

life travel

Getting a taste for the tapas

SO, WHY should people visit Murcia? we asked our charming and knowledgeable guide Esther García.

"The tapas," she said without hesitation.

And she was right.

While the capital of the region – one of the Mediterranean's Baroque cities – has plenty of museums and monuments to enjoy (including the striking 600-year-old Santa María Cathedral) the food was certainly the star of the show.

During our two centre stay – in Cartagena and Murcia – we ate some memorable food in equally delightful settings.

In Cartagena there was fantastic seafood aboard La Patacha floating restaurant in the harbour; sophisticated dining in the historical La Catedral and El Barrio de San Roque.

In Cabo De Palos, the owner of El Pez Rojo proudly cooked his speciality rice dish at our table.

And in Murcia, we enjoyed first rate tapas at Clararia.

But perhaps the biggest surprise of all, and testimony to just how good the food was in the region, came at lunch on our last day when the restaurant we had been booked in to cancelled at the last moment.

Instead we were taken to Restaurante Campoy in Bullas.

It was a campsite restaurant, that had little prior warning of our arrival, where you would imagine the food might run to burger and chips. It didn't.

Try octopus and swordfish; fresh grilled vegetables; hearty stews and tender meat. The food was fantastic.

Away from the table we visited Mar Menor, a saltwater lagoon where flamingos travelling to North Africa take a break and a host of nature activities and water sports are available.

We also went to the interesting Roman Theatre and Museum in Cartagena, the Wine Museum in Bullas and saw how miners used to live and work at La Unión Mining Park.

All great but the food... ah, the food. Magnificent.



Above, members of a re-enactment society at their festival headquarters. Below left, participants take a break at a local bar. Below right, fighting underway as a battle is recreated



ESSENTIALS

■ We travelled with Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, which 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). In addition to flights, Monarch also now offers a range of holidays, accommodation options, car hire and travel insurance. For further information or to book visit monarch.co.uk

■ We stayed at Hotel Posadas de Cartagena, on the outskirts of the town; and Hotel Novotel, a modern central hotel in Murcia

■ For details of how to get there, what to do and where to stay in Murcia go to murciaturistica.es



THERE are not many times or places when you turn round and find a Roman centurian stood next to you at the bar.

But for 10 days a year in Cartagena in south-eastern Spain it's a common occurrence as the town becomes packed with men in skirts.

Not to mention barbarians, warlords, senators, dancing girls, Amazons and mercenaries from across the globe.

The Carthaginians and Romans Festival – held annually in September – is based on one of the most important historical periods for the town.

From about 600BC the area was inhabited by the Carthaginians, originally from modern day Lebanon.

By 300BC the Romans wanted to take control of their trading routes and embarked on the 1st Punic War.

They were fought off and agreed to a truce. Peace reigned for 80 years, until 219BC when the Carthaginians attacked one of the Roman settlements.

Then two years later Hannibal, departed on his famous journey over the Alps with 37 elephants, 100,000 infantry and 12,000 horsemen to attack Rome and claim it for the Carthaginians.

The Romans took their chance, invaded and conquered Cartagena during the 2nd Punic War.

Parts of the story are re-enacted each day during the festival,

Step back in TIME

Jaine Blackman enjoys life with the Romans as history is brought back to life Gandam-style

culminating in a huge battle and a parade through the town.

Around 4,000 people take part in what is a true spectacular.

There's a huge walled grassy area where some of the battles are held and the port is also used.

Walking through the town is like taking a trip back in time, around any corner you may bump in to an ancient Brit or a vestal virgin.

On a press visit to last year's event we witnessed the impressive final battle of Kart Hadasht featuring explosions, arrows, 30ft walls being

scaled, horses thundering past "dead bodies" of the fallen and no end of unsheathed weapons that would have had health and safety officials in the UK rushing to stop the show.

Fast, dangerous and extremely exciting – it certainly brought history to life.

And it's a massive affair. After the battle we watched the participants march, dance, tumble and caper through the streets.

The legionnaires were, well, legion. Group after group proudly strutted their stuff, many accompanied by

striking drum beats.

It was quite a show, with stilt walkers, acrobats and fire-eaters among the floats and strictly choreographed marching troops.

Smart spectators had cleverly bagged pavement tables outside bars and restaurants, to watch the parade pass by.

There was a real carnival atmosphere with participants giving out sweets – and wine!

And the fun had only just begun.

Associations meet all year to create their authentic costumes and base camps.

A Festival Camp is located in the football stadium and the re-enactment societies have headquarters ranging from temple facades to the Roman senate.

There's also an artisan and craft market and locally produced traditional food and drink.

The headquarters also house temporary bars and discos... and those historical characters certainly know how to party.

After the parade, it's back to the camp to eat, drink, dance and be very merry into the early hours of the morning.

When we left at 5am, things were still in full flow.

And impressive as the battle re-enactment was, for real entertainment you can't beat a bunch of centurians dancing Gandam-style.