

MURCIA

The Real Spain

The sun-drenched province of Murcia is undoubtedly one of Spain's best-kept secrets. While over-development has marred many of the other costas, Murcia has remained traditionally Spanish and mainly agricultural for centuries. Now it's opening its arms to international tourism and visitors are in for a real treat.

Situated in south-eastern Spain on the Costa Cálida – or Warm Coast – Murcia enjoys an average of 315 days of sunshine every year. The terrain is varied, with arid flatlands nearer the coast rising to towering sierras and verdant

forests and river valleys inland. Fishing villages and lighthouses dot the coast, while in the south, you'll find the tranquil Mar Menor – a vast lagoon separated from the Med by La Manga, a thin coastal strip just one kilometre wide.

While significant pockets of new development certainly exist, Murcia has been very careful to learn from the mistakes of other parts of Spain. For example, no high-rise building is allowed and the accent is on quality rather than quantity. You'll also find a reassuringly high proportion of Spanish people buying property or holidaying there.

Food for Thought

And who can blame them? Basking in the heat, Murcia's fertile plains support the growth of pretty much every type of vegetable you can think of. Here, you'd be hard pressed not to eat your 'five-a-day' and locals pride themselves on their healthy diet, which also centres around fish and pork.

The choice of excellent eateries is vast, but don't miss the timelessly Spanish Restaurante Hispano on the Calle Radio Murcia in beautiful Murcia City. Tuck into mouth-watering local fare in a lively, authentic setting where you're unlikely to hear another British voice around you. »

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WORDS BY GAIL TAYLOR, PHOTOS ©DREAMSTIME & MURCIATURISTICA.ES

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» After you've eaten, take a stroll around the magical old town with its breathtaking Santa María Cathedral. It's impossible not to be awed by its majestic Baroque façade and haloed angels. In complete contrast, across the square is the cool, understated contemporary Town Hall designed by acclaimed Spanish architect, Rafael Moneo.

Of course, every good meal deserves good wine to accompany it and Murcia province boasts three Designation of Origin wines of its own: Jumilla, Yecla and Bullas.

Heartsease on the menu, said to soothe a broken heart.

Unabashed indulgence

Aqua is part of the sumptuous 5-star InterContinental Mar Menor Golf Resort and Spa. Situated just a 10-minute drive from Murcia's San Javier airport, this exclusive hotel is a perfect illustration of the type of high-end development earmarked for the region. It encompasses a 9-hole golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus, indoor and outdoor pools, and the wonderful ESPA spa – where you can walk in stressed



Wine production centres in the north-east and organised wine tours are a great way to enjoy the scenery and sample the goodies.

The subject of wine leads us to a topic that is close to every Murcian's heart: water. As you might expect with so much sunshine, water is a crucial and sometimes scarce resource, particularly in the agricultural areas. Understandably then, one top-class restaurant has been named Aqua (water) and offers over 110 types of bottled water from around the world, in addition to the stronger stuff. There's even a Welsh spring water called

and leave feeling completely serene.

Expect to be pampered to the max. The rooms incorporate every luxury, including balconies, walk-in showers and large hydro-baths. The hotel is not only perfect for a sensual romantic break, it's also well situated as a base for touring the rest of the province.

Although comparatively small – traversable by car in just two hours or so – Murcia is brimming with history. Numerous archaeological sites and relics can be found dating back from the Stone Age, Iberian period, and Roman Empire to the Visigoths, Arabs and later on the Christians. The many conflicts

between these civilisations made Murcia a pivotal military region.

A simple but classic example of the ebb and flow of differing cultures is that of the town of Blanca, nestling in the lush Ricote Valley. Originally named Negro (black) by the Arabs after the type of black stone it was built on, the Christians later changed it to Blanca (white) and put a large statue of Christ high up on the hill to watch over the population.

When you visit Blanca, make sure you dine at the divine Casa Conde La Vallesa hotel, with its exquisite tiled water font and palm-lined gardens outside. However, why not work up a good appetite first by taking a river rafting trip along the River Segura which runs through the town?

Wade in the water

Aventuras Turísticas Alana in Blanca's Plaza del Rubion runs supervised rafting and kayaking trips and provides all the necessary gear and instruction. Although there is a weir to negotiate and a few stretches of white water, it's a fairly sedate stretch of river, suitable for beginners.

The banks are lined by tall bamboos, birds sing from high up in the conifers and the mountains form a rugged backdrop. It's an incredibly therapeutic way to pass two or three hours, and a great way to experience things you wouldn't from the road.

Moving on to the south coast, another example of Murcia's diverse military history is that of the elegant and ancient city of Cartagena. »



Images © InterContinental Mar Menor Golf Resort and Spa



» Considered the finest natural harbour in the Mediterranean, the Punic Wars were waged here between 238 and 218 BC.

The starting point for any visit is the Historical Interpretation Centre in the Concepción Castle, which can be reached via a spectacular ride in a 45-metre high panoramic lift that links to the Castle via a footbridge. The Centre's modern facilities provide the key to understanding the most important chapters of the city's illustrious history. Other must-see attractions include the original Victorian prototype for submarines, a re-discovered Roman amphitheatre and several striking examples of modernist architecture.

However, if activities are more your bag, there's also good news. Murcia's varied landscape provides boundless opportunities for hiking, cycling, rafting, horse-riding, rock-climbing and exploring. The Mar Menor's peaceful, shallow waters not only provide an excellent family beach environment, but abundant watersports facilities. Keen golfers will love the Nicklaus Golf Trail at Polaris World, a circuit of nine world-class courses, all within a 25km radius.

It's impossible to cover every aspect of what Murcia has to offer in so short a space. The other ancient towns and cities; the colourful fiestas; the brightly

flowering succulents; the sound of the cicadas at nightfall; the sandy coves and crystal clear waters along the coast; the tremendous warmth of the people and their hospitality. All of these make Murcia the delightful and memorable destination it is. Discover more at murciaturistica.es

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FactFile

Language: Spanish
Weather: Coastal areas: rarely below 10° in winter, rising to about 30° in summer. Interior is colder in winter but summer temperatures regularly exceed 40°.
Time Zone: GMT +1 hour
Population: Circa 1.4m
Currency: Euros
More Info: intercontinental.com/marmenor
alana-aventura.org
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