

Valencia



So many of the more than 5.5 million overseas visitors to the Comunidad Valenciana (Valencia region) each year confine themselves to the resorts of the thin coastal strip, where they stay put – except, perhaps, for a day trip to Valencia city. The more enterprising rent a bike or car, leave behind the coastal hedonism and explore the region's rich interior.

Valencia is both of Spain and distinct from Spain. In Muslim hands for five centuries, its Christian European history has been shaped as much by Catalonia, its neighbour to the north, as by Castilla. The region's flag bears the red and yellow stripes of Catalonia and the mother tongue of many is Valenciano, a dialect of Catalan.

Valencia city, the region's capital, is famed for its nightlife, the wild Las Fallas spring festival and the stunning architecture of its Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias.

To the north, along the Costa del Azahar (Orange Blossom Coast), is a string of low-key resorts, plus the historic site of Sagunto. Southwards along the Costa Blanca (White Coast) stretch some of Spain's finest beaches. You can bar-hop and party in international resorts such as Benidorm, Torrevieja and the lively provincial capital of Alicante. Others, such as Denia and Gandia, still retain a much more Spanish flavour.

Inland lies a world where mountains buckle and castles crown hilltops: there's Morella, girt by intact medieval walls; Xàtiva, with its splendid castle; Montanejos, a tiny spa town that draws rock climbers from around Europe; and Elche, with Europe's most extensive palm groves.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Fling fireworks and suffer serious sleep deprivation at **Las Fallas** (p611), Europe's wildest spring festival
- Sway on the smart new tram that runs along the spectacular coastline between **Alicante** and **Benidorm** (p640)
- Bring your tent and shake your booty at **Festival Internacional de Benicàssim** (p623), Benicàssim's outdoor international music festival
- Gasp at the daring architecture of **Valencia city** (p607) in the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias, and immerse yourself in the Oceanogràfic, Europe's largest aquarium
- Savour your first glimpse of the medieval fortress town of **Morella** (p627) from afar



■ AREA: 23,255 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP:
HIGH 32°C, LOW 19°C

■ POP: 4.4 MILLION

VALENCIA CITY

pop 805,300

Valencia, Spain's third-largest city, for ages languished in the long shadows cast by Madrid, Spain's political capital, and Barcelona, the country's cultural and economic powerhouse. No longer. Stunning public buildings have changed the city's skyline – Sir Norman Foster's Palacio de Congresos, David Chipperfield's award-winning Veles i Vents structure beside the inner port, and, on the grandest scale of all, the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias, designed in the main by Santiago Calatrava, local boy made good.

Events too have raised Valencia's profile. In 2007 the eyes of the world were upon the town as it hosted the America's Cup sailing races, while in 2008 the city hosted both the World Indoor Athletics Championships and the first European Grand Prix, where Formula One cars hurtled around an urban circuit that threads in and around the radically transformed inner port.

An increasingly popular short-break venue (the number of overseas visitors has almost doubled in the last four years), Valencia is where paella first simmered over a wood fire. It's a vibrant, friendly, mildly chaotic place with two outstanding fine-arts museums, an accessible old quarter, Europe's newest cultural and scientific complex – and one of Spain's most exciting nightlife scenes.

HISTORY

Pensioned-off Roman legionaries founded 'Valentia' on the banks of Río Turia in 138 BC. The Arabs made Valencia an agricultural and industrial centre, establishing ceramics, paper, silk and leather industries and extending the network of irrigation canals in the rich agricultural hinterland.

Muslim rule was briefly interrupted in 1094 by the triumphant rampage of the legendary Castilian knight El Cid (see the boxed text, p258), but almost a century and a half were to elapse before the Christians definitively retook the city in 1238, when Jaime I incorporated the area into his burgeoning Catalan kingdom.

Valencia's golden age was in the 15th and 16th centuries, when it was one of the Mediterranean's strongest trading centres. Like Catalonia, Valencia backed the wrong horse in the War of the Spanish Succession (1702–13) and in retribution the victorious

Bourbon king Felipe V abolished the *fueros*, the autonomous privileges the city had enjoyed. The Spanish Civil War proved similarly unlucky; Valencia, having sided with the Republicans (and acting as seat of the Republican government from November 1936 until October 1937) was slighted for years by successive nationalist governments.

The *fueros* may not have been restored but, benefiting from the decentralisation that followed Franco's death, Valencia today enjoys a high degree of autonomy.

ORIENTATION

The 'action' part of the city is an oval area bounded by the old course of Río Turia, and the sickle-shaped inner ring road of Calles de Colón, Xàtiva and de Guillem de Castro. Within this oval are three major squares: Plazas del Ayuntamiento, de la Reina (also known as Plaza de Zaragoza) and de la Virgen.

INFORMATION

Call ☎ 902 12 32 12 throughout the region for tourist information (at premium rates).

Casa del Llibre (Map p608; ☎ 96 353 00 80; Passeig Russafa 11) Offspring of the giant Madrid mother store, with a reasonable stock of books in English.

Laundry Stop (Map p608; Calle Baja 17; ☎ 9.30am–10pm) Surf the net (per hr €1.50) or wi-fi as your clothes spin.

Librería Patagonia (Map p608; ☎ 96 393 60 52; Calle Hospital 1) An excellent travel bookshop with some guides in English, including Lonely Planet titles.

Main post office (Map p608; Plaza del Ayuntamiento)

Ono (Map p608; Calle San Vicente Mártir 22; per hr €3.50; ☎ 10am–10pm) Internet access.

Region of Valencia (www.comunitatvalenciana.com)

The Valencia region's excellent official tourism site.

Regional tourist office (Map p608; ☎ 96 398 64 22; Calle Paz 48; ☎ 9am–2.30pm & 4.30–8pm Mon–Fri)

CREEPING CATALAN

More and more town halls are replacing street signs in Spanish with the Valenciano/Catalan equivalent. While the difference between the two versions is often minimal, this can sometimes be confusing for visitors. Occasionally we use the Valenciano form where it's clearly the dominant one. But since Spanish is the version every local understands and the majority uses, we've elected to stick with it in most cases.