

From Castle to Quake: A Journey through Lorca, Spain

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I recently traveled to the Murcia region of Spain on a press trip. Here's the first in a series of what I saw:

Usually, when I think of Paradors, I think of very, very old Spanish buildings converted to hotels: palaces, castles, convents. In Lorca, the Parador is actually brand new. It opened in 2012, on the site of a castle that was built 1,000 years ago, and has managed to incorporate the history of the area into its architecture—there are nine archeological remains within the property's design. You can sit in the dining room, above an old Jewish synagogue, and gaze down out on ruins and part of an old Moorish wall constructed in the 12th century. Some of the remains found on the property date back 4,000 years.

Paradors have a history that I've always loved. The word, parador, comes from “parar,” or “to stop.” In 1928, the Spanish government started the hotel outfit, recovering historic sites and renovating them with the goal of A. education and cultural immersion. B. a luxurious, reliable place to rest and to have a meal on the outskirts of town, not far from the highway. C. To draw tourists to towns that otherwise don't necessarily have a large influx (Paradors are rarely located in the larger cities of Spain).

Today, there are 94 Paradors, and 48 percent of their income actually comes from the restaurants, which are known for serving regional specialties. In Lorca, that meant serving the specialties of the Murcia region, so there were lots of fresh veggie options, seafood, ox and giant wild chicken legs, like none I've ever seen.



Pollo gigante!

All Paradors also offer an array of gluten-free options—including loaves of delicious warm bread. Just because they're historic doesn't mean they haven't evolved with the times.

The Parador in Lorca has been a beacon of hope, for many reasons. In 2011, the city was hit by a 5.2 earthquake, which killed 9 people, injured about 300 and destroyed around 1,200 homes, according to our local guide, Enrique. Couple that with the strangulating recession, and the financial inability to repair buildings and homes, and you've got a pretty sad state of affairs. Enrique, who was trained as an archeologist, and worked to excavate the site around Lorca, said to our group many times that there's more digging to do, more repairs to do, but no resources. "We have no money," he said, with a palpable sadness, time and again.

Excavation of the site began in 1999. The Fortress of the Sun, as it's now known, was, at one time, one of the largest castles in Spain, measuring nearly 1 kilometer. Ruled by the Moors before the Romans invaded, the area is a kind of historical melting pot, where a Jewish community also lived (you can tour the 15th century synagogue). The building of the Parador began in 2002, but the earthquake was a huge disruptor, and plans were changed four times (you can see the damage on one of the historic towers) before the property opened in 2012.

Since opening, tourism in Lorca has risen 17 percent. It's the first year that the number of visitors has risen since the earthquake, and officials credit the Parador for that spike. It doesn't hurt that the property was recently named the No. 1 Parador in Spain by Tripadvisor.

In my first slideshow, you can see photos of the Parador and fortress, and views of Lorca. In my second, you'll find photos of Lorca. There, in addition to taking photos that depict the culture of the area, I really honed in on the post-earthquake sights, which were particularly arresting, considering it's now three-plus years later.



The Church of Santo Domingo.....

