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A Guide To Spain's Quirkier Festivals

By Mike McDougall

Spaniards seem rarely to need much of a reason for a fiesta or festival of some sort and you can

pretty much guarantee that wherever you are in Spain there will be some merrymaking going on somewhere in honour of a patron saint - I've decided to look at some of Spain's quirkier, slightly less known festivals and enlighten readers as to some of the stranger practices which take place at various times around the country.

Our journey begins in the east of the country in the town of Bunol in the Valencia region where a week long festival in honour of the town's patron saint, San Luis Bertran, ends in the famous "Tomatina", a two hour tomato fight where lorries bring in 120,000 kg of tomatoes for the locals to pelt each other with. It's all a bit of a free-for-all and it's usually girls pitted against boys for two hours of madness from 11am to 1pm. Participants can expect to get extremely messy and it's advisable to wear something old, and preferably red, if you don't want the stains to show up. Despite the "Tomatina" clearly being the highlight, there are many other facets of the festival to be enjoyed throughout the week with fireworks, parades and a paella cook-off amongst the most notable.

Not so far away in the city of Valencia, townsfolk revel for a week in the festivities of "Las Fallas", another one of Spain's more unique festivals. The raucous week of celebration takes place in March and is most notable for "Las Fallas" which are huge papier-mâché figures up to 60 feet in height. Built in the streets, the figures often have a satirical edge; Tony Blair and George Bush's effigies graced last year's festival. The culmination of the merry-making comes on the "Night of Fire" when all 700 of "Las fallas" are burnt to a cinder turning many of the city's streets into huge bonfires. Undoubtedly the local fire services busiest evening of the year and certainly one not to be missed by visitors to the region.

Next stop is Catalonia and the town of Valls located about 100km south west of Barcelona, where every year townsfolk gather for the legendary "Calcotada". A celebration of food and in particular the "calcot" (similar to a spring onion) with road side bbq's char grilling piles of them for locals to eat. There's even a hug pot of dipping sauce on hand to spice things up a bit. The main event is the eating competition as burly local champions from all over the region line up to see how many onions they can put away in 45 minutes, apparently it's not uncommon for the victor to eat in excess of 300! After a winner has been decided the town decamps to huge local cafeterias where for a small fee the "calcots"

are served in plentiful numbers alongside grilled meats and washed down with as much red wine as you can drink. It's certainly off the beaten track a little bit and for that reason you won't see many tourists but expect a warm welcome from the locals who will, undoubtedly, be in high spirits.

29th June, the day of San Pedro and we're deep in Spain's wine producing heartland, La Rioja, where for one day every year the medieval town of Haro is host to the famous "Batalla de Vino" (literally "Wine Battle"). Apparently the battle's origins lie in an ancient dispute with between Haro and its neighbours. These days the fight is pretty good natured with thousands of gallons of wine being hurled around the battleground (a hillside overlooking Haro). Like the Tomatina, this is going to be a messy one and I'd suggest coming prepared with some ammunition of your own, the locals have been doing this for years so expect to take a few shots early on.

Mike McDougall has been commissioned by Babylon Idioms to write a number of articles about Spanish culture. Babylon Idioms is a Spanish language institute with schools in Spain [Barcelona,

Madrid, Sevilla, Valencia], Argentina [Buenos Aires] and Costa Rica. Visit

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A Culture-Fest In Barcelona

By Rent City Apartments

Barcelona is one of those cities you can visit again and again. Its fantastic location, within reach of some of Spain's most beautiful coastline, together with its history, architecture and huge cultural programme is what makes it one of Europe's most popular city destinations.

So, how can you max-out on culture when you visit Barcelona? Here are just a few suggestions:

1. The Picasso Museum

Barcelona is awash with museum, both public and private, and the Picasso Museum is a must-see on any tourist's itinerary. Picasso trained in Barcelona, and so the museum displays a comprehensive selection of the work he created whilst studying in the city. It is an important collection that shows his technical skills and his growth as an artist. In addition, there is a collection of over 40 ceramic pieces, which were donated to the museum by Jacqueline Picasso in the 1980s. Housed in magnificent medieval palaces, and with classical music concerts as well as the art collection, the Picasso Museum is not to be missed.

2. The Architecture

Costing you nothing but tired feet at the end of the day, you can view the history of Barcelona through

its buildings. From its Roman Walls, visit the Gothic quarter, where the Cathedral, public and private buildings all take you back in time to the city's Medieval period. See Modernisme buildings that are also World Heritage Sites and modern buildings such as those built for the 1992 Olympic Games, and you'll have walked through thousands of years of Barcelonian history in just one day.

3. Festivals

Like any major city, Barcelona hosts a number of festivals each year. One of the most popular and best-known is the Barcelona Grec Summer Festival, which encompasses a wide range of productions and performers. In addition, festivals such as the Ciutat Vella Flamenco Festival and the Barcelona Guitar Festival give visitors a true taste of Spanish art and culture.

There's a whole lot of other cultural activities and events to keep you busy on your visit to this amazing city - and you'll want to come back for more

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