

Walk this way: Exploring Valencia, Spain off the beaten path

Mandy Trickett / North Shore News
August 11, 2013

Photographs by: Mandy Trickett

The article describes three separate vacations in the Valencia region with Walks in Spain (walksinSpain.com). They offer small group travel and comfortable minibuses are used to transfer guests from airports and to and from trailheads. They are specialists in Spain, offering programs in several different regions such as Catalonia, Andalucia and the Orange Blossom Coast. The walks are led by a bilingual father and son team who are extremely knowledgeable about the various regions and their history. Most programs offer a free day during the program, for your own independent exploration.



A walking holiday? Moi? The very concept conjures up blisters, sore muscles, daily dehydration; dragging my weary bones along, desperately trying to catch up with a group of hearty, bushwhacking colleagues who can yodel and tickle trout with equal ease. It does not conjure up visions of jetted tubs, turquoise swimming pools, sinful desserts. .. in other words, my kind of holiday. But I don't mind admitting that I was wrong on all counts.

Walking holidays through the Valencia region of Spain offer soft adventure of the best kind, tailor-made for those who want the pleasures of walking but who nevertheless appreciate being pampered at the end of the day: restful accommodations, excellent food, congenial company. There are no Olympic medals for staggering or heavy breathing - our backpacks contain only sunscreen, cameras and water bottles. They obviously created the term 'slackpacking' for just this kind of not-too-strenuous, where's-my-glass-of-red-wine vacation.

The whole point of a walking holiday like this is to get beyond the tourist spots, to discover a more authentic, traditional Spain, far from the crowded beaches of the Costa Brava.



And we do. We walk between 10 and 18 kilometres each day, some days with the company's owners, a father and son team who have lived in this area for most of their lives and who know every nook and cranny. Some days our small group sets out alone on trails carefully chosen for their unique character.

Near Bunol, an uphill slog on rocky trails rewards us with 360-degree views of distant plains fringed by far-off mountain ranges. In temperatures reaching the low 30s Celsius we stride out, crunching on dry pine needles, kicking up squirls of dust. We don't see a soul as we step through stands of pink oleander and terraced groves of olive trees, pruned so that they seem to be wearing great wreaths of silvery leaves above their gnarled trunks.



We stride around ancient Moorish forts overlooking the great Valencian rice paddies that provide Spain with the staple ingredient of paella. They call the Valencia region "the breadbasket of Spain": shouldn't that be "the rice basket"? We visit the "Valley of the Myrtles," clambering alongside a 600-year-old aquaduct that still brings sweet mountain water to a historic monastery. Surrounded by the fragrance of pine and wild herbs amongst clusters of convulvulus, daisies and wild chicory, terraced olive and almond trees, we try to concentrate on the long vistas across the mountains. We learn about harvesting cork from cork oaks and how carob trees, with their valuable pods, may have been introduced here by the ancient Moors.

The walks are leisurely, with frequent stops for chatting and re-hydrating. On wobbly legs, we complete the steep scramble up to an ice house at Nevera de Castro - a 19th century structure once used to store packed snow each winter. Inside the depths of its stone pit, piles of snow would be compacted under flat stones to form ice, which would then be cut into huge blocks, loaded onto packhorses and taken down to the nearby coast in summer for sale to heat-weary housewives for food preservation.

Other walks bring us to secluded churches like the Santuario del Remedio, where we picnic under the cool vaulted ceilings of its ancient exterior. We trek the cramped alleyways of Chulilla, cascading down the mountainside beneath ancient castle ruins. Chulilla has no bus service passing through it: its lanes are simply too narrow and twisting. It's gorgeous, in a slightly dilapidated, sleepy Spanish way. We leave behind its tiled balconies to walk along the river gorge - the same River Turia that ends up in Valencia. We feel puny beneath massive cliffs: jammed up against sheer overhangs, we linger between stone and water. We must cross the river three times, balancing gingerly on stepping-stones and pausing to sample pomegranates straight from the tree.

All this daily exercise creates hearty appetites but the program provides outstanding food, from picnics to fine dining. "Is it a walking program with an eating addition, or an eating program with a walking addition?" we ponder. We have to get into Spanish time, which means not having lunch until 3 p.m. or dinner until 10 o'clock at night. .. and even then, our group is often the first in the restaurant. Our hosts seek out genuine, mom and pop, hole-in-the-wall caf  s for our lunches, and upscale restaurants for dinners. The caf  s may lurk behind beaded fly curtains and have plain metal chairs, paper tablecloths and no-frills cutlery that we keep for the entire meal. But we're the only Anglos in these places, which are usually full to overflowing with local folks.

"If you can't pronounce it, I can't serve it," declares our waiter Enrico, and so begins the group's first, impromptu Spanish lesson. To his delight, hunger helps our pronunciation. Other days, our hosts translate the menu items for us - feast after feast - until we know everything by heart. At each meal, platter upon platter arrives at the table: endless tapas with spicy patatas bravas, Spanish tortillas, "pistos" (pastries similar to Cornish pasties but filled with tomatoes and peppers), wedges of the sharp local cheese with its black rind, tender calamari

in batter or garlic sauce. Olla soup is to die for. It's a meal in itself, a thick concoction made from various kinds of beans, chunks of beef and black pudding.

We usually realize far too late that these are only the appetizers, to be followed by even larger platters of lamb chops, baby squid in its black ink, or that identifying symbol of Valencia, paella, which originated in this region. Water vole was once the staple meat in a Valencian paella: fortunately for us, today's version includes not rodent but white rice,

green vegetables, rabbit, chicken or duck and beans. After this amount of food, all we're fit for is sitting, chatting, relaxing and pretending to have some laid-back Latin blood in our veins as we sip tiny cups of espresso.

Our companions on these holidays are an eclectic bunch, a mixture of young and young-at-heart, married couples and singles. An Irish railway worker, two sisters from Connecticut, both in their 70s, a retired dentist and his wife from England, a guide dog puppy trainer, a water-colour artist from Oxford. We may all speak English, but we chat in a rainbow of different accents and dialects. "Divided by a common language," quips our host.

The important thing we have in common is our desire to be travellers rather than tourists. No one speaks Spanish, but we are greeted with a cheerful "Hola!" by local hikers, and elderly dowagers clad in sombre black call out "Un dia superba!" as we pass by. Ask for a glass of wine in a caf   and the whole bottle is passed across the bar ... apparently quite normal in these backroads villages, and a mark of trust by the landlord that guests won't be greedy. We get by with lots of smiles, gestures, body language and oodles of good will.

Between the walking, eating and socializing, there is little time to worry about our accommodations. But we have our creature comforts. One year, our group of 14 takes over a tiny, family-run hotel. Beneath it are the medieval cellars that were originally the old bake-house. Now it's our dining room. Local artifacts are stacked everywhere: amphorae, Victorian china, weigh scales, weapons - the word "unique" doesn't begin to cover it.

On another trip, the group of eight takes over a hacienda with metre-thick walls and heavy, bronze-hinged shutters to repel the midday heat. The only sound we hear is the lazy coo of a dove in the surrounding orange grove. The group relaxes on an upstairs patio, with its terracotta tiles, looking out across a sea of lustrous green trees offset by the turquoise of a swimming pool. At another small inn, we enjoy our own private valley, a dusty "secret garden" of orange groves and ponderosa pines. The inn squats beside an elaborate water feature garden. Plump, white sofas invite laziness. The historic tiled floors and original ceiling beams transport us back to a more sedate age - if only it weren't for those darned walks every day, we could sit here forever. We have nothing that qualifies as a complaint.

I'll never be a back-country hiker, leaping up inclines like a mountain goat, but I have learned to love my boots and doublethick socks. My inner wimp is under control and I have become a confirmed walking holiday junkie. Yes, there are blisters on aching feet, muscles shocked by sudden activity, ankles scratched by thorny vegetation. But each time, on our final day, we realize the week has flown by far too quickly. Our waistbands are significantly tighter; our hearts are significantly lighter. We're sad to think of leaving such a warm and inviting country. To quote from one guest book, "We go home fatter but hopefully fitter, with sun-tanned shoulders and weary livers."

More information:

For general tourist information, visitvalencia.com, valenciacityguide.com or valencia-tourist-guide.com are all helpful. For the walking programs, good footwear is mandatory. Wear in new boots before you go! You should take the usual items you take on hikes like sunscreen, hats and a light rain jacket (just in case). However, Walks in Spain provides walking poles and bottled water on its walks.

Depending on the program you select, your hotel bathroom may not have a plug in the sink and may not provide toiletries. Have travel-size items with you, again just in case.

IF YOU GO

Getting there:

Several European airlines, such as Lufthansa and Swissair, fly from London to Valencia but their flights typically go via their home country, meaning longer travel time. Iberia (iberia.com) and British Airways (britishairways.com) fly out of London Heathrow via Madrid. EasyJet (easyjet.com) has direct flights out of London Gatwick and RyanAir (ryanair.com) has direct flights out of London Stanstead. If you are already in Spain, RENFE offers train services (renfe.com/en). High-speed trains are called AVE: raileurope.ca has lots of useful information about these services. For example, the AVE from Madrid to Valencia takes just one hour 40 minutes.

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