



■ The rugged coastline of Murcia.

A hidden gem of Spain that's well worth a visit

LAUREN ROGERS explores a corner of Spain which deserves to be much better known: Murcia.

At 7am in the Spanish town of Cartagena, four fishermen idle at the end of the harbour.

They smoke roll-up cigarettes as they look out across the sleepy sea, bright morning sunlight bouncing back. You can hear the waves lapping and the ancient town waking up.

So far, so normal for a sun-kissed Mediterranean holiday. But the Costa Calida region of Murcia is so much more – from world-class scuba diving, mountain ranges and magical mud baths to chiringuitos (beach bars), flamingos and some of the best tapas this food-lover has ever had.

Nearby Benidorm has a reputation for attracting a certain type of English tourist, but there are few L plate-wearing hen parties here, if any.

Touring this beautiful stretch of southern Spanish feels like discovering a hidden gem, a slice of real Spain where there's a happy marriage between old and new running through the whole region. There are layers of history to get lost in but there's life, youth and culture around every corner too.

The little fishing port of Cabo de Palos is the perfect place to start. If you've never tried scuba diving before, try it here. The protected Reserva Marina de Cabo de Palos e Islas Hormigas is a

marine reserve like no other – an oceanic habitat where an underwater mountain range has, over the centuries, proved both fatal and fascinating.

There are ancient Phoenician shipwrecks, Second World War casualties and the bones of a sunken ocean liner. Whales, travelling from the Atlantic Ocean to the Med via the Strait of Gibraltar, have been spotted from the shore in Cabo de Palos and inside the small visitor centre, you'll learn about the Continental shelf, the unique coastline and wild sea horses of the nearby Mar Menor.

Two hours here will whet the appetite for what else Murcia has to offer. But first, explore the rocky coastline on foot; walk to the lighthouse and stop at the (Red Fish) for calderos, the region's delicious – if filling – traditional rice dish.

Back in Cartagena, the fishermen, still watching their lines, are not the only ones up early. On the morning I walked along the harbour coffee in hand, cyclists were limbering up for the Cartagena Triathlon. The town has been a naval base for more than 2,000 years and the military past is a theme whether you're visiting the fascinating ARQUA museum (Museum of Underwater Archaeology) or touring the Roman Theatre. If you stop over in Águilas, a seaport town built between two bays, you can saunter along the sandy beaches, read a book in the bar of the Hotel Puerto Juan Montiel, or take a trip on the Don Poncho boat. If you're looking for something faster, rent a jet ski or go sea kayaking.

Whatever you've done during the day, however, make time to visit the hillside Zoco del Mar. This recently opened rooftop bar and restaurant offers breath-taking views, fine food and

Factfile

■ Murcia is a Spanish municipality on the southern east coast, neighbouring Andalucía on one side and Alicante on the other.

■ A vast panorama of landscapes, there are green mountains, arid valleys, world famous diving site the and the aptly named Costa Calida ('hot coast') with its rocky coastline, sandy beaches and more than 330 days of sunshine a year.

■ Kilometres of coast: 252km, kilometres of beaches: 90km

■ Average annual temperature: 19.4 C

■ There are some 20 marinas, nine yacht clubs, 24 sailing schools, 21 golf courses, seven regional parks and one nature reserve.

■ There is direct motorway access between Alicante International Airport and the Mar Menor (60km) and the city of Murcia (68km).

refreshing mojitos. All credit to owner Andreas who will taxi customers up the steep hill free-of-charge.

A good way to discover Murcia's Mar Menor is a trip from Águilas to San Pedro del Pinatar. The Mar Menor ('small sea') is a shallow salt lagoon formed centuries ago. The lagoon conditions are perfect for wind surfing and dragon boating, but go a little further to the salt marshes and get caked in Mar Menor mud. In Lo Pagan, the mud baths are free-to-use and the therapeutic (if pungent) sludge, slapped on bare skin by locals and visitors alike, is said to be good for all skin complaints, aches and pains.

My last day in Spain was spent wandering the inland city of Murcia (founded in 825), taking in the baroque architecture, visiting the Cathedral of Murcia, and tucking into seriously good tapas in Las Flores Square.

Having a car in Costa Calida will be a huge help if you're going to seek out these highlights, but the majority of hotels will happily arrange transfers or transport. Hotel NH Cartagena and Hotel Costa Narejos offered day trips and travel information during my stay.

After returning to the UK, it was strange to find out the region was one of the least visited in Spain. But with affordable flights to Alicante and Murcia-San Javier, not to mention more than 330 days of sunshine a year, Murcia is just waiting to be discovered – do not miss out.

Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, operates year-round flights to Alicante from Birmingham, London Gatwick, London Luton, Leeds Bradford and Manchester airports with fares, including taxes, from £46.99 one way (£76.98 return).

Travel news

■ **Tobago:** Virgin Holidays (www.virginholidays.co.uk; 0344 557 3870) offer seven nights at the 4V Magdalena Grand Beach and Golf Resort (B&B) from £855pp (two sharing) - saving up to 50pc. Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick on October 4.

■ **Australia:** Round the World Experts (www.roundtheworldexperts.co.uk; 0800 188 4503) offers a 13-day tour of North Queensland from £1,799pp (two sharing). Includes B&B accommodation in four and five-star hotels, car hire, some tours, transfers and flights to Cairns from Heathrow. Valid for travel October 26-December 8. Book by September 25. To book quote reference: 3436494.

■ **Prague:** Travelzoo (www.travelzoo.com) offers three nights at the Icon Hotel (B&B) from £139pp (two sharing) - saving 61pc. Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick or Stansted on select dates from November 1, 2015-March 7, 2016.

■ **Mexico:** Travelbag (www.travelbag.co.uk; 0207 001 4112) offers seven nights at the five-star Dreams Sands Cancun Resort (all-inclusive) from £999pp (two sharing) - saving up to £350 per couple. Includes flights from Gatwick. Valid for travel from October 1-20. Book by September 22.

■ **Cyprus:** Kuoni (www.kuoni.co.uk; 01306 747008) offers seven nights at the five-star Constantinou Bros Asimina Suites Hotel (half-board) from £1249 (two sharing) - saving £974 per couple. Includes transfers and flights from Gatwick on October 9. To book please quote tour ref: KE2678

■ **Barbados:** letsgo2 (www.letsgo2.com; 0203 582 6621) offers seven nights at the four-star The Club Barbados (all-inclusive) from £1,049pp (two sharing) - saving up to £340pp. Includes flights from Gatwick. Valid for travel from September 20-October 31.

Local offers

■ Latest holiday offers from flights from Norwich. Telephone Travel Norwich Airport on 01603 428700, email enquiries@travelnorwichairport.co.uk or visit www.travelnorwich.com to check availability.

■ **Bulgaria:** September 6, seven nights, 4* Named Hotel in Sunny Beach, all-inclusive from £349pp

■ **Bulgaria:** September 13, seven nights, 4* Named Hotel in Sunny Beach, all-inclusive from £425pp

■ **Gran Canaria:** October 1, seven nights, 5* Named Hotel in Maspalomas, half board from £629pp - saving up to £320 per couple

■ **Corfu:** October 9, 14 nights, 4*Named Hotel in St Spyridon, all-inclusive from £585pp - saving £112 per couple

■ **Turkey:** October 12, seven nights, 4* Named Hotel in Olu Deniz, half-board from £359pp - saving £482 per couple

■ **Majorca:** October 17, ten nights, 4* Named Hotel in Cala D'or, half-board from £515pp - saving £446 per couple

■ **Tenerife:** December 10, seven nights, 5* Named Hotel in Costa Adeje, half-board from £479pp - saving £236 per couple

■ **Tenerife:** January 21, seven nights, 4* Named Hotel in Puerto Santiago, half board from £439pp - saving £196 per couple

■ Prices are correct at time of going to print, all subject to availability and based on maximum occupancy.

■ Prices excludes £10/adult Norwich Airport Development Fee payable at the Airport.