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BREAKS ON YOUR
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END TO THE GREEN

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NOT ONLY FAMOUS
FOR ITS FOOD

NEW ROUTES
STOCKHOLM
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THE CASINO

As significant as the cathedral might be to the city's history, it is Murcia's Real Casino that provides the actual surprise. Not a casino in the way we know today, this social club (the original meaning of the word casino) is a mix of marble and plaster, grand arches and intricate panelling. First opened in 1847, it was added to over the years. It is still used as a social club today – pool is played and meetings are held here.



Tasting Murcia

This region of south-east Spain might be best known for its food, but there are many other sides to Murcia. And with the cooler autumn weather, now's the perfect time to explore...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS MARK HIGHAM

You might never have stepped foot in the south-east of Spain, and the region of Murcia and its long history might be completely unknown to you. But one thing is certain: Murcia plays a part in your life almost every time you head to the supermarket. It's particularly known for its lemons and grapefruit, but lettuce, peppers, tomatoes and even broccoli are just a few of the vast array of fruit and vegetables that begin life here. A whopping 70 per cent of these crops are exported, but the best are snapped up by restaurants and local food markets. It's impossible to convey just how delicious the food here is. The tomatoes have a flavour that is discernibly sweet and seem so much nicer than the ones filling our shelves back home. With fruit and vegetables



“Pilgrims walk the Via Verde on their way to Caravaca de la Cruz, one of Christianity’s most holy cities.”

Maria dates back to the late 14th century. Its belltower took around 200 years to build and is a steep climb, but from the top you can marvel at 360-degree views across the region. From here, you can see signs of the complex networks of irrigation channels that put every drop of rainwater to work feeding the people. It’s hard to overstate the significance of those channels or the skill and knowledge that went into perfecting them.



EAT HERE Out and about in Murcia’s capital? Stop for tapas and a cold glass of wine at **LA TAPA**. This family-run restaurant has been dishing up authentic tapas dishes for generations and you’ll see why.

Address: 13 Plaza de las Flores (30004)

HOLY TRAMLINES

You can experience a slice of this landscape up close by bike thanks to the Via Verde. In 1933, a train line was opened linking Murcia to Caravaca de la Cruz. The line was never very successful and was eventually closed in 1971. Since 1998, it has been transformed into a relatively flat cycle route, slicing through verdant forest and linking quaint towns. Walking or cycling some or all of the 50km route is now a popular pastime. There’s even an old railway station on the way that has been radically modernised and transformed into beautiful but cheap accommodation.

Pilgrims often walk this route on their way to Caravaca de la Cruz, one of Christianity’s most holy cities. Basilica de la Vera Cruz is their destination. Built in the early 17th century and set in the grounds of a hilltop castle from the Moorish era, the basilica houses a revered Christian relic. According to legend, in 1232 the Moorish King Abu Zeid converted to Christianity when he saw two angels bringing a cross down from heaven to a priest held prisoner in the castle, so he could give Mass.

If you want to see the cross, said to contain fragments of the cross on which Jesus was crucified, it can be viewed after Mass or by phoning ahead prior to your visit.

that taste this good, it should come as no surprise that fresh, tasty food is a high priority here, and whiling away an afternoon with a bottle of wine and a tapas menu is de rigueur.

But there’s another side to this part of Spain. Founded by the Emir of Cordoba in 825, Murcia was a melting pot of Christian and Islamic forces, and these influences are everywhere. More surprising, the Romans exported fish from here, and in colonial times the British arrived to trade and ended up teaching the country how to play football.

The region is best known for Cartagena, a city founded by the Carthaginians and filled with Roman ruins. Popular with cruise tours, the city swells with tourists, particularly in the summer, but hire a car and explore the rest of Murcia and you’ll be in for a treat.

CITY LIFE

Murcia itself is a university town and the capital of the Murcia region. Its mix of Baroque and Gothic architecture gives an insight into its history, but to really understand what you’re dealing with, you need to visit the local cathedral. The Cathedral Church of Santa

Above: the Vélez Chapel in Murcia’s Santa Maria Cathedral

Right: separated from Murcia’s coast by the La Manga sandbar, is Mar Menor, Europe’s largest saltwater lagoon

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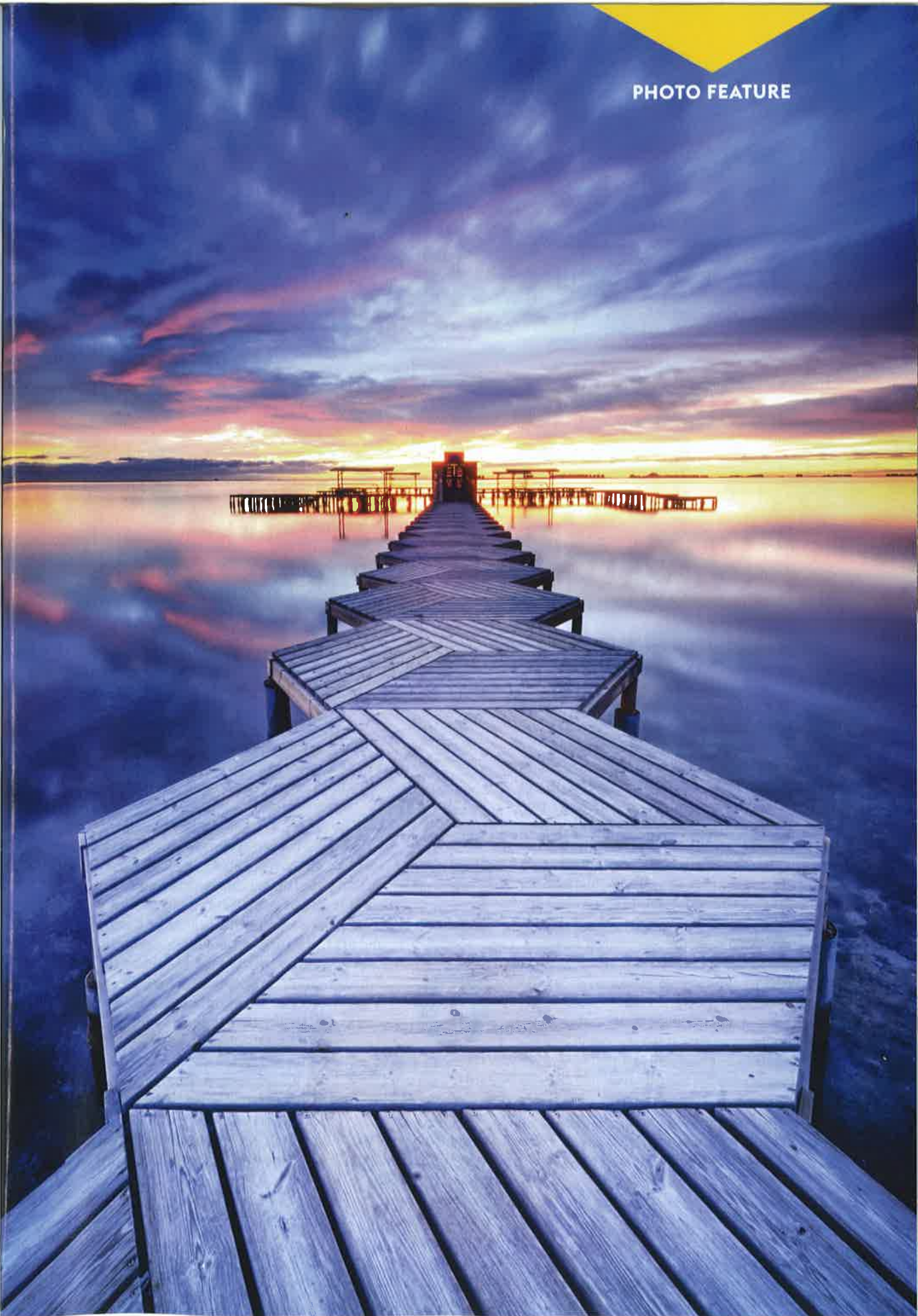


PHOTO FEATURE



FESTIVAL MADNESS

It's in Caravaca de la Cruz that you'll find one of the region's more unusual festivals. The Wine Horses festival, or Los Caballos del Vino, might sound like just another excuse to get merry with friends but the locals take it extremely seriously. The contest itself involves horses, each with four 'runners', in a mad dash up the hill to the castle. The runners spend a year practising the run and the womenfolk spend just as long making the clothing worn by the horses. It might sound like an unusual way to spend a few days in May, but the festival is so popular there's even a museum dedicated to showcasing past events. After it's all over, the clothing is sold off and the process begins again.

DARK DAYS

The partying and merriment were brought into sharp relief one day in May 2011. From just a kilometre below the surface, a magnitude 5.1 earthquake struck the town of Lorca. Nine people died and the scars are still visible today, most notably at one of Lorca's most precious relics. An ongoing effort to

"There are long, sprawling stretches of beach, secluded coves and sleepy fishing villages."

repair three centuries of neglect to the town's castle was almost brought to an end when the quake caused major damage to its walls and nearly brought down its tower.

Built between the ninth and 15th centuries, and of Muslim origin, Lorca Castle is one of Spain's largest castles and a National Historic Monument. Standing on the border of Christian Murcia and Muslim Granada, the castle reveals much about the lifestyles and traditions of those people. However, perhaps the most surprising discovery is the revelation of a Jewish quarter. Works have unearthed 12 homes and a synagogue dating back to the 14th century. A street layout and



STAY HERE: HOTEL PARADOR DE LORCA is a luxury hotel built within the confines of Lorca Castle. During excavation works for the hotel, the castle's Jewish quarter was discovered.

Address: Castillo (30800) paradores/en



WINE HORSES

Festivals are commonplace in Murcia but the Running of the Wine Horses in early May holds a special place in the hearts of locals. A great deal of work and money goes into the horses' mantles



three terraces have been opened up to the public as part of a sensitive excavation project, which really brings the past to life.

COASTAL CHARMS

For many, the lure of the coast is hard to resist but with Murcia fringed by 250km of coastline it's easy to satisfy your beach-front cravings here. Known as the Costa Cálida (the warm coast), unlike the Costa Brava to the north, the coast here is much less developed. While long, sprawling stretches of beach are common, so too are secluded coves and sleepy fishing villages, often with a rich history once you dig beneath the chocolate-box surface.

Águilas is a prime example of that. It's a charming little seaport built between two bays. It looks like any other pretty beach-front town, but back in the latter half of the 19th century it was swamped by a huge British contingent, which came here to trade. The local tour guide alleges that it was during this time that the British taught the Spanish locals how to play the game of football. We'll be wishing we hadn't now!

Further up the coast, the Port of Mazarrón has a very different story to tell. Once a Roman

Clockwise from far left: sunshine and shadows in a Murcian street; looking down from Murcia Cathedral's belltower; the façade of the Basilica de la Vera Cruz; a wine horse costume; Lorca Castle; a railway tunnel in Águilas that was built by the British

fishing village, an archaeological museum now uses exhibits to show how the Romans exported fish byproducts from here. Mazarrón comes with an array of beaches and when you tire of sunbathing, dolphin-spotting boat trips are available. This particular journalist was lucky enough to catch sight of two humpback whales on just such a trip. By night, the harbour is filled with people; families congregate at the many waterfront restaurants, then later, as bars spill out onto the streets, the sound of live music fills the air and little kids finally begin rubbing their eyes with tiredness.

So much of Spain has come to be defined by its tourist resorts, but there is life beyond the beach. That's never more true than in Murcia. When you get out of the tourist hot spots and explore the quieter corners of the region, a rich tapestry of history and culture slowly reveals itself. Best of all, it will be a journey punctuated with great gastronomy guaranteed to excite your taste buds and remind you what fresh food really tastes like. Can any holiday destination offer more? 🍷

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