

A scenic view of a stone castle wall overlooking a town in a hilly landscape. The castle wall is made of light-colored stone and features a central arched gateway. The town below has buildings with red-tiled roofs. The background shows rolling hills under a blue sky with scattered clouds.

INLAND TRIPS FROM THE
Costa Blanca

Castellón

DEREK WORKMAN

Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca

Castellón

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

Derek Workman

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

As well as all the detailed information contained in the print book, this series of 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



A HIDDEN GEM

Area: Northern Castellón province

Route: Vinarós –Traiguera - Sant Mateu - Morella

Distance: 75 kilometres

Discover a hidden delight on the edge of the Valencia region, meet an angel and roam colonnaded streets rich in medieval history.

At the northernmost reaches of the province of Castellón the road from Vinarós passes through open countryside decorated with ranks of orange, lemon and almond groves before it twists up the slope to the hilltop town of Morella. While there is no doubting the beauty of this historic city, few visitors realise that only 20 minutes after leaving the coastline they pass one of the many gems to be found in the Valencia region, the Reial Santuari Verge Font de la Salut.

The first thing you see are four stone pillars supporting a square canopy over a stone cross. Then, as you turn down towards them, the cleft in the valley opens up to reveal a chronology of architectural styles from the 15th century to the present day. Gothic, Renaissance, baroque and neoclassical, interweave with the popular architecture of the Maestrazgo, a scenic region of rugged terrain and medieval villages north of Castellón and including areas of Teruel and Valencia. It's known as the Maestrat in *valenciano*.

The story goes that two young goatherds, Anastasio and Jaime Sorlí, were tending their flock in the mountains where the sanctuary is now built, a dry and sterile land. One of them (history does not record which) was extremely thirsty but had no water. He saw one of the goats rummaging through the thick grass of a ravine, and when it brought its head up its beard was soaked with water. The boy rushed to where the goat was drinking and saw a small fountain gushing from the earth. After drinking his fill, he looked up and saw a vision of the Virgin Mary. The boy had been unable to speak from birth, but when he saw the vision he thanked her, in *valenciano*, for the refreshing drink.

Historians seem unable to agree on the exact date of the miracle, citing a 50-year span from 1384 to 1434, but on September 8, 1439, the day of the festival of the Virgin, the first stone of the Gothic temple was laid. Kings, cardinals, archbishops and civic authorities visited "la Font de la Salut de Triaguera", and by the 16th century it was one of the four or five most important sanctuaries in Spain, and certainly the most important in the kingdom of Valencia.

As you enter the sanctuary grounds you are struck by the benign mix of architectural styles: painted façades next to Gothic arches, next to rustic Maestrazgo

stonework, next to a run of barbecues built into a long stone wall to keep visitors happy.

A saunter down the side of the baroque entrance to the temple, under low stone arches, brings you to a small courtyard, in the cobbled centre of which is located, curiously, the off-set stones of a game of hop-scotch. Ornate paintwork surrounds the door and window frames. To the left, three curved stone steps lead you through a modest doorway, and a short flight of stairs polished by centuries of passing feet brings you to a small landing. Should you turn right, your first sight will be of some ghastly floor tiles, but as you step into the church you witness some of the most stunning ecclesiastic decoration.

The paintwork is that of Vinarós baroque master Eugenio Guilló Barceló who, at the time of its completion in 1736, was Spain's foremost artist of ecclesiastic painting. Almost every inch is covered with symbolic imagery glorifying the Virgin Mary and anywhere that isn't painted is intricately carved, attributed to the Valencia sculptors Francisco Esteve and Antonio Salvador, who completed the work in the mid-1720s.

Almost six centuries since the miracle that created it, after living through fame and fortune, development and destruction, the Font de la Salut is being restored to its former glory.

Rejoin the N232 Vinarós-Morella road, turning right after La Jana on to the CV10 for Sant Mateu. Sant Mateu is typical of a small medieval town. Everything radiates off a central square, the Plaza Mayor or, as it is sometimes known locally, the Plaza Ángel because of the angel that tops the fountain in the square.

The plaza is one of those lovely arcaded squares with little streets running from its corners and, thankfully, still has some proper village-type shops, although it is mainly taken up with cafes and even the odd estate agent is sneaking in. The pretty 18th-century Fuente del Ángel, symbolising San Mateo Evangelista, keeps serene watch over the square, but if you want to see the original 14th-century version, minus odd bits and pieces, you will have to visit the Museo Histórico-Etnológico Municipal on Calle Historiador Betí.

Historiador Betí was originally the "posh" part of town and has some excellent examples of the architecture of the Maestrazgo from the 14th and 15th centuries, including the Corta Nova, where the local court is now held, and the Museo. The museum houses a model of a 14th-century stately home and a small collection of local artefacts, including the originals of the Fuente del Ángel and the Fuente de Santa María de Montesa, originally documented in 1365 and named after the soldier-monk Order of Montesa, once as famous as the Knights Templar. The tourist office is in the same building.

Sant Mateu isn't short of grand buildings although unfortunately most are closed to the public. The sheer Gothic magnificence of the 16th-century Palau del Marqués de Villores is worth a stroll up Calle Vols for a gander at its façade, and the Convento de

las Monjas Agustinas (16th-18th century) just up the street from the Palau, like the famed Windmill club in London, never closes.

Just off the Plaza Mayor, but nonetheless dominating it and the whole of Sant Mateu with its majestic presence, is the Iglesia Arciprestal, built by the military order San Juan del Hospital in the 13th century (religion could be a pretty war-like affair in



those days). The church corresponds to the type known as *de conquista*, built during the fight to re-claim Spanish territory for Christianity and drive out the Moors. It was extended during the 14th century when the Order of Montesa took over the town. An urn is said to contain a reliquary of Saint Clement the Martyr (also said to be that of an anonymous martyr but he can't have been that anonymous if they call him Saint Clement).

Leave Sant Mateu by the CV132 for Chert (Xert), once again joining the N332 to the splendid walled town of Morella.

From its Iberian beginnings Morella has always been seen as a strategic point and been fortified to a greater or lesser degree. Archaeological research has shown remains of Iberian, Greek, Phoenician, Roman, and Moorish civilisations, but it was the Moors who were responsible for the first high medieval walls, built before the 10th century and partially destroyed when El Cid conquered the city in 1084. The present city walls, more than 1.5 kilometres long, were built in 1330 and have had various

modifications over the centuries so that now almost every element of military architectural style is represented.

Architectural grandiosity aside, it's the medieval town within the city walls that makes Morella such a joy to visit. Very few towns have the same sense of history that you experience wandering through the narrow cobbled alleyways, and it takes no great leap of fancy to imagine yourself back in the times when only horses and carts rattled through the streets.

The centre stage of Morella social life is the porticoed Calle Blasco de Alagón. Below those colonnaded walkways much of the city's life has flowed since it was built in the 13th century. In 1257 Jaime I authorised the building of 50 workshops and, were he to saunter along the street today, he would recognise the original structure and layout. But where once stood workshops are now restaurants and some of the many delis and fabric shops the town is famous for.

As you wander up the street a glance at the stone columns will show you that they don't follow any specific architectural order, almost as if they were picked up at a local store's "historical stone pillar" department. There are square ones, round ones, octagonal ones, fat, slim, tall and short, even some Romanesque ones with small carved heads. Where they aren't exactly the same height, to keep the floor level the builder has simply stuck in an extra piece of wood or hacked a chunk out to make them fit — and we think we invented reclamation.

One of Morella's most important buildings sits almost at the end of the street, the Palace of Cardinal Ram, now the (sadly recently closed) Hotel Cardinal Ram. Originally the home of an illustrious family, it was the residence of the said cardinal in the late 14th century, during Morella's period of maximum splendour. Apart from the cacophony of 21st-century life, nothing has changed much in the view from the hotel's windows down Calle Blasco de Alagón.

Wander up the steep, twisting streets and you eventually come to the Basílica de Santa María la Mayor, the splendid 14th-century centre of religious life, with its twin Gothic doors opening off a peaceful small plaza. Described by the Marquis de Lozoya, in his *Historia del Arte Hispánico* as "the most beautiful Gothic church in the entire ancient reign of Valencia", it certainly comes up to scratch for those interested in ecclesiastical history.

Further uphill you come to the Royal Convent of San Francisco — or at least what's left of it — through whose beautiful cloistered arches you can see the castle. It's very impressive from a distance but, after struggling up the steep slope on a steaming afternoon following a good lunch, you may wonder why you bothered. There's nothing to see except some restored stonework and signs telling you that what buildings are left are actually from the mid-1850s. Still, the stunning views over the Sierras de Ares are worth the entrance fee.

You can really only do so much history, though, before succumbing to the hearty grub that is the real delight of any visit to Morella and the Maestrazgo. Truffle is king,

and the town is full of wonderful delis where you can pick up small jars of the little black gems to titivate your taste-buds when you get back home. In February the town hosts the *Jornadas Gastronómicas de la Trufa* when the restaurants try to outdo each other with culinary delights based on the expensive tuber. You could well get the opportunity to try truffle brandy, made by leaving a half kilo of truffles in five litres of brandy for two years, which results in a very peculiar, but pleasant, flavour that bears no resemblance to anything you've ever drunk before.

It's also worth trying *trinchón*, a hard ewe's milk cheese which originated in a small village just over the border in Teruel province. It has an excellent strong flavour and is served in razor-thin slices that melt on the tongue. *Cecina* or *jamón ternera*, made from beef, has a slightly richer flavour and darker colour than *jamón serrano*. It is also stringier and oozes juice, if that's possible with a dried meat. Vegetarians or otherwise should try the *setas de cerdo silvestres*, chopped mushrooms cooked with *ajos tiernos*, garlic shoots, which, apart from truffles, are probably nature's best fungi friends. Thick and juicy, they have the texture of a good steak.

To round off a meal you will inevitably be offered *cuajada*, a dessert of milk, sugar and sheep's cheese flavoured with artichoke flowers. Soft and creamy with a yoghurt-like texture, it is a delightful culmination of a robust mountain meal.

To complete the excursion return to the coast by way of the N232 to Vinarós, or experience the beauty of the Maestrazgo by taking the CV12/CV15 via Ares de Maestre to reach the coastal motorway at Castellón de la Plana.

WHAT TO SEE

Traiguera:

Reial Santuari Verge Font de la Salut. The Font Salut is being restored by the Escuela Taller, a government-funded body that provides training in specialised building and restoration work, and has no fixed opening hours, depending on the work being done.

Sant Mateu:

Iglesia Arciprestal, 13th-15th-century Gothic, national monument.

Museo Histórico-Etnológico Municipal, Calle Historiador Betí. Tel. 96 441 66 58. Open Tues-Sat 10am-2pm and 4pm-6pm, Sun 10am-2pm.

Museo de Cárcels (Prison Museum), Calle La Cort 28. Tel. 96 441 61 02. Open daily 10am-2pm and 4pm-6pm

Morella:

Calle Blasco de Alagón, colonnaded 13th-century street.

Basílica de Santa María la Mayor.

Sexenal, the major fiesta held every six years.

MORE INFORMATION

Sant Mateu: Tourist Information Office, Calle Historiador Betí 6. Tel. 96 441 66 58.

Morella: Tourist Information Office. Plaza de San Miguel 3. Tel. 96 417 30 32.

Papa Luna's Peñiscola

Charlton Heston may have made Peñiscola famous in the '60's film, *El Cid*, when he charged his marauding hordes along the beach, but long before his arrival Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, and before them Phoenicians and Greeks, were all aware of the location of the town and its secure position as an unyielding stronghold. Its situation could hardly have been more secure, having its own supply of fresh water that still springs today from the heart of the rock underneath the fortified town.

The present day castle was built by the Knights Templar between 1294 and 1307, and the stout walls added between 1576 and 1578. Stand on the Castillo ramparts today and you get a clear idea of modern Peñiscola – a three kilometre sweep of beach forming a bay, more developed than when Charlton was here, but much of it still only a one apartment-wide strip of buildings separating the sea from the *huerto* (allotments).

Peñiscola's most famous resident was Papa Luna, who took up residence in the castle in 1411, changing it into a palace and papal library (although it must be said that his 'palace' is hardly palatial). With this move Peñiscola became, with the Vatican in Rome and the Papal Palace in Avignon, one of only three Holy Sees in history.

Papa Luna was widely known as a bit of a controversial figure but had the misfortune to be appointed Pope at a time when Christianity divided into two opposing schisms. In an age marked by war, ambition, greed and corruption that affected even the highly principled dignitaries of the Church, he decamped from Rome to Peñiscola where, in spite of being accused of being a heretic, and after surviving more than one attempt to poison him, Papa Luna died peacefully in his bed.

On the day I visited Peñiscola the sky was heavy with drizzle bearing clouds. Even in these gray conditions, the Castillo does have a certain charm, not the least of which is that it allows you to overlook life in the narrow streets below its walls. Those stout walls may have repelled innumerable invaders, but they are as naught against the latter-day invasion of tourism.

The meandering alleyways are full of tiny shops dedicated to relieving the visitor of his holiday spends. For every artisan shop there are three dispensing such 'must-have' souvenirs as the *porrón* (drinking jug) made to look like a Guardia Civil with the spout being an engorged penis. But there are some surprisingly good crafts.

On C/San Roque, at number 29, Tiziano has some pretty paintings done by the owner, and opposite, at 32, his wife sells attractive small crafts. Meanwhile, on C/Farones, Casa de las Conchas is a tiny shell covered building with Arabic horseshoe-arched windows, which houses a bright beach wear and knick-knack shop, and is a charming bit of kitsch that must have taken hours of seaside walks to collect enough

shells to cover the walls. Someone has tried to maintain its kitschy appeal by covering even the downspouts with shells.

As the day drifted into evening and the rain lifted, the narrow cobbled streets came alive with the *paseo*, and old men and women brought out kitchen chairs onto the streets to chat – though kept themselves carefully segregated. The people who live up by the Castillo must have legs like whipcord and soles on their feet like well-tanned leather because not only is it a steep climb, but the small stones placed side-on to form the patterned cobbled streets are crippling on the feet.

If you want to escape the hustle and bustle of the streets, wander down through the Medieval Portal de San Pere, once the principal access to the castle, and cross the small wooden bridge that brings you onto the quayside where Peñíscola's fishing fleet tie up. Below the stone clock tower you will see an orange illuminated sign saying Puerto Mar, and alongside it a large knife and fork illuminated in blue. This is a four-table restaurant (although the whole of the quayside is its patio) that only sells fish fresh from the boat. Great bowls of *berberecho's*, spouting jets of seawater, sit on the open counters, and fishermen and their families discuss the merits of dishes of fish that they could have well caught themselves earlier in the day.

One of the nicest things about Peñíscola is that it is the sort of seaside town not seen in Britain for the last three decades. Stroll down the prom during the summer months and you are provided with a feast of free entertainment. Pavement artists, balloon twisters, juggles, Punch and Judy (Spanish version), and people selling all sorts of trinkets and tat under the glaring light of a camping gas lamp. Splendid entertainment, especially if taken with a big ice-cream cone.





DISNEY'S MOUNTAIN-TOP VILLAGE

Area: Southern Teruel

Route: Teruel-Albarracín-Rubielos de Mora

Distance: 310 kilometres

Glory at the sparkling architecture of Spain's coldest city and wander the narrow streets of a picture-postcard village that could have been designed by Walt Disney.

In the southernmost province of Aragon, Teruel city is only a couple of hours away from bustling Valencia and the shimmering beaches of the Costa Azahar, but a world away in temperament. Within a few kilometres, the landscape can change from rolling Cotswold Downs to ragged Lake District peaks – with a lot of non-British equivalents in between.

Architecturally Teruel is a little gem, renowned for having some of Spain's most beautiful examples of Mudejar structures. Mudejar emerged as an architectural style on the Iberian peninsula in the 12th century as a result of the Jewish, Muslim and Christian cultures living side by side. It is characterised by the use of brick as the main material. Unlike Gothic or Romanesque, Mudejar did not involve the creation of new shapes or structures but rather reinterpreting Western styles through Muslim influences. It is accepted that the style was born in Toledo, as an adaptation of architectural and ornamental motifs, although it became most highly developed in Aragon, especially in Teruel.

It is characterised by an extremely refined and inventive use of brick and glazed tiles, especially in belfries. Tiles are often cobalt blue and white, although a lustrous green predominates in Teruel. Look for airy patios with a fountain or tiled, reflecting pool and repeated motifs like square flowers and eight-pointed stars rather than faces and images. Teruel's most glorious examples are the towers of San Pedro, San Martín, El Salvador and the Cathedral. El Salvador's is the only tower that can be ascended. From the first floor of the Café El Torre next door you get an unusual, wonderful view of the tile-work glistening above.

Santa María Cathedral has a beautiful belfry but it's worth paying the couple of euros entrance fee to have a gander at the ceiling of carved panels painted in polychrome wood with images that represent Teruel life in the Middle Ages. You need to get there just as the guide begins her description (in Spanish) when the ceiling is illuminated – the light goes out when she moves on to the next part of her tour. If you want a quick chat with the man upstairs, it's free before 11am.

The gloriously rich brick-and-tile designs are the jewels in the city's crown, enhanced in their settings by the delightfully florid examples of modernista art, the Catalan equivalent of Art Nouveau.

On top of a pillar in the historic centre, the Plaza Torico, sits the symbol of Teruel, El Torico, a statue of a bull atop a fluted column. Given the Spanish propensity for big and bold in public sculpture, it comes as a shock to see how small the "little bull" actually is (the suffix "-ico" is a common diminutive).

The buildings that surround the triangular plaza are a mix of architectural styles, with stout columns and tiny narrow streets leading off, enticing you to discover more hidden corners.

Legend has it that in the 13th century two young people, Diego de Marcilla and Isabel de Segura, fell in love and wanted to marry. Isabel came from wealthy stock, but Diego was skint and her parents forbade the match. In a magnanimous gesture of a sort, Isabel's father gave Diego five years in which to make his fortune and establish a name for himself. At the end of this time he returned to Teruel a wealthy man, only to find his bride-to-be already married to a local nobleman. Poor young Diego died of a broken heart and Isabel, full of despair at his death, snuffed it the following day. You can see the couple, forever linked by alabaster hands, in the cloisters of the church of San Pedro. In true fairy-tale style, the story of the Spanish Romeo and Juliet has been made into a film. Sadly, the Plaza de los Amantes alongside the church that dedicates their love must be one of the ugliest in Spain.

If you want to take something home, pick up a couple of bottles of the cheap but excellent Campo de Borja wine from the Aragon region, but for a real bit of giddy gastronomy nip into Martín Martín, just opposite the defunct Mercado Municipal at the top of Calle Joaquín Costa. In one of the strangest combinations you will come across, it's a pickle, cake and sweetie shop. The former are sold loose from about 50 big ceramic pots, or in tins and jars from a mouth-watering selection on shelves behind the counter. On the other side of the shop are containers of lollipops, liquorice sticks, jelly things, crunchy what-nots, twists and twirls of all sorts. Plus a nifty selection of dried fruits, biscuits, cakes and nuts. An adult and children's edible heaven.

Instead of taking the road direct from Teruel to Albarracín, make the slight detour into the Sierra de Jabalón via Bezas (A1513) and the Espacio Protegido Pinares de Rodeno and its Neolithic rock paintings. (Teruel province makes much of its prehistoric heritage and, if you can't see the dinosaurs in real life, you can at least visit a whole theme park designed around their existence on the edge of Teruel.) Rodeno takes its name from the reddish rock in the area that contorts into strange formations.

The road through the Espacio is a delightful wander through pine trees with long vistas of cornfields snaking off into the distance. Nothing prepares you for Albarracín though, with its narrow streets terracing up the hillside and the casas colgadas, houses with wooden balconies precariously hanging over the streets below.



When Walt Disney had Mickey Mouse running around medieval streets in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, he must have conjured up the idea after a visit to Albarracín. This mountain-top village's streets are so narrow that neighbours can not only shake hands from their windows but probably share the same curtains.

Albarracín, on a rocky outcrop above a meander of the river Guadalaviar, has been classified by UNESCO as a monument of world interest. Stand in the centre of the Plaza Mayor and in a 360-degree turn you'll see a town square almost as it would have looked in the 16th and 17th centuries — without the cars of course. The buildings have been tidied but not tarted up and the streets that radiate off at odd angles are like cobbled, stone-and-iron canyons, up steps, around sharp bends, down tiny alleyways, where even in the height of summer the sun never reaches.

The magnificent mansions — and there are a surprisingly large number of them — date from the 17th century, when the town experienced rapid economic growth thanks to the raising of cattle and wool exports. That faded during the 18th century, leaving the town virtually moribund until a few years ago when the tourist industry brought a new lease of life.

If you are a fisherman you may like to chance your line in the Guadalaviar, where the national trout fishing championships are held every year. The surrounding Sierra de Albarracín is a walkers' and naturalists' paradise, while you can hunt wild boar in the Montes Universales National Game Reserve.

(Read more about Albarracín below.)

If you want to see “genuine Spain” as distinct from the purple-prose “real Spain” beloved by travel and estate agents, take a slight detour through Cella on your way back to Teruel. In a complete contrast to Albarracín, the village wins no prizes for beauty. Half-finished houses are scattered among disreputable-looking farm buildings surrounded by ancient equipment and newly laid-out patios share ground space with half-heartedly cultivated plots, with the pulping factory on the outskirts belching out fumes. It sounds totally anti-touristic, and it is, but it’s worth passing through just for the fun of it.

Skirt Teruel and take the road for Corbalán and Allepuz, the A226, which wends its way through beautiful rolling countryside, interrupted only by scattered farmhouses, many in ruins but some still with the curious steeple-like towers seen on early buildings in the region. After Allepuz (blink and you’ll miss it) you can stay on the main road to Cantavieja or Mirambel, another couple of must-see mountain villages. Skiers should take a right just after you leave the village on a country road pointing towards Valdelinares, one of the two ski centres in Teruel, the other being Alcalá de la Selva.

You feel as if you are driving through somewhere untouched since Noah was a lad. On the outskirts of the few villages you pass are rows of *pajares*, one-storey stone sheds the villagers use to store grain and keep rabbits in. Some are being bought up to make rural homes, although you’ll need a lot of building experience and a good bank balance to tackle them.

You begin to realise just how cold Teruel province can get when you see the pistes at Valdelinares where, even in mid-April when coastal types are having their first tentative toe-dipping in the Med, the mountainsides are covered in snow and villagers are scarved-up when they nip out for a loaf.

Drift on, past Linares de Mora, with its ancient arched entrance to the village and the church spire rising over the narrow streets, down to Rubielos de Mora, not to be confused with Mora de Rubielos, its next-door neighbour and poor relation in the architecture stakes, bonny as it might be in its own right.

Some claim Rubielos de Mora is as lovely as Albarracín. It is one of those wonderful Spanish villages that seem forever set in Sunday afternoon mode. In the narrow, twisting medieval streets within the walls of the historic centre you may see the occasional granny pulling a wheelie basket and you know it’s rush-hour when a cat gets up to stretch its legs after a doze in the sun.

The size of the village belies the fact that it was once one of the most important religious centres in Aragon, with not just one but two convents, one of which is still home to five *monjas clausuradas*, elderly nuns who never leave the confines of the convent.

Enter through either of the 14th-century portals, of Carmen or of San Antonio, and you enter a time warp where grand mansions and stunning *casas señoriales* (noble

houses) fill the squares. Not all past visitors are held in high regard to judge by the red paint daubed on a plaque on a modernista façade in the Plaza del Carmen — the lettering commemorates the visit of Generalísimo Franco.

An amusing detail on a couple of large houses, long corrugated plaster ribs, isn't a regional architectural oddity. It was a way wily householders stopped the local lads using their walls for an impromptu local handball game that left marks all over a nicely painted house front.

If you feel in need of relaxation after all this beauty, you can nip over the border into Valencia, to Montenejos, and soak in the natural hot water springs or while away an hour in its famous spa. Take the CV20 to return to Valencia from Montenejos or A515 from Rubielos, which joins the N234.

WHAT TO SEE

Teruel

Mudejar towers of San Pedro, San Martín, El Salvador.

Cathedral.

Dinópolis, Polígono Los Planos, s/n Tel. 90 244 80 00. Dinosaur park. Open daily 10am-8pm (last ticket 6pm) €18, children under 11 and pensioners €14.

Albarracín:

Whole town has been declared of International Tourism Interest.

Rubielos de Mora:

Ayuntamiento, in 16th-century nobleman's house.

Santa María la Mayor, parish church consecrated in 1620.

MORE INFORMATION

Teruel:

Tourist Information Office, Tomas Nogues 1. Tel. 97 860 22 79.

Albarracín:

Tourist Information Office, Plaza Mayor 1, Tel. 97 8 71 02 51.

Rubielos de Mora:

Tourist information Office. Ayuntamiento, Plaza Hispano América. Tel. 97 880 40 01. Open Apr-Oct daily 10am-2pm and 5-8pm. Nov-Feb Mon-Fri 10am-2pm and 5-7pm.



A Stroll Around Albarracín

Nothing prepares you for Albarracín, with its narrow streets terracing up the hillside and the casas colgadas, houses with wooden balconies precariously hanging over the streets below.

Officially designated a 'city', Albarracín it is little more than a large village, although as there is no Spanish equivalent word for the English 'town', only 'pueblo' or 'ciudad', it probably helps that the 'big village' has a Cathedral, to raise it to its higher status.

Standing in the car-park below the town, staring upward, wondering how the wooden balconies above you haven't succumbed to the force gravity after three hundred years, you are offered three choices; steep – a slope that rises up and provides access for residents and their cars, but the long way round; very steep – a stepped slope, one-third the length of the lower one but definitely puff-making; and 'I'm not sure I can manage those' – a flight of steps that require a lot of knee-lifting but get you into the heart of things pretty quickly.

The heat of the day hadn't arrived and I'd had my booster shot from the café in the car park, so I took the Himalayan route, unaided by either a hand rail to pull me up the near vertical steps or Sherpa Tenzing to help with my bag. From below, everything looks easily identifiable, so that you can move between castle, cathedral and quaint alleyways with ease, but the moment you step into the shadowed red-stone gullies, whose walls and windows seem to curl inward over your head, their eaves almost touching, you are lost to the idea of urban planning as you know it and have to guide yourself by instinct – usually wrong – or give yourself up to happenchance. The latter is usually the better option, given that the town is so small that if you get lost, just keep heading down and you will eventually arrive back at the car park.

When I arrive, breathless, at the top, I'm immediately wrapped in a shroud of antiquity, as I walk under a thick-beamed archway, with great oak posts sticking out at right-angles to support the houses above. With its crooked steps and battered ancient doors, it could pass for a location for a Charles Dickens story of the seedier side of London life. A sharp left at the end of a short passage leads me into the Plaza Mayor, the hub of village life.

The Plaza Mayor is dominated by the Ayuntamiento, the Town Hall, which forms a U. The square has its origins in the 13th century, when it was built on the foundations of the ancient wall, but the more 'modern' building of the Town Hall is the result of a total renovation in the 16th century, built in the typical Arogonése style of architecture of the period, with its colonnaded lower level providing shade during the heat of the summer months and the snows of winter. To the side, a mirador looks down over the village and the Riu Guadalaviar. A black and white photo of the Plaza Mayor, taken during the 1950's, shows that nothing has changed structurally in the intervening half-century, probably due more to the economic decline the town went into after the War of Independence with France in the early 1800s until the

'deliverance' of tourism during the last decade, and the lack of cash flow, than any premeditated conservation on the part of the town council.

For centuries, the Plaza Mayor was the end, or perhaps the beginning, depending in which direction you were headed, of the road to Molina de Aragon, hence the name of the tiny street, barely a couple of metres wide in some places, that heads off into the shadows opposite the Town Hall, Calle Portal de Molino. It's difficult to imagine flocks of sheep and cattle being driven down it to market in the town square during Albarracín's heyday, when cattle and wool exports during the 18th century paid for the magnificent big rambling casas señoriales, noblemen's homes, that date from this period.

I walk up the narrow street, feeling warmth exude from the ancient walls, not only from the heat of the sun the stone has absorbed, but from the dusky pink hue of some of the buildings. This is because of the locally produced plaster, which contains tiny flecks of iron, which rusts when it rains and gives the walls their unique colour.

Half-way up Calle Portal, it opens out into a small square, the Plaza de la Comindad, where the Casa de la Comunidad stands. Up until the 19th century, representatives of the twenty two villages and towns of Albarracín would meet here. Far more delightful, though, is the upper area of the Plaza, known as the Rincón de Abanico, Fan Corner, because the interconnecting houses spread out, imitating the shape of a fan. At the end of the street, where one of the original entrances to the town, the Portal de Molino, still stands, I turn around to look at probably the most emblematic building of Albarracín, la Casa de Julianetta, a tiny higgledy-piggledy house, built into the Y of Calle Portal de Molino and Calle Santiago, where there's barely a straight line or sure angle. Other than that it was the home of Julianeta, "una señora del pueblo que tenía una casa muy humilde, modesta, muy propia de Albarracín", a lady of the village who's house was very humble, modest, and typical of Albarracín, there is no historic or cultural reference, but it is a wonderful bit of 'eye candy' for lovers of Medieval architecture.

It seems strange to me that something smaller than many village churches I've seen in Spain should be exalted with the name 'Cathedral', but Albarracín definitely has one, dating from the 16th century. On closer inspection, it doesn't live up to it's grandiose title either, it's most delightful artwork being the stunningly carved wooden alterpiece of San Pedro, removed from the Iglesia de Santa María, on the edge of the city, when it was deconsecrated and became an auditorium. At various times the

cathedral plunges into semi-darkness, and the assembled visitors wait for someone to drop a one euro coin into the slot to switch on the spot lights, strategically placed in the side chapels and around the 17th-century High Altar. I once spent €10 this way trying to photograph the glorious Luis XV-inspired ballroom of the Casino in Murcia, giving everyone a free show while getting in my way, so I declined to do so again. I followed the crowd of misers as we left the building in darkness and empty of redemptive souls.



One thing that did strike me about the Cathedral, was that it has the only calvario I've ever seen inside a building. The calvario, the stations of the cross, are usually found, at least in Spain, forming a ziggurat footpath up a hill crowned by an hermita, with each of the fourteen stages marked by ceramic images in small niches. Here, they are illustrated by ancient oil paintings, cracked and faded with years of exposure, interspersed with seven images of Mary in the simple garb of a nun, each with an extra sword plunged into her breast, representing the Seven Sorrows, one for each of seven sorrowful episodes that occurred during her life.

As no trip to Paris can be seen as complete without a ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower, a climb up to the walls of Albarracín is also an itineristic necessity, (although having lived in the French Capital during my thirties and not having entered the Tower's lift, I could possibly have passed on the Albarracín excursion).

The castle stands on a rise behind the Cathedral, but the long crescent of the extant wall radiates from both sides of a tower, curving like protective arms. Which is exactly what they were intended to be. Whereas most walled cities used the walls to protect only the citizens and therefore concentrated on the urban structure, those of Albarracín were designed to safeguard livestock during times of siege and to provide ample grazing land.

Climbing up to the castle may not have seemed the most sensible thing to do on a steaming July day after a heavy lunch of excellent local chuletillas ternasco, a specially bred lamb, unique to Aragon, that even has its own Denominación de Origen. Either a way to walk off lunch or bring on a coronary, depending on how you look at it, but it needs to be done at some time for the stunning views.

The apparently steep incline isn't as difficult as it looks, as the path meanders up quite languidly, (unless you want to use the path at the side of the wall which could probably benefit by having a Stannah Stair Lift installed), and is almost a nature ramble – bees gather pollen, dragonets, dusky greyish-green lizards, skitter across the stony path, and black-winged butterflies take short bursts of erratic flight in their short, day-long lives.

The first stop-off point is a short flight of steps up to the top of the right wing of the wall. As you take the last step onto a small landing, the wall offsets to the left – and vertigo kicks in! What appears to be a wall of modest height from below suddenly assumes frightening proportions from this angle. No handrail, no crenulations, no waist-high wall to stop the cumbersome of foot from tumbling earthward. Nothing! – just a rough-topped wall that swoops down to a corner tower before doing a sharp right to continue on its way, the fall of the land dropping to the river valley below. I would not have liked to have been a guard on patrol at night in the depths of an icy winter, and these days to walk it is suitable only for those who find the white knuckle rides at Blackpool Pleasure Beach just a bit of a jolly.

Vertigo and I are old companions so, having gingerly lain down to take a photo, I equally gingerly slithered back down the stairs, to take the final climb up to the Torre Andador, the Walker's Tower, presumably named for those poor souls who had to patrol the nerve-wracking perimeter. It was worth the climb. Ahead of me I looked down over Albarracín – its spaghetti alleyways, church towers and mottled crunched-up rooftops – over to the backdrop of the Sierra de Albarracín, where roam the herds that provide the village's famous queso puro de oveja, pure sheep's cheese. My eye followed the meandering River Guadalaviar, one of the richest trout rivers in Spain, past the circular turret at the end of the wall, and on through the orchards and cornfields, pockmarked with houses and small factories, as it wandered its way onward to Teruel and beyond.





MEDIEVAL BYWAYS

Area: Alta Mijares (inland from Castellón city)

Route: Vilafamés – L'Alcora – Onda – Vall d'Uixo

Distance: 105 kilometres

Drive over a rust-red landscape, explore Valencia's pottery past and underground wonders, and enjoy one of the province's most important collections of contemporary art in a Gothic palace.

Exit from the A7 coastal motorway at junction 47 and take the CV16 in the direction of L'Alcora and Tarragona. Keep to the right side of the slip road and follow the signs for L'Alcora, passing a number of roundabouts. Stay on this road for about 10 kilometres until you see a sign to San Juan de Moro and Vilafamés on the CV160. At a roundabout with three tall, multi-coloured tiled pillars take the road to Vilafamés and you enter the Alto Mijares. Water from this area irrigates the crops of the La Plana district far below.

As the road climbs, everywhere is covered in fine red dust, deposited by this area's historic industry, ceramics. Stunted pine, holm oak and carob are interspersed with occasional olive trees and avalanches of deep-red rock and earth from the quarries that supply the ceramic factories. Soon, however, you leave the dust behind and enter a pleasant terrain of undulating hills covered in gorse and the sweet-smelling Spanish juniper.

Rounding a left-hand bend at the km10 marker, you see the castle of Vilafamés perched on the top of a hill, with sunlight shining through the empty window apertures, its circular tower watching over the village clinging to the hillside.

At the roundabout just below the village, take the first right, following the road up the hill. As you enter the village, take the road to the right of the Cooperativa de Crédito Caja Rural, which leads you into the Plaza de la Font. It is advisable to park here and walk up to the old town. Cross the square and turn right up Carrer la Font. A few metres up the street you will see La Roca Grossa, a huge red stone blackened with age, that hangs on a steep slope and looks ready to slide down any moment and carry half the pueblo with it.

Vilafamés is a mountain village of narrow winding streets of white houses edged in chunky red stone. Its history goes to Neolithic times. Human remains, named *Homo erectus vilafamensis*, have been found from this period as well as Bronze Age cave paintings. However, it wasn't until after the conquest of the Moorish leader Beni-Hemez by Jaime I in 1233 that the village began to take its present-day shape.

The oldest part of town is at the foot of the castle, around the 13th-century Iglesia de la Sangre. Built over an Arab aljibe (cistern), this tiny church was renovated during

the 17th century, when its original design was altered, but it still contains an interesting baroque retablo (altarpiece) and painted frescoes in the presbytery.

Calle Cuarticho, the arms-width alleyway that runs alongside the church, is one of the oldest thoroughfares and could easily win a “prettiest street in Spain” competition.

Just above the church is the castle, from whose ramparts you can look across to the mountain of Penyagolosa, at 1814 metres the highest peak in the Comunitat Valenciana.

One of this small rural town’s unexpected delights is that it has one of the region’s most important collections of contemporary art. Housed in the beautiful Palau de Batle, an excellent example of Valencia’s Gothic civic architecture of the 14th and 15th centuries, the Museo Popular de Arte Contemporáneo displays the work of more than 400 artists from the 1920s to the present day. Sculptures, paintings, etchings, and holograms unfold before you as you wander through baronial halls and out into the sculpture patio with its beautiful views over the village and the valleys beyond.

As you make your way back to Plaza de la Font, passing La Asunción parish church with its baroque organ, on your right you will see a corrugated doorway that looks like the entrance to a garage. Here is El Perol Trencat (The Broken Cooking Pot), where you can stock up with ceramics and a wide assortment of decorative items.

Return to the roundabout at the entrance to the village and head back in the direction of San Juan de Moro. One and a half kilometres after leaving Vilafamés a small sign on your right indicates the Cami Costur, a narrow country road. You pass a number of low round stone buildings, farmers’ huts. Keep an eye out for the carob tree on your right that looks like a large green crown; an inventive farmer has forced the upper branches to grow vertically and the lower ones to spread out horizontally, supported by stout canes. (Be careful on this road after heavy rains as, after 10 kilometres, there is a ford which gets quite high in times of flood.)

When you reach the next junction (unmarked but it’s the CV165), turn left for L’Alcora. Soon you drop down into a pretty valley, marred only by the eyesore of the Euroacra tile factory. Turn left when you reach the CV190 and the signpost indicating four kilometres to L’Alcora. As you approach the town the road bears sharp left, but you take the right turn over the bridge.

In 1727 the ninth Conde de Aranda opened the Real Fábrica de Loza y Porcelana (Royal Tile and Porcelain Factory) and established L’Alcora as the foremost manufacturer of fine-quality porcelain in Spain and one of the most important in Europe, whose products graced the tables of the wealthy worldwide. The count imported French specialists to oversee design and production. They brought with them many of their country’s decorative styles, but eventually the factory created its own distinctive designs, including tableware in fruit and animal shapes.

The factory fell into ruin at the end of the Civil War, when the wooden roof beams were removed by impoverished locals, but the ceramics industry continued to flourish in L'Alcora and the Museo de Cerámica L'Alcora, in a manor house built in 1907, has an excellent collection of historic and contemporary ceramics.

Close by is the Portal de Marco, the town's 14th-century entrance, and beside it is the small palace built in 1740 by the Marco family, a pillar of the local nobility. The house is typical of the time and region, with its ornate entrance of Doric columns surmounted by semi-circular pediments so loved in classical architecture and topped off by the Marco family shield. On a wall in the the Plaça la Sang, the square behind the house, you can see a wonderful example of the corrugated plastering used to discourage local lads from practising a local ball game against the surface. These are usually quite simple but this is glorious in its ecclesiastical design.

As befits a medieval town whose history is based on ceramics, the Ayuntamiento is a testament to the tile maker's art. Ornate scenes on vast plaques adorn its otherwise square and tedious façade. A little piece of social history was lost when the grandly named La Muy Noble y Artística Cerámica de Alcora (The Very Noble and Artistic Ceramics Company of Alcora) at 12 Calle Pintor Ferrer, that had continued the tradition of handmade and delicately painted ceramics, where women, deep in concentration, reproduced with paint the designs for which the town is famous, closed.

Leave L'Alcora on the road which runs in front of the town hall, turning left at the first set of traffic lights, left again at the next set, a T-junction, and right at the roundabout heading in the direction of Onda.

As you enter Onda and drive up the right-hand side of the underpass, a quick glance to your right reveals the wonderful façade of a tiny tile factory. The front wall catalogues some of their stunning designs. Unfortunately the building is now in ruins and many of the original tiles have been torn off, but it is still a little gem.

The historian Ramón Muntaner said the castle of Onda "had as many towers as there are days in the year". Today only the El Moro tower retains its original height. Restoration has been done with a somewhat heavy hand but the monument is impressive all the same.

Below the castle walls the tiny streets zigzag down to the old town, many of them ending in the Plaza de Almudí. This former market place, with its cobbled pavement radiating from the Font de Dins at its centre to the Gothic arches that shade its four sides, was an important grain market from 1418 until the 19th century. The buildings under the oak-beamed porticos housed a slaughterhouse and butchery and, from the middle of the 17th century, the local lock-up.

Onda is another ceramic town but one specialising in tiles, as a visit to the newly built Museo Taulelle Manolo Safont, a tile museum, will testify. Take the CV223 in the direction of Tales and, right on the edge of town, take a left at the school in front of the crafts (*artesanía*) centre. The museum is on the next block.

You can see more than 50,000 examples of architectural tiles from 13th-century Moorish to modern day. Ceramic headstones, votive plaques, religious and celebratory images, elaborate floor tiles, and a collection from the workshops of Bernat Segarra, considered the best Modernist tile-maker in Spain during the early years of the 20th century, make this a must-visit. Displays show the painstaking processes used in making tiles by hand over the past 700 years.

A few minutes further on in the direction of Tales you come across the beautiful monastery and church of the Carmelites, which sadly has a huge, ugly brick building tacked on the side. This unattractive edifice houses the Museo de Ciencias El Carmen. Do not enter if taxidermy is not to your taste.

A modest collection for private study begun by the Carmelite fathers in 1952 grew and grew until, in 1965, it was opened as a museum to the public. Three floors of more than 10,000 specimens from the animal, plant and mineral worlds — from birds, butterflies and insects to a donkey, an elephant and a giraffe — are displayed in a myriad of habitats. A huge shark dangles grinning from the rafters while below Iberian ibex prance before a snow-topped mini-mountain.

After such excitement, you can relax in the calm of the church next to the museum. As you enter there seems nothing unusual about the altar surmounted by a statue of the Virgin with a beautiful stained-glass window on either side. Then you suddenly realise all those coloured stone blocks are hand-painted, all the way up to, and including, the high vaulted ceilings. Every archway, pillar and spandrel is fake white marble. Even the backs of the doors have been carefully grained, which seems to be a pointless effort as their fronts show them to be made of beautiful pitch pine.

Return to Onda and take the CV20 to Vila-Real, turning off on the CV10 in the direction of the A7 Valencia. Take the exit for La Vilavella (Nord) and drive through the village, joining the CV10 at a roundabout directing you to Vall d'Uixo and Valencia. You are returning to the coastal zone and will travel through orange groves with mountains to your right and the occasional sparkle of the Mediterranean to your left.

Leave the CV10 when you see the CV226 to Vall d'Uixo and Soneja. Two kilometres later you come to a roundabout with three large vertical stones. A sign to the right indicates the Coves de Sant Josep, otherwise known as the Grutas San José, in the direction of Segorbe. When you reach the roundabout at the top of this road a large sign indicates the Grutas San José, the entrance of which runs down the left side of a bar called Les Moreles

The Grutas are Valencia's second largest cave system, extending 2,750 metres, of which 800 are navigable by boat (although if you are a hardy explorer type a lot more can be visited by cave diving). The caves have been known since prehistoric times but were not explored until the early 20th century.

The caves as seen today are not totally natural as they have been dynamited at various times to "expand the visitable itinerary". When you enter them, a sense of awe

immediately overcomes you as a boatman sculls you through an underground wonderland.

At points the ceiling is so low you almost have to lie down. Strategically placed lights make the surface of the water look like a shimmering mirror as you pass through caverns with names such as *Boca del Forn* (Mouth of the Oven) and the *Sala de la Morenata* (Hall of the Dark-skinned Girl). The caves really are stunning, though one could do without the fairy music that accompanies the 40-minute ride.

To complete this excursion, return to the CV10 and turn right for Valencia and south or left for Castellón.



WHAT TO SEE

Vilafamés:

Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, Calle Diputación 20. Tel 96 432 91 52. Works of more than 400 artists from the 1920s to the present day. Open daily Jun-Sep 10.30am-2pm, 4-8pm, and Oct-May, Mon-Fri 10.30am-1pm, 4-6.30pm, Sat-Sun 11am-2pm, 4-7pm. Web page:<http://www.cult.gva.es/museovilafames>

Iglesia Parroquial de la Asunción, 16th-century church, restored in 19th. 17th-century retablo by Bernado Monfort, 18th-century baroque organ.

Iglesia de la Sangre, 13th-century church, heavily reformed in baroque style of 17th. Painted frescoes in presbytery, ceiling and chapel of Santa Bárbara.

Castillo, castle with Moorish origins, conquered by Jaime Primero in 1233. Interesting circular keep.

El Quartijo, medieval quarter and narrow streets of original town.

L'Alcora:

Museu de Cerámica L'Alcora, Tel. 96 436 23 68. Excellent collection of historic and contemporary ceramics. Open Tues-Sun 11am-2pm, 4-8pm (extended opening hours Easter and summer months, telephone to confirm). Web page www.alcora.org/museu

Onda:

Castle and castle museum. Tel 96 476 66 88. Unique collection of Moslem plasterwork in a small palace dating from early 13th century. Open Jun-Sept, Tues-Sun 11am-2pm, 5-8pm. Oct-May, Tues-Fri 10am-2pm, Sat, Sun and fiestas 11am-2pm, 3-6pm.

Plaza de Almudí, medieval plaza.

Museo de Ciencias El Carmen, Ctra. De Tales s/n. Tel. 96 460 07 30. Three floors of stuffed animals, plant and mineral specimens. Open Jun-Sep (Tues-Sun 9.30am-2pm, 3.30-8pm) and Oct-Feb (Tues-Sun, 9.30am-2pm, 3.30-7pm) and Mar-May (Tues-Sun 9.30am-2pm, 3.30-7.30pm).

Museo de Taulell Manolo Safont, Open Tues-Fri 11am-2pm and 4-8 pm, Sat/Sun 11am-2pm and 5-8pm.

La Vall d'Uixo:

Grutas San José. Tel 96 469 67 61. Wonderland of caves and lakes. Open year around. Opening hours depend on the month. Summer openings: second week in July to second week in Sep, 10.30am-1.30pm, 3.30-8.00pm. Other months have reduced opening hours. Best to call to confirm.

MORE INFORMATION**Vilafamés:**

Tourist Office, Plaza Ayuntamiento, 1. Tel. 96 432 99 70. Open daily 9.30am-1.30pm.

L'Alcora: Ayuntamiento, Plaza Sant Francesc, 5. Tel. 96 436 00 02. Open weekdays 9.30am-2pm.



Card Sharp Oropesa's Museo del Naipes

It probably never crosses your mind when you enter the British Museum, the Tate or some other space dedicated to the weird and, sometimes, wonderful, but if it wasn't for the obsession of the odd curious individual (who would, more likely, refer to it as a 'passion'), most of the world's museums wouldn't exist. We like to think that we British have the handle on eccentricity, and it's fair to admit that we are inclined to have our fair share of those who might well otherwise be known as 'nutters', but the Spanish have produced a fair few whose singleness of mind has created a little bit of collectable nonsense they can call their own. The chap from Torremolinos with the world's biggest collection of potties springs immediately to mind!

Juan Carlos Ruiz is one such person, and never have I heard someone wax so lyrical about the humble playing card – or not so humble, as some of the stars of his eight thousand plus collection show. Such is his enthusiasm that he has converted the

ground and first floor of his house in the old town of Oropesa, on the Costa Azahar, into the only private *museo de naipes* in the world – mind you, there are only eight in total, one in Cuba, for some obscure reason.

As a mere strip of a lad of fifteen, Juan Carlos began work with Heraclio Fournier, a playing card manufacturer in Vitoria in the north of Spain and for the next forty years assembled his collection, including some totally unique examples from around the world. Five years ago he took early retirement, moved to the Med, and set up his museum.

Here's a man quite wondrously obsessed with his hobby and, like any collector, can't wait to show me his latest 'find', a still sealed, boxed presentation pack from 1949 celebrating the centenary of Harrods.

"This is a real joy, and very rare, because it hasn't been opened and the cards still have the British government wrapper on them saying that if they aren't cancelled in writing the owner can be fined £5. How much is £5?" Not much now, but about half a working man's wage back then.

The Chinese are thought to have invented playing cards, based on the fact that they invented paper. The first record of the word *naipe* (playing card) being used is in a poem by the Catalan Jaume March, in 1371, and a document of six years later, in a typically miserable bit of Barcelona bureaucracy, prohibits all card games in the streets. Prior to that only the nobility could have a bit of a flutter, because every card was made and painted by hand and cost a fortune. Gradually, by way of stencil, and wood and stone printing blocks, *naipe* became more available to the man-in-the-street – as long as it wasn't the streets of Barcelona!

From the thumbnail-sized smallest pack in the world, which measures a mere one centimetre, to the Guinness Book of Records monster that weighs in at 14 kilo and stands a metre high, Juan Carlos has everything conceivable in-between; round, square, mini, teardrop, curiously elongated Chinese versions with sensuously executed calligraphy, the oldest pack in the world in private hands (1748), triangles, all the favourites of Happy Families including Mr Bun the Baker and his daughter Miss Bun-in't-th'oven (vary rare indeed, that last one), and a real tongue-in-cheek pack called Stars Behind Bars, which show the mug shots of such celebs as Steve McQueen when he was done for drunk driving, Michael Jackson for being rather too close to little boys, Hugh Grant for trying to get a lot closer to grown-up ladies, and Frank Sinatra for being nicked in 1938 for carrying on with a married woman, which is practically what he was paid for in later life.

The use of cards in magic came in around the beginning of the 19th century, for the simple fact that they were easily transportable; three decorated bits of paper and you had a show. Juan Carlos explains this to me as he does a quick three card trick using Mr Plod the Policeman, a three of hearts and an ace of *picos*, the replacement for spades in an English deck. I know he's just using his fingers to slide the cards about,



but it still flummoxes me how Mr Plod gets from the bottom to the middle when I never took my eyes off his copper's helmet.

Strolling around the *Museo del Naïpe*, you can't help but agree with Juan Carlos that many of the cards on display are miniature works of art, but some fulfilled a more dramatic role than simply having a quick game of poker.

On one wall hangs a framed set of the backs of a Bicycle pack, so called because of the image of an angel riding a bike, and used by magicians worldwide. Turn the frame over and you will see a detailed map. These would form a pack where the map was sandwiched between the back and the numbered face of the card, and carried by those parachuted behind the enemy lines. By peeling off the face and laying the cards side-by-side and end-to-end, a map of the area would be created for use in undercover operations or – in the direst of cases – when attempting to escape.

Juan Carlos tells me that journalists always ask which is the most valuable pack in his collection, and his reply is truly that of the devotee. "It isn't the financial value that's most important, it's how special it is to me, and usually it's the one I've just bought." So the owners of England's most prestigious shop can sleep easy at night knowing that someone in a little Spanish seaside town has Harrods close to his heart.

Museo del Naïpe, Calle Hospital, 1 (Casco Antiguo), Oropesa del Mar, Castellon



CASTELLÓN'S INLAND BEACH

Area: Southern Castellón.

Route: Sagorbe – Jérica – Montanejes – Onda

Distance: 145 kilometres

Drive through the haunt of fishermen and hunters, delve underground to peer at wax limbs and the "white dove", and soak in thermal pools where Moorish courtesans once bathed.

Take the exit 1A for Sagunto and Teruel from the A7 motorway, a 20-minute drive north from Valencia. Just before Sagunto take the A23 for Teruel and drive 30 kilometres inland to Segorbe. The road follows the Palancia river along the Ruta de los Manantiales (Route of the Springs), snaking through valleys and gorges decorated with poplar, aspen and willow. Tributaries and springs feed the orchards of the Alto Palancia.

The river is the haunt of fishermen after trout, barbel, pike and carp, while hunters scour the forested mountains and broad plains for wild boar, hare, partridge and quail. The valley was for centuries the major link between the region of Aragon and the Mediterranean.

Exit at junction 27 for Geldo and Segorbe, taking the road to the left for Segorbe. At the roundabout take the first exit for Segorbe (with a small railway station sign) and follow the road through a small industrial estate. You pass under a blue railway bridge (you will come back to this to continue the excursion) and continue on the road into town. Shortly after the Guardia Civil barracks a sign, on the right, directs you to the tourist information office. Turn left here on to Calle de Castellón, turn right at the first set of traffic lights and this takes you directly to the tourist office and car park.

The former bishop's seat of Segorbe is now the regional capital and the name of its principal square, Plaza Agua Limpia (Clean Water Square), symbolises the historical importance of the area's springs and rivers. Many streets in the old town have plaques describing their history which is often reflected in their names. Calle Foro Romano, Calle Mezquita and Plaza Almudín are reminders of the city's Roman and Moorish past, while Calle Los Silleros (Chairmakers' Street) recalls the time when each trade could be found in a specific area within the city walls.

A plaque in Plaza del Ángel informs you that it was formerly known as the Plaza de los Cerdos, where every Thursday for centuries the most important pig market in Valencia and lower Aragon was held and only pigs of the highest quality were sold.

The Arco de la Verónica on Calle Argen is thought to be part of the original Roman wall, and on the edge of the old town there are two cylindrical towers that also formed part of the fortifications. Torre Cárcel housed the prison and Torre Botxi was home to the town's executioner (Botxi being the Catalan name for that grim occupation).

The city's history as a religious centre is reflected in the abundance of its churches, the most prominent of which is the 12th-century *catedral-basílica*. Its inherent Gothic style has been considerably modified, like those of most churches in Valencia province. It houses a small museum of art from the 15th to 18th century, including work by Donatello.

Segorbe's main fiesta, held during the last week of August, incorporates the homage to the city's patron saint, la Santísima Virgen, and a week of bullfights. The high point of the taurine week is the Entrada de Toros y Caballos (Entry of the Bulls and Horses) when horse riders drive bulls down the main street between two densely packed rows of unprotected bystanders who rely on the skill of the horsemen to prevent them from being gored.

To leave Segorbe, retrace your route and take the road to the right just before the main road passes under the blue railway bridge. You join a dual carriageway. A couple of kilometres out of Segorbe (having bypassed Altura) you pass under an arbour of pines with a hotel on the right and arrive at a roundabout. Go straight over, where you will see a sign for La Cueva Santa. The road twists and turns as it rises through pretty countryside sprinkled with ancient farmhouses and ruined mills and, after about 13 kilometres, you see an enormous white building, once a convent but now home to only a handful of nuns.

The White Dove in an underground cave

The Santuario Cueva Santa is dedicated to the Virgin of the Holy Cave, known as the White Dove, and her image is portrayed in bas-relief stucco about 20 centimetres high. The legend goes that Bonifacio Ferrer, a Carthusian prior, gave the image to a shepherd who hid it in a niche in the cave, where it was found by another shepherd in 1503.

At a later date a glorious Doric-style temple was built in the cave, 20 metres below ground, where the image now sits, surrounded by jade and gold. As you descend the stairway lined with tile votive plaques giving thanks for prayers answered and ailments miraculously cured, you pass small side niches and diminutive altars.

Nothing quite prepares you for your first sight of the temple, with its ornate scroll plasterwork topped by a pair of cavorting cherubim. The tiny stucco image of the Virgin glows in its gold mount and it comes as no surprise to hear that she is the patron saint of Spanish speleologists (cavers).

It is said that, if a drop of water lands on you from the ceiling and you rub it over the part of your body that is ailing, you will be cured. Drops taken from the puddles on the



floor will also work but without the same efficacy. You will also be cured if you hear the tinkling of a bell when visiting the cave by night.

Retrace your route and, just after you leave Altura, pick up the A23 once more and head for Jérica. A few minutes up the motorway take the exit for Navajas and follow the road under the railway bridge into the village centre.

This otherwise nondescript little village must have one of the largest stocks of the delightful modernista architectural style in the whole of the Valencian Community. Towers, pillars, porticoes and promenades are everywhere, mostly surrounded by beautifully kept gardens abundant with statuary. Most of the houses are in excellent condition, although some have such a spooky dilapidated air that you can imagine opening an ornate front door to find Dickens' Miss Havesham sitting before her spider-webbed wedding feast.

Drive back under the railway bridge and turn right, following the road for the Embalse de Regajo, with occasional glimpses through the trees of the sun sparkling off the water of the reservoir. Keep following the signs for Jérica. The roadside olive trees are not for harvesting but intended for sale to restock other olive groves.

Almost the first view you get of Jérica is the imposing Mudejar bell tower, unique in Valencia and forming an unmistakable silhouette as it overlooks the town. The

Muslim-influenced Mudejar style is characterised by an extremely refined and inventive use of brick and glazed tiles, especially in belfries.

Also eye-catching is the Torre del Homenaje, the strong central tower of Jérica castle, which is almost all that is left of the original fortifications standing guard over the river Palancia from the heights of the Peña Tajada (cleft rock).

With its round Moorish towers, Gothic arches and narrow cobbled streets, Jérica is a beautiful little town. As in many such pueblos that have little room for gardens, most of the countless balconies and walls are covered with colourful plants, especially off the prettily named Calle del Pequeño Horno, the Street of the Little Oven.

In the tourist information office on Calle del Río you can pick up a town map that describes a tour around the main points of interest, but Jérica is the sort of place where when you get lost the locals will usually walk you to where you want to go. When you get tired of strolling around town, you can relax by watching the world go by as you sit outside a café on the small square in front of the rather grand Fuente de Santa Águeda.

To continue the excursion, take the road to the right of the fountain for Teruel, CV195. The road rises up through pine-covered mountains and orchards of almonds, carob and figs, to pass between the Sierras of Pina and Espadán.

You pass Montán. Abandoned after the expulsion of the Moriscos (Moors converted to Christianity) in 1609, it was settled later in the century by 28 families from Provence and a group of Servite monks who built the monastery. It still stands and part has been converted, badly, into apartments. Neither the monastery nor the haphazard village is worth a second glance so it is on to the main destination on this leg of the excursion, Montanejos, six kilometres further on.

Visitors flock to Montanejos for two reasons: walls and water. The walls are the precipitous rock faces of the Garganta de la Maimona and Los Estrechos that have made Montanejos one of the most important centres for free-climbing in Europe. The sheer cliffs rise more than 100 metres high and there are 1,100 climbing routes in the three-kilometre stretch of the Barranco de la Maimona.

The beautiful gorges and pine forests that rise from the River Mijares as it gouges its way through the limestone mountains are a magnet for cavers and walkers, but water is the main reason Montanejos is busy year-round. It has two kilometres of thermal pools naturally heated to a constant temperature of 25 degrees. The salutary effect of its mineral springs has been known for millennia. The water is high in sulphate, magnesium and bicarbonate and does wonders for a wide range of ailments.

At Fuente de los Baños, the largest of the thermal pools and with a beach, the 13th-century Moorish king, Abu-ceit, built a bathhouse to help "keep his favourites always young and beautiful". A sign directs you to the ruin of the baños árabes, but little remains now except for a fragment of wall and a pile of rubble.

Although the Fuente de los Baños was recognised as a public utility as far back as 1863, it was only recently, with the opening of the Balneario de Montanejos, that the health-giving waters were utilised for more than a quick dip and drink. Now visitors can choose from a wide range of hydrothermal treatments designed to help physical, respiratorial and circulatory problems as well as those delicately referred to as *enfermedades de la civilización*, or stress.

Montanejos has little else to offer other than the recently restored 17th-century church of Santiago Apóstel and a few narrow cobbled streets in the old town that still have small shops and cafes undisturbed by the booming water business.

Leaving Montanejos and taking the CV20 to Onda, you drive through deep, green pine forests covering rugged mountains. You pass a series of small villages, including Cirat, Torrechiva, Toga and Espadilla, consisting of nothing more than a plaza and a few narrow streets clustered around a church but offering somewhere to stop and enjoy a coffee and stretch your legs.

Eventually you wind down to the suburbs and orange groves of Onda, where you can either take a tour of the town (see Trip Medieval Byways) or stay on the CV20 and rejoin the coastal roads at Vila-real.

WHAT TO SEE

Segorbe:

Catedral-Basílica. 13th-century cathedral with Gothic cloister and museum of 15th and 16th-century art.

Torre Cárcel, Torre Botxi, and Arco de la Verónica. Old town walls.

Santuario Cueva Santa, Ctra. Altura-Alcublas. Open during daylight hours. Ornate chapel built 20 metres underground.

Jérica:

Torre de las Campanas, Mudejar bell tower.

Municipal Museum. Examples of 14 to 19th-century ceramics, religious artifacts, local archeological finds and gravestones. Mon-Fri opening by arrangement with the town hall (next to the museum). Tel. 96 412 91 77. Sat 12noon-2pm and 7-9pm, Sun 12noon-2pm.

Iglesia de Santa Águeda, Originally Gothic church, rebuilt in the baroque style in 1749.

Montanejos:

Barranco de la Maimona and Los Estrechos. Two main rock-climbing faces a short distance from the town centre, signposted.

Fuente de los Baños. Natural thermal pool, part of a 2km stretch of thermal waters. The main pool is a five-minute walk from the town centre.

Balneario de Montanejos, Carretera de Tales, s/n. Treatment centre and public indoor swimming pool. Call 964 131 275 for details of treatments and to make reservations. Open every day 9.30am-2pm and 4.30-8pm. Closed Jan.

MORE INFORMATION

Segorbe:

Tourist Information Office, Calle Marcelino Blasco, 3 (beside municipal car park). Open 10am-2pm and 4-7pm, Tue-Sun.

Jérica:

Tourist Information Office, Calle Río, 2. Tel. 96 412 80 04. Web page www.jerica.com. Open 10.30am-1.30pm Sat and Sun. At other times ask in Ayuntamiento, Calle Historiador Vayo, 19. Tel. 96 412 91 77.

Montanejos

Tourist Information Office, inside the Balneario de Montanejos, Carretera de Tales, s/n. Open every day 9.30am-2pm and 4.30-8pm. Closed Jan.

Asociación Escuela de Escalada de Montanejos, Carretera de Tales, 27.

Centro Ecuestre la Garrocha. Tel. 600 535 180. Does 45-minute pony and trap rides, also hires out horses.





The Romance of Iced Toes

The Picturesque Village of Aín

If any village in Castellón deserves the title of Romantic Spain, Aín really hits the button, with its white painted houses, rare *en mas* outside Andalucía, cobbled narrow streets filled with floribunda, and icy water flowing from the village font. It was a complete surprise to find it, and I almost drove past without a second glance.

Everywhere is spotless; here's a tiny village whose inhabitants are proud of where they live. Not a scrap of paper fluttered about in the breeze, not a dog turd lay in wait for the unwary, or an empty coke can floated in the fountain. Every street was lined with plant pots bursting with greenery and vivid colour, and a bright purple spread of bougainvillea framed the arched doorway of the petit village church, the Iglesia San Ambroso. It was delightful wandering through the alternating shade and sun of the narrow streets.

It was one of those lethargic summer afternoons, where the heat of the past few days had faded and the sky was a hazy washed-out blue. A light breeze kept it cool, and even in the shade the temperature was warm enough to raise a light sweat if you walked too quickly – so I didn't. All I wanted to do was lie on a warm rock and dangle my feet in the water, so I made my way down the zigzag streets to the river running in the fold of the ravine over which half the village hangs.

I dropped down through the near vertical streets but when I reached the river I found there were no rocks big enough for lounging on, so I ended up stretched out on a short cement path, occasionally hauling myself upright to plunge my feet into the bubbling flow. As they slowly turned to ice in the gin clear water, I watched tiny sticklebacks weaving around my toes, as water dragons skittered across the surface. The clarity of the water made it clear that my toenails needed clipping. Concrete slab or no, rarely has my bed been so luscious for a siesta, as I drifted off to the rippling and splashing of the miniature waterfall a metre from my head.

Having dozed and reflected that had I brought my paella, a bag of rice and a rabbit or two, I could have made lunch at the *paelleros* at my side, but as I hadn't I climbed the narrow track up the other side of the shallow ravine. I heard the hectic gurgling of water as it whooshed through the *acequias*, the network of irrigation channels, many of which in these mountains have been in use since the Moors established the first terraced agricultural system over a thousand years ago. In fact, Aín is Arabic for water, and given the amount of water flowing from the font, through the *acequias* and in the river, it was aptly named.

As I topped the short rise and started along a rough track, with the village spread along the hillside opposite, I saw the *hermita* and the *calvario*, (the stations of the cross), with its row of cypress trees, that instant identifier in Spain of either an *hermita* or a *cementario*. As far as I can remember, this is the only *calvario* I've come across that

is on the flat and not scaling a steep hillside. For that reason alone I decided to have a look at it when I passed by later on.

I followed the curving path back down the hill, and passed the sparkling water of the village swimming pool, with jumping and splashing kids and adults picnicking or dozing in the shade. I added another 'must carry in the car' item to my list, alongside my walking boots – always take swimming trunks and a towel, because I would have loved to have thrown myself into the shimmering pool – but at least my feet were still smiling from the paddle earlier.

When I arrived at the *calvario*, not only did I find that it was flat, but that it was also in a straight line, another first, and it was one of the most delightful I've ever seen. Between each of the tall cypress stood *tinajas*, the large 'Ali Baba' pots once used for storing oil and wine, plant pots and small troughs full of plants that had obviously been the centre of someone's loving care and attention. Too often plants in public places are just thrown in the ground and left to fend for themselves, but here the gardener cared, and the care showed in the abundant greenery. From two large cracked and much cement-repaired *tinajas* grew two ivy, whose years had led them to finally meeting and forming a frame for the central of the three arches to the portico at the entrance to the *hermita*.

In the shade of the portico stood a lone and battered old bentwood chair, its woven cane seat long ago replaced by some rough wooden slats. I sat for a while looking out over the garden and the village, just listening to the breeze flutter through the cypress. It was sublime, and as much a temple as the consecrated *hermita* behind me.

Having visited literally hundreds of villages and towns in the Valencian Community over the last few years, I can safely say that Aín is one of the most delightful. It has no museum, no art gallery and no fancy must-eat-at restaurants, but it is the peak of romantic Spain during the summer; a place to walk, make a paella with the family beside the river, splash in the open-air swimming pool or simply lie down beside it and drift in and out of a siesta.





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