



Partying with the romans

Sheena Campbell heads to Murcia, the southern region of Spain, where Roman history meets Spanish gastronomy. *Pictures by Sheena Campbell and The Azalea Group*



The cannons are loaded and ready to fire, the horses saddled and set to spring into action, and thousands of centurions, slaves and troops have gathered for battle.

This may sound like a scene from a big-budget Hollywood film but you would be way off the mark. Instead this is my introduction to southern Spain.

When I was invited to attend the last two days of the annual ten-day celebration of the Second Punic War I was excited but unsure what to expect.

As a 'cocktails and a book by the pool' kind-of-girl rather than a battle re-enactment spectator I was concerned – but it was well worth the trip.

Cartagena has a wealth of Roman history due to its importance as the gateway to Africa during the years of the empire.

In fact, much of it is still being uncovered - the Roman theatre has only recently opened to the public.

The festival, which marks the Romans claiming the city, includes events such as the final battle of the week which takes place under the shadow of the city walls.

The celebrations are organised by those taking part, families who have been part of the festivities for generations, and the attention to detail is exquisite.

Going for a drink after witnessing a battle I am treated to a Roman victory



parade through the town with drums and pyrotechnics adding to the atmosphere.

Dinner presents another opportunity to explore the area's history with the wonderful La Cathedral restaurant immediately next to the Roman theatre.

When the theatre was discovered, the owners set about remodelling the restaurant in respect of the heritage discovered.

The result is an amazing space with glass floors to show the waterworks used to serve the theatre and exposed walls revealing the Roman columns used in the original building.

The food is also exquisite, with hueva de

maruca, the local speciality of dried fish eggs, and a main course of barbecued pork well worth a try.

Ahead of the final parade, we set out to explore more of the region, heading to San Pedro Del Pinatar - the free to use mud flats.

Set in the Regional Park of Las Salinas, it is a great place to spot wild flamingos or cycle along the promenade between the peninsula and the mainland (bikes are available to hire from the tourist information office).

After a walk along the sand dunes, we took a boat trip across Europe's largest salt lagoon, Mar Menor to La Manga.



This is an easy, cost-effective way to get between Santiago de la Ribera to La Manga, with the ferry running throughout the day.

Lunch is another treat, with views of the Cabo de Palos harbour only one of the attractions at El Pez Rojo.

Divine tapas, fish and meat dishes all lead up to the main event, a regional speciality of rice cooked in fish stock with saffron and peppers.

In the evening, it is time for the grand finale - the parade of all legions, troops and slaves from the harbour to the camp at the other side of the city.

This is when the true scale of the festival hits you. We watched the parade for three hours and there was still more to come.

For dinner we visit El Barrio de San Roque, a beautiful restaurant where the food is modern but still true to its Spanish roots.

If you're looking for a party after the parade then there is only one place to go - the camp.

Although few tourists make it down it is well worth a visit, set just outside the main city. Each legion has its own bar and you haven't seen surreal until you've seen a group of legionnaires in full costume doing Gangnam Style.

Aside from the festival there is much to do in the area.

Whether it is seeing the theatre, built between the fifth and first centuries BC; a tour of the old mines 'Mina Agrupa Vicenta'; or



visiting Murcia city's impressive cathedral.

The city itself is a great place to wander, and it also boasts its own festival in the spring - the festival of the sardine.

A trip to Spain must include its superb wine so we set off to the Bullas wine region and a tour of the museum.

The passion for the trade here is evident with traditional methods on show and a co-operative set up to help all the wine producers in the region.

One vineyard on our list to visit is the Balcona family vineyard, set in the stunning Aceniche Valley.

Grandmother and widow Josefa built the first 'bodega Balcona' to provide wine for her workers - an unusual move at the time.

Since then the vineyard has thrived, producing its Bodega wine with great success.

Leaving the region to get a flight home we are left with great memories of partying with Romans, amazing cuisine and architecture which will leave you in awe.

Fact box

We stayed at the Hotel Posadas de Cartagena for two nights and Hotel Novotel, Murcia, for one.

Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, operates year round flights to Alicante from Birmingham, London Gatwick, London Luton, East Midlands and Manchester airports with fares, including taxes, starting from £40.99 one way (£79.98 return).

All customers are allocated a seat at check-in; however seats can be pre-allocated on scheduled Monarch flights for £5.99 per one-way flight to ensure families and groups are seated together.

Extra legroom seats are available, offering up to six inches of extra space, from £14.99.

To avoid booking charges, pay for your flights using a debit card or a PayPal payment option.

There is a 4.5 per cent fee for credit cards transactions, with a minimum value of £5.

In addition to flights, Monarch now offers a huge range of great value holidays, accommodation options, car hire and travel insurance.