

Kerry Miller finds himself immersed in Spanish tradition at the re-enactment of the battle between the Romans and the Cartagenians in Murcia

Roads are blocked off, bleachers erected, pyrotechnics sorted and elaborate musical systems engaged before thousands of proud Cartagenians gather each year around the end of September to witness a truly spectacular free show.

It is the re-enactment of the battles between the Romans and the Cartagenians – the Punic Wars – which appear to take over the waking thoughts of the city’s people as a culmination of ten days of festivities.

Imagine the colour and pageantry of the Somerset Carnivals combined with the passion of the English Civil War recreationists and then multiply it several times and that will give some indication of the scene which greets the eager audience alongside the city wall in Cartagena, a city in the Region of Murcia, in SE Spain.

Unsurprisingly the festival has been declared as being of National Tourist Interest and it seems virtually everyone in and around the city is involved in what is obviously an important and passionate part of the culture.

The citizens are either in the Roman



MAGNIFICENT MURCIA

Murcia's Cathedral of Saint Mary



or Cartagenian camp and the attention to detail on their outfits and uniforms is astonishing with even toddlers' pushchairs redesigned as Roman chariots. With warriors mounted on horses and the smell of sulphur in the air the whole scenario is played out to the background of stirring music and cannot fail to stir the most hardened of hearts.

Twenty four hours later the city itself comes to a standstill as thousands from both sides assemble at the camps beside the football stadium before marching through to an accompaniment of drums and

trumpets with stilt walkers, fire eaters, jugglers and acrobats, all ending back at the camp with a massive party before it all begins again a year later.

Cartagena is an engaging city at any time and without doubt its pride and joy is the Roman Amphitheatre, remarkably only discovered in 1988.

Built during the occupation at the end of the first century BC, it was rediscovered after the Palacio de la Condesa de Peralto, itself a fine building, was demolished and carved columns were unearthed, leading to a 15-year archeological dig where several later buildings

Murcia essential guide

- Although Murcia has an airport, it is some distance from the city itself. As an alternative, Gatwick flies regularly to Alicante, around an hour away.
- Transfer from the airport takes the form of regular bus services or by train from downtown Alicante.
- The area is full of good quality eating places but recommended are: La Patacha floating restaurant, situated in the Port of Cartagena, specialises in fresh fish, seafood and rice dishes while in Capo de Palos the seafront El Pez Rojo restaurant also comes highly recommended.
- In Cartagena next to the Roman Amphitheatre in the Plaza Conesa de Peralta is La Catedral restaurant. Cleverly designed with glass floors to show some of the ruins and with an attentive English speaking owner who is more than happy to give guided tours of his business, of which he is rightly proud.



A battle re-enactment

from other occupations were removed.

The outcome is an amphitheatre which has now been granted a stunning museum, the whole described as the ‘Jewel in the Crown of Cartagena.’

For those whose holiday pleasures involve soaking up the rays, the area known as the Mar Menor fits the bill well, separated from the Mediterranean Sea by the La Manga sandbar.

The Mar Menor is described as a ‘watersports playground’ and proudly offers scuba diving, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, kiteboarding and powerboating while the

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adjacent mudflats are home to the exotic Pink Flamingo which can be seen in the spring and autumn as well as occasionally during the winter.

Outside of the waterborne activities the Mar Menor offers miles of flat and traffic free cycling or walking and has any number of open air cafes and restaurants plying their trade, all providing fresh and good value food.

Summers in the Murcia Region are very hot with very little rainfall, indeed it enjoys a Mediterranean climate meaning cold days are very rare and sea swimming is usually comfortable from April onwards.

Inland Murcia has the outward appearance of being a dry and arid land but it is one of the most important areas in

Europe for fruit, vegetables and flowers and a vibrant wine industry is celebrated in the town of Bullas where the wine museum is in the process of adding English translation to its artefacts.

A few miles east of Cartagena is the town of La Union, established centuries ago but changed out of all recognition due to the silver mining boom and its underground museum gives a vivid indication of the harsh working environment where life expectancy and worker’s rights were low.

A full tour takes around two hours and is reached by way of a land train from the

headquarters close to the railway station.

Murcia itself, the capital city of the Region, despite the countries’ current economic problems, is a colourful and fascinating venue dominated centrally by the magnificent Cathedral of St Mary. Built with a Baroque exterior and with a Gothic interior design it is free to enter and if visited during Mass, the reverence can be enjoyed both by those of a religious or secular persuasion.

Dotted around the city are any number of eating establishments and open air cafes which attract locals and tourists alike and it seems to come to life in the late evening when the temperature goes down and those in the know come out to play.



Cartagena's Roman amphitheatre