

TRAVEL FEATURE

Murcia: a world away from the boozy Brits of Benidorm

Adam Skinner samples a city break in the south eastern corner of Spain

MURCIA FEATURE

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Preconceptions of weekend breaks to Spain, especially ones that start with a flight to Alicante, might conjure up images of rowdy stag nights, tacky karaoke evenings, Irish pubs on every corner and packs of drunken Brits roaming palm tree-laden streets.

On first arriving at Gatwick these initial fears seemed to have been confirmed.

While I was greeted by groups of cross-dressing lads, readying themselves for their weekend of booze with more booze from the airports resident wether-spoons, as well as rows of I heart Benidorm T-shirts, I was pleasantly

surprised to see that we were headed in different directions after we touched down.

North of Alicante you'll find all that any archetypal Brit abroad could lust for. If two-euro fry-ups are your thing or you'd simply like to go and pay homage to your favourite Saturday night TV show, then you're in luck.

However, if you're looking for more from a break that is only a two-hour flight away, just 50 clicks south lays the region of Murcia. A quaint, tranquil Province of the Spanish mainland, etched in culture and history with smatterings of gourmet restaurants, upmarket hotels and a whole host of interesting and unique activities for even the most experienced traveller.

Cartagena's port is beautiful and the views of the La Manga strip are stunning. Golfers couldn't wish for more perfect conditions, while the healing powers of the natural mud spas sees tourists

descend on the area like a Mediterranean Lourdes.

Locked in the mountains is Archena, where the striking landscapes are accompanied by various spa hotels - the perfect place to unwind.

But perhaps the historic centre of the region's capital, Murcia City, is the perfect way to start your trip.

The area is equally perfect for a weekend getaway as it is for a longer holiday. While Murcia moves slowly, you will never be short of things to do.

Much of the city centre is like a maze, with warrens of bustling side streets packed with tapas bars, museums and markets that stock luscious fruit and vegetables from the

fertile valley that surrounds the town.

Strolling from square to square, taking in the town's 16th century Baroque ar-

chitecture under the shade of trees which line each street is a lovely way to spend a sunny afternoon.

Eventually you'll stumble upon the city's main square and it's difficult not to feel overwhelmed as the Cathedral presents itself. Much like Salisbury Cathedral in our own fair land, religious or not,

taking it in somehow feels like a religious experience.

Construction of the Cathedral began in 1388, taking over 300 years to complete. Built over the remains of a mosque, in a city which saw Islamic rule overthrown in the 1400's, means an eclectic architectural influence of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque is evident, a recurring theme throughout the city.

Inside the choir stalls and the flamboyant Gothic Vélez chapel are equally compelling.

Murcia is also home to some of the best tapas that Spain has to offer. You'll be spoilt for choice as far as coffee shops and restaurants go, but these are best visited at night. Instead, for lunch, take a five minute walk along the North Bank of the Segura river where you'll find the local food market.

Here you can pick up an array of fresh meats, fruits, vegetables and homemade tapas. Rabbit is a favourite among locals and an on-site chef will cook up anything that takes your fancy.

The pretty squares make for perfect outdoor drinking too. Though Murcia's nightlife doesn't really get going until 11pm you won't be short of restaurant options before hitting the town

"La Tapa" offers unique regional dishes all prepared with the best local ingredients. Pigs cheek was delicious and you have to try local delicacy, the Marinera, with a large glass of red made from the local Jumilla grape.

The bars will be starting to fill up by the time you've finished eating and the tables that sit outside all of the bars, brimming with locals.

Be prepared for a hangover the next day, but rest assured it won't be half as bad as your British counterpart who has spent their night listening to karaoke and guzzling watered down lager in Benidorm.



Murcia Cathedral



Murcia beach



Sampling the local vino



Hotel Thermas

How to get there and where to go

Flights:

RETURN TO ALICANTE FROM GATWICK START AT £53 WITH MONARCH

Hotels:

CARTAGENA: NH-HOTELS.COM;
MURCIA CITY: NOVOTEL.COM;
ARCHENA: BALNEARIODEARCHENA.COM/EN/

Restaurants

CARTAGENA: RESTAURANTMIRAMAR.COM;
MURCIA CITY: FACEBOOK.COM/LASFLORESQUALITYTAPAS;
ARCHENA: BAR EL CARRIL
murciaturistica.es/en/home/