

# Down by the waterfront docks

For a slice of city life right on the Costa Cálida check out Murcia's second city - the spruced up port of Cartagena

**F**OR MOST Spaniards, the port of Cartagena is synonymous with the navy. Its stern military presence can still be felt in the huge 18th century ramparts, military hospital and Arsenal buildings.

Founded by Carthaginian general Hasdrubal as Qart-Hadast or New Carthage around the year 229 BC, the city rapidly established itself as one of the principal trading ports of the Mediterranean. Over the next 2000 or so years, the city fell to successive waves of conquering Romans, Byzantines, Visigoths and Arabs, each of them stamping their own identity, language and culture onto an already cosmopolitan city.

My tour of Cartagena began at the *Centro de Interpretación de la Muralla Púnica*, or Punic Wall Experience. The building encloses and protects the only remaining vestige of the Carthaginian walls. Gazing down on these few foundation stones through the reinforced glass floor, I found it quite hard to visualise the mighty ramparts of the 3rd century BC Qart-Hadast. What did catch my eye

though was a curious 17th century crypt grafted onto the remains of the wall, its dusty niches still containing the odd crumbling femur or two.

Next port of call was the *Refugio-Museo de la Guerra Civil* or Air Raid Shelter Museum of the Spanish Civil War. Now this was more like it. Cartagena, due to its prime strategic location and military significance, was the victim of frequent air raids undertaken by Franco's German and Italian allies. The local authorities were quick to bore a huge network of bunkers below the ground, thereby affording the civilian population some form of protection from the ceaseless bombardment that took place during the early years of the conflict. The very touching filmed testimonies of survivors, excellent exhibits such as the propaganda ministry posters of the doomed republican government, the exercise books of sheltering school children still attending class through the chaos, the sirens, all help to conjure up a sense of the drama and outright terror of those dark days.

## Roman remains

After a superbly refreshing lunch of *gazpacho murciano*, some wafer-thin cooked *paletilla* or ham carved at the table, then drizzled with a first class *aceite de oliva* and a couple of glasses of the excellent *Finca Omblanca Demay*, we hit the streets once again. My guide Pedro began to explain the project underway at the Roman Theatre. Wherever you turn in Cartagena you will find teams of young archaeologists burrowing and sifting in cordoned off streets. Excavations in the area near the *Calle Mayor* in the early 90's revealed the city's Roman Theatre, hitherto undiscovered. The engaging work of these archaeologists is to peel back layer after layer of about 2500 years of more or less continuous construction in order to get down to the required level and hopefully reveal something historically worthwhile. One of the main problems encountered is the practice of cannibalisation employed by ancient builders, i.e. Byzantine *chapuzas* or cowboys using columns, seating and pilasters from the Roman theatre as





Cartagena city and Theatre



Roman Mosaic



Roman Theatre



Punic wall

screed in order to build a market place fit for an ever-growing population. When all this work is finished by around the year 2010, Cartagena will be able to boast some of Europe's richest archaeological treasures. The jury is currently out on whether to demolish the disused and decrepit Plaza de Toros Jose Ortega Cano in order to get at the huge Roman Amphitheatre lying just below its circus sands. A visit to the *Casa de la Fortuna* and the *Augusteum* provides you with an interesting glimpse into the sumptuous lives of the city's Roman patricians, lives dedicated to the daily pleasures of the senses and the wielding of influence. You'll probably be left wondering where it all went wrong.

**Art deco delights**

The previously mentioned Calle Mayor is the symbolic heart of Cartagena's *casco historico* or old town. In the 19th century, anybody who was anybody, owned a posh residence on this thoroughfare. The street is host to some fine examples of the modernist style of architecture, prevalent at the turn of the century. The *Liceo Casino* is absolutely stunning, but the story about how the neighbouring building got to be even more stunning is hilarious and indicative of how elitist Cartagena once was and probably still is. The story goes that a very wealthy

mining magnate was refused membership in the *Liceo Casino* due to his humble origins. The guy decided to wreak vengeance on these stuffy chaps by acquiring the building next door, demolishing it and erecting in its place a town house so opulently extravagant that it not only totally eclipsed the *Liceo Casino* but all the other buildings in the street as well.

Most of the town's traditional eateries are in this area. A popular haunt for both townsfolk and visitor is the *Heladería Reina Sofia* on Calle Mayor. Judging by King Juan Carlos's signed portrait up on wall behind the bar, he too must have scoffed a few *tapas* and sunk a few *cañas* on the terrace here in his time.

**Sea views**

After a tramp round the Calle Mayor and its adjoining streets it was time to visit the Castillo de la Concepción, a mediaeval fortress which is accessed from street level by means of an enormous gleaming steel and glass lift. There are some splendid panoramic views of Cartagena from here and you can get a grasp on the strategic importance of the city just by gazing below at the huge expanse of water that forms the harbour below. Rampart after rampart protects the town in virtually every direction. On all the surrounding hills long-empty batteries







and gun emplacements with the odd symbolic canon or two face off would be foes in don't even think about it fashion. Inside the castle, as in all *Cartagena Puerto de Culturas* sites, there is an excellent audiovisual presentation plus a series of large panels jointly called the *muro de sorpresas* or wall of surprises which tell the mesmerising story of the city's evolution from the earliest times to the present day.

#### Along the prom

It was at this point that guide Pedro began to sense the fact that I was beginning to show signs of information intake fatigue and suggested a cooling *refresco* on a terrace before going to see the world's very first prototype submarine. A damned good idea I thought. The Paseo de Alfonso XII on the harbour front is the perfect place to drink a cold beer under the shade of a safely anchored *sombrilla* and watch the world go by. Lined with huge palm trees, ice-cream parlours, open air bars, burger joints and *freidurías* or fried fish restaurants



#### OUT AND ABOUT



Calblanque

#### CALBLANQUE

### To the east of Cartagena, on the way to Cabo de Palos is the Parque Regional de Calblanque

With its strangely formed fossilised sand dunes, unique desert flora and fauna and long sweeping, unspoilt beaches of golden sand, this is, without doubt, one of the most beautiful areas in Murcia. Dusty dirt road tracks lead down to a number of basic *chiringuitos* or beach bars and parking areas. As there is no public transport available in the park, car hire is absolutely essential, as is a visit to the car-wash afterwards.

#### CABO DE PALOS

### Further to the east is the former fishing village of Cabo de Palos. Take a stroll along the prom and then pull up a chair for some top class fishy treats

Cabo de Palos, with its imposing 19th century stone *faro* or lighthouse, happened to witness the worst catastrophe in Spanish maritime history. In August 1906, an émigré packed transatlantic liner bound for Brazil, hit the barely submerged rocks of the *islas hormigas* just off the Cape and went down with over 800 passengers, mostly women and children, onboard. The area is strewn with the wrecks of other vessels suffering a similar fate and these attract what is considered by experts to be the most abundantly diverse marine life in the whole of the Mediterranean. Sightings of sperm whales are not uncommon. These leviathans are attracted by the giant squid that inhabit the deep trenches off the Murcian coast. Near the marina, clusters of squat, whitewashed cottages of the *barrio de los pescadores*, or fishermen's neighbourhood back up a splendid *paseo marítimo*, or promenade where most of the town's excellent *marisquerías* or fish and seafood restaurants are to be found. The dish perhaps most identified with this area is *caldero*, which is the local rice cooked in a fabulous monkfish head stock flavoured with local dried peppers called *ñoras* and served with *alioli*. *El Pez Rojo* at the end of the *paseo* in Cabo de Palos, described enthusiastically by amiable owner Pepe Garcia as *El Balcón del Mediterraneo*, or the mediterranean balcony, is one of the culinary joys of Cabo de Palos. Try his outstanding *menu de degustación* or sampling menu featuring wonderfully sounding names such as *atún en escabeche con mojete murciano*, or pickled tuna with murcian vegetable dip, *boquerón templado a la carta esférica*, a variation on the pickled anchovy theme, *berenjena frita con miel y foie*, or diced aubergine coated in honey, pan fried and served with foie and *bacalao* or cod *al perfume del mediterraneo*. All this sumptuous grub can be washed down with an excellent bottle of the local *D.O. Jumilla* red wine recommended by the man himself. Call +34 968 563109 to reserve a table or just wing it.

Whilst in the marina area you shouldn't miss a tour of the *Centro de Interpretación de Cabo de Palos* at Planeta Azul. This is an outdoor activities and educational centre run by a group of committed marine biologists, diving instructors, mountaineers and oceanographers whose primary purpose is to raise awareness of ecological issues along the Murcian coast. The centre offers a compelling visual walk through of five themed areas and a huge scale model of the region which explains quite captivatingly the incredible bio-diversity of this region. Visits arranged by appointment only.



**ESSENTIALS**

■ **GETTING THERE**

Ryanair fly to the airport of San Javier in Murcia. From there it is about half hour's drive via the AP-7 south to Cartagena.

■ **STAYING THERE**

**NH Cartagena**

Real 2

Plaza Heroes de Cavite

Cartagena 30201

Tel: +34 96 8120908

www.nh-hotels.com

A wonderfully stylish hotel in a superb location near the seafront and town hall.

■ **EATING OUT**

**El Barrio de San Roque**

c/ Jabonerías, 30 bajo

Cartagena

Tel: +34 968 500600

A most elegant restaurant serving the best Murcian cuisine. *Paletilla cocido*, the local wafer-thin ham and their refreshing Murcian take on *Gazpacho* are a must.

**Cerveceria y Restaurante Principal**

c/ Principe de Vergara 2 (esq. c/cañón)

Cartagena

Tel: +34 968 123031

My visit happened to coincide with a very rowdy wedding party shouting the customary *iivivan los novios!!* toasting the bride and groom every 5 minutes but the *asado de lubina con patatas* or baked sea-bass with potatoes was truly exquisite.

■ **SHOPPING**

A sure sign that a place is on the up is when department store El Corte Inglés pulls in to town. Opening last year it has been a big addition to the city and is almost a day out in itself. The underground food hall is a wonder to behold. Check out also the smart pedestrianised Calle Mayor where you can walk and shop to your heart's delight. If you are lucky enough to be setting up home in the region then just over an hour's drive away through the lovely Ricote Valley you'll find the Ikea superstore. (Serious bargain hunters should also stop off in Molina de Segura just off the A30 to check out the incredible booze prices in the Aldi supermarket.)

**El Corte Inglés**

Alda. San Antón 52,

30205

**Ikea**

Av. Don Juan de Borbón, S/N,

30110

**Aldi**

Avda. del Chorrigo, 75

30500

Molina de Segura

and a gentle sea breeze wafting in, it's a dream come true after having *pateado* or tramped round mind a witheringly hot Cartagena. Pedro ordered his Vichy water and my *cañita* and proceeded to grumble about the French. Now this was nothing new to me, a Spaniard grousing about *gabachos* (disparaging Spanish term for the French as some people use the term Frogs). Isaac Peral Caballero, illustrious Spanish naval officer and marine engineer invented the submarine and that was that as far as he was concerned. The French apparently dispute the invention, claiming to have patented an earlier vessel, but Pedro informed me that Peral's was the first to navigate vertically and more importantly, to fire torpedoes, so end of story. The twenty-two metre grey submarine has its pride of place on the paseo de Alfonso XII and attracts a considerable number of visitors and *curiosos*, or intrigued tourists. From the seafront here you can catch the tourist catamaran for a lovely trip around the harbour with some contrasting photo opportunities with the naval base, spectacular town hall building, swanky yacht club and marina, commercial fishing port and the imposing 18th century ramparts of the *muralla Carlos III* all jockeying for position as you glide past.

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Excellent website of the Murcia Tourist Board.

**Planeta Azul**

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