



INLAND TRIPS FROM THE
Costa Blanca

Valencia North

DEREK WORKMAN

Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca

Valencia North

Discover a Countryside
of Stunning Scenery
and Timeless Pueblo

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

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

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



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INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

REGIONAL INFORMATION

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

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

LANGUAGE

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

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

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

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

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

INFORMATION

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

VISITING HOURS

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

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

TRANSPORT

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

ON THE ROAD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

MAPS

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

SECURITY

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

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

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

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

EATING OUT

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

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

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

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

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

WORTH KNOWING

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

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

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

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

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



CHILDHOOD CASTLES AND SWEET STONES

Area: West of Valencia city

Route: Benisanó – Benaguasil – Pedralba – Casino – Lliria

Distance: 75 kilometres

From the semi-industrial suburbs of Valencia, a mere hop takes you to one of the prettiest castles in the region, the sugared-almond village and the town with the oldest musical history in Spain.

From the autoroute that bypasses Valencia, take the exit for the CV35, to the north of the city, in the direction of Lliria. After 17 kilometres, leave the CV35 at exit 15 on the road signposted to Benisanó and Benaguasil. Leaving the semi-industrial suburbs of Valencia behind, you enter an area of olive groves, with a view of Lliria's white-and-cream Monasterio de Sant Miguel nestled in the hills to your right.

At a T-junction 1.5 kilometres from the motorway at exit 15, follow the sign for Benisanó, half a kilometre further on. Go directly over the roundabout at the beginning of the town and, after five sets of traffic lights (very close together), you will see a castle on your left. A small road runs uphill to the Plaça Comte de Sástago, directly in front of the castle gate.

The Castillo de Benisanó is one of the most delightful in the region, with a central keep, small circular tower and proper crenulations, just like all toy castles have. It even has slits to shoot arrows through.

Built during the second half of the 15th century, the castle-cum-palace was the home of the Cavanilles-Villarrasa family, governors of Benisanó. With its stout beams, twisted pillars and beautiful stained-glass windows, it has a cosier feeling than most castles. On the ground floor is a ceiling designed by one of the Vatican architects (a similar one can be found in the papal city).

A few metres' walk from the castle entrance is the Iglesia de los Santos Reyes. The church looks ancient but is actually little more than 80 years old. Seriously damaged during the Civil War, it was restored in 1945 but didn't receive its final lick of exterior paint until 1983.

Though the church is simple compared to many in the region, its *trompe l'oeil* side chapels are glorious in their own way. It houses a number of artworks from the original 15th-century building, including *La Adoración de los Reyes Magos* attributed to Claudio de San Leocadio, set high in the retablo behind the altar, and *Jesús el Nazareno* by Juan de Juanes in the sacristy. As you leave the church, light pours through a modern but pleasing stained-glass rose window above the entrance, depicting the Three Kings.

The old part of town retains much of the shape of the original walls that surrounded it and the narrow streets are entered by the three arched portals of Valencia, Bétera and Lliria.

To continue the excursion, drive back through Benisanó to the roundabout at the town entrance and turn right on the CV373 to Benaguasil, just 1.5 kilometres away. At a sharp left-hand bend as you enter the town (just after a telephone and post box on your left) take the right alongside the Bar/Restaurant Pelotari, then a left a few moments later signposted Ntra. Sra. Montiel Santuario. At the end of this road, turn right following the signs for the Santuario. Stay on this road to take you through the town.

Benaguasil doesn't have a lot to offer the tourist, but the locals are inordinately proud of their town hall, opened ten years and said to be the finest in the locality. It is rather impressive as modern architecture goes. You can locate it by following the signs for Ayuntamiento as you drive through town.

Feeling peckish? The Bar Palau, just opposite the town hall, offers a *bocadillo de sobresado y queso*, an enormous toasted sandwich of local sausage meat and cheese.

Leaving the town, the road takes you in the direction of Pedralba 12 kilometres away, although it isn't signposted until you reach a roundabout almost two kilometres after Benaguasil. Go straight across the roundabout on to the VV6124.

After five kilometres, you crest a rise to view a wide valley of orange groves with a scattering of houses and farms. If you fancy a paddle or a picnic, take the left turn immediately after you cross a newly restored concrete bridge signposted Rambla Primera, in front of a sign for Parque Natural la Fenosa. The road zigzags through orange groves to a small park in the bend of a narrow river where you can sit at wooden benches to eat lunch cooked at the large barbecues provided.

Continuing on the VV6124, a couple of kilometres later you will notice some odd-looking red piles of earth. On closer inspection they prove to be mounds that supported pylons for electricity cables that once criss-crossed a quarry, now abandoned and flooded, and raucous with the croaking of frogs. As the quarry got deeper, the diggers worked their way around the pylons, leaving the strange mounds.

While not outstandingly scenic, the road to Pedralba is a pleasant drive through orange groves and gently sloping hillsides. At the junction with the VV6122, turn left to Pedralba. Two kilometres later you reach the VV6123 where you turn left again (you will be returning past this junction to continue the excursion). As you descend into Pedralba, the ancient cemetery is to your right, with a red cliff surmounted by a cross behind it.

At a Y-junction, with a building directly in front, bear left. Follow the sign for Villamarxant until you reach the main road with a Petronor filling station ahead and turn right. Take the next right for Casinos and Lliria and park because you will be leaving by this road.

Walk back to the T-junction and turn right onto Calle Acequia (you will see a beautiful blue-and-white tiled sign for the Fábrica Harina de Salvador Civerá Peiro). The street is named after the narrow canal that runs along a row of beautiful modernista (Art Nouveau) houses, now in a poor state of repair. Arched stairways pass over the canal to the houses and narrow channels run between them to irrigate the orange groves behind. The town hall planned to demolish these former homes of the Pedralba wealthy and build new apartment blocks. Fortunately, they have seen the light and plan to restore them instead.

Halfway up Calle Acequia, a tiny alleyway on the right called Calle Iglesia takes you through narrow streets to the 18th-century parish church. The splendid late baroque façade and graceful fluted columns either side of the impressive doorway are decorated with images of the sun and moon. Unfortunately, you can't stand back for a full view of its ecclesiastical magnificence as it is completely boxed in on all sides by tiny alleyways.

Atop the church's bell-tower, a loudspeaker keeps the local populace informed and up to date with public announcements and advertisements, including one listing the day's best buys at a local supermarket. The passageway facing the church leads to the Plaza de la Constitución and the old town hall, whose façade frames a green painted panel where the locals can chalk up their own announcements. To the right of the town hall on Calle Mayor are a number of attractive examples of Art Nouveau architecture, particularly the curved bay window at number 13, now sadly in need of restoration.



Retrace your steps to Calle Acequia and reverse the directions to take you back out of town in the direction of Casinos, 11 kilometres away on the VV6123.

In Moorish times, Valencia was known as the most fertile and productive region in the known world and until recently was the world's biggest producer of rice. Home of the famous paella, it still supplies much of the rice consumed in Spain.

The region has been given a new lease of life by the miracle of drip-feed irrigation. On this trip, you pass through great swathes of once-abandoned land that is being cultivated again thanks to the thousands of metres of thin black plastic tubing that is replacing the old concrete channels and carrying water to the rows of newly-planted orange trees.

As you approach Casinos, you see the groves of almond trees, the source of this small rural town's fame. At the junction of CV35, turn right and enter the town. Just after the bridge and a set of traffic lights is a small square where it is usually possible to park.

The home of sugared almonds

Casinos is the centre of sugared almond production and at Fábrica Carmela on Avenida Valencia (just beside the traffic lights), the fourth generation of the Jarrin family serve various versions of these crunchy delicacies as well as their own make of turrón in their shop-cum-cafe.

Peladillas (sugared almonds) are made by revolving toasted almonds in a drum that slowly coats them with sugar that is then allowed to harden. Fábrica Carmela make a version for kids called *La Piedra* (The Stone) that looks like a dappled bird's egg and is a real tooth-cracker. *Garrapiñadas* are given their roughness and soft texture by being stirred in caramelised sugar, and *piñones* are pine nuts that have been given the same treatment as sugared almonds.

Stay on the CV35 as you leave Casinos and head towards Lliria 12 kilometres away. As you approach the town, ignore the first exit for Lliria (*oeste*) and Pedralba, and take the second, the CV25, two kilometres further on, signposted Marines, Olocau and Lliria.

When you reach the roundabout at the bottom of the slip road, look for the indication to Centro Ciudad and a small sign for Turismo Lliria. A few metres after leaving the roundabout, another sign for Turismo Lliria directs you to the left. At the next stop sign turn right and immediately left, down the side of a carwash.

At the junction with the main road turn right where you will immediately see the new building of the Mancomunitat Campo de Turia on your left, below which is one of Lliria's two tourist offices. This one, which has information about the town and the region, is a long walk from the centre of town, so it's best to visit it first. The second one, the town hall information office, is in La Forn de la Vila, one of the two 15th-century bakeries that stood by the entrance to La Vila Vella, the medieval part of the town.

A statue of a Grecian maid complete with lyre in the Plaza Mayor proclaims “Llíria a la Música”, supporting the local claim that the town is known world-wide as La Ciutat de la Música (the City of Music), though a number of other towns in the Valencia Community claim the same. Llíria was the first town in Spain to have a town band, formed in the 19th century, and now has two, La Primitiva and La Unión Musical, regarded as two of the best in the region.

The precursor of modern-day Llíria was Edeta, an important provincial settlement during the fourth century. Its remains can be found at the foot of the hill on which sits the Sant Miguel monastery. During excavation of the site, important remains of coloured Iberian pottery were discovered and can now be seen in the Museo de la Prehistoria in Valencia city’s La Beneficencia.

The tiny church on the hilltop, Monasterio Sant Miguel, will steal your heart. Its baroque ostentation, culminating in the winged and silver-armoured Sant Miguel ramming his spear down the throat of a black demonic creature, could overwhelm if it wasn’t for the serenity that wraps around you as you sit in a pew, hearing nothing but birdsong. You want to close your eyes and hang a “Do Not Disturb” sign around your neck.

The view from the hilltop alone is worth the ride through the higgledy-piggledy streets, with views across rustic and cultivated land to the Sierra Calderona to the north and the blue Mediterranean to the east.

Llíria is a bustling modern town but still has some excellent examples of the architecture and culture of times past. Santa María de la Sangre church is a superb example of an *iglesia de la Reconquista*, the kind of churches built during the Christian re-conquest of Spain combining elements of the Romanesque and Gothic. The structure is simple but has a glorious wooden ceiling painted with colourful scenes showing knights and ladies, mythical beasts and decorative patterns based on plants and heraldry.

On Plaza Mayor, the imposing 16th-century ayuntamiento, officially known as Ca la Vila, has been functioning as a town hall for more than 400 years. The building was reopened in early 2003 after a three-year restoration, which included the cleaning and repairing of a stained-glass window commemorating those who died in the Carlist Wars.

Just a few metres away is the Asunción church, a magnificent baroque edifice that took more than 50 years to build, being completed in 1672. The Doric columns of its façade flank sculptures by Raimundo Capuz, whose monumental Sant Miguel vanquishing the Devil rides high above a central niche.

Feeling spiritually replete? Time to feed the inner man — and there is no better place to go than the Pastissería Ca Susi at Calle Sant Vicent 1. It is said to be the best bakery in town, which the number of customers crowding the tiny triangular shop appears to confirm. Sra. Susi herself presides over trays of *besitos de Llíria* (Kisses of Llíria, an almond biscuit), *torta de mazapán* (marzipan cake sprinkled with chopped almonds) and *torta de aceite con sardina* (long flat loaves baked with sardines on top).

To complete the excursion, return to the CV35 for Valencia and rejoin the autovía that bypasses the city.

WHAT TO SEE

Benisanó:

Castillo de Benisanó, 15th-century castle/palace on Plaça Comte de Sástago. Open Sun 11am-2pm.

Iglesia Santos Reyes, Plaça Comte de Sástago. Built 80 years ago on site of a 15th-century church, houses artwork from the original building.

Pedralba:

Calle Acequia, houses in the modernista style with arched steps over a canal.

Iglesia Parroquial, 18th-century late-baroque church.

Casa-Museo Pedralba 2000, Calle Bugara. Modern art museum. Open Sat/Sun noon-2pm, 5-7pm.

Llíria:

Ca la Vila, Plaza Mayor, Original 17th-century town hall.

Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Plaza Mayor. 18th-century parish church with rich baroque ornamentation.

Santa María de La Sangre, 13th-century church in the old town, decorated in the Mudéjar style.

Monasterio de Sant Miguel, 16th-century monastery. Closed to the public but you can visit the chapel. Locals say that it houses a feather from the wings of Archangel Gabriel. Open mornings Mon-Sat 9am-1pm, Sunday 7am-2pm, afternoons 3pm-8pm every day.

Edeta, remains of the Iberian town on hillside below the monastery.

Forn de la Vila, restored medieval bakery on Calle de la Sang, Vila Vella, that now houses the town's tourist office.

Museo Arqueológico, Plaza Trinquet Vell, Vila Vella. Attractively laid-out archeological museum housed in modern building in the old town. Open May-Sep, Tues-Fri 8am-2pm and 5-8.30pm, Sat 11am-2pm and 5-8.30pm, Sun 11am-2pm; Oct-Apr, Tues-Fri 10am-2pm and 5-7pm, Sat 11am-2pm and 5-8pm, Sun 11am-2pm. **Parc Sant Vicent**. Pleasant park with playground, 2km from town centre in the direction of Olocau.

MORE INFORMATION

Benisanó:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza del Ayuntamiento, 1. Tel. 96 278 07 01. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

Benaquasil:

Ayuntamiento, Plaça Mayor de la Vila, 17. Tel. 96 273 00 11. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

Pedralba:

Ayuntamiento, Calle Ismael Quiles, 6. Tel. 96 270 70 01. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

Llíria:

Tourist Office (Generalitat), Edificio Sede de la Mancomunidad de Camp de Turia, Pla de l'Arc, s/n. Tel. 96 279 36 19. Open Mon-Fri 9.30am-1.30pm and 3-7.30pm, Sat 10am-1pm.

Tourist Office (Llíria), Calle de la Sang, 8 (in the old town). Tel. 96 279 15 22. Open Tues-Fri 10am-2pm, 4-7pm, Sat 10am-2pm. Closed Sunday. Offers free guided walks around the historical parts of the city on Sunday mornings at 11. Contact office for programme (in Spanish only).



A Stroll Around Marines

When you first see Marines as you drive north from Llíria to Olocau it looks like a white painted housing estate, but in fact it is a genuine little Spanish village and fully recognised as such by the regional government. Strictly speaking, it is called Marines Nuevo to differentiate it from Marines Viejo a few kilometres further on.

There's none of the twisting narrow streets of most Spanish villages, denoting its Moorish origins, for the simple reason that the Moors had long gone when the grid street plan was laid. The village owes its existence to a much more basic, if not considerably more frightening, event than the settling of the moors during their

seven-hundred years in Spain. It is there because of the devastating floods that wrought havoc through much of the Valencian Community in 1957.

Not only were vast funds made available to build an enormous channel around Valencia City to stop the regular flooding when the Rio Turia bursts its banks, (which now gives us the Jardines de Turia, the dried up riverbed with gardens, sports grounds, and the City of Arts and Sciences), but the regional government decided to build a complete village to house people who's homes had been destroyed in the torrential floods, and so Marines came into being – although building didn't actually begin until a decade later.

Unlike many so-called 'new towns' where the designers throw up hundreds of same-old, same-old boxes without a care for the needs of the people who would actually live in them, the chaps who laid out the urban plan for Marines thought of everything. There's a church with a fountain in the square and a town hall to the side, restaurants, cafes, banks, butchers, bakers (the candlestick makers were redundant by then), a cultural centre, and there's even a theatre.

The streets are generously wide, with parks and small public spaces dotted everywhere, usually with thoughtfully provided benches to have a natter on. There are four types of houses to suit different family sizes, from the big family affairs to the small bungalows for pensioners. Each has a little garden in front and most have a spacious patio at the rear. All of the buildings are of Mediterranean design and include copies of *calles partidas*, streets where the first floor extends over the ground floor to create a shady, arched walkway. The design is Castilian in origin but similar designs can be found all over Spain. Everywhere is white, white, white, apart from the octagonal tower of the sports centre, with its band of green tiles.

These days many of the houses in Marines are second homes for city folk living in Valencia, but there are still enough permanent residents to give it a proper village feel. It's not the place you'd go for a historical or culturally charged visit, but it is worth a look to see just how pleasant somewhere new can be when a bit of thought goes into the design and that not every new development has to include a golf course at its centre.



EXPLORE THE MORISCO MAZE

Area: Alto Turia region, west of Valencia city

Route: Villar de Arzobispo – Chulilla – Chelva –
Tuéjar – Utiel

Distance: 205 kilometres

Wander a medieval maze to a symphony of swirling water, marvel at a Moorish village clinging to the side of a cliff, and pray for a miraculous cure in a mountain sanctuary.

From the autoroute bypassing Valencia city, the CV35 dual-carriageway to Adamuz wends its way through a light industrial landscape. After it passes Lliria 11 kilometres later, take the road to Casinos, the sugared-almond centre of Valencia and, as you cross a bridge leaving the town, a sign to your right directs you to Villar de Arzobispo (VV6206), a further 10 kilometres.

The road begins to climb slowly through the almond groves that supply the sweet factories of Casinos. Just after the 5km mark, the road dips into a valley and in the distance you see Villar de Arzobispo and the scarred mountains that provide the marble and stone for local industry.

Less than one kilometre from Villar, you skirt a roundabout to which you will return to continue the excursion.

The story goes that during medieval times a knight returned home to Villar after fighting the infidels and discovered his wife en flagrante delicto with a chap who had stayed at home. He punished them by building two houses facing each other and imprisoning one lover in each, so that they could see one another but never have physical contact.

The town describes itself as "a dynamic centre of regional services", but what the visitor finds is a sleepy little place of shady narrow alleys. The Plaza de la Iglesia has a pleasant array of architecture, from the 16th-century parish church and archbishop's palace (the town was formerly linked with the Archbishopric of Valencia) to the grand modernista mansion on the opposite side of the square and the arched portico of the town hall.

The museum, the Casa Museo de los Cinteros, on Calle Hospital, is housed in a traditional village house of the type constructed in the late 19th century. It displays life in a typical village home around the 1850s and in it you will find a large collection of agricultural tools, furniture, kitchen utensils, ceramics and clothing typical of this era.

The town's main commerce is wine, a selection of which can be tasted at the Cooperativa Agrícola el Villar on Avenida Ingeniero Tamarit, and at the privately owned Bodegas Comeche next door.

Return to the roundabout at the entry to Villar and take the C234 to Chulilla 11 kilometres away. The flat road takes you through vineyards laid out in military precision. A couple of kilometres later you cross the CV35 Llíria to Adamuz road and join the CV395/VV6241.

This is a pleasant, cultivated low-lying landscape of grapes and almonds and after four kilometres you pass through Vanacloig, little more than a scattering of houses most of which seem to be falling down. Shortly after leaving the village, you drive through a shallow valley of varied cultivation offering a wonderful changing palette of greenery.

At the km42 marker, you see on your left the Instalación Recreativa de Pelma, a picnic area with barbecues and walks beneath the shady pines. A short while later on the outskirts of Chulilla, as you round a bend by La Rueda restaurant, you see the village hanging on the cliff face ahead with the walls of the castle suspended above. As you get closer it comes as no surprise to see that some of the houses have actually tumbled into the canyon below.

Stay on the road through the village and, as you exit the main square, parking signs direct you to a short track off the main road with parking on either side.

The narrow streets of white-painted houses are full of twists and turns, steep curving stairways and dead ends. The high elegance of the parish church, Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, suddenly becomes a low wall as you wander up the little alleyway behind it.

Follow the signs to the castle and you come to a metal-barred gate in a breeze-block wall. A very rough stone path runs up the high wall that obliterates any view except for occasional niches that give a narrow perspective of life in the village below. The castle is Moorish in origin but underwent rebuilding in the 14th to 16th centuries. During its lifetime it served as the residence of the local nobility and as an ecclesiastical prison. Not much of the structure is left but the views across the valley and the weathered orange tiles of the village rooftops are splendid.

The cuisine of the region is represented by *ollas*, thick stews rich in beans, vegetables, meat and mountain herbs. You might try *cocotes*, small pastry parcels filled with spicy sausage. At the Cafetería Baronia, tucked in the corner opposite the town hall on the Plaza Baronia, you can buy locally produced honey.

Leave the car park and turn right at the main road at the bottom of the short track. The road immediately begins to rise and takes you through a landscape of rugged hills and broken terrain with rough-textured mountain slopes of creamy earth and spiky scrub. Seven kilometres later you see the blue-tiled dome of the Ermita Virgen de los Dolores at Losa del Obispo, peeping out of the pine trees that guard the village cemetery.



You join the CV35 once more, heading for Chelva 16 kilometres away. If you wish to take a pleasant break by a dam, after three kilometres a sign to your left

directs you to the Embalse de Loriguilla, 4.9 kilometres away. Otherwise, continue on the road to Chelva.

Just after the km59 marker, you get a glimpse of a beautiful waterfall. To get a closer view, take the next left that sends you briefly back in the direction you have come. After a few moments, a sharp right leads you to an old stone bridge, after which you see a rough track to your left. Follow this for a couple of hundred metres, taking a left fork that brings you to open ground where you can park, picnic and take a paddle in the river Tuéjar, just behind a screen of spindly trees.

To continue the excursion, you can either rejoin the CV35 or turn left on the road at the end of the track (with yellow lines, bridge to your right) that joins the CV35 one kilometre further on.

As you enter Chelva, look out for signs for the Ayuntamiento, which is in the Plaza Mayor at the bottom of Calle Mártires. The parking is limited in the plaza, both in the number of spaces available and the time allowed to park, so it may be best to park on the main road and take the short walk to the square.

Chelva is unusual in that it still has, more or less intact, the original Morisco and Jewish quarters (although you would be hard pushed to tell which is which without a map). As you walk the higgledy-piggledy streets, you are accompanied by the sound

of water either gushing from the dozens of fountains from which you can slake your thirst or surging below the metal gratings that cover the channels taking the water down to the river. The village sounds as if it is in permanent flood.

Twisted houses tumble down narrow alleyways, some of them quite literally, and it's like walking through a medieval maze without ever being sure you will reach the centre. The fading designs painted on the streets are renewed each year to celebrate the fiesta of the Virgen del Remedio held from August 15 to 20.

The Plaza Mayor is dominated by the imposing bulk of the 17th-century Los Ángeles church, which has a series of shell-fluted niches once ornamented by a profusion of statuary, now long gone. Above the main entrance, the angels supporting the town's coat of arms are chipped and broken, some limbless and headless, and one poor cherub has had a totally inappropriate face of a different design, size and material stuck on what is left of its head.

The interior decoration is credited to Juan Bautista Pérez Castiel, the master of works for Valencia cathedral. The saving grace of the church is its unique clock set high on the painted bell-tower that tells you not only the time but the days and months as well.

The fine modernista houses that surround the square give the impression of a once-elegant provincial town. Now, sadly, they are mostly cracked and. The original Renaissance town hall on Calle Caballeros in the Jewish quarter is altogether more beautiful.

Before you leave Chelva you might want to visit Embutidos de Chelva, a sumptuous shop of locally made sausages and bottled meats. Here you can be tempted by *longanizas* (spicy pork sausages – which give their name to a Spanish saying, '*Hay mas días que longanizas*' there's no rush), *lomo en aceite* (pork fillets in olive oil), and *blanquettes* and *morcadillos* (white and black puddings).

Return to your car and take the road opposite Calle Mártires that has lots of signs on it, one of which directs you to Ahillas. After a two-minute drive, you will see an ancient bullring to your right. Opposite this, a short track to your left leads you to a car park. Take the flight of stairs to the side and you enter a small square where the 20 spouts of the Fuente de Gitana sparkle in the sunshine. It's a surprise to find such a beautiful and ornate fountain in the middle of nowhere.

Continue on the road uphill that rises steeply for five kilometres. A sign directs you left to the Santuario del Remedio. This sanctuary sits 850 metres above sea level and has been a pilgrims' destination for centuries. (Note the low walls that support footpaths through the hillsides, once the only routes through this terrain.)

The sanctuary is a pleasant, cool chapel, though the peaceful ambience is somewhat marred by the noise from the television in the café next door. A side chapel displays bundles of wax limbs, artificial hairpieces, a rack of fancy dresses - all votive offerings calling for the Virgin to cure a loved one.

The tiered terraces here with their benches are a delightful spot to rest or picnic. If you want a meal, the Santuario has a restaurant.

Retrace your route back to the Chelva. As you descend, you will see an olive grove cut out of the top of a hill and surrounded by pine trees, a secret garden that can only be seen from above.

When you reach the main road (CV35), turn right for Tuéjar five kilometres away. After passing the tourist office on the outskirts of Tuéjar, turn left into the village.

Tuéjar doesn't offer much to justify a visit. As you reach the old town, follow the sharp bend that sends you in the direction of Utiel and the Embalse de Benalgéber. The road climbs upwards through pine-covered hillsides before levelling out at 850 metres. It is a beautiful drive on a summer's evening, as the haze softens the blues and greys of the distant mountains and the pine trees dapple the road with their elongated shadows.

At the km11 marker, you catch your first glimpse of the reservoir in the valley to your right, twinkling like frosted glass. It's worth stopping here for a few moments to breathe in the fresh air and listen to the breeze rustling through the pines. It's a curious sensation to stand on the cobbled road halfway across the dam and look up at the massive bulk of the power station built almost into the rock. Now in ruin, it looks like the stone skeleton of a deserted space station.



Cross over the dam and pass some derelict buildings and deserted workshops that serviced the power complex. Shortly after this a sign to your right directs you to a recreation area by the reservoir, three kilometres away. Stay on the road and a strange sight awaits you a couple of hundred metres further on.

When the Confederación Hidrográfica del Júcar constructed the dam in the 1950s to hold back the River Tuéjar, the residents of the soon-to-be-flooded Benagéber village at the bottom of the valley were given the choice of being relocated to the outskirts of Valencia city or re-housed higher up the valley.

At the new village of Benagéber the rows of one-storey terraced houses — they look like holiday camp chalets, charmless and identical — became home to those who didn't fancy city life. Many are still lived in, but the more substantial buildings that housed the offices and management of the dam now lie shuttered and derelict, although, apparently, there are plans to restore them. The stunning vistas aren't wasted though, as a holiday centre has recently been built to allow teenagers to enjoy all manner of rural pastimes.

Upward and onward is the only way to go, in the direction of Utiel 29 kilometres away, a beautiful drive through the Sierras Atalaya and Negrete, with the occasional cornfield among the pines. Small vineyards set in the red earth become more frequent as you approach Utiel. Requena is one of Valencia's biggest wine-producing regions with its own Denominación de Origen.

At km39, you enter a strange little village called Casa de Medina, a scattering of houses around an unruly village green. At the T-junction, turn right and follow the CV390 to Utiel, eight kilometres further on. In front of you as you turn you'll see a curious bodega with two conical chimneys resembling dove cots.

When you reach Utiel, turn left at the junction with the N330 to Valencia, passing under a bridge. The road takes you through the town and, just as you cross over a bridge by the Guardia Civil post, look out for the small sign that directs you to Valencia to your left. This takes you to the Ego1/A3 autoroute to return to Valencia (76 kilometres away).

WHAT TO SEE

Villar de Arzobispo:

Casa Museo de los Cinteros, Museo Etnología, Calle Hospital, 2. Tel. 96 164 64 19. Open Mon-Fri 7-9pm, Sat-Sun noon-2pm. Household ephemera and agricultural equipment of the mid-19th century.

Cooperativa Agrícola el Villar, Avenida Ingeniero Tamarit, 8-12. Tel. 96 272 00 50. Open Mon-Sat 9am-1pm & 4-7.30pm, Sun 9am-1pm.

Bodegas Comeche, Ingeniero Tamarit, 10. Tel. 96 272 00 78. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-2pm & 4-7pm. Sat-Sun 9am-2pm.

Granja-Escuela La Serranía, off Avenida Jorge de Austria. Working farm near the Convento Carmelita, where you can feed livestock, go horse riding or hire mountain bikes

Chulilla:

Castillo de Chulilla, castle of Moorish origin overlooking the town.

Hotel Balneario de Chulilla, Afueras, s/n. Tel 96 165 79 13. Open Mar-mid-Dec. 4km from Chulilla on the CV6241 Sot de Chera/Requena road (turn at junction beside La Rueda restaurant). The hotel is also a health spa with water rich in lime, magnesium and sulphates. Naturally heated swimming pools, and a range of treatments.

Chelva:

Barrio Antiguo, original Morisco, Arab and Jewish quarter, behind the town hall on Plaza Mayor.

Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, 17th-century church in Plaza Mayor.

Fuente Gitano, one of the dozens of fountains in town, on the road to Santuario del Remedio.

Santuario del Remedio, pleasant, cool sanctuary full of votive offerings, 5km outside town on the Chelva-Ahillas road.

Acueducto Peña Cortada, Valencia's best-preserved Roman aqueduct, a 6km walk from Chelva. Map and route obtainable from the town hall.

Embutido de Chelva, shop selling locally made sausages and potted meats on Avenida Mancomunidad Alto Turia, 21.

MORE INFORMATION

Chulilla:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza Baronia, 1. Tel. 96 165 70 01. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-2.30pm.

Chelva:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza Mayor. Tel. 96 210 00 11. Open Mon-Fri 9am-2pm.

Tuéjar:

Tourist Information Office, Ctra Chelva-Tuéjar, km73. Tel. 96 163 50 84. Open Jul-Sept 10am-2pm, 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun. Rest of year 10am-1pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm, 4-8pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun. The main tourist office for the five villages of the Alto Turia region.



A Stroll Around Utiel

It must be admitted that Utiel lacks the charm of nearby Requena, but it does have its moments, particularly in the warren of narrow streets around the church. The church itself is magnificent in its simplicity. Barely decorated, in complete contrast to most of the churches in the Valencian Community, the simple stone walls and barley-sugar twist pilasters with their gilded capitals has a majesty that outweighs much of the extravagant ornamentation seen elsewhere. With recordings of Gregorian chant enhancing more than destroying the peacefulness, it is the sort of place where, even if you aren't of a religious mind, you can't help but want to sit awhile and absorb the tranquillity.

When I left the church I stood for a few minutes watching some council workmen trimming trees. No hint of delicacy, they just hacked away with a great big trimmer till most of the growth was sheered off. I knew how the tree felt; it was an arboreal version of the No.2 I get when I visit the barber. Almost to the bone, giving plenty of growing time – same for the tree, I suppose.

Utiel is one of the main wine production towns in the Valencian Community, and gives its name to the Denominación de Origen Utiel-Requena (where its name goes first, much to the chagrin of the Requenenses). Once mainly exported or used for blending, the region is now producing some excellent wines, hence the D.O. and is Valencia's main producer of *cava*.

The Cooperativa Agrícola Utiel is the main bodega to visit in Utiel for well-priced wines. Great tiled swathes of grapevines decorate either side of the arched doorway with a tiled panel above depicting a poetic rural landscape of lowing oxen pulling a plough through deeply tilled earth. The huge metal door itself would look more in keeping as the entrance to a prison, but during working hours it opens to reveal the work going on around the huge shining vats in which the wine is produced. Two large tiled plaques inform you that it was built between 1949-1960 and has a capacity of 30 million litres. Some *resaca* (hangover)! Step through inside and the bouquet certainly doesn't have the hint of chocolate and raspberries that wine aficionados eulogies about. If you want to sample the product you can do so at the *Despach de Vinos* next door.

To see how it's all done, visit the Museo del Vino housed in the Bodega Redondo (Round Bodega – which is exactly what it was) where tools and equipment used in wine making for centuries past are on display. As you walk around the lower section, where the wine would once have been stored, look up at the ceiling and you will see it is made up of broken bits of tiles (to help with insulation), some of which are so gorgeous that any collector would give his eye teeth even for the damaged piece.

Unlike the façade of the Cooperativa, the bullring almost opposite is more a thing of ugly than a thing of beauty. Even so, the locals are inordinately proud of their *plaza de toros*, which was built in 1858 and rivals that of Bocalrent as the oldest in the Comunidad and is the second largest in the region, second only to the bullring in the capital.

The Guardia Civil barracks on Calle Heroes de Tollo (which presumably celebrates a battle, although I could find nothing relating to the name other than an hotel, restaurant and industrial estate) is like a big iced birthday cake in the shape of a castle, with turrets and all. Don't be tempted to take a photo though, because they are considered military establishments and therefore secret – although how secret can they be, stuck on the main road into town!





THE ROUTE OF THE SQUASHED TOMATOES

Area: Hoya de Buñol and Chiva, west of Valencia city.

Route: Cheste – Chiva – Buñol – Dos Aguas

Distance: 114 kilometres

Drive through the green and pleasant land of Hoya de Buñol, where bubbling springs and spectacular cascades once fed a vast savannah roamed by giant rhinoceros, elephants, wolves and bears.

From the A7 autoroute that bypasses Valencia, take the E901/A3 to Madrid and the Aeropuerto. After 12 kilometres, take exit 332 for Cheste and Godelleta. Stay on this road for two kilometres. As you enter Cheste, you cross a metal bridge over a rail track, followed immediately by a roundabout. Turn left off the roundabout and almost immediately right on Calle de La Ribera. This leads into the square in front of San Lucas Evangelista church.

The *chestanos* are said to be very proud of San Lucas's hexagonal bell tower. At 51 metres, it matches that of the Micalet tower of Valencia cathedral. In 1982, the church was declared a Monument of National Artistic Interest, and has been completely restored, its rich cream stonework glowing as if it were completed last year and not in 1770. High above the main doorway cherubs perch precariously, praying on a pointed pediment, while to the left of the main altar is a mural attributed to the 18th-century artist José Vergara (or one of his students).

Unfortunately, the charm of the church is somewhat marred by the appalling 1970s apartment block beside it, but the modernista (Art Nouveau) façade of the building that houses the Salón de Té Verdi opposite helps restore the ambience. You can nip in to try some of the home-made local specialities such as *tortas de toros*, small pastries with raisins and nuts, or *testaminos*, made with sugar, flour, egg yolk and occasionally an assortment of fillings such as chopped almonds.

In the Plaza del Dr Cajal, the main square, the Fuente del Ayuntamiento spouts forth in front of the elegant town hall. The fountain was designed in 1802 by Vicente Marzo, president of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de Valencia. Also on the square are the splendidly ornate Sindicato Agrícola y Caja Rural and the town casino (a kind of gentlemen's club where the town's solid citizens socialise) with its sinuously curving ironwork and colourful tiled panels. Sadly, the interior is rather a letdown — it was slightly modernised in the 1980s but not very well.

Tucked behind the municipal market in Plaza Mercado, the Ermita de la Virgen de la Soledad Gloriosa, named after the town's patron saint, was originally built in 1573, but has been considerably restored since. Numerous plaques advertise various facelifts, most notably a medallion below the twin bells that informs the public in bold

lettering that the façade was restored in 1904 at the expense of one José Rodrigo Martínez. In such manner do the rich pave their way to heaven.

To the side of the market the rickety hand-made sign for the long-closed Cine Goya, which looks more like a barn with balconies than an entertainment centre, recalls the time when every tiny village had its own cinema.

As you wander the streets, take a look at some of the tiled side panels framing the front doors of many of the modernista houses.

Leave Cheste by returning over the railway bridge you came in on and follow the CV50 signs for Chiva, a couple of kilometres away. When you get there, turn left at a roundabout with half an arch on it, following the one-way sign. At the next Stop sign, turn right and continue into the village.

Chiva is a bustling little town but, apart from a collection of paintings by José Vergara and sculptures by his brother Ignacio in the parish church and the hilltop sanctuary of the Virgen del Castillo, there isn't a great deal for the visitor to see. Its greatest claim to fame is that it is the birthplace of Enrique Ponce, one of Spain's favourite bullfighters.

On the fountain in the Plaza de la Constitución, with its 20 lions' heads spouting constant streams of water, a plaque depicts the *Torico de la Cuerda*. This is a reference to the fiesta in the last two weeks of August, when brave (or foolhardy) young men try to grab a rope tied around the head of a charging bull to direct its movements.

Behind the fountain a large pond is the home of a couple of geese and some large fish, plus (on my last visit) a collection of plastic bags. Houses back directly on the pond, rather like a poor, latter-day Venice.

Leave Chiva via the Valencia road, the way you came in, and at the next roundabout at the bottom of the hill turn right. Moments later at another roundabout turn right again and immediately begin climbing a hill in the direction of Madrid. After one kilometre a footbridge crosses the road with the Restaurante Canario on your right. Almost opposite the restaurant a narrow road on your left twists its way up to the Santuario de la Virgen del Castillo.

The Santuario is only open the hours of Mass but it is worth climbing the hill just to enjoy the panoramic views of the surrounding countryside that varies from rolling olive groves and stately pine-covered hills to industrial estates. On clear days they say you can see the distant Mediterranean. Nearby are the ruins of the castle, said to be of Roman and Moorish origin.

Return to the main road and turn right (the junction is on a long bend, so exit with care). At the roundabout at the bottom of the hill, turn right for Godelleta seven kilometres away, joining the CV50 for Alzira. Continue on this new road and exit at Godelleta Norte. Moments later you see a roundabout with the village's name laid out in bricks.

Godelleta has little to offer other than its sweet Moscatel dessert wine, the best in the region. You can pick up a bottle at a bargain price at the Coarval shop in the front of the San Pedro Apóstol wine cooperative, just as you cross the bridge after the roundabout.



A bend at the edge of Godelleta (just after you cross the bridge) points you in the direction of Buñol, 13 kilometres away (CV3036). A couple of hundred metres up the hill from the main road, a small sign on a right turn points to Buñol. Stay on this pretty country road, crossing over the junction with the VV3034 to Chiva and Turis, and continue in the direction of Buñol. Directly ahead you will see some of the windmills that are doing so much to destroy the visual beauty of Spain.

The first views of Buñol are rather spoilt by the towering chimneys of the cement factory that drives the local economy. As you drop down into the small town you soon lose sight of these behemoths and enter a busy little pueblo that nestles around an ancient castle whose history goes back to the first century BC.

Entering the town, you come to a roundabout with a building bearing a strange yellow-and-green sign for the Diputación Provincial de Valencia. Take Avenida País Valenciano, the road to the left of this building. Park here if you can because the road narrows as it enters the older part of town (over the bridge) and parking is difficult.

There are more than 300 fountains in the town and its immediate surroundings, with such splendid names as *La Alegría* (The Happiness), *La Umbría* (The Shady Place) and *La Jarra* (The Jar). It was this abundance of water that caused the first Iberian settlers to name the town Bullón, meaning fountain. Roman settlers created irrigation channels and aqueducts to supply the surrounding fields and built the original castle keep, later heightened to 25 metres by the Moors.

Little is known of life under the Visigoths during their stay in this area, but the Moorish conquerors enclosed the *kalaa* (castle) with its high walls and built the Torre de Musa (later known as the Torre del Sur) that led to the first urban development, the narrow streets that ring the castle. Salvador church, built into the castle, sits on the site of a former mosque.

Notable visitors to the castle have included Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, more widely known as El Cid, but perhaps its most famous resident was Francis, a king of France imprisoned there by Carlos I in 1525. In the early 19th century, the town formed the dividing line between Aragon and Castilla and the castle served as a prison during the Carlist Wars of 1833-1839 and 1872-1876.

Anyone who likes twisting alleyways and cobbled streets will be in their element in the meandering thoroughfares around the church and castle. Wander behind the Ayuntamiento into the heart of the castle to reach the Plaza de Armas, a medieval square partially inhabited and retaining much of its original appearance.

Lovers of marching music will be interested to know that Buñol boasts two bands, each with more than 120 musicians. One is named La Artística but is known locally as Los Feos (the Uglies).

A short walk out of town along El Cid, the road that goes past the town hall and church, brings you to the pretty little San Luis sanctuary, alongside which are a new open-air auditorium and several restaurants, mainly open during the summer months or when there is a concert at the auditorium. (If you stand right in front of the door of the Santuario, a sensor turns on the light allowing you to see the image of the saint inside).



Buñol's annual tomato battle

These days, Buñol is most famous for its annual tomato battle called La Tomatina which, in a country known for weird fiestas, must be one of the weirdest.

One day in the 1940s a resident of Buñol wandered across the square in front of the town hall on market day singing – badly – the song *Amada Mía* from the Rita Hayworth film *Gilda*, using a funnel as a megaphone.

Shoppers and stallholders alike objected to his raucous rendition and began to pelt him with tomatoes, but some of them missed the intended target and hit other bystanders, provoking a tomato battle all over the square.

The following year a local civic dignitary was in the wrong place at the wrong time and found himself the centre of unwanted attention as youths gathered in the square (this time with their own tomatoes) to celebrate what was already becoming known as "the day of the tomato".

The local authorities banned the event, but fines and even prison sentences could not stop the villagers from celebrating the bizarre fiesta. There were public uprisings and even a 'funeral of the tomato', when a giant tomato was paraded through the town as a protest against the ban. Now the fiesta is an annual event.

At 11am on the last Wednesday in August, a single shot gives the signal for teams of men in six enormous wagons to heave 140 tons of ripe tomatoes on to the cheering crowd of 30,000 or more cramming the town square.

Intermingled with the locals are visitors who have travelled from all over the world. Drenched in juice, they pelt one another with the tomatoes until, on the chime of 12, a second shot is fired and they sink wearily into the bright red slush that covers the square.

They don't have long to relax, however, as soon a swarm of town hall staff, volunteers and neighbours swoop down with hosepipes, buckets and brooms. While the exhausted revellers drag themselves to the showers in the municipal swimming pool, the square is scrubbed spotless in less than an hour.

For hearty mountain eating you could try Buñol's famous *perdiz en escabeche* (partridge in pickle sauce), *olla podrida* (a thick stew of vegetables and pork), or the simple *patatas en caldo*, a working man's staple of potatoes in broth. You will also find local sausages and plenty of rice dishes, including *arroz con caracoles* (rice with snails). For a picnic you could try the *bollos con sardinas*, flat loaves baked with sardines and bacon laid over them.

Leave Buñol by following the signs for Macastre, five kilometres away. After Macastre, sit back for a relaxed ride to the sierra of Dos Aguas. Beautiful, rolling countryside comes into view as you reach km8. The land is uncultivated apart from a few orange groves, and the hillsides are pockmarked with bright yellow gorse bushes. Here the occasional *algarrobo* (carob) tree sheds its dark brown pods on the roadside in the autumn. Shadowed clefts break the undulating hillside. This sinuous drive is particularly pleasant in late afternoon summer sunshine.

You travel through delightful countryside where arbours of pine trees cast shadows across the road. You are passing through the Sierras Malacara and Martés that together form one of the main nature reserves of the area, as well as being rich in discoveries of the Bronze Age and Iberian cultures.

Sixteen kilometres from Buñol, a sign on your right directs you to the Embalse de Forata. A few minutes' drive further and another right (signposted) takes you to an attractive open area where you can park, have a picnic and take a stroll. The *embalse* (reservoir) is a little further on. A road crosses it, should you want a closer look, but at the other end you have to turn around and come back.

Retrace the route from the reservoir to the main road from Buñol and turn right on CV425. Turn left at the sign on a roundabout for Dos Aguas, just over three kilometres later. The road climbs higher and you see tiny olive groves atop shallow hills surrounded by rough moor land, giving the appearance of monk's tonsures with a few hairs sprouting from bald pates.

A kilometre after the roundabout, you crest a rise and see the dark turquoise water of the Naranjero reservoir along one side of a valley. This must be one of the most beautiful views in the whole of the Valencia region. Park for a few moments; you will hear nothing but the sound of the breeze rustling through the undergrowth and the twittering of birds.

The bright yellow of the gorse mixes with the dark green of rosemary and the deeper green of holm oak. The shades subtly change as they move toward the hazy greyish/green of the mountains in the distance. Through a cleft in two hills you see Dos Aguas dozing in the sun.

Stay on this road and eight kilometres further, just after the outskirts of Dos Aguas, you join the VV3081 (CV425 on Michelin maps) which leads to Real de Montroi after a pleasant 22-kilometre drive. Stay on the VV3081 and continue via Montserrat and Colinas de Venta Cabrera to the Valencia bypass and autoroute.

WHAT TO SEE

Cheste:

San Lucas Evangelista, completely restored Monument of National Artistic Interest. Ermita de la Virgen de la Soledad Gloriosa, a 16th-century hermitage, restored several times.

Circuito de la Comunidad Valenciana Ricardo Tormo, racetrack opened in 1999 and named after the Valencia motorcycle champion who died of leukemia in 1998. Has hosted World and European Superbike championships and the Spanish Formula 3 championships, as well as regular Formula 1 races. Spectators get an uninterrupted view over the whole circuit. Call 96 252 52 12/13 for information and prices, which vary depending on the event.

La Sàrgula, the archery range that is the home of the Spanish Championship.

Campo de Tiro de la Sociedad Valenciana de Caza y Tiro, considered one of the best clay pigeon-shooting ranges in Europe. Contact the Ayuntamiento for information.

Chiva:

San Juan Bautista, parish church with paintings and sculptures by artists José and Ignacio Vergara.

Ermita de la Virgen del Castillo, the hilltop sanctuary just outside the town.

Buñol:

Castle and medieval quarters, situated off Calle El Cid, above the Ayuntamiento.

Plaza de Armas, original medieval castle square.

Ermita de San Luis, a pretty little hermitage and fountain 15 minutes' walk from the town centre.

Auditorio al Aire Libre, open-air auditorium. Venue of regular concerts and the Bienal de Música, a bi-annual gathering of some of Europe's most outstanding bands. Contact the town hall for concert details.

Tomatina, tomato-throwing fiesta held on the last Wednesday in August.

Cuevas y cascadas, a number of caves, waterfalls and pools around Buñol can be explored with the aid of a detailed map.

MORE INFORMATION

Cheste:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza del Dr Cajal. 96 251 00 51. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-2.30pm.

Chiva:

Ayuntamiento, Plaza Gil Escarti s/n Tel. 96 252 00 06. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.

Buñol:

Ayuntamiento, Calle El Cid. Tel. 96 250 01 51. www.bunyal.es. Open Mon-Fri 8am-3pm.





THE HIGH WINE COUNTRY

Area: West of Valencia city

Route: Siete Aguas – Requena – Utiel

Distance: 190 kilometres

Travel to a rust-red plateau where you can wander ancient alleyways above and below ground, enjoy bargain-priced wine and stock up on delicious sausages.

Take the A3 autoroute for Madrid which starts in the centre of Valencia, passing under the autoroute that bypasses the city to the west. You leave the semi-industrialised suburbs quite quickly, then pass Cheste, Chiva and Buñol. Leave the A3 at junction 306 (48 kilometres from Valencia) and take the VV6308 for Siete Aguas. After four kilometres, when you see a playground on your right, turn left into the village.

Siete Aguas has one of the most outrageous fountains you will ever see – a vast affair of ornate tile-work dedicated to San Isidro Labrador, the patron saint of agriculture. In lettering above the image of the hallowed saint, farm labourers exhort the '*Celeste Patrono de la Agricultura*' to protect them in their battle with the hard soil and to give them wine, oil and bread.

Sharing star billing with San Isidro is a large tiled image of a tranquil village scene with a river meandering through it. Smaller tiles depict agricultural scenes, including such unlikely ones as a woman with a parasol being chased by a bull, a boy in a sailor suit pulling a donkey, and a game of football in full swing.

Villagers gather to fill five-litre containers from the six gargoyles and one lion's head that spew forth a constant supply of fresh water, the chatter of the ladies competing with the screeching of the geese in the pond opposite. The geese have been provided with a home, a little white circular house with a blue roof, from which protrudes a metal sculpture of baffling complexity. Siete Aguas itself has little to offer historically, other than that the body of El Cid supposedly rested here en route to Castilla.

Return to the road by the playground and turn left for Madrid and Requena. Rejoin the A3 (direction Madrid) and soon you enter the Altiplano de Requena-Utiel, the highest, most western part of Valencia province on the fringe of the meseta of La Mancha,

You leave the rugged Mediterranean landscape behind and enter a vast plain covered in grapevines, which have replaced the mulberry trees that, in the 18th

century, made Requena the fourth largest producer of silk in Spain. More than 800 looms manufactured this sumptuous fabric for export to the Americas.

Then the vines took over and by the end of the 19th century the area was widely known for its wine production. The Denominación de Origen Utiel-Requena is respected, in particular for its cava, which is gaining an international reputation.

From the A3, take the exit 291 for Requena (N111) and follow the signs for the Centro Urbano. At the fourth set of traffic lights after a bridge turn left and at the bottom of the street turn left again on a dual carriageway. This leads to the Plaza del Portal, at the end of the tree-shaded Avenida Arrabal, where you will see the Oficina de Turismo and Casco Histórico alongside one other.

La Vila is the medieval heart of Requena, whose name is said to derive either from the Arabic *rekina* or the Latin *richenna*, meaning 'the secure' or 'the strong'. Some of the original walls of the castle still stand and are in a relatively good state of conservation.

As you walk up the Cuesta del Castillo, the steep street that takes you from modern Requena into La Vila, with the 10th-century Muslim Torre de Homenaje to your left, you come face-to-face with the Carnicería Emilio.

The sausages that make this butcher's shop worth a visit are at the back. On mouth-watering display are *morcilla de cebolla*, fat black puddings with onion, *perro blanco*, stout haggis-like sausages, and the slim, dark *perro* and the even thinner, spicy *chorizo longa*. All these homemade products are of a sufficiently high standard to have been awarded the *Requena Denominación de Origen*.

La Vila is full of tucked-away little corners with makeshift gardens. Despite a good deal of tourist promotion, it still has a delightful tumble-down feel about it, partly due to the piles of ancient beams, roof tiles and large stone blocks waiting to be used in restoration work.

Calle Santa María is one of the most important streets in this quarter, where the Knights of the King's Roll built their homes after the Reconquest, forcing the Moors out to the Las Peñas quarter.

Santa María church, two-thirds of the way down the street, has been on the list of national monuments since 1931. Its florid Isabelline Gothic style is a delight. Begun in the 14th century, it was redecorated in the baroque style in the 17th century, but fortunately its awe-inspiring front entrance with saints on pedestals and rich Gothic motifs was left untouched.

There are two other grand churches in La Vila and the 13th-century San Nicolás, which until quite recently was in such a bad state of repair that stout metal beams shore up the façade to stop it collapsing and would have taken a great deal of divine intervention ever to get it back to a state of grace, is now a slow hive of restoration. The tiny alleyway beside the church is called Calle Paniagua (Water and Bread Street) to signify the two basics of life.

As you wander the streets the buildings constantly remind you of Requena's heritage: the Casa del Arte Mayor de la Seda (House of the Fine Art of Silk Weaving) celebrating the city's silk trade, the 15th-century palace of El Cid (where legend has it he met King Alfonso VI to make arrangements for his daughter's marriage) and the Casa de la Inquisición in the aptly named Calle Cuartel (Prison Street).

Beneath La Vila's warren of streets lies a very different labyrinth, a series of caves dug over centuries to serve as homes, wine cellars, storage areas for oil and grain, sanctuaries for women and children during battle – and even a chapel and ossuary (when the caves were re-discovered and cleaned, more than 20 wagonloads of bones are said to have been removed).

Flights of steps inside houses lead to long-sealed-off trapdoors. Sadly, all traces of cave life have been removed, but you can still see some of the enormous *tinajas*, earthenware jars up to three metres high, that were used to store the wine and olive oil.

Entrance to the caves is in the Plaza de Albornoz but, if you want to see how they would have looked in use, cross the square to Mesón La Vila which has created a small museum in its private cave. It's debatable how many of the original caves would have had a bar, as this one does, and the collection of rusting old farm instruments is more fit for a junkyard than a museum. It's amusing nonetheless and, frankly, more interesting than other caves on view, especially when you learn it was apparently used during the Inquisition to interrogate the locals.

Lively Requena is a pleasant town to explore and enjoy the examples of almost every historical element of Spanish architecture. It also has some excellent little food shops, such as the one at 20 Calle del Peso, just at the end of Avenida Arrabal.

On the Avenida itself, the Mesón del Vino is one of the town's oldest and most respected restaurants. As you enter the bar at the front, you see two large arched paintings, so blackened with age and nicotine that you can't make out what the scene is.

A great bull's head stares down at you. Named *Guapito*, it met its end in Requena's Plaza de Toros on September 18, 1901. No matter what you think of bullfighting, you have to admit it takes courage to face up to a live bull that size.

To leave Requena, drive back down Avenida Arrabal until you come to a roundabout with a fountain. Cross the roundabout following the signposted N332 for Albacete and one kilometre further on you come to El Pontón. Look for a small sign on your right directing you to the Torre Oria three kilometres on, just before you get to El Derramador.

The first thing you see as you approach the Bodega Torre Oria is the way-out kitsch onion dome and ornate wrought-iron balcony of the tower from which the bodega takes its name. A decorative sign on the stunningly tiled front of the main house informs you it was originally known as Finca de Oria de Rueda Bodega San Juan.



The bodega buildings, built between 1897 and 1903, are the epitome of the Catalan Art Nouveau style. It comes as no surprise to find that the chap who created this glorious monument to wine production, Valencia architect José Donderis, was also the brain behind the design of Valencia's splendid Estación del Norte, recognised as one of the most emblematic modernist designs in the Valencia region.

Unfortunately, the main house's interior is now in a sad state of repair, having lain empty for decades, but there are plans to restore the building to its former opulence. Visitors are only able to see the entrance hall. The bodega's true value, at least in

economic terms, lies in the vast underground cellars, where six million bottles of wine are maturing, of which one million are cava (Spanish sparkling wine).

From Bodega Torre Oria, continue on the peaceful country road towards Utiel, 10 kilometres further on. You pass a series of low-lying pueblos that barely interrupt the skyline, Barrio Ayoro, San Juan and Calderón, and wineries almost the size of small villages. At the roundabout with three enormous *tinajas* in the centre on the A3, go straight across and, at the junction just beyond, turn right before a row of modern three-storey houses.

Utiel may lack the charm of nearby Requena, but it does have its moments, particularly in the warren of narrow streets around the church. The church itself is magnificent in its simplicity. Barely decorated, in complete contrast to most of the churches in the region, the simple stone walls and barley-sugar-twist pilasters with their gilded capitals have a majesty that outweigh much of the extravagant ornamentation seen elsewhere. Recordings of Gregorian chant enhance the peacefulness and it is the sort of place that encourages you to sit awhile and absorb the tranquillity, even if you're not religiously inclined.

Utiel's Cooperativa Agrícola is the bodega to visit for well-priced wines. Grapevines depicted in tiles decorate each side of its arched entrance with a panel above showing an idyllic rural landscape.

The huge metal door looks more appropriate for a prison entrance, but it opens to reveal the work going on around the huge shining vats in which the wine is produced. Large plaques reveal the winery was built between 1949 and 1960 and has a capacity of 30 million litres. If you want to sample the product, you can do so at the shop next door.

To see how it's all done, visit the Museo del Vino housed in the Bodega Redondo, a circular ex-winery, where tools and equipment used in wine-making for centuries past are on display.

Unlike the façade of the Cooperativa, the bullring almost opposite is not a thing of beauty. Even so, the locals are inordinately proud of their plaza de toros, which was built in 1858 and rivals that of Bocairent as the region's oldest. It is Valencia's second largest, smaller only than the bullring in the capital.

Leave Utiel by the road you came in on, passing the Guardia Civil barracks on your right. When you come to a roundabout with a filling station and a large new hotel on your right, El Tollo, turn right for Madrid. About one kilometre later, this road joins the motorway but you go straight ahead on the N111 in the direction of Caudete de las Fuentes (two kilometres), a sleepy village with a factory that – at least according to the owner – is unique in all Spain.

At Caudete, go across the first roundabout and at the second take the VV5025 to Las Casas, a sharp right that has you almost going back on yourself. The road twists up around the edge of the village and, as you pass a sign that you are leaving Caudete, you see on your right a low cream-coloured factory.

Artesanías Folklóricas España boasts that it is the foremost, if not the only, factory in Spain dedicated to the production of items of 'folk' interest. If mock 17th-century pistols, model galleons, flacid fans (almost all Spanish fans are made in the Valencia region), flamenco dresses and clattering castanets are to your liking, this is the place for you. All those little souvenirs of Spain tourists love are here under one roof — and at factory prices

Return to the roundabout and go straight across for Los Isidros, VV8108. You begin a lovely drive through pine forests and vineyards and run-down little villages. Despite consisting of mere handfuls of houses, all have signs directing you to the '*Centro Ciudad*' and great glittering tanks where thousands of litres of wine are slowly fermenting.

At the next junction turn left for Los Ruices and Requena on the VV8101. Pass Los Ruices and, at the junction two kilometres along, turn right on the N322, once again heading for Los Isidros.

At the junction with the N332, turn left for Requena and after three kilometres turn right for Los Duques (VV8021), shortly after which you arrive at Campo Arcis, a veritable city compared to many of the tiny pueblos you have been passing through. If you haven't picked up any wine, you can do so at Bodegas Sebiran where they have been producing it for almost 90 years.

When you reach the N330, turn right for Almansa and, a few minutes later, left at La Portera. There is a large sign for Yátova as you leave the main road, but watch out for another small one moments later on the front of a cream-painted building opposite Bar La Sartén. Turn left here on the CV429. Beyond La Portera relax and enjoy the view and rural serenity as you gradually leave the vineyards behind, passing the small villages of Hortunas and Mijares.

At Yátova, follow the road that skirts the town (VV3037) and head for Buñol through almond, carob and olive groves. When you get close enough to see Buñol cascading down the hillside, just after a sharp left-hand bend you take a very sharp right, opposite a couple of battered road signs, and continue downhill. You pass over an old iron bridge, immediately start to climb again and turn right at the next junction, then follow the motorway signs for Valencia.

WHAT TO SEE

Siete Aguas:

La Fuente de San Isidro, an ornate fountain dedicated to Spain's patron saint of agriculture. **Fauna Ibérica**, Parque de la Naturaleza, near El Rebollar, just off the autoroute between Siete Aguas and Requena at junction 297. Tel. 96 213 80 76. Nature park where you can see Spanish wildlife, including the rare Iberian lynx, in almost natural surroundings. Open daily 10am-8pm Apr-Oct & 10am-5pm Nov-Mar.

Requena:

La Vila, walled town of Moorish origin dating from the Caliphate period (8-11th century).

Cuevas de La Vila, noon, 1pm, 4.15pm, 5pm & 6pm, Tues and Thurs mornings only, Fri-Sun afternoons only. Entry €3 adults, €2 children and pensioners.

Museo Municipal de Requena, housed in Carmelite convent in Plaza Consistorial. Tel. 96 230 12 00. Open 11am-2pm daily except Mon. Ethnological museum, reproduction of a rural house with furnishings from the 18th century, displays of regional costume, and the history of wine production in the locality.

Muestra del Embutido de Artesano. A three-day celebration of locally made sausages held every February (dates vary slightly, check with tourist office).

Fiesta de la Vendimia, annual wine festival held last week in August and first days of September to celebrate end of the grape harvest.

Utiel:

Museo del Vino, Bodega Redonda, Calle Sevilla, 12. Tel 96 217 10 62. Free entry. Wine museum in circular bodega.

Bodega Cooperativa Agrícola de Utiel, Avda. Marín Lázaro 8. Tel 96 217 14 68. Open for sampling and buying weekdays (except Thurs), 4pm-7pm, Thurs 9am-12.30pm, Sat/Sun 9am-12.30pm

Caudete de las Fuentes:

Artesanías Folkloricas España, Ctra. de Las Casas, s/n. Tel 96 231 91 88. Manufacturer of Spanish folklore artifacts. Shop open Mon-Fri 9am-2pm, 4pm-8pm, Sat 10am-2pm.

Wineries:

The area of the Utiel-Requena Denominación de Origen has 108 bodegas, some producing more than a million bottles a year, others only tens of thousands. Most offer guided tours and tastings.

Pago de Tharsys, Ctra. Madrid-Valencia, km274, Requena. Tel. 96 230 33 54. Web page www.pagodetharsys.com. Open Mon-Sat from 11am-2pm & 4-7pm. Sun holidays 11am-2pm. Small, family-owned bodega that produces a limited range of wines, including cava and petillant (slightly sparkling) white and rosé, mainly from their own vines. They include a white vendimia nocturna, the only one in the area, and a vino dulce, also unusual for Requena. English-speaking guide.

Dominio de la Vega, Ctra. Madrid-Valencia km270, San Antonio (on the outskirts of the village). Open to the public Sat March-Dec from 10am-2pm or by prior arrangement. Since starting production in 2002 the bodega has won a number of awards, including best cava in Spain in 2003 and best rosada (rosé) in the Valencia Community in 2004. The four owners principally involved in production have almost a century-and-a-half of wine-making experience. Extremely well-priced wines, even its prize-winners are affordable. English-speaking guide.

Bodega Torre Oria, Ctra Pontón-Utiel, km3. Tel. 96 232 0280 (web page www.torreoria.com). Open Mon-Fri 10.30am-2pm, 4pm-6pm, Sat 10am-2pm. During Nov & Dec, Sat 10am-4pm, 4.30-6.30pm, Sun 10am-2pm.

Bodegas Sebirán, Calle Pérez Galdós, 1, Campo Arcis. Tel. 96 230 33 21. Open Sat 11am-2pm, 4-6pm, Sun 11am-4pm. Web page www.bodegassebiran.com

MORE INFORMATION

Siete Aguas

Ayuntamiento, Arrabal, 2. Tel. 96 234 00 03 Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-3pm

Requena:

Tourist Information Office, Calle García Montés, s/n (beside entrance to La Vila). Tel. 96 230 38 51. Web page www.requena.es, email requena@touristinfo.net. Open Tues-Thurs, Sun 9.30am-2pm, Fri/Sat 10am-2pm, 4-7pm.

Utiel:

Tourist Information Office, Puerta Nueva, 11. Tel. 96 217 11 03. Email touristinfo_utiel@gva.es. Open Wed-Sun 11am-2pm, & Thurs-Sat 4-7pm.

Museo del Vino (Bodega Redondo), Calle Sevilla, 12. Tel. 96 217 10 62. Open Mon-Fri 10am-2pm.

Ayuntamiento, Plaza del Ayuntamiento, 1. Tel. 96 217 05 04. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-3pm.

Ask at the tourist information offices or the Bodega Redonda in Utiel for a copy of "Ruta del Vino de la D.O. Utiel-Requena", an excellent book giving details of bodegas, restaurants, museums etc in the area. Not normally on display, but it is free.





Everything But the Squeal The Sausages of Requena

*Tres días hay en el año
Que se llena bien la panza:
Nochebuena, Nochevieja
Y el día de la matanza*

*(There are three days in the year
When the belly is well filled:
Christmas Eve, New Years Eve
And the day of the slaughter)*

The harsh winters of the Utiel-Requena plateau demand stout foods to bolster the energy and moral of those tending the vines, and the cuisine of Requena has historically been rich and varied. There are many pork dishes such as stews, rolls or deep pancakes filled with rashers and sardines, dishes such as *ajovarriero*, a cod dish

made with oil, garlic and peppers; rice casserole with string beans; potatoes in stock and game dishes such as *gazpacho manchego* or *morteruelo*, a type of *migas*, fried breadcrumbs. Desserts made from honey, such as *alajú* – of Arab origin – and the *burruecos* are popular while others include nougats, sweet potato pastries, pies and butter cakes.

Throughout Spain in days gone by the *matanza*, the killing of the family pig, was celebrated by family and friends as they prepared the meats and sausages that would see them through the next year. The ritual usually took place in the chill months between January and March, depending on the area, after the pig had been carefully fattened for the previous nine months.

Great bowls would be on hand to gather the blood that would go into the making of delicious *morcillas* (black puddings), vats prepared for the salting of the joints, legs hung from rafters or laid on roofs to slowly air dry and innards carefully cleaned to take the minced meats for the sausages, each with its own texture and flavour depending on which part of the animal it came from and the family's preference in spicing. The head would be roasted to provide the delicious *cabilleras* (roast cheek) and the trotters boiled and chewed on. In keeping with the old English saying, 'they use everything but the squeal', or, as they say in Spanish, 'todo, pero el chillido'.

In these days of sanitised butchery where the weekly joint comes in a cling-film covered carton, the *matanza* is rarely seen, although a few rural folk still carry out the annual killing. The pig, however, still provides everything but his squeal and the Spanish take great pride in producing some of the finest *embutidos* (sausages) to decorate a plate.

In Requena the sausage makers art has reached its pinnacle and eleven local manufacturers make up the membership of the Consejo Regulador I.G.P, a body who fiercely controls the quality of all who proudly label their product 'Embutido de Requena'.

The producers of 'Embutido Artesano y de Calidad de Requena' use recipes, methods and rituals handed down from father to son to recreate the traditional flavours of the region. The Consejo Regulador covers a range of seven different varieties of sausage, *longaniza*, *morcilla*, *chorizo*, *salchichón*, *sobrasada*, *perro* and *güeña*, the last two being included in February 1995 in the catalogue of Quality Products of the European Union.

There are four fundamental features that must be conformed to for an *embutido* to be accepted as *artisano* by the Consejo Regulador.

The pig must come from within the limits of the municipal territory, therefore being a product of the long, cold winters and strictly regulated control.

Only the meat of the female and castrated male can be used.

The intestines used to contain the meat are completely natural to allow for the conservation of the sausage and giving an authentic taste.

Only top quality spices can be used and added at a specific time and in the correct proportions during production.

On Calle Fortaleza, just as you enter La Vila, the Medieval centre of Requena, is the shop of Carneceria Emilia, one of the members of the Consejo. Walking into the shop is like going into a small museum with displays of old sausage-making machinery and rows of ceramic *orzas*, the pots filled with olive oil in which meats were stored in pre-fridge days.

The sausages that make this shop worth a visit are at the back. On mouth-watering display are *morcilla de cebolla*, fat black puddings made with onion, *perro blanca*, stout haggis-like productions with big chunks of white fat to give it flavour, the slim, dark *perro* and the even slimmer spicy *chorizo longa*. A chat with señora. Emilia or her sister Maria Angeles will reveal a family steeped in sausage who can recount personal memories of childhood *matanzas* and excellent ways of using their equally excellent products.

Savouring the sausage

The Embutido Artesano y de Calidad de Requena

The artisan *embutido* (sausage) makers of Requena justly pride themselves on the quality of their products, based on the recipes of generations and fiercely controlled by the *Consejo Regulador*.

In addition to the into seven different varieties of sausage produced under the regulations of the *Consejo Regulador* you will also find creative delicacies that include walnuts, almonds and pine nuts, amongst other delicious flavourings, and the *orza*, jars of top quality olive oil that are filled with sausages, pork sirloin and ribs that are fried before being stored in the oil and which can be eaten either cold or reheated.

Whereas the 'British banger' can now contain anything up to 90% skin, bone, unmentionable extremities and a dubious collection of bulking agents, the Requena sausage has nothing added to the animal meats other than experience and dedication. The skins of the *Embutidos de Requena* can only come from the intestines of the animal, which permits the meat to 'breathe' and allows for a long conservation period.

Longaniza The king of sausages. Only lean pork, a small amount of flavoursome fat and finely controlled spices go into this slim, pale sausage that bares a faint visual resemblance to the British banger but is prince to pauper of anything sampled on a UK plate. A flavour of farms and countryside that bubbles with genuine fats; when oven-baked the meat expands to give a dumpy, superbly textured bite oozing with natural juiciness. One of the sausages that can be used for the *orza*. The only sausage that gives it's name to a Spanish saying, '*Hay mas dias que longanizas*', which, very loosely translates as 'another day, another dollar', or 'there's no rush'.

Morcilla When a pig is butchered the blood must be used immediately, to prevent it from thinning. The warm blood is stirred continuously and if the sausage is to contain pieces of meat, they are coated in a mixture of spices. Apart from meat, blood and bacon, the filling may contain a wide variety of ingredients: potatoes or rice, almonds or nuts, cinnamon or garlic, salt and/or sugar. The Requena version is blended with onions to make *morcilla de cerbolla*. As a genuine blood sausage, *morcilla*, along with *chorizo*, is the main ingredient of many stews, such as the Asturian *fabada* or the Castilian *cocido*. It goes well with a wide variety of vegetables.

Chorizo . Chorizo is a bright red sausage made from chopped pork meat seasoned with paprika, garlic, herbs and salt. The dried version is cured in a dry, cool environment. The paprika lends the chorizo a distinctive spicy flavour. Served thinly sliced as an *aperitivo*.

Salchichón A hard sausage, similar to Italian salami, made from chopped pork, coarsely ground pepper and seasoning sometimes including whole black peppers that give it an additional tang.

Sobrasada Something of an acquired taste, *sobrasada* is a soft, loose textured sausage, traditionally made with paprika and pepper, which is cured for up to four months. It can be eaten by spreading it on bread.

Perro The Spanish word for dog, the name *perro* comes from a course intestine that was traditionally thrown away; 'Ese es para el perro,' 'That's for the dog.' Now it is used to contain a selection of pork meats, blood and spices to make a thick black pudding and can be bought as slices of a fat, haggis-like concoction, which can be fried in slices or a slimmer version which is dried and eaten cold.

Güeña Made from a mixture of pork meats, garlic, paprika, pepper, cloves salt and other spices, this is one of the most characteristic sausages of Requena.



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