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Cover image: Praying at the shrine of the Virgen del Rocío, Huelva province

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



The narrow streets and alleys of the tiny village of Bugarra, near Valencia, seem an unlikely place for a street party. Yet the telltale bunting and the red flags and drapes 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

The religious images of the Spanish golden age and their descendants remain centrepieces of Spanish culture to this day

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 merry-making into the small hours. Throughout the year there are many fiestas, each a colourful and rousing mix of religious rite 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 *capirote* 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 (p13). 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 (p.10), 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 recreation. 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 to 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. But even at Corpus Christi the piety gives way to levity, and some places go out of their way to make merry, with displays of colour, fireworks and flowers - even in some of the most obscure places, such as the wonderful La Orotava in Tenerife (p.11).

The fiesta tradition doesn't end there. The Spanish have carried on the tradition of the pilgrimage like no other Christian country, such as the *romerías*, reminiscent of Chaucerian medieval pageants, which take place around the country during Pentecost. These too are accompanied by singing, dancing and merriment. We look at the biggest and best-known - the Romería del Rocío, (8-9). It is a 600-year-old tradition that over the weekend of the Romería, transforms the tiny village of Rocío in Huelva province into the third largest city in Spain.

But size isn't everything: throughout the year there are many smaller festivals taking place. Among the most intriguing is the Patrona del Carmen (p.12) in which seafar-



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

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 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.

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 Cadiz, 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 papier-mache 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 (pp4-6).

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 April 2010
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 Cordoba, 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
Cordoba, 6-17 May 2010
A contest to find the city's most beautiful flower-covered patio, combined with the traditional

pilgrimage of the Virgen Conquistadora to her sanctuary at Linares.

Feria de Cordoba
Cordoba, Andalucía, throughout May
A fiesta of flamenco and all things Spanish, which now rivals Seville's April Fair in size.

Fiesta de San Isidro
Madrid, 8-15 May 2010
Celebrating the patron saint of the capital, this is Madrid's most colourful festival of the year.

June
La Romería del Rocío
Rocío, Huelva, from 23 May 2010
A village of 2,000 people becomes a city of 1.5 million for Spain's biggest pilgrimage (pp8-9).

Corpus Christi
Throughout Spain, 3 June 2010
Especially spectacular in Toledo, Seville, Granada and La Orotava (pp10-11)

July
La Patrona del Carmen
All around the coast, varying dates
A statue of the Virgin Mary tours the local harbour accompanied by a flotilla of fishing boats and fireworks (p12).

St James' Day
Santiago de Compostela, Galicia, 25 July 2010.
St James Day pilgrims who have walked the Camino de Santiago congregate around the cathedral where it is said the saint's tomb lies.

August
El Misterio de Elche (Elx mystery play)
14-15 August 2010
An unusual take on the medieval mystery play that dates back to the 15th century (p7).

Feria de Malaga
Malaga, mid-August
Ten days of partying starting around mid-August.

September
Fiestas de Otoño, (Jerez sherry festival)
Jerez de la Frontera, first Saturday of September for three weeks
Celebrated with flamenco dancing and music, and of course, sherry.

La Fiestes de la Merce
Barcelona, Catalonia
Barcelona's main festival in honour of the Virgin de la Merce, featuring giants, human towers, processions, fireworks, dancing, and lots of cava.

October
Las Fiestas del Pilar
Zaragoza, 12 October
Commemorates the Virgin Mary's appearance to St James, and is a major festival day in Zaragoza.

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!

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

Discover Valladolid, in the Castilla y León 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 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



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