



## leisure destinations

**61 Neighborhoods: Singapore** Discover the spectacular awe of Marina Bay.

**64 Business Plus: Seoul** Find something in the capital city to fascinate every generation.

**68 Add-On: Murcia** Unearth the unique treasures of Spain's Murcia region.

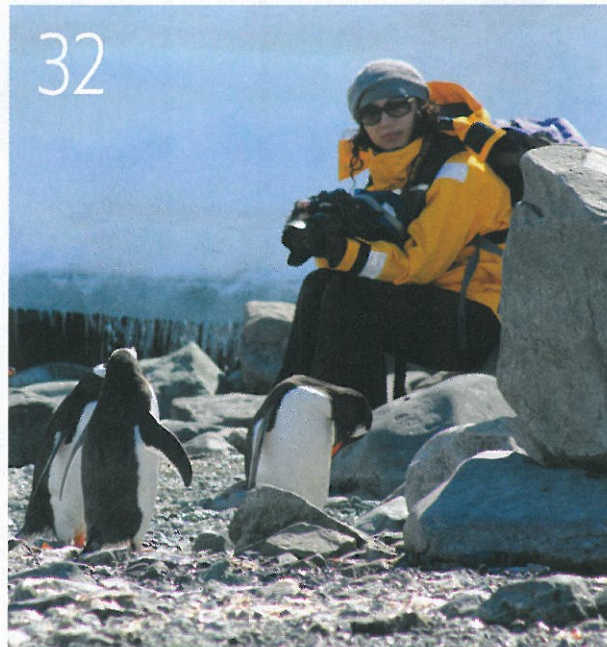
**72 Kicking Back: Bermuda** Take an island break, Bermuda-style.

*Every September, Marina Bay hosts the Singapore Grand Prix, part of the FIA Formula 1 World Championship. Using public roads, the Marina Bay Circuit utilizes powerful lighting to replicate daylight conditions.*

22



32



## lifestyle

- 22 **Technology**
- 23 **Wine & Spirits**
- 26 **Spas**
- 28 **Chefs**
- 30 **Golf**
- 32 **Cruising**
- 76 **Events**
- 80 **Health**

## connections

- 10 **Mail Call**
- 13 **News**
- 16 **Reviews**
- 20 **One on One**  
Brussels Airlines
- 78 **Airport Update**
- 82 **Quiz**

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**OUTER BEAUTY:** Colorful sunrise and a zigzag pier in Mar Menor  
PHOTO: © GERÓNIMO CONTRERAS FLORES | DREAMSTIME.COM

## One of a Kind

Unearth the unique treasures of Spain's Murcia region. BY KIMBERLY KROL

Tucked in the Iberian Peninsula's southeast corner, Spain's region of Murcia may not be as well-known or as popular as other destinations in the country, but it should be. Accessible from other regions of Spain, including Madrid (the city provided a beginning and end cap for my visit to Murcia), Murcia offers a region of contrasts, from dry plains to mountains and coastlines, begging to be unearthed. As a bonus, its semi-arid subtropical climate and location in the Mediterranean coastal arch guarantee near-daily sunshine.

Begin your exploration of the region in Lorca, immediately recognizable for its elaborate, well-known Easter week celebrations. Carve out time for the Embroidery Museum, which displays the workmanship of the hand-embroidered outfits donned during the

Easter week processions. A visit to Lorca provides a trip through time, with Baroque façades, a medieval castle and old city streets surviving in tandem with the 21st-century pulse of the city.

For a uniquely Spanish experience, use Parador de Lorca as a base throughout your stay in the city. A new build located in the enclosure of the Castle of Lorca — which throughout history served as a meeting place for Islam, Judaism and Christianity — archaeological remains seamlessly meld with the conveniences of a modern hotel. Boasting 76 guestrooms and nine suites, Parador de Lorca features an on-site spa with a therapeutic water circuit. The property is also well-noted for MICE and banquet capabilities as well as superb dining.

Just steps from a traveler's guestroom lie some amazing archaeo-

logical wonders. Discovered in 2003, the Jewish quarter, located to the east of the castle, features excavations of houses dating to the 15th century. The synagogue is the best-preserved building in this area, featuring Gothic-style plasterwork. These excavations led to the development of an archaeological park on the premises of the Castle of Lorca, with three tours offered to the public daily; English-language tours are held Thursdays.

High above the city, Lorca Castle, a defensive fortress and watchtower, was occupied by successive civilizations from the Argaric period to the 21st century. The castle marks the second-largest fortress structure in Spain, dating to the 12th and 13th centuries. Nine archaeological remains can be spotted throughout the parador. Digging here began in 1999, and the *Fortaleza del Sol* has been converted with showcases, workshops, children's areas and more through Lorca's Workshop of Time.

In 2011, an earthquake rocked Lorca, halting some of the city's archaeological explorations. The city continues to rebuild from the devastation of the natural disaster.

For a bit of sun, sand and surf, stop next at Mar Menor, a large saltwater lagoon. A favorite of British tourists for years, Mar Menor, including La Manga del Mar Menor, San Javier, San Pedro del Pinatar and Los Alcázares, boasts 315 days of sunshine per year and an average temperature of around 65 degrees. Beaches in the area include El Mojón, Torre Derribada and La Llana.

Calm waters, reliable winds and a shallow depth make Mar Menor a haven for water sport enthusiasts. In addition to sailing, windsurfing and canoeing, scuba divers delight at the underwater remains of a Roman shipwreck.

San Pedro del Pinatar's Regional Park, another popular spot for outdoor activities, covers more than 2,000 acres between seas. During the Roman times, it consisted of salt flats, some of which still exist, which created pools, dikes, dunes and pine groves. Today, the wetlands provide sanctuary for 100 bird types, with the pink flamingo a standout. Other birds include grebes, guinea fowl, royal herons and owls.

Among the many highlights of Mar Menor, discover the therapeutic qualities of its water and the clay/mud sediments of the sea floor. The climate of the area resulted in the deposit of clay in the region. Analysis of the material shows a high percentage of positive ions, including calcium, magnesium, potassium and fluoride, as well as negative ions such as chlorine and sulfate. Given its make-up, it has great absorption power and is recommended to aid a number of skin conditions.

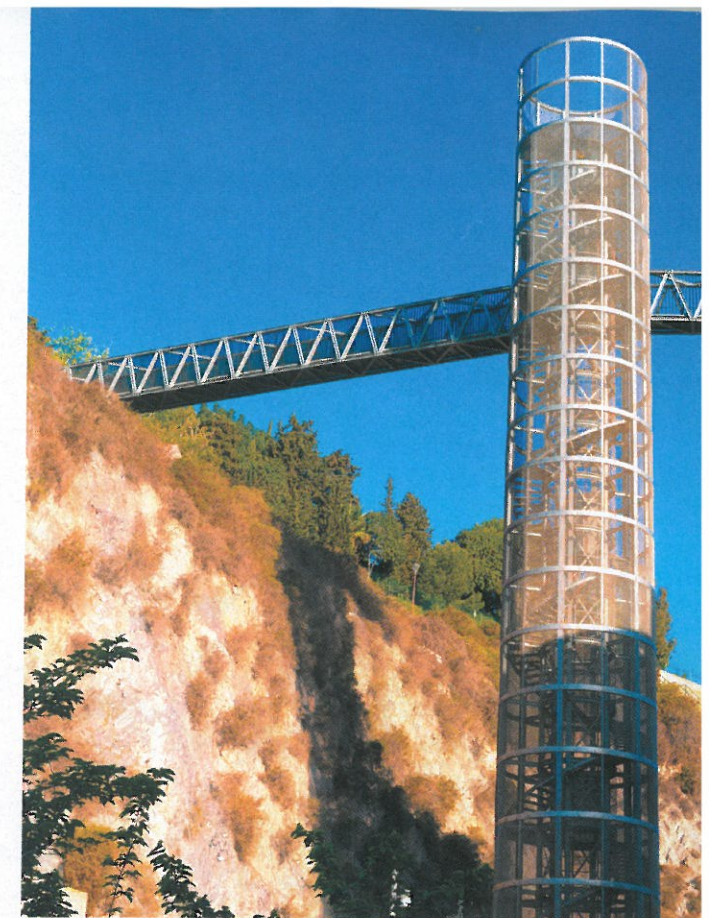
It may startle you at first to see people covered head to toe in mud while wandering the area, but hop right in and slather your body with the thick, gray mud to enjoy the numerous proven therapeutic effects of the clay. Take heed to start with a few small areas first, letting the mud dry on the skin for about an hour. If there are no side effects, liberally cover yourself, dry in the sun and return to saltwater to rinse. The effects will last for days as you continue your Murcian discovery.

Next stop: Cartagena. Get a taste for the history of the city, which dates back 2,500 years. This Port of Cultures is home to Concepción Castle, with vistas over modern-day Cartagena. Start here to get acquainted with the layout; for those with a fear of heights, avoid the panoramic lift, the easiest way to reach the highest point in Cartagena. If heights don't bother you, the experience and the views are worth a peek.

Back on level ground, stroll the ancient ruins of the Roman theater and the accompanying Roman Theater Museum. The excavation, restoration and construction of the museum allow for an easy flow from the exhibits into the monument, seamlessly blending the remains into the layout of the city while

**TOP SPOTS:** Cartagena panoramic lift elevator (top), and sword sundial at Lorca Castle (bottom)

PHOTOS: © LUNAMARINA | DREAMSTIME.COM, © FOTOMICAR | DREAMSTIME.COM





**BACK IN TIME:** Cartagena  
Roman theater

PHOTO: © LUNAMARINA | DREAMSTIME.COM

**INFO TO GO**

Flights arrive to either Murcia-San Javier Airport or El Altet Airport (Alicante). Region of Murcia International Airport is coming soon. Around the region, travelers can easily transit within cities or towns or between different areas by taxi, bus, train, tram and boat services.

**Parador de Lorca**  
parador.es/en

**Murcia Tourism**  
murciaturistica.es

**Roman Theatre Museum**  
teatoromanocartagena.org

**Spain Tourism**  
spain.info

maintaining the integrity.

Roman Cartagena still lies beneath the surface of the city, but further excavations are underway. The Roman forum in the Molinete section is also open for public visits. The main part of the dig site has been converted into an open-air archaeological park with the remaining part of the ancient forum, with two semi-public buildings including a thermal spa dating to the first century.

In between trips back in time in Cartagena, savor a few moments at a local café for an *asiático*. While Licor 43 can be found throughout Spain, in Cartagena it is typically paired with coffee and offers a refreshing reprieve from sightseeing. Cartagena is also ideal for leisurely ambles through the streets and shops. And, as in any port city, take advantage of the water. Cruise ships dock here, and visitors can enjoy beaches as well as the gastronomic delights of the sea.

Wrap up a discovery tour of the region in Murcia, the seventh-largest city in Spain with a population hovering around 500,000. The city’s gastronomy highlights fresh fruits and vegetables, various types of meat and fresh-from-the-sea delights. Peruse Verónicas market, built between 1914 and 1917, where many of the stall’s roots date to the market’s origin. Choose from among the seemingly endless food options to either prepare your own feast or have the vendors do the cooking for you.

For another culinary experience, take a stop-by-stop journey on the Murcia Gastronomic Route. My personal six-stop gustatory walk included city center favorites like Gran Rhin, Las Viandas and Las Mulas. At La Tapa, my last stop, I happily

switched from savory to sweet, indulging in *paparajotes*, a typical dessert of the region — lemon leaves coated with flour and egg, then lightly fried and sprinkled with cinnamon and sugar.

Murcia is home to many Baroque churches, the most important religious building being the *Catedral de Santa María*. Construction began at the end of the 14th century and contains a number of Gothic elements as well. Its tower was built in various stages between the 16th and 18th centuries. Another fun fact: Its organ is the largest in Spain and among the top 10 in size worldwide.

The city boasts noteworthy architecture of the 18th century, including the Episcopal Palace and old Granary, as well as the 19th century, evident in the Town Hall, the Victoria Hotel and the Casino, a National Monument built in 1847. Take a few moments to wander the interior decorations and the sculptures peppering the façade. The style mimics the Alhambra, and everything in the ballroom is an original.

An original — a great way to describe the region of Murcia, designed to offer a one-of-a-kind experience for visitors and business travelers to Spain. Its many cities and towns are ripe for exploration. Delights abound. Why wait any longer to discover this Spanish gem?



**ONLINE EXTRA**

Jump to [gtravmag.com/murcia](http://gtravmag.com/murcia) to read about wine tasting in Murcia.