



INLAND TRIPS  
FROM THE  
**Costa Blanca**

Costa Blanca South  
and Murcia

DEREK WORKMAN



# **Inland Trips from the Costa Blanca**

**Costa Blanca South  
And Murcia**

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

**Derek Workman**

This ebook 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. There's even a basic vocabulary to get you through those tricky situations.

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 my website, [betterlatethanever.com](http://betterlatethanever.com), 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 book 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.

## 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.





## ROUTE OF THE CASTLES

**Area:** Valley of the Vinalopó, west of Alicante

**Route:** Alicante – Novelda – Monòver – Elda - Petrer – Sax – Villena – Castilla

**Distance:** 142 kilometres

*Trace the necklace of castles that kept warring Aragonese and Castilians apart, raise your eyebrows at a bizarre shrine and admire a copy of the world's most expensive shoes.*

This excursion takes you to some of the main castles in an area that was one of the most heavily fortified in the region, much fought-over by the kingdoms of Aragon and Castilla. For non-castle lovers there's still plenty to see.

From the centre of Alicante or the A7 that bypasses the city take the N330 Autovía del Mediterráneo towards Madrid, leaving this road at the junction for Novelda, 24 kilometres from Alicante. Cross over a new roundabout and at the next set of traffic lights turn right, following the signs for Elda and Castillo (next to a Citroen garage). At the T-junction a couple of hundred metres later turn left, passing along a dry riverbed. At the next traffic lights, beside the Kia service station, turn left and right at the next lights. At the following junction turn right (you join the Paseig de Molins) and follow the signs for the Castillo.

La Mola castle is unique in Europe in that it is the only one with a triangular tower called, not surprisingly, the Torre Triangular. The tower is thought to have been built in the early 14th century to fortify the crumbling ruins of a 12th-century Moorish castle, although references are made to there being fortifications on the site since Roman times. It is therefore one of the first examples of a Gothic civic-military building in Catalan style in the land of Valencia, and its peculiar shape conjures up tales of alchemists and the search for magical formulae in secret rooms.

### A sanctuary with Gaudiesque charm

Beside the Castillo La Mola is the Santuario de Santa María Magdalena, one of the strangest-looking shrines in the area. It looks like something Gaudí cut his teeth on before getting stuck into the Sagrada Família in Barcelona, but in fact was the brainchild of one José Sala Sala, an engineer who studied in Cataluña and built the church in the Catalan modernista style.

The sanctuary was begun in 1918 but, because of a series of delays, was not completed until 1946. This bizarre edifice has a knobbly charm, being made of rough-hewn stone and pink-tinted marble and rubble lifted from the Vinalopó river.

With its arched façade and twin towers rising heavenward, you can imagine it in some Gothic horror movie, backlit with forked lighting against a stormy Transylvanian sky. In bright sunlight though, you can see that it is decorated with delightful polychrome tiles with motifs of medieval and baroque origin and the naturalised floral forms of the modernista period. Some of the designs carved into the blocks that form the triple arch of the entrance are decidedly pagan in origin.

In complete contrast to the outrageous exterior, the interior is surprisingly simple. Light filters through arches of alternating red-and-colourless glass panels, illuminating a minimum of architectural details. Around the walls, religious scenes are depicted in a series of three-metre-high paintings, many of which include Santa María Magdalena, patron saint of Novelda. Despite their appearance of antiquity, they were painted during the 1960s.

(Learn more about Novelda in [Sea of Palms](#))

Return to Novelda and when you reach the T-junction at the end of Paseig de Molins turn right, heading for Monòver and Aspe. At the next junction (almost a T, with a dead-end ahead of you) turn left and then right with the one-way system at the end. You come to a square with a church in front of you, to the right of which is a sign directing you to Monòver. At the next major junction, just across the road to your left is the ornate entrance to the Parque del Oeste, an intriguing little park and pleasant picnic stop. Stay with the signs for Monòver (CV835), but be aware that this junction is a bit complicated and the exit slip road is very short before you are brought into the rush of traffic on the main road.

You pass through a barren, rubble-strewn landscape of no great appeal. When you arrive at Monòver, after nine kilometres, you will see the Casa Cuartel (Guardia Civil Barracks) on your right, partially hidden by some trees on a grassed area. On the corner after the barracks is a sign pointing to Pinoso, 19 kilometres. Turn right in front of this sign and follow the signs for Elda, eight kilometres.

Birthplace of the novelist José Martínez Ruiz Azorín, one of Spain's most renowned 20th-century literary figures, Monòver is a busy little town that forms part of a 'wine route' and you will have ample opportunities to sample the local vintage. It is potent stuff, with often as high as 14 degrees alcohol, and very light on the pocket. Monòver also has a museum dedicated to its most famous son and a good art and craft museum with a fully equipped 19th-century pharmacy and shop and examples of local industry from times gone by. The latter can only be visited by appointment.

Keep following the signs for Elda. Miss the first exit for Elda (also signposted for the Polígono Industrial) and take the second one. As you enter the town look out for the large Porcelanosa sign on your left. Elda is as near a gridlocked town as you can find, so it is advisable to park in this area and go on by foot. It's only a short walk to the next venue. Just after the Porcelanosa sign a large green bollard with white arrows directs you either side of a narrow strip of garden. Stay on the left side. After the junction at the end of the garden you join Avenida de Chapi where, at number 32, you will find a



museum that celebrates the product on which the city's fortunes are built, the Museo del Calzado (Footwear Museum).

The first records of shoemaking in Elda go as far back as the mid-18th century but within a century the industry became the mainstay of the city's economy and these days Elda and its near neighbour Elche vie for the title of shoe-making capital of Spain. The museum is a collection of the weird and wonderful tools and equipment used in the early years of shoe production and some of the equally weird and wonderful shoes they made, showing what agonies people would go through, all in the name of fashion. Donations from the rich and famous are on display, including some from King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofía, and a copy of what are said to be the most expensive shoes in the world, worn to the Oscars by Mexican actress Laura Elena Harring.

(You can read a full article about the museum below.)

To leave Elda follow the white arrow in the green bollard to the right of the garden and at the traffic lights turn right. A couple of hundred metres later look out for the small sign directing you left in the direction of Madrid and Petrer. Cross over a roundabout with a tall wrought-iron lamp standard in the centre, and at the next junction turn right. Follow this all the way to the roundabout at the top where you will see the two-storey, red-brick building of the Cervecería Cruz Blanca, which forms part of the bus station, where you will find the information office of the Conçorcio la Isla del Interior. This represents five of the surrounding towns and is a central pick-up point for tourist information, including a neat little pack of walks in the area endearingly called the Rutas del Caracol (Routes of the Snail).

Turn left at the roundabout on Calle Madrid which forms the border line between Petrer and Elda, although you would think you are in the same town except that Petrer has retained much of its old-town whereas Elda has only a few tumbledown streets surrounding what's left of the castle.

Continue along Calle Madrid to the traffic lights and turn right. Stay on this road as it narrows beside a blue-and-white painted building and at the next junction, a slightly awkward crossroads, go straight across to the narrow road that almost looks like a left turn. (To visit Petrer's castle and the meandering streets of the old town, you go straight ahead instead of turning left at this junction, but it's tricky to get back here so you would be advised to park and walk.) At the next traffic lights turn right at a slightly angled crossroads and stay with the signs for Madrid until they take you once more on to the N330, heading in the direction of Sax.

(Please note, at the time of writing this, Elda was undergoing extensive road works. If the directions mentioned above are blocked, look for signs to Madrid which will take you to the motorway.)

Four kilometres after joining the N330 Sax castle rises in front of you, snaking along the ridge of the hill overlooking the town. It's only when you get close or pass it on the autoroute that you realise just how precipitous the rock face is. While the imposing castle has been well-restored the rock on which it stands has been disintegrating due

to frost erosion. Millions of euros are needed to support the castle before it collapses on to the medieval streets below. This might account for some of the houses bearing such names as Las Penas (The Sorrows), El Peligro (Danger) and El Milagro (The Miracle).

Continue on the autoroute to Villena to find one of the best-preserved castles in the province. In the soft rays of the evening sun the pinkish-cream stone of the castle glows. Rigorously restored, it still has a fairytale charm. La Atalaya (meaning watchtower) is one of the most imposing constructions once used to defend the extensive marquisate of Villena. Perched on a hill, surrounded by the meandering streets of the old town, the castle is composed of a double ring of solid walls protecting two inner baileys (main defensive walls) with circular turrets at its corners. To enter the inner bailey you pass through a Moorish arch in a crenulated gatehouse with slits for archers.

The great square Torre del Homenaje (keep) stands 25 metres high, its four storeys marked by two building styles, the lower section being mud walling and the upper having a rubblework finish. The keep has ribbed vaulting indicating its Islamic origin and was constructed during the late 12th century and the early 13th century, a date confirmed by Arab sources that mention the castle in 1172. The plastering of the keep's lower section is characteristic of the style of Al-Andalús (as the Moorish states were called at that time) during the late 12th century. This lower section of the tower is the only part of the castle remaining from that period. Having passed through the hands of numerous invaders, the structure you see today was built during the mid-15th century under the governorship of Don Juan Pacheco, Marqués de Villena, whose armorial bearings adorn the building.

While La Atalaya can be seen as one of the jewels in the necklace of castles that gird the Vinalopó, Villena's greatest treasure is tucked away in the town's vaulted Museo Arqueológico, in the 16th-century Palacio Municipal. Such is the value — monetary, historical and emotional — that one of the most important finds of gold jewellery and artefacts in the western world is kept in an ornate, metal-studded cabinet, specially constructed and only opened in the presence of a curator.

In 1963 José María Soler, director of the Municipal Archeological Museum, discovered 35 pieces of ancient gold jewellery, including rings, necklaces and a belt, on Cabezo Redondo, a nearby mountain that was being mined for gypsum. Understandably pleased with that find, in December of that year he, the town and the international archeological community were stunned when a beautifully made gold bracelet was discovered while workmen were clearing a piece of land in what used to be known as the Rambla del Panadero.

Then, on closer inspection, Soler and his team came across a ceramic pot measuring 50 centimetres across containing the biggest single find of Bronze Age golden artefacts ever recorded (later dating estimated them to be from 1000 BC): 11 bowls, 28 bracelets, three bottles and an assortment of other priceless items, richly



decorated with geometric and circular relief patterns. Weighing almost 10 kilos, the find became known as El Tesoro de Villena (The Treasure of Villena).

Just around the corner from the Museo Arqueológico, in the Plaza de Santiago, the 14th-century Santiago church with its helicoidal (twisted) columns and baptismal font attributed to Jacobo Florentino, an associate of Michelangelo, has been splendidly restored and is said to be one of the region's finest Gothic-Renaissance buildings. (It is usually only open during mass but ask at the tourist office, just opposite, as there are plans for the staff to provide access to the church.)

Villena has some fine examples of Art Nouveau architecture, in particular the Teatro Chapí. Named after Ruperto Chapí, the illustrious composer born in the city, the theatre was inaugurated in 1925 after 11 years in construction. Following years of neglect, the theatre was returned to its former grandeur at the turn of the millennium and now hosts performances of dance, opera, theatre and the zarzuela (Spanish light opera), for which the composer was famous.

Leave Villena by following the signs for Alicante that take you past the front of the Teatro Chapí. At a T-junction for Madrid, Alcoi and Alicante, turn left, and left again just before the road passes under the motorway, then follow the signs for Biar to the right (seven kilometres).

As you approach Biar along a straight road through pleasant countryside, you see its castle looming over the town. The castle keep is one of the most important in the region of Valencia and one of only three in Spain with ribbed vaulting on the arches on

the second storey that intertwine to form a rosette in the middle of the vault, a feature that dates it to the second half of the 12th century.

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

Leave Biar by the A210 to Castalla. A few kilometres further on you see the ragged outline of Castalla castle, with Onil to your left, where more dolls are manufactured than in any other town in the Valencia Community.

From the top of the limestone rock, 785 metres above sea level, on which Castalla castle stands, you have a commanding view of the Verde river. Archeological remains show that the castle was most likely of Moorish origin, probably from the 11th century, although no remains from this period are to be seen. The parts still standing date from the second half of the 15th century. When Pedro IV of Aragon granted the castle to Ramón de Vilanova in 1362, he said it should be razed to the ground and built anew because of its decaying fortifications, a small job that lasted a mere 217 years. The keep was finally finished in 1579. The remains belong to the ancient manor house that had two circular towers on each end. Stretches of wall around the main bailey are still much in evidence and enclose the remains of a number of medieval storerooms. The pièce de résistance, however, is the huge circular Torre Grossa.

The locals fought their own battle a few years ago when the local council tried to asphalt their Cami de la Bola, a rough piece of ground on the outskirts of town where the local game of joc de la bola has been played at weekends and fiestas for 300 years, with steel balls weighing three kilos handed down from father to son. Vociferous protests and hundreds of signatures saved the day.

From Castalla take the road for Alicante until you join the A36, where you can go to Alcoi and the north or continue on to Alicante 24 kilometres to the south.

## WHAT TO SEE

### NOVELDA:

**Castillo La Mola**, the only castle in Europe with a triangular tower.  
Santuario de Santa María Magdalena, a bizarre-looking sanctuary beside the castle.

### ELDA:

**Museo del Calzado**, Avenida de Chapí, 32. Tel. 96 538 30 21. Open Tues-Sat 10am-1pm and 4-8pm, Sunday 10am-2pm. During August Tues-Sat only, 10am-2pm.



**VILLENA:**

**Castillo de La Atalaya.** Open Mon-Fri 10.30am-1pm, Sat/Sun & holidays 10.30am-1.30pm. Guided tours every half hour. Free entry.

Museo Arqueológico, Plaza de Santiago, 1. Tel. 96 580 11 50 ext 66. Priceless gold treasure. Open Tues-Fri 10am-2pm, 5-8pm, Sat/Sun 11am-2pm. Free entry.

**Teatro Chapí,** Calle Lucían López Ferrer, 17. Tel. 96 581 47 50. Restored early 20th-century theatre with neo-Moorish external decoration. Open at performance times.

**Museo del Botijo.** Calle Párroco Azorín, 7. Tel. 96 580 05 71. Private collection of over 1500 examples of wine and water-cooling jars from around the world. View by arrangement with the tourist office

Museo del Festero, Plaza de Santiago (in the Casa de Cultura). Tel. 96 534 30 50.

Museum of the Moors and Christians' Fiesta. View by arrangement with the tourist office.



## Putting Your Best Foot Forward

Elda Shoe Museum

Does it say something about our Victorian forefathers (and, to a degree, our Victorian foremothers) that the only examples of fetish footwear on display at the Museo del Calzado in Elda are English – and the crippling lace-up boots with their excruciating curved heel definitely weren't designed for walking in!

Almost no other functional item has had such lavish attention paid to it over the millennia than the shoe. Frocks have got fancier, coats got comfier and the invention of the zip played merry havoc with the button trade, but the shoe, almost from the time it was little more than a bit of leather with a couple of thongs, has separated the high from the low, the rich from the poor and the elegant from the ignorant. You can

just imagine Mrs Cavewoman sewing a brontosaurus toenail onto the front of her sandal just to be that bit more a la mode.

And talking of high and low, Elton John, before he became 'Sir' might have thought he was the bees-knees, cautiously strutting his stuff on stage in a gaudy pair of platforms a yard high, but he was waaaayyy behind the times. The Venetians had been doing it centuries ago, in embroidered beauties, complete with 'buttons and bows', to keep their dainty tootsies out of the water when the Lagoon flooded its banks and to be one step up for Carnival. (Sir Elt does sho(e)w his face at the museum, though, in a display case where old boots are painted with the faces of celebrities – perhaps a case of art following reality.)

The museum is the brainchild of one José Maria Amart, one-time professor at a local college, now director of the only museum of its kind in Spain and only a handful in the world. As a former engineer in the shoe industry (Elda is the major producer of high-quality shoes in Spain), José had built his own collection of weird and wonderful machinery used in shoe making over the centuries. It turns out that a couple of his fellow professors had the same, somewhat obscure, interest and had quietly been building their own collections. You can imagine the conversation over a coffee and cigarette in the staff-room one day.... "Look, what do you think would happen if we pooled our collections and....." The 'and' became the Museo del Calzado.

But how do you go about filling a museum when there's never been a museum of its kind before? "We just asked," says José, with the sort of look that says, "Well what else would you do?" And they must have asked an awful lot because there are over 5,000 shoes on display – and six times as many in storage! Just think of the amount of space he must have cleared in other museums who had no idea what to do with the hundreds of pairs of cast-off footwear that didn't fit into their display criteria.

Using the 'clouds and silver linings' adage, the museum acquired an unusual collection of 18th-century footwear stored at an un-named English museum that had been deposited there when a cemetery had collapsed into the Thames. Apparently a soggy grave is a good place to conserve leather because it likes to be kept damp.

"We have shoes from every age, culture and tradition," continues José, "but we wanted to create a section that people could relate to so we asked famous people to let us have a pair of their shoes." Famous in Spain is not famous world-wide, but they do have a pair each from King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia. Nothing fancy actually, but they keep the Spanish punters intrigued in a sort of, 'I had a pair like that but the soles went,' sort of way.

In the same cabinet are copies of the most expensive pair of shoes in the world, a chi-chi pair of diamante sling-backs with a tantalisingly dangling pendant designed by Stuart Weitzman and worn to the Oscar's by Mexican actress Laura Elena Harring (who?). Only someone like Harrods ex-owner Mohamed Al Fayed could possibly think of owning the originals, a snip at over half a million pounds each one, but the copies still set the museum back a whacking €40,000.

When you walk into the museum almost the first thing you see is a Gulliver-like gents maroon leather number, alongside which is its award from the Guinness Book of Records for being the biggest shoe in the world. (Well it would be, wouldn't it, what else would you expect to see in a shoe museum!) Real leather it is, and so elegant that if you bunged an engine in and gave it a set of wheels you'd have a pretty nifty little sports car, fit to turn the eye of any gold-dangling Marbella bit of totty.

The first floor deals with the archaic equipment used to make shoes in the 19th-century. The gilded insignia of the Singer Sewing Machine Company is there, as it was in every corner of the globe where something had to be stitched – and probably still is. Ancient – and terrifyingly dangerous-looking – belt-driven machines used to make lasts are much in evidence, along with the tumbrels of wood to supply them. (If you'd care to see the lasts used for the shoes of Queen Elizabeth and Lady Diana, they are in the case upstairs, alongside the shoes of the Spanish monarchy.) This floor is like having a meal as a child – you have to eat all your greens before you can get to the pud, because upstairs is what you've really come to see!

If you are a shoeaholic (or leather fetishist) the entrance to the upper floors should have a health warning displayed – 'Do not enter on the grounds that you may destroy the carpet by salivating over it within five minutes! (It's parquet, actually, but you get the drift.) Case after case of shoes, boots, clogs, sandals, trainers, high heels, low heels, cultural, sexual, staid, erotic, functional, 'oh God, if only!', hand made, miniature, gigantic, historical, modern, 'not possible!', rainbow and monotone, watered silk and plastic, "I'll have three pairs but can you make the heels a couple of inches higher – with spikes?". But while the deviants dribble over metal clasps and ever-so-tight lace ups, there is actually a serious side to the museum.

"The shoe trade has suffered a tremendous amount over the last few years because of competition from the far east," says José, "but one of the most important aspects of the shoe museum, and one that not many people know about, are our training courses.'

For thirteen weeks each year a group of no more than fifteen hand-picked trainees are given intensive tuition in shoe-making. "Spain has always been the country with the best shoe designers in the world. When the upper crust go shopping for shoes they say "I'm going to buy some new Manolos," meaning they are going to buy shoes by Manolo Blahnik, the world's top shoe designer, and Spanish. That's not what we are about, but it would be wonderful if one of our students could be the new MB!"

What they, or at least the course, is about is specialism. "People come here to see the shoes, that's obvious. They want to imagine themselves wearing the gorgeous high-heels to some elegant dinner or have a collection of the beautiful miniatures that the top designers often make to see how their designs look. But as you walk around the museum you will also see the lasts of some very special designers, those whose names will never be known but whose work will give more pleasure to one person than a hundred copies of the Stuart Weitzman sexy sandals."



Elton John's booty face; high fashion snake skins; the belted, booted and bewildered, Elda's shoe museum has it all – and it's pretty sure you won't find them in a high street branch of Clarks!







## ALICANTE'S LUNAR LANDSCAPE

**Area:** Inland southwest Alicante

**Route:** Alicante – Santa Eulalia – Pinoso – Baños de Fortuna – Abanilla

**Distance:** 135 kilometres

*Visit a semi-deserted village with a murderous past and wallow in the warm waters of a natural spring on an excursion that passes through Alicante's wine-producing hinterland.*

From the A7 motorway that circumnavigates Alicante, take the N330, the main road to Madrid that begins just south of the city. Stay on this dual carriageway for 46 kilometres, passing Novelda and Elda until, a couple of kilometres after you see Sax castle perched on top of a sheer precipice, you come to the exit for Santa Eulalia. You exit with a large Cepsa filling station on your right. Follow the signs for Santa Eulalia as you cross over the motorway and come to a T-junction. Turn right.

As you drive down the narrow road, a rooftop rises over the pine trees before you. A few moments later you enter the Colonia de Santa Eulalia, a peaceful, picturesque village surrounded by cornfields but with a semi-derelict air and a past shrouded in mystery.

Sit in the centre of the square of baked earth and neglected plants in front of the church — its clock pointing permanently to one minute past two as if signalling the time when the old town died — and try to imagine it as it was in its heyday. Once the square was adorned with statues, pools, fountains and gardens and the Condesa de Santa Eulalia entertained her guests in the Teatro Cervantes behind La Unión, the towering fábrica de alcohols at one side of the square. In its day, the most important performers in Spain trod the boards of the tiny theatre.

The story goes that at the end of the 19th century, with funds supplied by the Conde de Alcudia, an agricultural engineer built here a village of 20 houses, a farm, a flour factory, a distillery, café and shop, and a small palacio surrounded by beautiful gardens. A while later the count was murdered by someone, it was rumoured, in the pay of his wife, who then inflamed local gossip by setting up home with the engineer.

Little by little the lady's wealth was frittered away by her lover, who later abandoned her. What was left she spent defending herself against an accusation of murdering her husband, until she was reduced to penury and the deepest misery. This is just one story of many that haunt the slowly disintegrating colonia. Others involve a miracle and a giant serpent.

Although the flour factory finally closed its doors in the 1970s, Santa Eulalia isn't as deserted as it appears at first glance. The permanent population of a dozen or so



families is increased at weekends and on fiesta days by visitors, some of whom have holiday homes in the village.

There are moves afoot to restore some of the buildings, including the palace, which has a stunningly painted interior. But things are slowed down by the fact that Santa Eulalia is located in two municipalities (the border runs right through the palace), and it's feared this odd but rather engaging little village could tumble into ruin before anything is done to save it.

Leave Santa Eulalia by Calle de Salinas, the narrow road that runs up the side of the Teatro Cervantes in the direction of Cabrerias and the El Plano picnic area. At the first T-junction turn right. Take care on this road. Most of it is in quite good condition but there are sections, mainly where old water courses have been filled in, that are a bit rough.

You are now travelling through flatlands of corn, vines and olive groves, passing rows of tiny, ancient terraced houses typical of this area, some of which have been joined together and converted into weekend retreats for city folk.

In the fields you will see dozens of one-room casitas (huts used by farmers to store their tools or cook meals) and what look like tall chimneys but are in fact towers housing pumps to draw water for irrigation. Turn left at the next T-junction.

The countryside is a cornucopia of jagged rocks, pointed hillocks, undulating mountains and rolling fields, a multi-hued valley of different crops each displaying its own colour and shade of green.

A short drive brings you to Salinas. When you get to a large new roundabout beside some industrial units on the edge of town, take the second right, leading you into the village. Follow the road as it curves around taking you on to the main road. Just after you turn you will see an ochre-coloured building on the left with a sign for the Asociación Amas de Casa. Stay on this road (CV830) as it leaves the village.

You pass through a fertile valley with barely a millimetre of the land uncultivated. On your left you catch glimpses of the Laguna de Salinas, a small lake that irrigates the patchwork quilt of vineyards, olive groves and almond trees. Seen from a distance, the vines look like rows of well-regulated stubble in the brick red earth, interspersed with the occasional cornfield that adds a golden haze. By summer they will be heavy with the grapes that make this one of the most bountiful wine-making areas in Valencia.

Ten kilometres after Salinas you come to a junction where you turn right on the CV83 and drive to Pinoso, 13 kilometres away. The sleepy nature of Pinoso belies the fact that, per capita, it was one of the richest towns in Spain, its fortune based on the three 'S's': salt, shoes and sausages. Most people who see giant mounds of salt on the coast at La Mata think it comes from the salt lake of Salinas de Mata; in fact it is deposited there after having travelled 60 kilometres propelled by gravity through an underground pipeline from the purple salt mountains above Pinoso.

Despite being an ancient crossroads, Pinoso isn't exactly packed with historical content (apart from the pretty clock tower that also served as the town jail), but it is a pleasant town with a good indoor market. It also has some good walks in the vicinity and is part of a wine route dotted with 'Venta de vino' signs inviting you to stop to sample locally produced wines.

Leaving Pinoso, take the CV836/C3223 to Fortuna 26 kilometres away. The road descends into another valley full of vineyards and fields edged with grey stone walls. The landscape is strangely impressive, far removed from the mountains only an hour's drive north.

In the distance you can see what looks like a metropolis of white, high-rise buildings but are actually the sides of mountains cut away to extract marble. This sight is especially spectacular by night when the searing arc lights of the quarries light up the sky.

Just after the Bodega Sanbert, a new building six kilometres from Pinoso that looks rather out of place in this beautiful countryside, you crest a small hill, and a stunning vista of orange groves and vineyards laid out along the valley floor comes into view. The landscape changes rapidly as you twist through barren hills, the earth taking on a peculiar colouring of striated red and pale green, where hilltops have been lopped off to provide more space for cultivation.

You pass plenty of ruined masías (old farmhouses) just waiting to be restored, and what look like man-made stumps sticking out of the ground are actually the chimneys of troglodyte houses. Historically, these cave homes were inhabited by poor people but are now becoming much sought-after, partly because they maintain a year-round temperature of 18°C and can be easily and cheaply enlarged. If you need an extra room, you just hack it out of the sandstone.

As you drive on, the terrain becomes more lunar-like and takes on a peculiarly rugged and barren beauty. When you cross the long narrow bridge at Compules, keep an eye open for cacti growing on the roof of a semi-derelict house.

The village of Baños de Fortuna, three kilometres after the cactus house, looks dusty and careworn, but as you pass the first few houses you see a large tiled sign to the left indicating the entrance to the Balnearios Fortuna-Leana, one of the foremost spas in Spain.

Drive under the shady pines that welcome you to the Balneario and you enter a world of Victorian elegance whose health-giving waters have attracted a constant stream of elderly and not-so-elderly Spaniards for almost a century and a half.

If you don't feel the need for lumber sprays, mud massages or being bombarded by high-pressure hoses, all of them wonderfully stimulating, you can relax in a pair of naturally heated swimming pools.

(Read the full story of the Balneario Fortuna-Leana below.)



From the spa, continue on the road you came in by, following the sharp bend left just after the blue painted building and the entrance to the piscina. It isn't signposted, but 10 minutes later you will enter the village of Mahoya. Turn right at the T-junction (signposted Abanilla) and very quickly you will come to a roundabout indicating Abanilla is two kilometres further on. When you get there, follow the signs through the twisting streets for the church, behind which is a small car park.

San José, with its gilded and marbled retablo, is one of the most beautiful churches you will ever see. The side chapels alone would grace any cathedral. But this is only one of the jewels in Abanilla's crown.

In front of the church is the beautifully restored façade of a mansion, once home to the commander of the local forces of the Knights of Calatrava, Spain's oldest military order. Founded in 1158 by a group of Cistercians monks from Navarra, who formed themselves into a military confraternity as a defence against the Moors, the order was very powerful, holding large tracts of land until the 13th century, when it fell into decline. The house is now a private home, but you can sometimes get a brief glance through the heavy, studded doorway into its tree-shaded central courtyard.

Walk a few metres up Calle Mayor, a narrow street that runs off the Plaza de la Constitución, the square in front of the Ayuntamiento, and you come to a beautiful fountain, decorated with ceramic imagery telling the folkloric history of the area. Elderly women of the village spurn the bottled water available from shops and bring large plastic buckets to fill up here, proselytising on its excellent quality. "Es muy dulce; en verano es fresca y en invierno es caliente," they will tell you. "It is very sweet; in summer it's cold and in winter it's warm."



Climb up the 177 steps from the Plaza de la Constitución to a pleasant garden of cactus and palm and you find yourself beneath a 10-metre-high statue of Christ of the Sacred Heart. It is completely white except for the vivid red heart emanating golden rays and the stigmata in the hands.

Walking back down the steps, you can enter one of the narrow side streets that meander through the old town and stop off at the Plaza de la Lonja to relax in the shade of a bougainvillea-covered arbour where the locals gather to chat and enjoy the cool of the evening.

Leave Abanilla in the direction of Orihuela and Benferri. At Benferri you can pick up the E15/A7 for Alicante or Murcia. If you wish to return to Costa Blanca south, continue on the C4140/CV870 to Orihuela until it reaches the junction of the N340. (Ignore the road to the right signposted Orihuela just before you reach the N340.)

Turn right and a few hundred metres on you will see a road passing over the N340, just before which is a right-hand turn almost opposite a Repsol garage. This turning is badly signposted as the direction sign for Orihuela is almost obscured by a large blue-and-white traffic bollard. Take the turn, going over the N340, and follow the signs for Bigastro and Torrevieja.

## WHAT TO SEE

### **COLONIA DE SANTA EULALIA:**

A picturesque, semi-abandoned village with a colourful past set amid cornfields.

### **PINOSO**

**Torre del Reloj**, clock tower that also served as the village jail.

### **BAÑOS DE FORTUNA:**

Bañeros Fortuna-Leana. Thermal spa with residential accommodation. Thermal pools open to non-residents who can also arrange treatments on the day of their visit. For information about treatment and reservations call 902 444 410.

### **ABANILLA:**

**San José**, beautiful church with a gilded and marbled retablo.

La Fuente, Calle Mayor. A fountain decorated with 12 metres of ceramic imagery telling the history of the area.

Sagrado Corazón, 10-metre-high statue of Christ overlooking the Plaza de la Constitución.

## MORE INFORMATION

### **PINOSO:**

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaza de España, 1. Tel. 96 697 02 50. You can pick up a small booklet here giving information about the town and locality.



## Mud, Mud, Glorious Mud Balneario Fortuna-Leana

As we walked along the arched brick passageway, twelve metres below ground, my charming guide, Ingrid de Mulder, explained to me that I could spend as long as I liked in the room up ahead, but she would probably only be able to stay about thirty seconds because her glasses get steamed up. (Although as she was talking about her sunglasses and we were below ground I was understandably a bit confused.)

We stepped through a door set in a narrow wall into a small, pink-painted, domed room with a statue of a Grecian water carrier spot-lit in a niche in the wall. Instant sauna! A rock-lined pool in the centre of the room, no more than a metre across, bubbled ferociously as water spurted from three holes the diameter of petit lady's palm. This is the 'Source' - the source on which the whole of the Balneario Fortuna-Leana is built; of the treatments it prides itself on, of the soft waters that fill its swimming pools and bubble baths, and serves the steam room that lulls its visitors into luxuriant lassitude - 960 litres per minute at a constant temperature of 53°, just as it has for centuries. "I have to go," says Ingrid. "My glasses are steaming up and my dress is beginning to cling to me!"

A marble plaque just above the main entrance the subterranean thermae informed me that Don Juan Cascales Font (a highly apt name for someone who was to create one of the foremost spas in Spain) and his wife Doña Carlota Bocio Boucha 'Dueños de estas Prodigiosas Termas' opened them to the public in 1863. Two decades later the elegant Gran Hotel was opened, and two rows of cottages, each with their own source-heated bath which could be rented on a daily or weekly basis. (The hotel is now known as the Hotel Balneario, thanks to a ruling during the Franco regime that ordered that only hotels of four or five stars could precede their name with the adjective 'Gran' - although locals still refer to it as 'el Gran')

Don Juan being a fierce advocate of the reigning Modernista style (Art Nouveau), the hotel reflected this elegant and visually entertaining architectural form. It still does, as many of the public rooms - including the splendid sweeping staircase and the beautiful dining room, with its central row of ornate cast iron pillars, based on the dining room of the ill-fated Titanic (another of Don Juan's fancies) - are still in their original condition.

As the decades rolled by the elegant Hotel Victoria replaced the cottages, gardens were laid, swimming pools set in place, and the Casino built. This was not a casino in the usual context of the Spanish word, a gentleman's club, but a genuine gambling arena, where a turn of the card might deliver the funds for a longer stay and extra treatments at the balneario. (It's to be hoped that payment for the balnearios services was taken in advance for those for whom the cards went the other way.)

In true vacationing style (Don Juan was an pioneer of the package holiday), the Casino also incorporated a ballroom and, in the arid land just above Murcia in which Fortuna sits, the novelty of a Salon de Golf, an indoor pitch-and-putt course, with fairways and obstacles made from wood and golfing scenes painted on the wall.

As we emerged back into daylight, Ingrid ushered me into the foyer of the Hotel Victoria, where I was to spend the next three days, sampling sprays, jets, masseur's kneading, and heated outdoor pools to see if some sort of life could be drummed to this corpulent form of mine. She handed me a big white bathrobe, with the comment, "Don't worry, you'll probably feel a bit silly wandering the streets in it at first, everybody does, but you soon get used to it." What had I let myself in for!

While many people visit balnearios for relaxation, spas have historically been important to the Spanish people as part of their health regime. Visits are often made on an annual basis as a preventative measure against suffering from the ailments that can occur in later years. If you are staying for a week or more, or are there for a specific medical condition, you are advised to speak to one of the resident doctors, when you will be prescribed treatments suitable to the conditions particularly troubling you at that time. The prescriptions can be highly specific, detailing water temperature, pressure, length of treatment etc., which will be carried out by the trained staff.

As I was only there for a couple of days I was all out for a bit of relaxation and pampering, and my first treatment was to be a *masaje lodo marino*, a massage in warm marine mud. As I relaxed on the massage table, listening to gentle music floating in the background, I became aware of the door opening behind me. A few seconds later I felt the splash of hot mud hit the small of my back that sent a surge of 'Ooooooooooooo.....!' rushing up my spine. It was glorious!

The masseur gently spread the mud over my back (not directly on the back, as a fine layer of material is laid between the skin and the mud), and covered it over with further layers of material before leaving me to bake. I have no idea of the curative properties of marine mud, but I do know that it was one of the most exquisite sensations I have ever felt, warming my back as it crackled and popped. The mud - not my back. I slowly drifted off, waking once more to the sound of the door opening a while later, from a dream - and I swear this is true - of riding on a double-decker bus in Bolton!

The layers of mud and material were peeled away, followed by a gentle massage using aromatic oils. When it was finished I managed, somehow, to glide back to my room, flop on the bed and zonk out in a state of bliss.

It was suggested that I experience the treatments over two mornings, as it is best not to overdo things no matter how much you might be enjoying them. On the first morning I had another massage, this time under powerful sprays of warm water, a lounge in the steam room, and a bubble in a huge bath carved from a solid slab of marble over a century ago.

One of the things I noticed was the consideration of the staff. Every few minutes a head would pop in to ask "¿Va bien?" and yes, everything was going well; a little touch on the shoulder or a gentle guiding by the elbow did not go unnoticed and added considerably to the relaxed ambience of the treatment rooms.

Day two I experienced treatments for the lumber region and the back of the neck, where thin layers of very hot water run over the lower back and neck. "It makes you jump at first," laughed the attendant, but, like wearing a bathrobe in public, I soon got used to it.

While I leaned on a bar revelling in the delicious relaxation my back was experiencing, I chatted to an elderly chap sitting next to me. He'd lost count of the number of years he'd been coming to the balneario, but swore by the benefits the



treatments afforded him, particularly as he now suffers from very painful osteoporosis throughout most of his body.

From the circular shower, where your entire body is bombarded with fine jets of hot water (as I'm terribly ticklish I didn't know if this was pleasure or purgatory), I ended my treatments with a hose down from a high-pressure jet. It was wonderful, with the attendant, like a fireman practicing his hose technique, pounding almost every inch of my body, including the soles of my feet - a very novel experience.

Between treatments I spent the days drifting in the deliciously warm outdoor pools, or lazing on the sun terrace surrounding them. It was there that I met Joe Maloney and his wife Anne, from Dublin, who own a house in Rojales, a forty-minute drive away. "Although it took me five hours to get here the first time," grins Joe. "I kept getting lost!" The couple spend the whole of the months of April and September in Spain, and every week they visit the balneario. "This has become something of a pilgrimage for us," Joe continues. "I just love being in the water here, it seems to wrap itself around you like a warm blanket."

After lazy days, my evenings passed imagining myself sailing the Atlantic in the dining room of the Titanic - although I lacked the temerity to ask for ice in my water, and my nights sleeping peacefully in the silence that engulfs the balneario







## SEA OF PALMS

**Area:** Southwest of Alicante city

**Route:** Elche – Aspe - Novelda

**Distance:** 42 kilometres

*Stroll through Europe's largest palm forest which provides the white fronds used in Easter celebrations all over the world, and marvel at how the other half lived at the turn of the 20th century.*

Palms are the one thing you can't miss in Elche. It has the most extensive palm forest in Europe, covering more than 445 hectares (1,100 acres). With more than 200,000 trees, there is said to be one for each of the city's inhabitants.

The older part of Elche (Elx in valenciano) is set in the middle of this palm forest like an urban oasis, which is exactly what the Moors who planted the palms intended it to be — an oasis on the trade route between Africa and the interior of the Iberian peninsula. Their original irrigation system is still in use today in some places and has ensured the continued existence of Europe's most northerly palm forest.

There are 67 huertos (gardens or orchards) of palm trees in total, but the most historic is the 13,000-square-metre Huerto del Cura, famous for its 200-year-old Imperial Palm, a single tree with eight branches.

It is also renowned for its baptised trees, which bear a plaque in honour of the person in whose name it was baptised. One palm carries the name of Queen Sofía. The patron attends a ceremony during which their palm is baptised with wine and each year they receive a bunch of dates from their own tree.

The influence of the palm extends far beyond that of providing a few dignitaries with dessert or visitors with a bit of exotic shade. The fronds of the white palm cultivated in Elche are sent throughout Europe for Palm Sunday processions. Black plastic hoods are placed over the tops of male palms to keep the light out and stop the young branches from turning green. When they are harvested they are kept moist in special refrigerators before being woven into ornate confections of stars, crowns, donkeys and castles, which can be anything up to 2.4 metres (8 feet) high.

Almost as numerous as the palm trees are replicas, from finger-sized to monumental, of the bust of the Dama de Elche to be seen throughout the city. Thought to be the earliest example of Iberian sculpture (dating from 500 BC), the Dama was discovered in 1897, then sold to the Louvre in Paris for the equivalent of about 35 euros. It returned to Spain in 1941. The beautifully carved head of a woman



with ornate headgear went on show in Elche for six months in 2006 but its permanent home is in the Museo Arqueológico Nacional in Madrid.

But the Dama is just one example of the art and architecture brought to Elche, or Illici as the original Iberian residents knew it, by conquering hordes. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans and Moors all adapted the city to suit their needs and left their mark. The original 12th-century Arab baths are hidden inside the 14th-century convent of Our Lady of Mercé, while the town hall looming over the Plaza de Baixa was built in the 13th century to a Moorish design but acquired a new façade during the Renaissance period. Most overwhelming is the Basílica de Santa María, the 15th-century baroque church that dominates the city centre, built on the site of a mosque.



### Elche's medieval mystery play

Vying with the Palm Sunday procession as one of the city's most important fiestas, the Misteri d'Elx is the only medieval choral religious mystery play allowed to be performed inside a church after the Council of Trent's ban in the 17th century. In true medieval liturgical style, no women are allowed to participate and all the angels, and Mary herself, are played by young boys.

Performed and sung by amateurs, the re-enactment of Mary's death and ascension to Heaven takes place over five days in mid-August, in the Santa María basilica. A three-day dress rehearsal (open to the public) is followed by the full two-day performance.

In the early part of the performance the Mangrana, an enormous gilded pomegranate, descends through an opening in a painted canvas representing heaven, slowly opening to form a palm tree of brilliantly coloured leaves. It shelters an angel carrying a golden palm, which he delivers to Mary, la Virgen de la Asunción, 22 terrifying metres below. The audience goes wild when Mary rises triumphantly heavenward, accompanied by a guitar-strumming angelic choir.



An ancient, complex contraption of beams, pulleys and stout ropes is used to send the actors flying upwards and downwards during the performance. The operating instructions were passed verbally from father to son and only were finally written down in the year 2000.

Apart from its historical significance, Elche produces 42 per cent of the shoes made in Spain and has some splendid shoe shops to prove it, as well as shops selling virtually anything you can think of to do with palms and dates.

To continue the excursion, leave Elche by the road that passes in front of the tourist information office and crosses over the Pont d'Altamira in the direction of Crevillente and Aspe 12 kilometres away. A couple of hundred metres after the bridge, a small sign to the right directs you to Aspe and the Polígono Industrial Carrús. (The sign is not easy to see, so look for St Andrew's School of English on a corner and turn there.)

Follow the signs for Aspe, Murcia and Alicante, with the Polisportiu Municipal de Camps on your right, taking the right at the first roundabout. Take a left at the next roundabout, signposted for the Hotel AC and the Hotel Campanillo (there is no motorway sign here but you will soon see one). You pass through an industrial estate, where you turn right at a large roundabout directing you to the motorway and a few moments later join it heading toward Aspe and Alicante. When you see an overhead sign for Aspe-Asp, cross over to the left lane as you come to a left-hand bend, immediately after which is the turn-off for Aspe (CV84). If you aren't in the left lane, you could miss it.

Stay on this dual carriageway (ignoring the small sign to your right that indicates Aspe and Zona Industrial) until you come to the exit for Aspe and Crevillente (N325). Follow the signs into Aspe town centre.

Aspe has been an independent wine-producing area since the 16th century, but these days the town forms part of an association with neighbouring Novelda, Hondón de las Nieves and Monforte del Cid and shares with them the Denominación de Origen Uva Embolsada del Vinalopó, which guarantees the high quality of the table grapes from this area.

The mature grapes are covered with paper bags while ripening to protect them from insects and to ensure their sweetness — an unusual sight during the months of September and October. These grapes are the sweetest available and much favoured during the New Year's Eve celebrations, when Spaniards traditionally gulp down one grape on each of the twelve chimes of the clock at midnight to bring them luck for the coming year.

The original Moorish town of Aspis was founded in the 12th century on a site about four kilometres from the present town. A few ruins are still visible there. Modern Aspe was built on the banks of the Tarafa River, a tributary of the Vinalopó, which later dried up and earned the town the nickname of *uvas mil y agua poca*, a thousand grapes and little water.

At its heart Aspe is a pretty little town with a liking for pastel-shaded paintwork. Even some of the modern buildings are decked out in coats of ochre, pale blue, brick red and other pleasantly muted tones. In the Plaza Mayor, the 17th-century palacio of the Duque de Maqueda, until recently used as the town hall, is undergoing extensive restoration. The new town hall next door has been designed by someone with obvious good taste and the modern frontage blends in beautifully with the stone of its 300-year-old neighbour. It's worth nipping inside to admire its arched glass ceiling.

Facing the palace in the Plaza Mayor is the attractive Casino Primitivo, one of a number of modernista (Art Nouveau) buildings in the town, but the square is dominated by the grand baroque façade of the Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Socorro. The church celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2002. Unfortunately it is often closed, but there is a pretty little side chapel on the narrow lane to the right of the building.

The attractive streets radiating from the Plaza Mayor are a mixture of modernista and medieval. Two minutes or so walk from the town hall is the splendid 1930s Mercado de Abastos with its glorious Moorish-style horseshoe arch for an entrance and its cream-and-rust-red stonework. You can shop here for a picnic and take it to the nice little park beside the market.

To find out more of the history of Aspe visit the Museo Municipal, situated in the Centro Social, by the bridge that takes you in the direction of Novelda. The museum is housed in a 19th-century nobleman's house and has displays of oil and wine-making processes (original to the house) as well as depictions of life in a small town.

To leave Aspe, cross the bridge in front of the Museo Municipal on Avenida de la Constitución and stay on this road for five kilometres until you reach Novelda. When you reach the traffic lights at Novelda just after the Renault garage, turn right following the signs for the tourist information office and the Santuario and Castillo. Follow the road to the roundabout at the bottom and turn left in the direction of Elda then left again when you see the sign for Centro Urbano in front of the Citroen garage. Park where you see a sign for the tourist office to your right because there is no parking near the office itself, and parking in the small square beside it is reserved for official vehicles (you will also be leaving by this road.)

Novelda owes its existence to marble, saffron and grapes, but what sets the town apart from others are the splendid examples of modernista architecture, with its characteristic curved and spiralling arabesques, more widely known as Art Nouveau.

The Plaza del Ayuntamiento has one of the prettiest Cruz Roja (Red Cross) offices in Spain, with its gaily turreted and balconied exterior looking down on the ambulances below. Opposite, across the peaceful tree-filled square, the restored façade of what is now the town hall is a lovely example of 17th-century Valencia civic architecture. Set in the cool arcaded entrance are large tiled murals depicting the main industries of the area. Take Calle Mayor, to the left of the town hall, and at number 24 enjoy a glimpse of how the 'other half' lived at the turn of the 20th century. The house, now known as the Casa Museo Modernista, was originally a grand family home in the centre of the developing town.

It was built by one Antonia Navarro, a widow of formidable business prowess and well supported by an extensive fortune inherited from her father. To get an idea of just how affluent she was, take a look at the row of tiles set in the walls surrounding the delightful internal patio. Each tile, and there are an awful lot of them, bears an image of one of the properties she owned.

No expense was spared in the building of the house, which was inaugurated in 1905 to coincide with the wedding of one of Antonia's daughters. The house fell into near-ruin after the Civil War but fortunately, in 1977, a bank restored it, furnishing it with period pieces from auction houses throughout Spain. The museum also houses an exhibition in honour of Jorge Juan, son of Novelda and one of Spain's most famous mariners.

On Calle Emilio Castellar in the Parque de F. Rodríguez de la Fuente, is the splendid Casino, founded in 1888 and beautifully restored a century later. To the rear of the building, amid tree-shaded gardens full of birdsong stands a superb Victorian bandstand, complete with an angelic harp on its roof.

(To enhance your visit to Novelda, read the article below.)

Leaving Novelda, go straight ahead until you come to a square with a church in front of you. To the right of the church is a sign directing you to Monóvar. At the next major junction you will see, just across the road to your left, the ornate entrance to the Parque del Oeste, a pleasant picnic spot.

The park is a delightful Gaudiesque respite from the bustling town. Passing through the gaudily tiled and luxuriously entwined wrought-iron entrance, the first thing you spot is an undulating, mosaic seat encircling a pond, from the centre of which spouts a bubbling fountain. It is pleasant to saunter along footpaths and over bridges made from disused railway sleepers that cross ponds filled with goldfish.

There is a picnic area set aside with wooden tables below shady conifers and, on weekends, the neat little fake ruins bedecked with bougainvillea provide an idyllic backdrop for the constant stream of newlyweds who come here to have their photographs taken.

From the Parque del Oeste head back into town and follow the signs for Alicante. They will take you to the N330 and a quick 25-kilometre drive back to the coast.

## WHAT TO SEE

### **ELCHE:**

**Huerto del Cura**, Carrer Porta de la Morera, s/n. Open daily 9am-6pm (summer 9am-8.30pm). Tel. 96 545 27 47. Entry €2.50

**Basílica de Santa María**, Plaza de Santa Isabel. Open daily 7am-1.30pm and 5.30-9pm.

**Museu de la Festa**, Carrer Major de la Vila, 25. Tel. 96 545 34 64. Open Tues-Sat 10am-1pm and 4.30-8.30pm (summer 5-9pm). Entry €3. (Fiesta museum including costumes and items used in the Mystery play. Video show of the play daily 10.30am, 11.30am, 12.15pm, 5pm, 6pm, 7pm.)

**ASPE:**

**Plaza Mayor**, attractive tree-shaded square with interesting buildings including the Ayuntamiento, Nuestra Señora del Socorro church and the Casino Primitivo.

**Museo Histórico de Aspe**, Avda. Constitución, 42. Tel. 96 549 34 63. Entry free. Open 6-8pm Wed, Thurs, Fri, and 10.30am-1.30pm Sat, Sun and Fiesta days.

**Mercado de Abastos, Parc Dr. Calatayub. Open 8am-2pm Mon-Sat. Closed Sun.**

**NOVELDA:**

**Casa-Museo Modernista**, Calle Mayor, 24. Tel. 96 560 02 37. Open 9.30am-2pm and 4-7pm Mon-Fri (6pm on Fri), 11am-2pm Sat. Closed August.

**Casino/Parque F. Rodríguez**, Calle Emilio Castelar. The park open to public but only certain rooms in the Casino have public access although the caretaker is usually amenable to visitors seeing the upper rooms if asked politely.

**Parque del Oeste**, Avenida Ingeniero Enrique Santo. On the edge of town in the direction of Monóvar. Open 10am-7pm

**Castillo La Mola**, the only castle in Europe with a triangular tower.

Santuario de Santa María Magdalena, a bizarre-looking sanctuary beside the castle.

Note: A visit to the castle and sanctuary outside town is a must. See "Trip 20: Route of the Castles" for details and how to get there.

**MORE INFORMATION**

**ELCHE:**

**Tourist Information Office**, Parque Municipal, s/n. Tel. 96 545 27 47. Open Mon-Fri 10am-7pm, Sat 10am-2.30pm, Sun 10am-2pm.

**ASPE:**

**Ayuntamiento**, Plaza Mayor. Tel. 96 691 99 00. Open Mon-Fri 8.30am-2.30pm.

**NOVELDA:**

**Tourist Information Office**, Calle Mayor, 6. Tel. 96 560 92 2892 2





## A Stroll Around Novelda

'Glorious!', 'Stunning!', 'Gorgeous!' - not thoughts that might immediately spring to mind as you drive through the mundane suburbs and industrial zones of Novelda, but those with a little perseverance will discover one of the gems of the Valencian Community, for which those same words will hardly do justice.

Set in the Valle Medio de Vinalopó, 25 kilometres above Alicante, Novelda owes its existence to the three pillars of marble, saffron and grapes, the latter said to be the only grapes to be consumed fresh during the Christmas festivities. Like many of the towns of the Valencian Community, Novelda has pockets of history going back to the Moorish invaders, but what sets the town apart are the splendid architectural examples of the Modernista period.

For a well laid out map and a hand-full of tourist information, nip into the tourist office in the Centro Cultural Gómez Tortosa, at 6 Calle Mayor. (For such a grandly named calle, it's actually the narrow street that runs up the left side of the Town Hall in the Plaza de Ayuntamiento.) Here you'll get your first view of the brightly coloured, plaster and tile work and the curved and spiralling arabesques that were symptomatic of the cult of all things Eastern that became the Modernista style, more widely known as 'Art Nouveau'. Like the carthorse to the stallion though, the Centro Cultural is as

nothing to its near neighbour a few doors up the calle. A couple of doors away is the splendidly named 'Papeleria Escandell' – what could the scandal be about! (Although that's not what the word means, why spoil a good paraphrase!)

Don't be too quick to pass through the Plaza de Ayuntamiento or you'll miss one of the prettiest Cruz Roja offices in Spain, with its gaily turreted and balconied exterior looking down on the ambulances below. Opposite, across the peaceful tree-filled square, the restored façade of what is now the Town Hall is a lovely example of 17th century Valenciano civic architecture, with its sundial surmounted by a clock for those who aren't too good with shadows. Set in the cool arcaded entrance are large tiled murals depicting the main industries of the area.

Having dawdled long enough, wander up Calle Mayor to number 24, and prepare yourself to step back into the lap of luxury of how the 'other half' lived at the turn of the 20th century.

The house was initially a one-family palace-like residence, right in the centre of the developing town. It was built, not by some city-slicker grandee, but by one Antonia Navarro, a widow of formidable business prowess, well supported by an extensive fortune inherited from her father. (To get an idea of just how affluent she was, in the walls surrounding the delightful internal patio are a band of tiles, each with an image of one of the properties she owned – and there are an awful lot of them!)



No expense was spared for this 'caso insólito' (one-off), and the building was inaugurated in 1905 with the wedding of one of Antonia Navarro's daughters. Sadly, the privations of the Civil War brought the building to the brink of ruination, but in 1977 CAM Bank took over the complete restoration of the mini palacio, equipping and furnishing it from auction houses throughout Spain.

It would be an insult to try and describe this glorious building in a few miserable words – it has to be seen to be fully understood and appreciated, and it will cost you nothing to do so. And hope you get a guide such as the delightful Juan Francisco, the gentleman who spoke with such enthusiasm as he showed me around, and explained about the concerts held regularly in the tiny first-floor ballroom, before taking me to the top floor to introduce me to the permanent exhibition in honour of Jorge Juan, son of Novelda and one of Spain's most famous mariners.

It's only a five minute ramble to the Casino, the centre of many Spanish towns, which usually had nothing to do with gambling at all other than a few hands of card, a rattle of dominoes, or a game of billiards.

Founded in 1888 and beautifully restored a century later, this splendid building is set in its own park-like grounds, the Parque de F. Rodriguez de la Fuente. To the rear of the building, tree-shaded gardens full of birdsong provide a dozing area on a hot summer's day, and in the centre is a superb Victorian bandstand, complete with angelic harp on top.

As you wander through the games rooms on the upper floor a sign asks you to 'Guardar por favour silencio', and next to it another tells you that because of the increasing costs of staff and to produce a good service they have had, unfortunately, to put up the games fees. If you want to play Poker or Ranni it will cost you 6 euros per pack, but if you want to play the more civilised parchisi or dominoes it is a mere fifty centimos per person. Green velvet covered card tables sit under an incredibly rococo ceiling and if lady luck isn't going your way you can step out on to the veranda for a spot of fresh air – or throw yourself off if she's really turned against you!

Novelda has a number of other parks and gardens but the one to head for to escape the town traffic is the Parque del Oeste, although it would be fair to say that it is a bit more than a 'stroll' from the town centre, but only a couple of minutes by car.

Through the gaudily tiled and luxuriously entwined wrought iron entrance, the first thing you spot is a Gaudi knock-off - an undulating, mosaic-enriched seat encircling a pond, from the centre of which spouts a bubbling fountain. It's a pleasant saunter along footpaths interrupted by bridges made from disused railway sleepers that cross goldfish filled ponds. You get the impression that a couple of buckets full of water would set all the tiered waterfalls in motion.

Not a stroll at all, but a ten-minute drive from the Parque del Oeste, is the wacky Santuario de Santa Maria Magdalena. Whilst the Santuario looks like something that the famous Antonio Gaudi cut his teeth on before getting stuck into the Sagrada Familia, the building has a knobbly Disneyesque charm.

In complete contrast to the outrageous exterior, the interior is surprisingly simple. Light filters through arches of alternating red and clear glass panels, illuminating a minimum of architectural details. Around the walls a series of three metre high paintings depict Biblical scenes and religious imagery, many of which include Santa Maria Magdalena, Patrona of Novelda. Despite their appearance of antiquity, they were painted during the 1960's.



Beside the Santuario is the Castillo Triangular, the only one of its kind in Europe, which, if you haven't already guessed, is three-sided.









## BUTTERFLY MAIDS AND PAINTED PIGEONS

**Area:** West of Torrevieja.

**Route:** Torrevieja – Orihuela – Murcia – Archena – Abanilla

**Distance:** 119 kilometres

*Visit a fabulously decorated old-time casino to see the butterfly maidens and dance a polka, then drive through the arid south to wallow in medicinal mud.*

You leave Torrevieja on the CV95, in the direction of San Miguel de Salinas and Orihuela, an inland road that takes you 21 kilometres through extensive orange groves, past the Embalse de la Pedrera and on to Bigastro. Leaving this town, you will see a sign just after a roundabout indicating Orihuela four kilometres further on. After a few minutes on this straight road, you will see the great edifice of the Seminario looming on the hillside above Orihuela.

Cross over the next roundabout and at the one after that, in front of the Hipermercado Eroski, turn left where the road becomes the CV925. Moments later, at the next roundabout, turn right to go through an underpass that brings you out at yet another roundabout, this one with a large sculpture of radiating metal bars. Take the left exit (passing to the right of Automóviles Joyper) for the Centro Urbano and at the end of this street there is a set of traffic lights (with a Benetton sign in front of you). Turn left and almost immediately you enter the town centre with a very pretty park, the Glorieta Gabriel Miró.

Orihuela is a tricky town to drive around and it's best to leave the car somewhere near the park because this is the way you will be leaving to continue the excursion. This is the modern part of the city but it is only a few minutes' walk to the old town.

Orihuela sits on the banks of the meandering Segura, a river that supplies a complex irrigation system dating back to Arab times and feeds the abundant orange and lemon groves that form such an intrinsic part of the regional scenery. The capital of the Vega Baja, Orihuela has no less than five national monuments and more than a scattering of museums, parks and galleries to keep the visitor entertained for hours.

It is a city of grand buildings. The most impressive of these is the 16th-century Colegio de Santo Domingo. Originally a convent with a small school, it was recognised by papal bull in 1569 and became a university. It taught theology, grammar, arts and the law until it was closed in 1824 as part of the suppression of religious orders. Almost two centuries later, it fulfils an educational role once more, housing a secondary school and part of the tourism department of Alicante University.

The Renaissance convent cloister was built in the early 17th century and the baroque university cloister was built between 1727 and 1737. The latter has two levels of Romanesque arches, slender Corinthian columns and heraldic logos among which are the coats of arms of Spain, Calatrava and a number of popes.

Between the cloisters is the original refectory, decorated in 18th-century Valencia tiles depicting pastoral scenes, said to be one of the most important examples of this kind of decoration in the region.

The interior of the church is an outrageous confection of ornate stuccowork and rich decoration dating back to the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th centuries. The altarpiece by Juan de Juanes looks out of proportion, hardly surprising as its former home was in a side chapel and replaces the original altar destroyed during the Civil War.

San Salvador began life as a parish church but, in a series of ecclesiastical promotions, worked its way upwards until, in the 14th century, it became a cathedral. Its main structure is Catalan Gothic and two of its main entrances, the Puerta de las Cadenas and Puerta de Loreto, are from this period while a third, the Puerta de la Anunciación, is of Renaissance origin.

At the rear of the church is the Museo Diocesano, which boasts Velázquez's *The Temptation of Saint Thomas* among its collection of religious art.

For a change from imposing architecture, you could venture underground at the Museo de la Muralla, where a guided tour leads you through the underground remains of the city walls, Arab baths and domestic buildings. The Museo de Semana Santa houses most of the processional thrones and sculptures used in the Easter processions, while the Museo de La Reconquista is dedicated to the folklore of the Moors and Christians fiesta. Here you will see costumes, arms, musical instruments, photographs and publicity material relating to this fiesta.

For the next stop on our excursion, we step over the Valencia border into Murcia and visit the capital of the region. As Murcia is a city, it is strictly speaking outside the realms of this book, but no visit to this area would be complete without a visit to one of the most beguiling buildings you could hope to see.

To leave Orihuela, take the road that runs along the left-hand side of the Glorieta Gabriel Miró (Calle San Gregorio) and turn left at the end, heading for the N340/E15 to Alicante and Murcia. This street brings you back to the roundabout with the metal sculpture, but this time you go straight across. Moments later you come to a small roundabout where you take the exit to the left.

Follow the signs for Murcia and, after two kilometres, it joins the N340. Just after this junction the road rises and to your left you see the Palmeral, Orihuela's palm garden, second in size to Elche, which is itself the largest palm garden in Spain.

The road from Orihuela could never be described as beautiful, running as it does through a number of small industrial areas, but the rugged hills of the Sierra de Orihuela, dotted with patches of pine woods, do have a certain grandeur.

Stay on this road, ignoring the first sign for the A7 and Alicante, until you see a sign directing you to the E15/A7, just in front of the Café Bar Casa Augusto, Cano Muebles to your right. Your map will tell you that this is a longer route to Murcia but it will get



you more easily into the city centre. When you reach Murcia, take the exit for Juan de Borbón and Ronda de Levante and follow the signs into the city until you come to a T-junction with MAPFRE offices directly in front of you. Turn right. At the second roundabout, where there are a number of direction signs take the right for Albacete. You can either park here and walk into the centre, ten minutes or so, as this is the direction you will leave Murcia, or drive to the centre by taking the exit to the left and following the signs for the cathedral.

A stone's throw from the cathedral, down the Calle Trapería, is the Casino, not a bit like a glitzy, high-rolling modern-day casino but more a gentlemen's club where the solid citizens of the town used to socialise, discuss business and play dominoes or cards for small stakes.

It's true that these old-time casinos can be found in many towns and villages in Spain but few of them are as grand as Murcia's. If the magnificent entrance with its rose marble pillars and heroic allegorical bas-reliefs isn't enough to convince you that you are entering a building of grandeur and significance, then the Islamic splendour of



the Patio Arabe will. Exuberant, multicoloured intricate designs with horseshoe arches radiating fantails of blue and gold arabesques fill the entrance hall, proclaiming its importance to the city's business and cultural life of years gone by.

The Casino of Murcia was founded in 1847 and over the following decades the magnificent palace-like building was expanded and embellished. It was recognised as an Historic National Monument in 1983 and, though a sepulchral calm pervades its halls, it now attracts more than 150,000 visitors annually.

As you stand awed in the Patio Arabé, bright daylight filters through the coloured glass canopy overhead, casting complex shadows and dancing rainbow illuminations over the walls of the upper level, around which runs a wrought-iron balustrade.

An arched glass roof over a marble-floored corridor stretches before you, awash with diffused daylight and leading to a semi-circle of deep armchairs, raised five steps above floor level and surrounding a copy of the famous statue of the Dama de Elche.

Pass through the Arab arch, with its marble columns and intricate plasterwork, and into the room to the left, where you enter an elegant Edwardian library. In the centre of the room, deep maroon and brass-studded chairs surround the two enormous library tables with their brass-hooded lamps. In one corner, a wrought-iron spiral staircase twists its way up to a narrow balcony where leather-bound tomes rest in glazed bookcases. The balcony and bookcases are born aloft on the wings of a flight of herons which great cast-iron brackets.

To lighten the mood, return to the corridor and visit the last room on the left, the Tocador Señoras (ladies' powder room), a tiny but delightful room where these days the gentlemen are allowed in, too. Gilded chairs line the walls but it is the painted ceiling that draws the eyes and the gasps. Youthful maidens with bright butterfly wings skitter across a deep blue sky. You think they are ascending heavenward to the centre of the domed ceiling until you realise they are reaching out to a flaxen-haired maid as she tumbles to earth, her wings on fire.

Before you leave the room, stand in front of one of the tall oval mirrors and see yourself reflected into infinity in the mirror opposite as you travel down an Alice-in-Wonderland hole in the wall.

The casino's pièce de résistance is the Salón de Baile Regio, inspired by the French palaces of Luis XV and completed in 1876. As you approach the room at the side of the Patio Pompeyano, all is in darkness. Drop a one euro coin into the box to the side of the door and a rousing Parisian polka strikes up as the room bursts into brilliant light.

The ballroom is an incredible confection of gilding and gold moquette. From its stunning painted silk ceiling hang five huge chandeliers, the light from their 326 bulbs reflected in a hundred directions from the rococo, gilt-framed mirrors. Heavenly scenes and Greek rural idylls fill panels in the frieze and a group of maidens floats on clouds.

If you get carried away by all the splendour and can't resist a twirl beneath the candelabras, don't wait too long because, just as the first strains of a waltz fill the ballroom, the lights suddenly go out and you are plunged back into near-total darkness.

Murcia is a pleasant city and you could happily spend a few hours wandering its streets. When you are ready to continue the excursion, leave the city by going back to the roundabout mentioned earlier and following the signs for Albacete (A301) and Molina de Segura, Madrid and Alicante (A7). You will pass the large Ikea store near the exit from the motorway you came in on. Keep following the sign for Albacete.

Pass Molina de Segura, Ceuti and Lorqui and take exit 375 for Fortuna and Archena, following the road as it loops under the A30 in the direction of Archena (MU554). Take a right at the third roundabout, that looks like the roof of a sunken house, complete with weather vane, and at the next roundabout follow the signs for the Balneario de Archena. At this roundabout look to your left. At the top of a small rise is an unusual building that looks like a small fortress. This novel little structure is known as the Castillo de Don Mario in honour of the owner, Mario Spreáfico, referred to in the local tourism brochures as a "magnífico médico y excelente persona", a magnificent doctor and excellent person. Despite its grand title, this amusing edifice with its round towers and arched windows was, in fact, a pigeon loft.

### The painted pigeons of Murcia

When the Arabs settled in Spain in 711, they brought with them a culture that was to permeate almost the whole of the Iberian peninsula. They also brought with them the pigeon. The bird was valued for its meat, its plumage and for providing palomina, a high-quality natural fertiliser. Documents dating from 1268 tell of a vast population of pigeons living in the 97 towers of the city of Murcia and in the surrounding countryside.

The people of the city had taken the bird to their hearts and specially bred pigeons, often the descendants of those left behind when the Arabs were expelled or fled, were trained by professional colombaires. Two hundred years later there was so much bird manure building up on the bridge above the Segura that travellers and tradesmen were unable to cross it.

In 1773, the first pigeon sports club was started in Murcia, but it wasn't until more than 200 years later, in 1994, that pigeon-breeding was finally officially recognised as a national sport, when the Federación Española de Columbicultura was set up. If, on your travels, you see flocks of garishly painted birds flapping around, these are the painted pigeons that make up the singularly Spanish sport of Columbicultura.

(Read the weird and wonderful story of painted pigeon racing at the end of this excursion.)

Keep following the signs for the Balneario and a few minutes later you come to the entrance to the spa with a car park to the left.

The Balneario de Archena was built in the middle of the 19th century and much of its decoration was in the hands of Manuel Castaños, the same man who decorated the Casino in Murcia. This spa actually has its own casino, its elegant green and white façade topped by a pediment of prancing cherubim and its entrance guarded by a pair of caryatid (a sculptured female figure serving as an ornamental support in place of a column or pilaster). Its palm-shaded garden is a haven of peace and quiet where you can enjoy a cool drink or use the enormous marble board and man-size pieces for a game of chess. There is also a delightful little church whose narrow Gothic style and imperial stairway make it look like the home of a fairytale princess.

'Taking the waters' has always been part of the Spanish approach to health and vitality, and each spa has its own specialities. That of the Balneario de Archena is mud, but not your common-or-garden type. The thermal mud here allows the chemical properties of the hot spring water to enter the body, and is especially soothing as an anti-inflammatory treatment. The spa offers a range of thermal treatments as well as hot-spring bathing.

To leave the Balneario (there's little else to see in Archena), retrace the route to the A301 and go straight across, heading for Fortuna (14km MU411). At last you leave the busy roads behind as you pass through orange groves with beige, barren mountains in the distance, a landscape far removed from the green mountainscapes only an hour's drive north. The barrenness isn't total because here and there small pockets of almond groves dot the hillsides. Even so, this land has a rugged beauty all its own.

At the T-junction in Fortuna, turn left for Pinoso and then right at the traffic lights for Abanilla (eight kilometres). As you arrive at Abanilla, follow the signs for Murcia and Orihuela. (If you want to stop at Abanilla, you can get more information about the town by reading excursion 16: Alicante's Lunar Landscape.) You soon enter large areas of orange and lemon groves with frequent vineyards.

Keep following the signs for Orihuela and, just after Benferri, you reach the A7/E15 autovia, which is the quickest way back to Alicante. For Torrevieja and south, continue on the C4140/CV870 to Orihuela until it reaches the junction of the N340

## WHAT TO SEE

### ORIHUELA:

Afternoon open and closing hours for the historic buildings of the old town are one hour earlier between Oct and May.

Convento de Santo Domingo, Calle Adolfo Clavarana, s/n. 16th-century university. Tel. 96 530 02 49. Open Tue-Sat 9.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm, Sun 10am-2pm.

**San Salvador**, Calle Doctor Sarget. Cathedral mainly in the Catalan Gothic style. Tel. 96 530 06 38. Open Mon-Fri 10am-1.30pm and 4-7pm (June-Sept 5-7.30pm) Sat 10am-1.30pm.

**Museo Diocesano**, museum of religious art at the rear of the cathedral. Same opening hours as cathedral. Entry €1.

**Museo de la Muralla**, Calle del Río, s/n. Remains of city walls, Arab baths and domestic buildings. Tel. 96 674 31 54. Open Tue-Sat 10am-2pm & 4-7pm, (June-Sept 5-8pm) Sun 10am-2pm. Free entry.

**Museo de Semana Santa**, Plaza de la Merced, 1. Holy Week museum with displays of floats and sculptures from Easter processions. Tel. 96 674 40 89. Open Tues-Sat 10am-1pm & 5-7pm. Entry €1.

**Museo de la Reconquista**, Calle Francisco Die. Open Mon-Fri 11am-1pm & 5-7pm. Free entry.

#### **MURCIA:**

**Casino**, Calle Trapería. The city's grand old casino. Tel. 96 821 53 99. Open 10am-9pm. Entry €1.20.

Murcia has spectacular Holy Week processions when amazingly realistic religious carvings by famed sculptor Francisco Salzillo are paraded on floats. Also worth seeing are the Museo Salzillo and the Cathedral with its dazzling Baroque façade, fine views from the tower.

#### **ABANILLA:**

**San José**, a beautiful church with a gilded and marbled altarpiece.

La Fuente, Calle Mayor. Fountain decorated with 12 metres of ceramic imagery telling the folkloric history of the area.

Sagrado Corazón, 10-metre high statue of Christ overlooking the Plaza de la Constitución.

#### **MORE INFORMATION**

#### **ORIHUELA:**

**Tourist Office**, Calle Francisco Die, 25 (on ground floor of Palacio de Rubalcava). Tel. 96 530 27 47. Open Tue-Sat 10am-2pm & 5-8pm. Sun/Mon 10am-2pm.

#### **MURCIA:**

**Oficina de Turismo**, Plaza Julián Romea, 4. Tel. 902 10 10 70. Mon-Sat 10am-2pm & 5.30-7.30pm, Sun 10am-2pm. Email: turismo@ayto-murcia.es. Web page [www.murciaciudad.com](http://www.murciaciudad.com)

Information Point, Calle Santa Clara. Behind the Teatro Romea. Tel. 96 822 06 59. Same opening hours as Ayuntamiento tourist office.





## Flouncing about in Fanciful Feathers The Uniquely Spanish Sport of Painted Pigeon Racing

When the Arabs settled Spain in 711 they brought with them a culture that was to permeate almost the whole of the Iberian peninsula. Their language, their food, their arts, are recognisable in every aspect of Spanish life. They also brought with them the pigeon.

The prime importance of the palomo was economic, it was valued for its meat, its plumage and for providing palomina, a high quality natural fertiliser. Documents dating from 1268 tell of a vast population of pigeons living in the 97 towers of the city of Murcia and in the surrounding countryside. The people of the city had taken the bird to their hearts and specially bred pigeons, often the descendants of those left behind when the Arabs were expelled or fled, were trained by professional colombaires. Two hundred years later there was so much palomino, basically bird manure, building up on the bridge above the River Seguram that travellers and tradesmen were unable to cross.

In 1773 the first pigeon sports club was started in Murcia, but it wasn't until more than two hundred years later, in 1994, that pigeon breeding was finally officially recognised as a national sport, when the Federacion Española de Columbicultura was set up. The sport, official or otherwise, almost disappeared altogether when, in 1932, the Minister of War issued a decree banning it because of the threat of the birds being

used to carry secret messages. Only after arduous negotiations was the decree repealed, when the Ministry of War finally conceded that the sport was of national importance, uniting many of the poorer rural communities.

In essence, the Palomos Deportivos consists of eighty garishly painted male pigeons chasing one female. This might seem like yet another example of male domination of the gentler sex, but in fact the female is highly trained, and always referred to as a 'professional' paloma. Her skill is to entice, hide, out-manoeuvre and out-fly all her pursuers except for the few she considers worthy of her courtship. The male, far from being just a gaudy bundle of lust out for a good time, has to show his prowess, not only to attract the female, but also to attract points from the judges. He will pit himself physically and psychologically against his opponents. If he is intelligent he will distract his rivals by moving haphazardly or appearing to lag back so that he can suddenly swoop around to appear, as if from nowhere, at the side of the female. Sometimes he'll take part in the mid-air fights, which can result in the death of a weaker opponent. All the while, he performs an aerial ballet, trying to invite the adoration of the female.

For Pepe Cano, president of the Benidorm Association of Columbiculture, the skill of the pigeon is much like that of the footballer.

'They each have their different tricks and techniques when they are dealing with their opponents,' he says, 'and you can see the way some of the better ones, those who will go on to become champions, watch what the others are doing and adapt their game accordingly.'

Training begins when the pigeon reaches sexual maturity at three months. First he will fly individually with a female, learning to recognise the scent that will later be his sonar on his route to possible championship status. After a few flights he is joined by other male trainees and begins to learn the courtship routines necessary for success in competitions to come. Eventually, the best of the flock are selected to take part in the first level of competitions, the comarca, which lead finally to the Spanish championships – at least for the best of them. 'It's like raising children,' says Pepe. 'You feed them and look after them, and as you watch them take their first flights you see which are the strongest, the ones which will be entered for competitions.'

The competition takes place around a tree - no particular tree, but preferably one with quite dense foliage where the female can hide when she needs a rest, although a particularly clever male can make extra points by finding her and settling down to a bit of private billing and cooing while his rivals tire themselves out flapping around elsewhere. It takes place over six consecutive days, and points are awarded for the time the male stays in the air with the female and for time spent in the courtship routine on the ground. Extra points can be gained for the elegance of his flight and courtliness of his attentions to the lady.

As the time of the competition approaches, a rocket is set off to alert the owners and trainers, who release their birds from gardens, patios and balconies all around the town. Slowly they congregate in their wheeling flight until the referee decides the

moment has arrived to release the female. Instantly she is pursued by the gaudy conquistadores and for the next two and a half hours she will try to confuse them to avoid their amorous intentions.

As fatigue and hunger override lust, pigeons will begin to retire from the chase, until only a hardy few will be left at the end of the allotted time. Their individual points will be added to their running total for the six days and the winner will go on to the next stage of the competition. As might be expected, the winning male is applauded for his stamina while the female gets scant recognition of the fact that she has had to clock up an equal amount of air-time, without which there would be no competition in the first place. But there again – she is a professional!

There is no official record of when pigeons began to be painted, but with up to eighty birds in the air simultaneously the referees would be hard pushed to identify which one was closest to the female if the birds didn't wear their distinctive markings. Reds, blues, greens and yellows fill the sky in the 'torneo amoroso', where the rapid dodging and weaving, unforeseen exits from the sanctuary of the tree, and mass close-up adoration make for a kaleidoscopic flurry of feathers.

Every club member has his own colour scheme but might have a number of birds wearing his house colours, each identifiable by an individual mark. The referee needs a phenomenal memory and keen pair of eyes to keep track of the action, but most of them have been involved in the sport since childhood and will have attended one of the many courses put on to educate children in the care of their birds.

As in horse breeding, pigeons carry names that identify them with their lineage and are instantly recognised by aficionados. The parents of Chulo de Abajo (The Ruffian From Below) obviously sired a youngster with a temperament for waywardness, and the owner of En el Nombre del Padre would seem to be looking for a bit of divine intervention. *Ida y Vuelta* (Go and come back) at least seems to have a likelihood of getting back to its home in Seville if it should go astray, and whilst *Violento*, *Rasputin* and *Renegado* might well be named to strike fear into the hearts of their opponents, *Desequilibrio* (Unbalanced), would suggest a bird with mental instability or a difficulty with getting into the air in the first place.

During the course of the competition, garbled voices crackling from walkie-talkies exchange information as to the whereabouts of pigeons that have wandered off from the main performance. With a national champion worth anything up to £20,000, security is high, and many pigeons will have chips implanted in their legs so that they can be located if they go astray. The club in Murcia recently bought a microlite aircraft to monitor birds during competition, and Benidorm even went to the lengths of hiring a helicopter for the international championships held there in 1997.

'For me, the sport has everything.' comments Pepe, 'You train the birds and get excited when you see them doing well in a competition. During the competition itself you have moments of intense activity but also of peacefulness. It's beautiful to see the whole brightly coloured flock flying gracefully through the sky.'



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