

Travel | Rory Brigstock-Barron leaves the fleshpots of Alicante and discovers there's much more to Murcia than he knew

Rowdy hens give way to flamingos in a hidden Spain

History, mud and salt flats

Flying into Alicante is an experience that conjures all the negative connotations of British tourism in Spain.

After a swift encounter with the Gatwick express I arrived at departures to find several stags in dresses and overexcited broods of hens who would combine to provide a chorus of chants and cheers, some ironic, some not, throughout the flight.

Luckily Monarch seemed to have siphoned off the party animals at the back of the plane, making for a pleasant journey.

Just as luckily, a short drive south from the airport which serves Benidorm sits the region of Murcia, as authentic a representation of Spain as you could hope to find in the 21st century.

Our first stop was San Pedro Del Pinatar, home of The Regional Park of Las Salinas y Arenales. The park is situated at the north of Europe's largest salt lake, the Mar Menor lagoon – a 105 square-mile expanse of water, hugely popular for water-sports and famed for its therapeutic muds.

Spaniards come from all over to bathe in the warm shallow waters and cake themselves with the thick

sulphurous dirt, which stinks. Once you get past the smell though, there's something to be said for a practice that is perhaps more than just superstition.

Legend dictates that bathers should coat themselves in the thick, black, pungent dirt before taking a two-mile stroll and washing the mud off in the same stretch of water it was applied. According to the locals, nine trips during the summer holiday is the secret to good health, aiding with ailments such as arthritis, broken bones and skin conditions.

Safari

While sampling the muds in the winter is not advised, it's certainly a lot of fun, and in hotter weather the beaches surrounding the southern part of the lake and the magnificent La Manga strip that separates it from the Mediterranean also come in to play.

One advantage of visiting in colder temperatures – still close to 20C – was the vast number of flamingos grazing on the salt flats which almost gave the illusion of being on an African safari. The majestic pink birds are less forthcoming in the summer months when the water is



■ The Roman theatre, Cartagena, used to be a slum now it is a jewel in the region's crown

full of holidaymakers, but we barely needed binoculars to get a good look at them.

We made the short drive to Santiago De La Ribera where we had our first taste of Murcia's distinctive form of tapas with beautiful views of the harbour at the Miramar Restaurant.

The highlight of the meal, which would crop up several times on the trip, was the sensational king prawn deep fried in a deliciously fluffy egg based batter. Not surprisingly, seafood across the region is of the highest calibre from tuna to shell fish.

We moved on to Cartagena, perhaps the most historically rich part of the region, with the jewel in its crown the Roman theatre – excavation of which only finished in 2003.

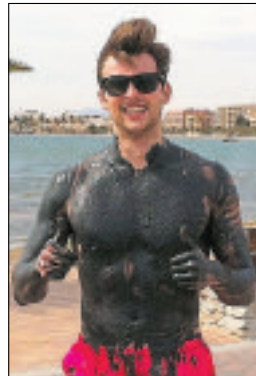
Up until the late 80s the theatre was a relative slum in the city, with some of its poorest citizens living where its most powerful dignitaries once sat to be entertained.

Now it is an awe-inspiring arena and through the adjoining museum a window on Cartagena's significance in Spain's Roman past.

Excavated and with some parts restored, a lost world has been discovered to the huge benefit of anyone lucky enough to visit.

Cartagena's night life is not its strongest suit. Nevertheless there are a number of bars full of lively locals that play a mixture of classic hits and more traditional Spanish music.

Don't expect fluent English, a big part of the romance of Murcia is that it hasn't seen the British invasion that parts of its neighbouring regions have, a potential downside is that it's harder to make yourself understood,



■ Rory takes the mud at San Pedro Del Pinatar

unless you're lucky enough to be a dab hand at Spanish.

Our next stop was the region's hub, Murcia city, a thriving spot with a much younger demographic than Cartagena.

Prayer rooms

The most overwhelming element of the city has to be the Cathedral, which combines a variety of architectural styles – due to its construction spanning four centuries.

Inside the great Catholic palace are a number of grand prayer rooms, paid for by rich families over centuries and lavished with grand works of art and furniture – in the hope of securing a spot in heaven.

We were lucky enough to sample the city's food market which had a vast array of enticing fresh produce and even luckier for our visit to coincide with the region's wine tourism fair, which was taking place in the city.

Murcia's nightlife is also high up on the city's attrac-

FACTFILE

■ **How to get there:** Alicante airport is two-and-a-half hours from Gatwick, with Monarch running daily flights from £30.99 one way including tax. www.monarch.co.uk.

■ **Car hire at airport from** £9.52 a day – probably the best way to see region. www.auto-europe.co.uk

■ **Where to stay:** The NH Cartagena Hotel offers four-star accommodation in the heart of Cartagena. e-mail nhcartagena@nh-hotels.com, tel +34 9 68

12 09 08, www.nh-hoteles.es

Hotel Novotel Murcia a few minutes walk from Murcia's historic city centre with fitness centre and pool. Email h5228@accor.com, tel +34 9 68 37 47 99, www.novotel.com

Hotel Termas is the main hotel in Balneario de Archena Resort. 19th century, it is an idyllic base to enjoy the spa experience. Balnearioarchenahoteltermas.com/Balneario_de_Archena_Hotel_Termas_Home.html



■ Murcia Cathedral. Many young people chose to settle down in the area
Picture: Azalea Group

tions with its trendy bars and clubs frequented by affluent locals seamlessly running alongside its more basic but vibrant student haunts.

Even if dancing isn't your thing, sitting at an outside bar and watching the city come alive gives you a real insight in to why so many young people from Murcia choose to stay and settle down.

Next up was a tour of the wine cellars of San Isidro in the small town of Jumilla, where 1,500 bottles of wine are produced an hour during peak production – 36 per cent of which are sent to the UK.

A tour of the cellars, where you really get an understanding for the phenomenal scale of what goes into keeping us sane, costs just 15 euros, and you'll get a chance to taste what all the fuss is about.

If it's a relaxing getaway you want, our next destination, Archena, was the perfect way to wind down after more than two days of sight seeing. The spa resort offers

luxury accommodation around natural hot springs, with a complex including pools at a range of temperatures, as well as saunas, steam rooms and even an igloo to cool down in. Healing muds are also used here with a wide range of treatments available for skin and muscles by professionals at surrounding hotels.

Happy

A day or two at the resort is lovely but there's too much to see in Murcia to linger there any longer.

The food, the wine and the weather could go a long way to explaining Murcia as a region.

It seems to make the people happy, and this is part of the reason it's such a joy to visit.

There's something for everyone, with vibrant history, culture and nightlife in the city, wine tasting tours and ideal opportunities to relax around Mar Menor or at Archena.

Just keep it schtum at Alicante – our little secret.