and Valencia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to escape the coastal heat in summer.

At the km10 marker, a sign directs you up a track to the left to the Poblado Iberico La Bastida de les Alcusses.

La Bastida is one of the oldest Iberian settlements in Valencia, dating back to the fourth century BC. The archaeological finds when it was first discovered and excavated between 1928 and 1931 show it to have been a city of great importance, perfectly situated on a hilltop with a plentiful supply of water, large open tracts of land for cultivation below and forests to provide game and timber. Unfortunately, no-one has yet discovered its name or the reasons for its destruction and abandonment after less than a century of existence.

About half of the city has been excavated and shows a complete urban layout. Large houses are grouped in blocks around a central thoroughfare, with smaller streets running off it to meet in squares, one of which has a large cistern. The houses, terraced up the hillside, had a single storey and were 80 to 150 square metres in size, with the internal layout depending on the activities of its occupants. Central in most cases is the hearth, the hub of domestic life, around which are arranged living rooms, storerooms, workshops and stables. There is ample evidence of remodelling where rooms have been added.

To experience life almost two-and-a-half millennia ago, a typical house of the time has been reconstructed, copied from the first house excavated in 1928 and using the same materials and construction techniques as those of the original builders.

Inside, the ambience of Iberian life has been recreated with replicas of artefacts found on the site.

Return to the road to Fontaneres and continue the ride through delightful countryside, now mainly vineyards, many of them organic. Where a sharp bend in the road is signposted to La Font de la Figuera, turn left for Fontaneres. You have just entered the Vall d'Albaida, known to the Moors as al-Bàйда, the white land. To your right, set on a hill overlooking its own vineyard, is a beautiful salmon-coloured masía that has recently been restored. Five kilometres on, where you see the pretty blue-and-white cupola of the church at Fontaneres to the right, turn left for Ontinyent.

Just after the km16 marker, the road curves downwards, leaving cultivation behind you as you travel through a land of beige-coloured earth and green scrub.

When you reach Ontinyent follow the signs for the centre. As you cross a bridge, you see to your right a church belonging to a convent of Carmelite nuns, founded in 1574 and the oldest in the city, opposite which is a large house painted yellow ochre.

This is the entry to the old town and you will be coming back here. At a sudden sharp right-hand turn, keep straight ahead to pass along the high side of the church and after a few metres you will see a piece of open ground to your right where you can park.

Ontinyent is the capital of the locality known as the Vall d'Albaida and, like most towns in the area, traces its origins back to Moorish times. From the 16th century its fortunes have been tied to the textile industry, still the most important source of income for the town today. The *barrio de la Vila*, the original Moorish town, dates from the 11th and 12th centuries. After the conquest by Jaime I, the Moors were banished to the areas outside the town walls and the Christians moved in.

Return to the yellow-ochre house and pass through the archway to the left, the Portal de Sant Roc, the first entrance built by the Christians in 1256. The tiny square you enter betrays its past importance. On your immediate left is the Palacio de la Duquesa de Almodóvar, which has had a major, and not very attractive renovation, and the house in the corner at number 10 is the Casa de Pala, above whose door is the shield of the Borja family.

The street leading off to the left, Calle de Sant Pere, is a narrow confine of pastel-painted houses and *atzucas*, tiny dead-end alleyways. At the bottom of the short street you enter a small plaza with a statue of Sant Pere, looking remarkably unperturbed despite the huge knife lodged in his skull.

Continue downward on Calle de la Trinidad for a few metres before taking the steps to your right that wind upwards through the narrow streets to Santa María church in the Plaza de la Vila. The site was originally that of a Moorish mosque. The present church was built during the 14th and 15th centuries and enlarged in 1582. At 71 metres, the bell tower is the highest in the Valencia region, topped by a splendid cupola that looks like a mini-Victorian bandstand. Just behind the church is the tiny

Placeta del Fossa, so called because it was used as a graveyard for the faithful who could not be interred in the church itself.

The old quarter continues below the steep walls of the church and, as you trip down the steps into the Plaça Mayor, you pass under the watchful gaze of three statuesque ladies representing justice.

Calle Maians, running off Plaça Mayor, is a mixture of the ancient and modern. A few metres along this street is the Círculo Industrial y Agrícola with a grand façade of columns in Doric and Ionic styles.

Leave Ontinyent by crossing back over the bridge you came in on and, turning right for Valencia at the first set of traffic lights. After some new cream-beige houses on your left you come to a roundabout.

To visit the Museo de Ciencias Naturales (see below) take the third exit on this roundabout, on the left side of the bar El Comodi. You will see the beautiful twin Gothic towers of the San Franciscan monastery/college almost immediately on your left.

To exit Ontinyent, go back to the roundabout and follow the signs for Centro ciudad, crossing over a bridge. At the next roundabout take the left exit, down Avinguda Ramón y Cajal that takes you in the direction of Albaida. One kilometre further on you come to another roundabout where you take the CV40 to Albaida (10 kilometres) and Xàtiva. You will also see it signposted as the CV320.



Stay on this road until you begin to descend through olive groves into Albaida and follow the signs for the 'Casc urba'. These will lead you to Albaida's Plaça Major where you will be confronted by the majestic façade of the Palacio de los Milà i Aragó. There is parking in the plaza.

The Moors knew Albaida as 'la blanca', because of the colour of the earth in the area. Their former presence there is obvious in the way that it is with most small towns, by the tiny, sinuous alleyways of the old town, but anyone who wants an entertaining day out doesn't need to follow those Moorish byways because the four gems that make Albaida worth a visit are all within a few seconds walk of each other, just off the Plaça Major.

When you arrive at the Plaça you are confronted by the majestic façade of the Palacio de los Milà i Aragó. Building began somewhere between 1471 and 1477 around what was the original entrance to the town, the Porta de la Vila, completed in 1460. Like many of these grand palaces it was an ongoing building process, with 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century refinements added along the way (including Baroque paintings by the local artist, Bertomeo Albert at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century). The wheel has turned because the *palacio* has been undergoing massive restoration, which seems to have a 'pinch-of-salt' finishing date of 2007. There are various rooms to visit in the *palacio*, including the private apartments of the marques who gave the building its name.

Pass through its 15th century arch and you enter the Plaça de la Vila, a delightful square with slatted benches shaded by Mandarin trees, where you can take a few moments rest.

To your right as you go through the palacio archway, and housed in the *palacio* itself, is the Museo Internacional de Titelles d'Albaida, a puppet museum unique in Spain. Historic and modern examples of the puppeteer's art have been brought from around the world, covering the decades from 1900-1970, with a separate floor devoted solely to Spanish and Valencian puppets. Amongst the elegant Japanese, Indonesian and African puppets you find Sesame Street characters glowering at you, and Mr Punch whacking Mrs Judy, still having family disputes over the baby after 350 years (they originated in 1652 and are now facing a come-back in the UK where they have been seen as highly un-politically correct of most of the last decade). The museum is the home of the annual International Puppet Fair.

On the other side of the arch is the Museo de Betlenes y Dioramas, a museum devoted to the cribs (*belenes*) that are a major part of the Christmas celebrations throughout Spain and can range in size from a shoe-box display to a huge production that can fill a village square. The dioramas in the museum are all made by the members of the local modellers association, some of them using the streets of Albaida as locals would have known them a couple of centuries ago.

In front of the museum is the Iglesia Arciprestal de Santa Maria, built during the 16th and 17th centuries, behind whose double-arched doors and plain exterior are splendid altar paintings by Albaida's most famous son, José Segrelles.

The real diamond in the cluster is the pretty Casa Museu José Segrelles, tucked in the corner of the square, a charming *modenista* building where the artist lived from its completion in 1940 to his death in 1969 at the age of 84. It is said he died with a brush in his hand, having had that very day completed a huge religious painting, still on display in his studio.

The house was designed by Segrelles himself and has been kept very much the same as when he lived there, including the library with 11,000 volumes. (Given his enormous work output you wonder if he ever got time to read any!) On display throughout the house are his paintings, demonstrating the extraordinary range of his work, and many of the original illustrations he did for books by such famous authors as Blasco Ibañez and Edgar Allen Poe and for magazines such as the American Weekly and Illustrated London News when he lived in New York and London.

Like Dr. Who's Tardis, it keeps opening up as you move further inside, but each room is a delight on a very personal scale, showing strong Moorish influences from the moment you walk through the horseshoe arched doorway.

To return to your base from Albaida, follow the signs for Xàtiva to the North and Alcoi and Alicante to the south.



## WHAT TO SEE

### Canals:

**Casino Gran**, modernista club/café, Plaça de Mercat. Open daily, 9am-9pm.

**La Torre de los Borja**, Calle Calixto III. Public viewing.

**La Foguera**, burning of the biggest bonfire in Valencia, on the evening of 16 January.

### Moixent:

Bastida de les Alcusses, Iberian settlement, Ctra. Moixent-Fontaneres, km10. Open Mon-Sat, Oct-Apr 10am-2pm & 4-6pm, May-Sep 10am-4pm & 6-8pm. Sun and holidays 10am-3pm. Free entry. Guided tours in Spanish Wed-Sun 10.30am and 4pm.

### Fontaneres:

The area around Fontaneres is one of the major areas in Valencia producing organic wines (as well as non-organic). The bodegas listed below produce organic wine.

**Bodega Los Pinos**, Casa Los Pinos s/n. Tel. 96 222 20 90, 699 44 72 20 (English-speaking owner). A delightful one-man vineyard still using antiquated equipment to produce excellent wines. Has accommodation in a grand house with sun-drenched inner courtyard. Visits to bodega by arrangement.

**Bodegas Fernando Francés**, Ctra Moixent-Fontaneres, km11. Tel. 96 323 93 00. Open Mon-Sat 10am-2pm or by arrangement. Family-run bodega that has been producing wine since the early 1900s. (See article below.)

### Ontinyent:

**Barrio de la Vila**, original Moorish/Christian town.

**Museo Arqueológico**, Calle Regall, s/n (below church tower). Tel. 96 291 19 55. Open Wed-Sun 11.30am-1.30pm, 6-8.30pm.

**Museo Fester**, Plaça de Baix, 26. Tel. 96228 0252. Open Sat/Sun 11am-1pm. Newly opened museum with costumes, arms, posters and anything to do with the Moors and Christians fiesta in Ontinyent.

**Museo de Ciencias Naturales**, Colegio La Concepción, Avda san Francisco, 5. Tel. 96 238 01 00. Open Mon-Fri 10am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm. Must telephone at least two days in advance to arrange entry. Museum of natural sciences with exhibits from Spain, Africa and the Americas. Also has a collection of Valencia ceramics.

### Albaida:

The following are all in the Plaça de la Vila:

**Museo Internacional de Titelles**, a unique international puppet museum. Tel. 96 239 01 86. Open Mon-Fri 9am-2pm & 4-7pm, Sat 11am-2pm and 5-8pm, Sun 11am-2pm.

**Museo de Belenes**, museum displaying belenes or Christmas cribs. No fixed opening times. Check with puppet museum.

**Casa Museo José Segrelles**, home-museum of the town's famous son, the painter José Segrelles. Tel. 96 239 01 88. Open Jan 1-Jun 15 & Sep 16-Dec 31, Tues-Sat 10am-1pm & 4-6pm, Sun 10am-1pm. Jun 16-Sep 15, Tues-Sat 11am-1pm & 5-8pm.

**Santa Maria**, 16th-century church with splendid altar paintings by famous local artist José Segrelles.

## MORE INFORMATION

### Canals:

**Casa de Cultura**, Calle Beato Factor, 17. Tel. 96 224 02 14. Open Mon-Fri 10am-2pm & 5.30-8.30pm.

**Ayuntamiento** (Casa de la Vila), Plaza de la Vila, 9. Tel. 96 224 01 26. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

### Moixent:

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaça Major, 1. Tel. 96 229 50 10. Open 8am-3pm.

### Ontinyent:

**Tourist Information Office**, Plaza de Santo Domingo, 13. Tel. 96 291 60 90. Open Mon 4-730pm, Tues-Sat 10am-2pm, Fri 4pm-730pm.

### Albaida:

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaza Mayor, 7. Tel. 96 290 09 60. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-3pm.



### Nature's Way – Organic Wines

As you take the meandering country road that runs almost parallel with the inland motorway from Valencia to Albacete, on a dour winter's day, full of heavy grey clouds that occasionally let their moisture drizzle on you, all around you are stunted vines. At this time of year they look withered and abandoned, but by the end of April they will be sprouting vivid green leaves, followed by the first tiny growth of grapes a few weeks later. By September, the time of the *vendimia*, they will be laden with fruit, ready for gathering to make the full bodied wines that the small village of Fontenares and the surrounding area is renowned for.

This has been a wine growing area going back over the centuries, but the name will be little known, as most of the wine was sold in bulk, un-bottled and unlabelled. The traditional grape is the *monastrell*, which creates a wine light in colour but full in the nose and on the palate, with 14° being the norm.

Spain has arrived late in the day in the appreciation of organic produce, wine included, as far as the rest of Europe is concerned, and close to Fontenares is one of the growing number of bodegas dedicated solely to the production of *vinos organicos*.

Just as the Marqués de Riscal came from Peru to Spain and created Rioja wines, Manuel Oleachea left the same country in 1990, where his family had been producing wines for more than a century, to search for a vineyard in Europe to devote

to the growing of grapes naturally to make organic wines, which he had been doing in Peru for almost twenty years.

“I was looking for land that could support both Atlantic and Mediterranean grape varieties, so I could produce wines that were more like those from the New World than the heavier, more woody flavours of those produced in Spain. I looked through France and Portugal and the whole of Spain before I finally found Los Pinos. Not only did it have wonderful soil and an excellent climate, but also a beautiful house – almost like a French *chateau*.”

Dominio de los Pinos had been producing monastrell-based wines for generations, but with the aid of chemical fertilizers and herbicides, so the first process for Manuel was to tear everything out, prepare the soil, and replant – a three-year process. But it wasn't just 'cleaning' the earth that was a big process, so was actually getting permission to plant the grape varieties he wanted.

“The Spanish can be very traditional, and while I'm no believer in the *Denominación de Origen* system because I think it stifles the development of wine making, I needed the *D.O.* if I was to be accepted as a quality wine maker.

It is an established fact that non-Spanish wine makers in Spain have influenced the varieties and qualities of Spanish wine by using grape varieties not typical to a specific region, which would eventually be assimilated into the *Denominación de Origen* system. Such was the case with the wines of Los Pinos.

“At first the assessors for the *D.O.* would only allow me to plant *monastrell*, but I said how could I possibly compete with the wines from the New World if that's all I could use. I'd just be another Spanish wine producer. Eventually I was given permission to plant *cabernet sauvignon*, *cabernet franc* and *merlot* as a test, which I later followed

with *syrah* and *granache*, so I could produce a rosé.” Now you will find those same, once banned varieties grown throughout the area, and which now form part of the *Denominacion de Origen de Valencia*. He was also the first to grow his vines along metal wires, despite the idea being derided as nonsensical at the time by traditional growers.

Manuel Oleachea's interest in organic agriculture came from a curious direction. “In Cañete, in Peru, many years ago, the cotton industry was almost totally destroyed by disease. My father went to California, where he was told that a specific species of bee could control the disease, and he imported thousands of the eggs, which we kept in freezers, and when we saw the onset of the disease occurring again, the cotton plants were exposed to the bees, which hatched naturally in the sun. This was the first time I began to realise that crops could be grown in a non-invasive way, so I began studying how to make wine organically.”

The essence of *vinos organicos* is that they are, quite simply, more healthy. The flavours, colours and aromas are the result of the skill of the grower and blender – or at least that is the accepted reasoning; Manuel Oleachea adds another dimension.

“An organic wine takes its flavour from the earth and isn’t influenced by chemical products that can change its flavour. What I’m looking for when I make my wines is an expression of the land and the climate.”

Manuel is unusual in that he makes an *enssemblage* of Atlantic grapes – *cabernet sauvignon*, *cabernet franc* and *merlot* – with Mediterranean varieties – *syrah*, *monastrell*, *tempranillo*, and *garnache*, often in unusual combinations, such as his Blanco Cum Laude 2002, a blending of *sauvignon blanc*, *voigner*, and *muscat blanc petits grains*. “With my wines I’m trying to create blends that are different, more directed to the New World style than traditionally Spanish.” Which might explain why, having won a raft of awards throughout Europe, including a silver medal at the International Wine Challenge in London in 2005, he has yet to win anything in Spain. “The Spanish prefer wines along the style of Rioja, and that’s not what I want to produce.”

*Dominio Los Pinos, Casa Los Pinos s/n, Fontenars, Valencia. The bodega is open to the public for tastings. Tel. 96 222 2090*





## THE WORTHY VALLEY

**Area:** West of Gandia, northern Costa Blanca

**Route:** Gandia – Simat de la Valldigna – Carcaixent  
Xàtiva – Quatretonda

**Distance:** 73 kilometres

*See one of the splendours of the Valencian region, be awed by an ancient bastion of defence and be intrigued by Victorian pumps and pistons in a village house.*

Following the N332 coastal road past Gandia, just to the north of the city a slip road for the CV675 takes you in the direction of Barx (13km). As you leave the roundabout that takes you under the autoroute, directly ahead are the jagged peaks of the Sierra Marxuquera to your left and the Macizo del Montdúver to your right, crowned by a cluster of tall radio beacons.

You travel through dense orange groves and, as the pine-shaded road begins to rise, you pass groups of attractive villas with the sierras rising majestically above.

Pass through La Drova and Barx, following the signs for Simat de la Valldigna (VV1083). To your left rises the Sierra del Buixcarró, where marble quarries, according to Valencia's famous 18th-century botanist and naturalist Cavanilles, are the same ones "from which the Romans extracted huge slabs to make 30-foot columns without the least imperfection". Marble from this region was used in the Vatican, New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral and Valencia city's 15th-century Lonja building (silk exchange) and the regional government palace, where five centuries ago the Borgias allegedly hatched their political plots.

Just after Barx, as the road begins to wend downwards, you see a picnic spot and photo opportunity to the left. Here you look down on the vast fertile plain of Valldigna, a green quilt decorated with the red roof tiles and white walls of Simat, Benifairró and Tavernes. The magnificent Santa María de la Valldigna monastery is the majestic centrepiece.

Entering Simat, follow the one-way sign to the right into the village and, as you reach the end of the street, you will see the grand twin towers of the monastery to your right.

Legend has it that Jaime II passed through the valley, then known as Alfandec, on his way from waging war against the Moors in Alicante and Murcia. He was impressed by the beauty and fertility of the area and said to his chaplain, Friar Bononat de Vila-Seca, abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Santes Creus: "*Vall digna per un monestir de la vostra religió*" (a valley worthy of a monastery of your religion), to which the abbot replied "*¡Vall digna!*" (a worthy valley indeed!). In March 1298, the land was given to the abbot for the foundation of a new Cistercian order and the valley has been known ever since as Valldigna.

Three different stages of construction can be seen in the monastery: the original 14th-century Gothic renovations, undertaken after serious damage was caused by an earthquake in 1396, and a second major renovation in the baroque style after another earthquake in 1644.

In 1835, with the expropriation of church lands, the monks were expelled and the monastery sold into private hands. Many of the buildings were destroyed and the great stone blocks sold for construction. This splendid physical prayer to the glory of god fell into ruin.

In 1991, the Valencia government began a massive restoration project, spurred on by the 700th anniversary of its foundation. The monastery will never again be seen in its former glory but it is a delight to behold nonetheless. Restorers have done a splendid job on the entrance to the Santa María church, but even that doesn't prepare you for the magnificence of the interior which is, quite simply, stunning.

Sacked of altars and artworks, the bare walls at first seem pitiful in their nakedness, but look heavenward as you pass through the enormous brass-covered doors and you see a ceiling of such ornate plaster and paintwork that it makes you gasp. Once it must have been absolutely breath-taking, but even now, awaiting the restorer's caring hands, it is one of the gems of the Valencian Community's artistic heritage.

Village life in Simat itself seems to centre around Font Grand, a pond so shallow that you wonder how the fat fish in it don't scrape their stomachs on the bottom as they lazily drift around.

Leave Simat on the road that runs in front of the monastery, taking the CV322 to Tavernes and Alzira. Soon you come to a roundabout where you take the VV1082 to Tavernes and Alzira and, two kilometres later, take the CV50 left to Alzira (14 km) and Chiva.

After the 9km marker, note the beautiful entrance to a large orange grove, with its palm-lined drive leading to what looks like bits of a ruin sat on a mound of earth. Just behind, you get glimpses of a grand mansion.

Pass through Barraca d'Aigües Vives, Spanish suburbia with houses scattered through orange groves and pine woods. Four kms further on, take the CV570/ VV1124 to your left for Carcaixent (4 km), where you pass alongside a dry riverbed full of bamboo, cactus and beautiful dusky pink oleander.

You enter Carcaixent on a dual carriageway that runs in front of a large shopping centre, the Ribera del Xúquer, and at the end turn left, following the signs for 'Centro ciudad'. When you reach the Carrer de Valencia, beside a blue building, go right and at the next junction right again (there is no left turn). At the next roundabout turn back and go up the road you have just come down. Continue on this road until you see the town hall. Try to park in this area as you will be leaving by this road.





Carcaixent has some architectural gems that are unfortunately not open to the casual visitor, although given a couple of days' notice the tourist office will arrange a private guided tour. Even so, it is a pleasant little town with enough to see for a short and entertaining visit.

The 18th-century Palacio de la Marquesa (part of the town hall) was originally the home of gentry involved in the silk trade, and has the original gloriously tiled kitchen. The two main modernista buildings in the town, the Real Acequi and the Magatzem de Ribera, represent the wealth of the community.

The former, built in 1927, controlled the flow of water in the area, in both the literal and legal sense, while the latter, designed in 1910 by José Ríos Chiesta, is the most ornate orange warehouse you could imagine, although now no longer used for that purpose. What appear to be beautiful wooden beams in the Real Acequi are actually painted steel-reinforced concrete, the first of this kind to be used in the region. Anyone old enough to remember Dolly Blue, the deep blue cleaner that whitened clothes, will recognise the colour in the painted ceiling — a Spanish version was used to tint the paint.

La Asunción parish church (15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup>-century), with its sparkling blue, white and bronze tiled cupola, is stunning. You can even light a real candle, a rarity in these days of coin-fed electric fakes.

Wandering down Calle Julián Ribera, you come across an ochre-painted cafetería above which the town band practises, as well as on the aptly named

Passatge del Musical. The barn-like interior, worth a glance to see how little changes in small-town Spain, has barely been touched since Edwardian times except to add a few battered Formica-topped tables.

You can stock up for a picnic at the Mercado Municipal at the bottom of Calle del Pare Marechena, a big, bright open market with all the stalls occupied (unusual these days) and as much a place for locals to meet and chat as a place to do the shopping.

Continue the excursion by taking the CV41 to Xàtiva (16 km), the road you entered Carcaixent on (passing in front of the Ayuntamiento). As you approach Xàtiva, its castle appears to be built on a ridge but, as you get closer, you will see that the walls actually rise up from the town itself.

Arriving at Xàtiva, follow the signs for the Casc Antic and Castell. As you wind up the hill through the narrow streets of the old town, you get tantalising glimpses of the castle high above. Soon you reach the lower walls scaling the hillside, but you continue on a twisting road upwards.

As you pass a pretty church on your left, you see the entrance to the Hotel Restaurant Mont Sant, one of the most delightful in the Comunitat Valenciana, surrounded by orange groves and palm trees where once all was barren.

A fortress stood here in Iberian times and in his poem on the Second Punic War the poet Silius Italicus (101-25BC) refers to *Saetabis celsa arce*, Xàtiva with its tall castle, proof that a castle existed in Roman times. Its strategic value was due to its situation on the Via Augusta that began in Rome and crossed the Pyrenees and travelled down the Mediterranean coast before heading on to Cartagena and Cádiz. The grand structure you see these days is a mixture of Iberian, Roman and Moorish influences and later Christian fortifications.

The castle, with its 30 towers and four fortified gateways, must rate as one of the loveliest in the Valencian Community, not only because of its historical value but because a lot of thought and work has gone into its surroundings. Tinkling fountains, small orange groves and herb gardens that perfume the air give you a sense of what life must have been like in an important garrison town. (The fountains and gardens aren't just modern titivations but were an important part of the Moorish culture.) If you stand on the high tower at either end of the long, thin castle, you become aware of just how massive an undertaking it was to build such a structure in such an inaccessible place.

The town below the glowering castle walls is equally steeped in history. It was the birthplace of two popes of the Borgia clan (in those days it was spelled 'Borja'). They were Calixtus III and Alexander XI, whose family held papal power for almost 200 years and sired the infamous Lucretia. It was the first town in Europe to manufacture paper, during the time of the Moorish occupation, and even today in Morocco paper is still known as *xativi*.

Not to be missed are the Royal Fountain of the Twenty Five Spouts, built in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and the Museu de L'Almodi, where the portrait of Phillip V is hung upside down in retribution for his sacking the city in 1707. The streets themselves are like a splendid public gallery requiring no entrance fee. Mounted high on almost every wall of the old town, tiled plaques celebrate the lives of the saints.



In the Plaça de la Seu, the Basílica de Santa María stands opposite the 16th-century Hospital Real, whose gloriously ornate façade of cream stone is inscribed with centuries-old graffiti. A beautiful tiled plaque is dedicated to Sant Feliu Màrtir, the patron saint of Xàtiva, and paid for by the Soler-Girenes family. Next to it is an even more elaborate confection, this one dedicated to Nuestra Señora de la Seu, female patron of Xàtiva, and financed by the Rus family.

In your meanderings, seek out the Plaça del Mercat, a square hovering between semi-tumbledown and modern and suffused with a cock-eyed, cobbled charm. Set back in a corner in the shadow of the basilica is the Posada del Pescado, its

name spelled out in intricate shell-like patterning with a fat fish dangling from a chain clenched in a lion's mouth. The building has undergone a major restoration after years of neglect.

At the opposite end of the square, the restored pedestrian street, aptly named Carrer de las Botigues (Calle de Tiendas, Street of Shops, in its pre-Valenciano days) reveals pockets of individuality. La Barraca displays rolls of the gorgeously rich fabrics used in the making of Fallas costumes (las Fallas is Valencia's fiesta marking the feast of San José). In the upper balconied floor, señoras toil over private commissions, hidden from public gaze. A few steps further on, Sombreros Matoses reveals that the trilby is alive and well.

The trip continues by leaving Xàtiva along the plane-tree-lined Alameda Jaume 1 (the street on which is the tourist office), in the direction of Gandia (CV610) and Tavernes (CV600). At the bottom of the Alameda, a right takes you up a rise where, moments later, you come to a sharp bend left. Almost immediately after this you will see a sign for Genovés (4 km) and Gandia to your left. If you feel like a moment's respite, drop into the delightfully named Parque del Beso (Park of the Kiss), just after you turn right, which has gurgling fountains, a beautiful cupola and lions' heads shimmering in the sun.

(For more about Xativa read [A Stroll Around Xativa](#) below.)

You quickly leave Xàtiva behind, passing olive groves and rugged, pine-covered hillsides, with roadside stands of bamboo. As you approach Genovés, it appears to consist of only an enormous, twin-spired church, perched on a hilltop and surrounded by a few houses. The village is actually long, narrow and mainly modern, and the recently built church is devoid of architectural delight. On a roundabout at the end of the village you see the Monumento al Pilotari, a statue celebrating the villagers' skills in this ball game.

Follow the CV610 for Gandia and Quatretonda (10 km). The road climbs upward through hills of pine and scrub. Just after the km7 marker, the road peaks and you begin to descend through an attractive landscape with pockets of cultivation in the valley below.

Orange, olive and almond trees blend pleasantly with a few small vineyards and the occasional apple orchards as you enter the Vall d'Albaida. Just after the km10 marker, you will come across a sign for a rest area, where you can stop to relax and picnic.

Moments later you rise a hill and see the pretty five-sided bell tower of the parish church of Quatretonda, the late Gothic Sant Joans. With its plateresque and Renaissance embellishments it is very attractive and the focal point of historic interest in the town.

Return to the CV610 Gandia road once more, going in the direction of Llutxent. Stay on this road until it joins the CV60, turning left for Gandia (16 kms). As you enter

Gandia, you pass under the autovía and shortly after come to a roundabout directing you to the N332 to Alicante and Valencia.

## WHAT TO SEE

### **Simat de la Valldigna:**

Santa María de la Valldigna, a magnificent monastery originally built in the 14th century for the Cistercian order of monks. Tel. 96 281 16 36. Open Tues-Sun 10am-2pm. Free entry. English guide by appointment. Has a series of exhibitions and concerts.

### **Carcaixent:**

**Real Acequi**, Calle Julián Ribera. An important modernista building from where the flow of water in the area was controlled. Tel. 96 246 70 66. Open weekdays 9.30am-1pm (or as part of the guided tour — see below).

**Magatzem de Ribera**, Calle Marquese Campo. The other main modernista building in the town. Designed in 1910 by José Ríos Chiesta, it was originally used as a warehouse for oranges.

**Palacio de la Marquesa**, Calle Marquessa de Montortal. Once the home of gentry involved in the silk trade, it still has the original gloriously tiled kitchen.

**La Asunción**, a beautiful 15 to 18th-century parish church with blue, white and bronze cupola.

### **Xàtiva:**

**Castell, the castle**. With 30 towers and four fortified gateways and beautiful gardens, rates as one of the region's loveliest castles. Tel: 96 227 42 74. Open Tues-Sun, Summer 10am-7pm, Winter 10am-6pm. (Hours change when the clocks change.)

**Museo de l'Almodi**, Calle Corretgeria. Municipal museum housed in Renaissance building. Exhibits include archeological remains, Roman and Iberian relics, baroque paintings and the famous upside-down painting of Phillip V. Tel. 96 227 65 97. Open Tue-Sun 15 Jun-15 Sep 10am-2.30pm, 4-6pm, 16 Sep -14 Jun, 10am-2pm, 4-6pm (closed Sat/Sun afternoons Sep-Jun).

**Colegiata Basílica de Santa María**, Plaça Calixto III s/n. 16th-century basilica. Open daily 10.30am-1pm.

## MORE INFORMATION

### **Carcaixent:**

**Centro de Promoción Económica**, Calle Marquesa de Montortal, 56. Tel. 96 245 76 58, Email [turisme@ayto-caircaixent.es](mailto:turisme@ayto-caircaixent.es)

### **Xàtiva:**

**Oficina de Turismo**, Alameda Jaume I, 50. Tel. 962 27 33 46. Open Tue-Fri 10am-1.30pm, 4-6pm, Sat/Sun and holidays 10am-1.30pm.



## A Stroll Around Xativa

Ask any resident wandering the streets of Xativa what the three most important things about their town are and they will reply:

1. It was the birthplace of two popes of the Borgia clan (although in those days, before the Italians fiddled with the name it was spelt 'Borja'), Calixtus III and Alexander VI, whose family virtually controlled the papal power, and therefore the known world, for almost two hundred years (as well as siring the infamous Lucretia).

2. It was the first city in Europe to manufacture paper, during the time of the Moorish occupation, and even today in Morocco paper is still known as xativi.

3. This will depend on whether they like fountains, football or food. The first they have in abundance, the Royal Fountain of the Twenty Five Spouts, built in the late 18th century; the second is almost second-nature to any Spanish male; and the third because of the city's renown for producing some of the best rice dishes in the whole of the Valencian community.

Pick up a guide book or leaflet from the tourist office and you will be informed about the wealth of historical monuments, the museums, the beautiful Castillo, whose walls snake up the mountain glowering over the city; the portrait of King Philip the Fifth, hung upside down in the Casa de Cultura in retribution for his sacking of the city in 1707; the churches and the culture, the fiestas and the ferias.

What few will mention is the semi-ruinous state of many of the buildings in the old town, which, far from giving an air of dilapidation, actually add great charm to one of the oldest cities in the Comunidad de Valencia. Every twist of the cobbled streets of the casc antic reveals eat-your-heart out casas and palacios, just crying out for benign restoration.

Just off the Plaza del Arzobispo A Mayoral, a seventeenth century palacio lies gaunt and vacant, topped by an incredibly out-of-context new brick cupola without any apparent attempt at restoring the beautiful building on which it sets. To be fair though, a lot of restoration has been done, and next door to the palacio its neighbour has been beautifully restored as a centre for retired people.

It is by walking the streets though, that the city really shows itself.

In Renaissance Italy, the Medicis ensured their posterity by commissioning paintings with family members depicted in them. In Xativa, nothing so grandiose; the family name lingers on in tiled plaques celebrating the lives of the saints mounted high on almost every wall of the old town.

In the Plaça de la Seu, where the Iglesia Colegial Basílica de Santa Mariá stares at the Hóspital opposite, whose gloriously ornate facade of cream stone is inscribed with centuries old graffiti, and its tall elegant windows decorated with more recent

pigeon droppings, is a beautiful tiled plaque dedicated to Salt Feliu Martir, Patró of Xativa (a expenses de les familials Soler-Girenes). Next to it is an even more elaborate confection, this time dedicated to Nustra Señora de la Seu, Patrona de Xativa (a expenses de la familia Rus).

The habit has even been picked up by latter-day Xativans, with N Alberton proclaiming his Laboritorio Protesis Dental in ceramic, although lacking a saint's image but adorned with bunches of purple flowers. For the apotheosis of the ceramists art though, saunter around the corner to Calle Noguera. But before you do, you might care to nip into the Iglesia, as it's about the only church in Valencia where you can light a proper candle, even if it is shaved down to little more than a wick and half-an-hour's burning time.

The Botica Central on Calle Noguera is an ex-pharmacy, and some wise person has retained the beautiful Victorian woodwork and glass cupboards full of ornately lettered dispensing bottles. Nowadays it serves as the office for OMIC, the Consumer Protection Office, whose gaudy posters of Euro conversion tables plastered in the window do little to enhance the shops beauty.

Alongside the shopfront a three-metre high, gorgeously ornate tiled plaque is inscribed 'Tu Pila es Jordan Fecund cuyos hijos con verdad son timbres. Festa Ciudad, Gloria y esplendor del Mundo.' Unfortunately the chap in charge of the lettering ran out of space and the 'do' hovers over the top of 'Mun'. Glorious still in its imperfection.

In your meanderings, seek out the Plaça del Mercat. A square at the cusp of moving from semi-tumbledown to modern, as delightful old restaurants such as the Casa Flora, tucked behind fat Corinthian columns, rub shoulders with newcomers Café del Moret, with its rough plastered walls and subdued lighting getting as near 'cosy' as a Spanish bar can get.

The square has a cockeyed, cobbled Disneyesque charm. Set back in the corner in the shadow of the Iglesia Colegial, the Posada del Pescado, it's name spelled out in intricate shell-like patterning with a fat fish dangling from a chain clenched in a lions mouth, slowly folds in upon itself, the beautifully carved doors and shutters weathered with years of neglect.

The shops in the Plaça disdain the modern excretions of roll-up shutters in favour of panelled doors which, when opened, give entrance directly into the interior of the premises.

But not all is disintegration. At the opposite end of the square from Casa Flora, the restored pedestrian street, aptly named Carrer de las Botigues (Calle de Tiendas in its more down-to-earth days) reveals pockets of individuality. La Barraca, Fabricacio de Valencians, displays rolls of the gorgeously rich fabrics used in the making of Fallas costumes. In the upper balconied floor, señoras toil over private commissions, hidden from public gaze. A few steps further is Sobreros Matoses, where the trilby is alive and



well, but the jewel of the street, albeit a little tarnished, is tucked away in a corner at the bottom of the calle.

The fading gray façade of fancy ironwork has been untouched by human hand for decades. A sign above the door in chipped gilded lettering tells you that this is 'Precio Fijo', and in the window a display of dolls looks as though it has been there since Santa was a lad.

The shop has been the business premises and home of Sñra. Maria Menendez for most of her ninety years. Started by her parents, it is an unintentional dolls museum, and the house that rises three floors above it is a palimpsest of late nineteenth and early twentieth century design.

It is unlikely than Sñra. Menendez has sold a thing in years, but each day she opens up in the hope and expectancy that today may bring a customer. Stand in front of the shop for more than two minutes and she will invite you in and send you on an unguided tour of her dollhouse home (she admits to being a bit too old these days for too many trips upstairs.)

The same grey that fades on the outside also fades on the inside. Glass cabinets line the walls with an assortment of cut-out dolls, tiny jewellery pinned on cards and what, in these politically correct days, must be some of the few black dolls still on sale. Drawers are filled with different sized dresses, probably still in perfect condition, as it is unlikely that any of them has been opened for a while.

Climbing the narrow marble steps to the first bedroom, two tiny Edwardian beds rest under a frieze of 1930's children's cartoon characters chasing each other around the room, while in the room above, ornate Victorian furniture, draped with lace and ribbons, dominates the minuscule living room. On the same level is what must be the first 'en-suite' bathroom in Xativa, except that this one is simply a full bathroom separated from the bed by two-metre tiled wall and open in all other aspects. The building is wonderfully quirky and far more intriguing than all the museums of the town put together, but in the thirst for antiquity that is current in Spain, this little corner of history is more than likely to disappear in the not too distant future.

(Sadly, since this article was written Sñra Mendez has died, and her little memorial to the lost days of childhood now no longer exists.)

Like most of the towns and cities of Spain seeking to benefit from the tourist Euro, Xativa has gone a great distance in promoting its history, culture and cuisine. But (also like most of the towns and cities in Spain) there is as much of interest to be found on the streets as behind the doors of the imposing portals of palacios.



## FOLLOWING OLD BLUE EYES

**Area:** Mountains west of Denia in northern Alicante province

**Route:** Pego – Vall de Ebo – Vall d’Alcala –  
Castell de Castells – Pego

**Distance:** 97 kilometres

*Take to aromatic hills in search of The Blue-Eyed One, a legendary Moorish leader, delve into enchanting chasms and marvel at Neolithic man's artistic endeavours.*

Leave the A7 motorway at junction 61 (just south of Gandia) and take the road for Oliva and Pego. When you arrive at Oliva follow the CV715 (also signposted C3318) for Pego (this also applies if you are on the N332 coastal road). Keep following the signs for Sagra and Callosa d'en Sarrià until you leave Pego. Two kilometres after leaving the town, immediately after the sign on your right for the Das-Ding factory, a sharp right heads you uphill in the direction of Vall de Ebo (12km on CV712).

This steep zigzag climb quickly takes you away from the modest urban sprawl of Pego. As you rise above a band of pine trees, the views get steadily more splendid, until the whole patchwork quilt of olive, orange and lemon groves, and few remaining rice fields, spreads all the way to the sparkling blue of the Mediterranean. At the summit, marked by a white-and-blue windmill to your right, the road begins a languid descent into Vall de Ebo. A right-hand turn immediately after a blue-railed bridge (signposted Vall d’Alcalà) runs along the bottom of the village to another bridge that takes you back over the river. Park before crossing this second bridge if you wish to have a look at Vall de Ebo. (These names can be a little confusing as Vall d’Alcalà refers to the valley of Alcalà, whereas Vall de Ebo is the name of a village.)

Like many small villages, Vall de Ebo has suffered badly due to depopulation as the young people moved to the coast in search of work. Those who stayed worked mainly in agriculture, but the beauty of the surrounding countryside is attracting an increasing number of visitors to sample the peace and tranquillity and excellent mountain cuisine. Lamb — roasted, grilled or in rich stews — is popular on local restaurant menus, as are *minjos*, small pancakes stuffed with meat or wild mountain vegetables, *blat picat*, a pork stew with vegetables and barley, and of course, being so near the rice fields of Pego, a wide range of rice dishes.

A couple of minutes’ drive up the hill from Vall de Ebo, following the signs for Vall d’Alcalà, is the Cova de Rull. Discovered in 1919 by one José Vicente Mengal when trying to rescue his dog after it had disappeared down a rabbit hole, the Cova de Rull (Curly Cave) is estimated to be between five and seven million years old. Visitors take a 20-minute wander through caves with splendid formations of stalactites and stalagmites with such endearing names as Catedral de Diamantes, where the rock sparkles in the light of the guide's lamp, and La Flor, an opening in the cavern roof

which has petal-like stone layers overlaying each other resembling a beautiful flower in full bloom.

Back in daylight, continue to Vall d'Alcalà, a small valley with only two villages, Alcalà de la Jovada and Beniaya. The land appears uncultivated apart from the occasional olive and almond groves, with spiky gorse and palmetto interspersed with the odd copse of pine trees. But don't be deceived. Since medieval times this area has been known as the medicine chest of Europe, and herbalists would travel hundreds of kilometres to pick the provender of these apparently sparse lands. The intense heat of this high, rolling terrain produces some of the finest-quality rosemary, thyme, camomile and lavender, and even today local people can be seen roaming the hills gathering medicinal and culinary herbs. A number of restaurants in the area offer wild vegetables picked from the mountains as well as using the herbs found on their doorstep.

Just before Alcalà de la Jovada, at the K7 marker, beside a car park and picnic area on your left-hand side, is a *nevera*. This is a snow well, one of the man-made shafts that proliferate in this region. They were used to store the mountaintop snow, brought down from high ground in panniers carried by mules, that would later chill the summer-time drinks of the coastal elite, as well as preserve the abundant fruits for which the local valleys are still renowned.

Park and walk up the rough track to the right for a few moments. To your left you will see a gray dome, reached by another small path. This *nevera* is one of the best preserved in the area. Two short footpaths, one to the top of the *nevera* and another, which allowed access half way down, give a good idea of the structure of these pre-industrial freezers.

As you look into the deep, dark reaches below through openings at the top, you can imagine the pulley suspended through the metal ring at the pitch of the dome, via which chilled workers would be lowered to stamp down the snow. When the compacted snow reached the level of the arched openings a layer of rice would be spread over it to conserve the temperature. When the snow became ice, it would be packed into straw-lined wooden boxes to be carried by mule down mountain tracks to the clients on the coast.

Return to the road and continue to the yellow-and-white km6 marker. Take the concrete road to the right and you will almost immediately see the ruin of Adzubieta. Far from the opulent centres of art and science that were Córdoba and Granada, Adzubieta is Valencia's best preserved Moorish village, albeit a ruin. As you step gingerly over the stones that now clutter what were formerly the alleyways of the village, it is easy to imagine yourself back in the *aljame*, the Moorish barrio, listening to the call to prayer from the minaret of the mezquita (mosque) in nearby Alcalà de la Jovada.

### An easy walk to fabulous views

This walk is a moderately easy ramble of about an hour and a half. Park your car at the small parking area beside Adzubieta, the Moorish village outside Alcalà de la

Jovada. Follow the track from the village for about 20 metres to a track on your right (the first you come across, on a bend).

After about three minutes' walk, the footpath splits. Take the left fork, going uphill. The path dips and rises, and after 10 to 15 minutes you see a ruined Moorish farmhouse on your left. Just beyond, the path bends sharply to your right, and tucked in the bend a couple of metres from the track is a *pozo*, the original well for the farm. Be careful, because it is uncovered and still contains water.

Fifty metres or so after the well is another fork. Again, take the left fork (way-marked with yellow and white stripes on the path and also on a rock a couple of metres up the hill). As you climb, you walk through the terracing created by the Moors, now mostly in ruin, and see scattered houses, long abandoned. There are occasional well-tended olive groves that seem all but inaccessible, indicating that there are still a few hardy folk around.

Wheatears (known until prudish Victorian times as 'whitearses' because of their distinctive markings) skitter low over the scrubland, and if it is your lucky day you could see a Bonelli's eagle scouring its hunting territory. Most of the walk is gentle, except for the last 30 metres that might have you catching your breath as you scramble over the rock and scree, but it's worth it for the breath-taking view down the Vall de Gallinera to the coast.

For those who really feel adventurous and have a head for heights, a steep rough path leads you into the rock hole of La Fordada, from where it's said that on a clear day you can see all the way to Ibiza. Retrace your steps to the car park at Adzubieta to complete the walk.



Return to the main road, turn right and within a couple of minutes you will arrive at Alcalà de la Jovada, which overlooks Adzubieta. From this village, Alshahir Ibn Al-Azraq (known as the blue-eyed one long before Frank Sinatra's time) ruled his domain. Born in the village around 1218, he was a thorn in the side of Jaime I in his conquest of the Kingdom of Valencia, until in 1254 he was defeated by the Christian king and banished to North Africa.

Longing for his home, the Moorish leader returned 22 years later to lead an uprising to reclaim his lands. He failed in the attempt and was killed in 1276 while laying siege to the walls of Alcoi. In the village square, remnants of the mosque that Al-Azraq built as part of his palace now form part of the parish church, La Purísima Concepción. A bust of Old Blue Eyes in the street behind the Town Hall commemorates his rule, and another, in the shape of a brass fountain in the main square, pours forth fresh mountain water.

Two kilometres after leaving the village, heading in the direction of Planes, a turn left leads to a twisting road that mounts the hill to Beniaya. With Alcalà de la Jovada, this village makes up the Vall d'Alcalà. Follow the sign through the village towards Tollos, a winding country road with stunning views as you pass over the top of the tail end of the Sierra d'Almudaina.

As you begin the descent just before the km5 mark, the valley to your left is the Barranco Malafi, the route by which, in 1609, thousands of *moriscos* (Moors who had converted to the Christian faith when the country finally came under Christian rule), who had been given only three days' notice of their forced departure, were herded down the twisting track through high cliffs to the port of Denia. Rumours of hidden treasure are still bandied about.

Turn left as you enter Tollos and left again at the T-junction and follow the road for Castell de Castells (13 kilometres). As the road descends into Castell, it crosses a small bridge and immediately begins to rise again. Fifty metres further on an ornate lamp standard stands at a junction that points right to the village or left for Benichembla. Take the left fork. Just after the marker km28, a sign indicates the Pla de Petracos to your left, 1.5km.

The narrow road takes you to some of the most important rock paintings in the Comunitat Valenciana. Park in the small area beside the next sign and take the steep footpath that begins with a set of steps right beside the sign. This takes you up to a viewing platform where large panels explain the history and significance of the paintings. The footpath is quite a scramble so not advisable unless you are wearing flat shoes.

Thought to be about 8,000 years old, and discovered in 1980, five of the eight drawings are visible. At first they are a bit difficult to see, but your eyes soon focus on them in the brown concave depressions of the rock face.

Return to the road and turn left. When you reach the junction at Parcent you can return to the coast via the Jalón valley (picking up some of the wine for which the

valley is renowned, particularly the full-bodied red) and taking the road to Pedreguer. To return to Pego turn left and follow the road to Orba and Pego.

## WHAT TO SEE

### **Vall de Ebo:**

**Cova de Rull**, underground caves with spectacular stalactite and stalagmite formations. Open daily, Apr-Sep 10.30am-8.30pm, Nov-Feb 11am-5pm, Mar-Oct 11am-6.30pm. Entry €3.80 (includes entrance to ethnic museum in Vall de Ebo). Last ticket sold 40 minutes before closing time. Guided tour in Spanish only but the guide speaks slowly and clearly for those with a modest understanding of the language. In any case, worth a visit for the visuals alone.

### **Alcalà de la Jovada:**

**Nevera**, historic snow well at Km7 on the CV712. Accessible to public, no charge.

### **Adzubieta:**

Remains of Moorish village at Km6 on the CV712. Accessible to public, no charge.

### **Pla de Petracos:**

Neolithic rock paintings at Km28 on the Castell de Castells–Benichembla road. Accessible to public, no charge. (There is a small museum at C/San Roque, 1, next to the Ayuntamiento of Castell de Castells that explains the paintings, but opening hours tend to be haphazard.)

During February and March the whole of this area and the valleys surrounding it are awash with various fruit trees in blossom. A major visitor event.

## MORE INFORMATION

None of the towns on this excursion have tourist offices, although most of the venues, hotels and restaurants in the area will have leaflets.

### **Vall de Ebo:**

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaza Mayor, 2. Tel 96 557 14 13. Open 9.30am-2pm.

### **Alcalà de la Jovada:**

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaza Bis Villaplana. Tel. 96 551 41 07. Open 9.30am-3pm.

### **Castell de Castells**

**Ayuntamiento**, C/San Roque, 1. Tel 96 551 80 67. Open 9.30am-2pm.



## Wines Made by Heart and Hand Bodegas de 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 the area was famous for and for which the good old British Co-Operative Wholesale Society kept a warehouse in nearby Dénia.

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 again. 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, judged in a blind tasting in January of this year as being the best white wine in the Alicante region, one Rosado, Rosat, and two *liqores*, 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 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. “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!

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