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# The fine art of celebration

To witness a fiesta is to see Spain at its best, each celebration an intoxicating mix of religious symbolism, artistic flair and paganistic passion – and an abundant sense of fun



**T**he narrow streets and alleys of the tiny village of Bugarría, near Valencia, seem an unlikely place for a street party. Yet the telltale bunting and the red flags and drapes embroidered with the image of the Virgin Mary hanging from the old iron balconies tell a different story. Now there is the sound of children's laughter, and the gravelly chug of a generator as an absurdly large bouncy castle, filling most of the tiny local square, wobbles incongruously into view.

These are the remnants from last night's fiesta. My friend Rosa Villalba tells me that every year in October the villagers honour the Virgin Mary in her guise as patron of the village, the Virgen del Rosario. Each Sunday morning the rosary is performed in the local chapel, and the following evening, the Vir-

gin's statue is taken from her usual place of honour in the church, and carried reverently aloft through the village. She is followed by a candle-lit procession of the faithful, who sing rosary prayer songs, including an anthem written specially for the image, composed by local musicians. A local brass band plays *pasodobles*, and people chat and sing until the procession reaches the house of the festival organiser, where the statue stays overnight. Then a banquet is served

on long tables in the street. Bands play and there is dancing until late into the night. "In the old times," says Rosa, "this was the way most people found a partner, as surrounding villages would come to our village to enjoy the party."

This will all seem familiar to people throughout Spain. Even the smallest villages have their own saint's day, often their own local legend, and every town has its own celebration, with processions and often merrymaking into the small hours. Throughout the year there are many fiestas, each a colourful and rousing mix of religious ritual and paganistic ritual.

The biggest of these celebrations is Holy Week (Semana Santa, pages 4-6). Easter is the most important event in the Christian calendar here, and in some places the celebrations can last more than a week. In larger

cities such as Sevilla, medieval-style processions of brotherhoods wearing colourful capes and cone-shaped *capiroto* hoods wind through the crowded streets accompanied by a tumult of drums and trumpets.

Each follows its own *paso*, a platform held aloft that bears the incredibly lifelike, carved sculptures of holy figures such as the Virgin Mary or Christ. For most of the year, these remain secure in their churches and cathedrals, to be admired from afar behind grilles or glass. Yet for these festivals, usually at Easter, they are brought forth to tour the streets and wow the faithful.

**The golden age**  
In many of the larger religious centres such as Valladolid and Sevilla (p5), these are often priceless works of art – national treasures that inspire tremendous emotion. Some are relics of the Spanish golden age of the 17th century, when sculptors and "polychrome" painters went to great lengths to accomplish graphic, even gory, realism, using what Guardian art critic Adrian Searle has called "the consummate technical skills of the 17th-century special effects studio".

They are a result of the 16th-century counter-reformation, a period associated with both Catholic dogma and artistic fertility, which eventually gave birth to the baroque styles of architecture, art and music in Spain (p3). The relics of this age and their descendants remain centrepieces of Spanish culture.

In many regions, such as historic Castilla y Leon, in cities such as Soria, Avila and Valladolid, you can see these works in their original settings (p14), or you can see them during Semana Santa. But if you can't make it this year, the good news is that the National Gallery in London has managed to borrow some of these masterpieces for its new exhibition, *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture, 1600-1700*. It features the work of some of the great masters of that age, such as Velazquez and

Zurbaran. We preview the exhibition on page 15.

Many fiestas also take place at or around the time of Corpus Christi (p10), 50 days after Easter. If it's possible, these celebrations are more intense than Easter. In some places, particularly in the north, it is more sombre; for remembrance rather than re-creation. Nonetheless, these are moving displays, and a chance for the faithful to show their devotion to Christ through the adoration of the "host" – consecrated bread that believers is the real presence of the flesh of Christ. Accordingly it is carried reverently through the streets in an elaborately carved and gilded vessel called a monstrance, accompanied by the occasional *saeta* sung by a member of the appreciative crowd.

And let's not forget the fairly recent resurgence of Carnival (p12), perhaps the only street party in Spain where the religious significance of the celebrations takes second place to the grand old art of partying for partying's sake.

With something festive going on somewhere in Spain throughout the year, we haven't been able to include everything.

Somehow, somewhere, there's a show going on. See the events calendar on this page for more information. Enjoy the fun!

**Dave Hall**

ers at ports and seaside villages the entire 5,000km length of Spain's coastline honour their patron saint in a seaborne procession.

Then there's the *Misterio de Elche* (p7): an entertaining version of the medieval mystery play with dramatic origins in pagan ritual and Moorish musical flavours that date back to a pre-Christian era.

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## Win a fantastic weekend away for two in Valladolid, Castilla Y Leon!

Discover Valladolid, in the Castilla y Leon region. Celebrated for its culture and history, as well as authentic cuisine, it's a must-see Spanish destination for culture-seekers and foodies alike. Lying on the Pisuerga River, it also boasts the famous Ribera Del Duero wine-making region. Spend the day strolling through world-class museums, visiting the historic cathedral, or visit the house of Cervantes, where the renowned writer was living when his masterpiece, *Don Quijote*, was published.

Valladolid is also brimming with restaurants and eateries, from contemporary Spanish cuisine through to the more rustic and traditional tapas bars. All this and the chance to soak up the Spanish rays!

Visit [www.spain.info/uk/tourspain/spanishspirit](http://www.spain.info/uk/tourspain/spanishspirit) and enter now for a chance to win this fantastic Spanish weekend away and discover the delights of Valladolid!

Terms and conditions Entries will be accepted until the 30th of November 2009. The winners will be selected randomly using a computer programme. The prize is a weekend break (2-night holiday) for two to Valladolid, including return flights. Prize valid for two people departing the UK between December 2009 and February 2010. Always subject to availability and excluding departures during Christmas, Easter and any UK or local bank holidays or public holidays. Accommodation will be at Posadas Reales in bed and breakfast board only based on two adults sharing an ensuite twin or double room (winner's choice). Full terms & conditions available at [www.spain.info/uk/tourspain/spanishspirit](http://www.spain.info/uk/tourspain/spanishspirit)

## Spanish fiestas

At any time of the year, somewhere in Spain there will be a festival, so the following is not an exhaustive list – though you might find it exhausting to visit them all! See [Spain.info/uk](http://Spain.info/uk) for more details on where to go and how to get there.

## January

## Procession of the Three Kings

Nationwide, 5 January 2010

Los Reyes Magos, or the Three Wise Men, are the Latin equivalent of Santa Claus. On the night of 5 January (the eve of Epiphany) Spanish children leave not their stockings, but their shoes on their windowsills, filling them with straw for the camels of the Magi, who leave presents the next morning.



Clockwise from left: Fun at the April Fair in Sevilla; a statue of Christ silhouetted against the sky during an Easter procession in Malaga; pilgrims on the annual Romería del Rocio; sailors carrying the Virgen del Carmen in Malaga, and a penitente in the Easter processions in Lorca, Murcia

## La Tamborrada

San Sebastián, Basque Country, 20 January 2010

A 24-hour celebration of the city's patron saint is celebrated noisily with drum parades through the city streets.

## Festivals of San Antón and San Sebastián

Throughout southern Spain, annually

Commemoration of the Christian victory against the Moors in 1570 with re-enactments and full costume.

## February

## Carnival

Throughout Spain but most notably in

Cádiz, the Canaries and Sitges, around

16 February 2010

Riotous colour, fancy dress, dancing and drinking (p12).

## March

## Fallas de San José

Valencia, 15-19 March 2010

Massive street parties and the best fireworks in the world to celebrate Saint Joseph, culminating in La Crema – the Burning of the Fallas (wooden and paper-mâché effigies of famous people or historical figures).

## April

## Holy Week (Semana Santa) celebrated everywhere, 28 March-5 April 2010

Most spectacular in Andalucía (particularly Sevilla), and Castilla y Leon (p4-6).

## La Feria de Abril

Sevilla, two weeks after Easter

Huge fair continues where the Semana Santa celebrations left off.

## Romería de Andújar

Andalucía, annually on the last weekend of April

Romería de Andújar, or Pilgrimage of The Virgen de la Cabeza, one of the largest pilgrimages of the year.

## Moros y Cristianos (Moors and Christians) festival

Alcoy, Alicante, 22-24 October

Mock battles in full costume. The festival takes place at different times of the year in different parts of the comunidad Valenciana.

## May

## Cruces de Mayo

Granada and Córdoba, Andalucía, first weekend of May

Huge crucifixes dressed in flowers adorn the streets, plazas, balconies, pavements and railings, becoming focal points for dancing, singing and general merriment.

## Fiesta de los Patios

Córdoba, 6-17 May 2010

A contest to find the city's most beautiful flower-covered patio, combined with the traditional

## November

## Todos Los Santos (All Saints Day)

Nationwide, November 1

Spanish people from all over the country return to their birthplaces to remember their dead.

## Fiesta de la Almudena

Madrid, 9 November

The patron of Madrid, the Virgin de Almudena, is carried through the streets to the Almudena cathedral, and flowers are laid in the Plaza de la Almudena.

## December

## Spanish Christmas

Nationwide, 24 December-5 January

A mercifully quiet, family affair!



## Travel information

## TRAVEL BY LAND

Spanish Rail (020-7725 7063; [spanish-rail.co.uk](http://spanish-rail.co.uk)) provides information and books tickets for journeys from the UK and around Spain. You can also book through Railbookers (0844 482 1010; [railbookers.com](http://railbookers.com)) and Rail Europe (0848 4064; [raileurope.co.uk](http://raileurope.co.uk)). The best way to get to Spain by train is to take the Eurostar to Paris ([eurostar.com](http://eurostar.com)), then the sleeper to Madrid/Barcelona ([elipsos.com](http://elipsos.com)). Renfe, the Spanish rail network, has a website for checking timetables ([renfe.com](http://renfe.com)). NB: All routes are subject to change.

## TRAVEL BY AIR

BMI ([britishmidland.com](http://britishmidland.com)) flies from four UK airports, including Cardiff to Alicante and Madrid, from where there are connecting flights to our featured destinations.

## British Airways

(0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies to Madrid, Barcelona and Málaga from London Heathrow, Gatwick and City.

## EasyJet

(0905 821 0905; [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)) flies from many UK airports to Spain including Alicante, Málaga, Murcia and Tenerife.

## Flythomascook

([flythomascook.com](http://flythomascook.com)) flies from nine UK airports including Glasgow to Málaga and from 12 UK airports including Aberdeen, Glasgow and Manchester to Alicante and from 14 UK airports to Tenerife.

## Vueling