



Verín, Ourense

# Playing Pagans

Bande, Ourense



The Entroido, Galicia's version of carnival is a world away from the usual glitz and glamour. **Adrian McManus** risks life and limb to discover a darker side of Spanish fiestas

**C**ARNIVAL FOR many people conjures up exotic images of men and women in towering plumed costumes cavorting sensually to the mesmeric percussion of *charangas* beating out samba and salsa rhythms.

For many purists, these manifestations merely ape those of Rio de Janeiro. In Galicia however, particularly in the province of Ourense, carnival, or *entroido*, as it's known locally, exists in its most pure and pagan form.

The main centre of action is Verín, where the fiesta begins on the Thursday, the *jueves de compadres*, continuing on

Sunday with the *Domingo Corredoiro*, where the first *farinada* takes place. *Farinada* comes from the Galician word for flour, *farina harina* in Spanish and involves mass flour fights across the town. All the bars and pubs protect surfaces and furnishings with plastic sheeting, so don't be surprised if you're welcomed in a bar with the equivalent of two pounds of Homepride being tipped over your head. Wear some suitable clothing, and smile convincingly!

On the *Jueves de las Comadres*, hundreds of women gather for a communal dinner, and then at 12 midnight walk through the town in the





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'procession of the candles and white sheets', an ethereal sight if ever there was one.

Things continue like this until Ash Wednesday and the appearance of the *cigarrons*, very scary individuals wearing garish masks bearing the images of totemic beasts such as wolves, eagles, lions, tigers etc. They announce their arrival with cow-bells they have strapped to their waists and then proceed to whip anyone who crosses their path with a cat o' nine tails. Some anthropologists believe they represent tribute collectors, the medieval henchmen of the nearby Marquis of Monterrey.

The tiny village of Laza has become quite famous in recent years, with TV crews from all over Spain turning up to film the hedonistic revelry that takes place in the village at carnival time.

As in Verín, there are characters similar to the *cigarrons*, only in Laza they are known as *peliqueiros*. Parades of hay carts, drawn by donkeys and festooned with angelic children, pass through the main street, while the crazed men that lead them hurl angry half-starved wood ants and cow slurry at onlookers. A wild, drunken and rarefied



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Photography: Turgalicia



atmosphere bubbles away under the surface and most of the crowds leave before nightfall. You have been warned.

Carnival in Xinxo De Limia is probably the oldest in the peninsula, with the *pantallas* being the key players. These mask-wearing chaps run amok through the streets, preying on the townsfolk foolhardy enough not to be in fancy-dress, forcing them to buy a round of drinks in the nearest bar. *Charangas* parade through the streets, playing a hideous cacophony of sounds from seemingly out-of-tune trombones, saxophones, clarinets, cornets and drums. This area of Spain also serves the best *pulpo a feira* (octopus country fair style) in the land, so tentacle lovers shouldn't pass up on the opportunity.

The *entroido* of Viana do Bolo also dates back to pagan times, and here the principal figure is the *Boteiro*, another mask-wearing individual – whose shirt alone is made up of more than 1000 metres of silk, forming different geometric patterns. It seems that here the accent is on who can make the loudest din, with villagers beating drums and plough shares simultaneously in what is known as the *folion*. A mule led by a *maragato*, an ethnic group that monopolised road transport in days gone-by also makes an appearance. Traditionally, the *cacique* or feudal lord, rode this mule through the village, kindly inviting his minions to join the feast.

Sequins, samba and the big hair of your traditional Spanish Carnival it ain't. But Galicia maybe always is that little bit different.

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