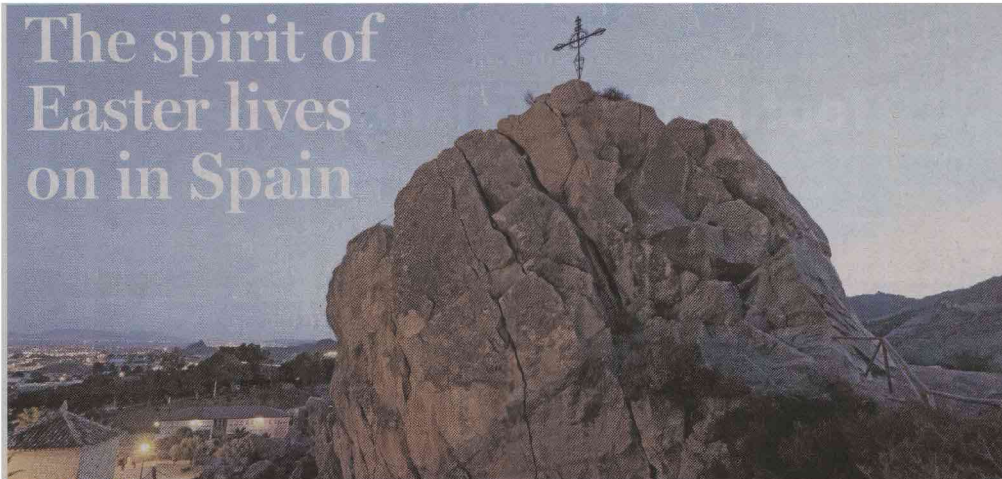


Sunday Independent



The spirit of
Easter lives
on in Spain

LANDMARK: A Christian cross on a rock above the town of Lorca in the province of Murcia, Spain

MURCIA, SPAIN

Joy Orpen

THE deep throb of beating drums precedes the march of Roman soldiers resplendent in polished breastplates and gleaming helmets as they move along a narrow street. All along the route the audience is enthralled. On one side white scarves abound, while blue predominates on the other. The colours denote their allegiance to one of two particular religious brotherhoods; it matters which side shines in the coming Easter procession here in the ancient town of Lorca in south-eastern Spain.

As the drumbeat fades there is a lull; but almost immediately a tsunami swells as five black horses, nostrils flaring, thunder into view pulling a gilded chariot with a gladiator. The crowd goes crazy; viva, viva, viva they yell in unison as the chariot flies by. They have a close encounter with flying manes, cracking whips and creaking wheels. Less than a minute later comes another span of horses — the fling of the head, the white of the eye heightens the sense of drama. The adrenalin is not just coursing; it's pounding.

Then come solo horses; some of them the most beautiful in the world with their manes crimped and plaited. One horse is the colour of gold — whether real, contrived or imagined it's hard to say.

The riders wear rich tapestried cloaks featuring intricate religious images. One stunning cloak took over 18 years to complete with stitches so fine you'd need a magnifying glass to see them.

The cloaks cascade from the riders' shoulders over the plump rumps of their steeds to the dusty ground. These equine stars perform stunning dances; side-stepping, back-stepping, walking on their hind legs, turning on a peseta, interacting with other horses.

The riders do their bit too, flinging themselves up and over their horses; they ride backwards on the saddle and every other way possible; they punch the air in triumph after each successful, daring feat. Then, like a sym-

phony, the pace slows right down and along come sombre hordes of Egyptians, sombre hooded penitents, soldiers and anyone else likely to crop up in ancient or modern religious or social history.

They are interspersed with floats — so heavy in some cases it takes as many as 100 men to shoulder them. They do it in strictest unison swaying from side to side, in-step with the beating drum or the blare of a brass band.

Processions are a common feature of Easter week in parts of Spain but Lorca's is unique in that it's not purely religious. Some floats are eagerly awaited such as "good versus evil", Cleopatra upon her throne and the passion of Christ. Not one is meagre or spartan — they are as rich and image-full as any Bollywood set.

Another distinguishing feature is that horses play such a pivotal role in this particular festival.

Meanwhile the Fortress of the Sun stands over the town. A Jewish synagogue has been unearthed within its ramparts. The fort was built atop a mountain to protect local residents from marauders and the Jewish settlers were no different — hence their location within the fortress. However, in 1412 Queen Isabella I of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon II expelled the Jews, who then fled to Portugal. Excavations have unearthed various pieces of pottery, utensils and artefacts with Hebrew origins.

Lorca is just one of many wonderful places worth visiting in the Murcia region in south-eastern Spain. We flew from Dublin to St Javier airport about half an hour's drive from the city of Murcia, which is the capital of the region (province) of the same name.

The whole region of Murcia is rich with buildings influenced by Arabic, baroque, gothic and art deco architecture. What is an

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absolute must-see, is the deep water naval city of Cartagena. The place bustles with expensively dressed, deeply tanned tourists streaming off cruise ships. But don't let that distract you from the local splendours. While it is true that some parts of the city are derelict, many important buildings from the baroque to the neoclassical have been carefully restored. In recent years archaeologists have unearthed significant Roman remains, which had been concealed for centuries beneath layers of more recent habitations.

Archaeologists have painstakingly unearthed a civic centre complete with temple, baths, under-floor heating (bet you thought this was a modern invention) and reception rooms. Some of the decorations, including mosaics and murals are still visible.

Afterwards we head to the Roman theatre dating from the first century BC. The theatre is almost totally intact so it still retains a great sense of what it must have been like to attend a play or a musical event with your fellow citizens over two thousand years ago. Apart from the 43 metre stage, many of the arches and pillars still stand proud while three altars with white marble relief work and a statue of Apollo are important to the site.

Cartagena also has a hilltop fort. Take the "panoramic lift" up to Castillo de la Concepcion. This fort is also well maintained — look for recycled stone with the stonemasons marks still visible.

The greater region of Murcia has very little rain and plenty of sun; inland the geography is hard, dry and hilly although it also comprises thriving agricultural areas. Along the Mediterranean, Costa Calida has many beautiful unspoilt beaches and small coves. Here you will find La Manga Club — a haven for golfers, with three prize-winning courses and every type of accommodation imaginable.

And for those who like a to razzle and dazzle in the sun then the town of La Manga has plenty to offer including affordable accommodation, good nightlife and wonderful water sports on the 22 kilometre long salt water lagoon, known as Mar Menor (small sea).

I'm heading back to Murcia soon — there is clearly so much more to see in this wonderfully exotic, under-exploited and beautiful part of Spain.

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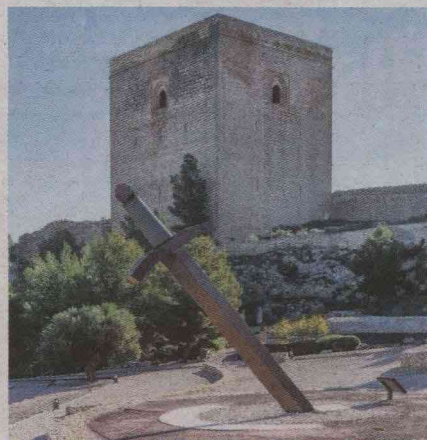
GETTING THERE



FROM 29th March 2015 Ryanair will operate daily services between Dublin and Murcia. One-way fares are from €56, including taxes and charges. Hotel JCI Murcia, see hoteljci1murcia.com; Hotel SPA Jardines de Lorca, see hoteljardinesdelorca.com; Hotel Posadas de Cartagena, see posadasdeespanacartagena.com; Hotel Thalasia, see thalasia.com

For general information on **Spain**, contact Holiday in **Spain**, 1-3 Westmoreland St, D2, tel: (01) 635-0200, or see spain.info

Instituto de Turismo de la Region de Murcia | Avda. Juana Jugán, 2 30006 Murcia, tel: 34 968 35 77 25, or see murciaturistica.es



THE SWORD IN THE STONE: A sundial at the entrance to Lorca Castle