

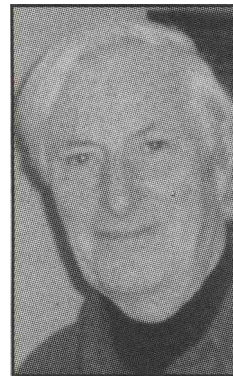


The Northern Standard

Circulating in Counties Monaghan, Cavan, Armagh, Louth and Fermanagh

TRAVEL

BY GEORGE KEEGAN



SURROUNDED BY HISTORY IN LOVELY MURCIA

The Spanish region of Murcia can be found in the Southeast of the Iberian Peninsula and is easily accessible from Ireland. It is just 80km from Alicante and lies in the valley of the Segura river surrounded by the hills of Carrascoy, Cresta del Gallo and the Pila mountain range. Climate is dry with mostly all year round sunshine. The capital of this region is also called Murcia and not far away is the fascinating port city of Cartagena with many fine 18th century town houses and picturesque harbour area which has been an important maritime gateway down the years. In both cities visitors can trace the centuries through the many impressive Roman ruins, historical buildings, churches, museums, memorials to leaders and in recent years modern state of the art interpretive centres. An enjoyable way to learn about the history is by taking a walking tour with expert guides. Anyone who wishes just to relax best head for La Manga the 250km coastline bordered by 2 seas with calm warm waters all year round – the perfect holiday spot for families with small children. Dad (and Mum) can also get their golf fix with over twenty top courses to choose from, many with hotel or self-catering accommodation. One option is the large and exclusive resort of La Manga Club which has 3 courses. As with most of Spain this region is well known for several important festivals held during the year so before booking your trip have a look at these dates to try and include one on your holiday.

CARTAGENA

The first city I visited on my trip and I was greatly impressed. I would advise spending several days here to explore the numerous attractions. Cartagena has encountered many changes of ownership through history and has been ruled by the Arabs, the Castilians and for a short period was in self government.

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

The Castle of The Conception - take the outside high tower lift (opened in 2004) which rises 45mtr in just a few seconds then walk through a small well kept park leading to the Castle. It was the main defence for the city and dates back to the 13th century. Contains an Interpretive Centre outlining the city's long history. Close by is the Civil War Museum (Museo Refugio Dela) built in 1937 during the civil war. Parts of the shelter were first opened to the public in 2006. Breathtaking views of the city and port.

Roman Theatre & Museum- situated opposite the City Hall. This museum is divided into 2 separate buildings connected by an underground passage leading dramatically out into the original Roman remains built in 1st century BC to hold 7000 spectators. Recommended.

District of The Roman Forum (Molinete) – work is ongoing in what can only be described as a unique look at Roman Cartagena and their expertise at constructing thermal baths. The pictorial wall decorations are particularly impressive.

The Sea wall (Muralla del Mar) was constructed as a military defence in the mid 1700s on the orders of Charles III.

Auditorio y Palacio de Congresos el Batel – take a walk along the harbour and find this quite amazing very modern conference centre, also used for the annual jazz festival and concerts. The design of the building was based on the marine history of the city and the luminous interior creates a sense, not only of light, but also great space. Be sure to have a look inside. Highly recommended.

Tourist Boat Trip – travel on a catamaran around the bay to see various fortifications built to protect the port. Highly recommended.

MURCIA

This is another lovely city also worth spending time in. There are many open spaces to linger in plus Palaces, numerous churches, museums and art galleries to visit. Murcia also contains several fine large Squares (Plazas) to mix with the locals and have a coffee or drink. However the first stop for most visitors is the cathedral. On the way there I took a walking tour along the river to see the famous bridges (including the footbridge designed by Pasarela Manterola (1997) to represent a lighthouse along the quay), the old mill and the strange fish sculpture. Murcia is very much a city in transition with many interesting developments taking place.

MAIN ATTRACTIONS

Cathedral Of Murcia - this magnificent building in Plaza de Belluga was constructed on the site of a Moorish mosque and consecrated in 1467. The façade is a good example of European Baroque art while the naves of the interior highlight the best of the Gothic period. Also in this plaza is the Bishop's Palace (1748).

The Royal Casino –considered one of the most historic buildings in the city. Dating from 1847 it contains a real mix of artistic styles portraying the opulence of the period. It consists of a Moorish Patio (inspired by the Alhambra), library, ladies powder room, dance hall with large chandelier and a billiards room. In 2006 it was completely restored and refurbished to its former glory. Open to the public except one area which is for members only. Recommended.

The City Market – always worth a visit and Murcia is no exception. Look out for the locals purchasing their fresh fish before stopping at a small kiosk to have them grilled for eating or takeaway.

OTHER ATTRACTIONS IN THIS REGION

If touring by car try to visit some of the following locations;



Roman Theatre. Pic G. Keegan



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Caravaca de La Cruz Castle/ Sanctuary/ Museum - High up over the town and the pilgrimage site of the Holy Cross (inside which is a wooden fragment believed to be from the wood of the cross Christ was crucified on. The Sanctuary was the last place occupied by monks during the Granada Kingdom period. Caravaca de La Cruz is located in the North West of the region (under 1 hour drive from Murcia) it is very much farming country. The town with many narrow steep streets is worth a visit. Note the large monument in the town centre of the Moor & the Christian.

Wine Museum in Bullas - state of the art museum located inside an old winery (19th C) well worth taking a look and perhaps purchase wine produced in the region from the shop. Pick up a copy of the Bullas Wine route with list of certified establishments.

Mina Agrupa Vicenta at La Union - this mine was the largest in Europe and great source of employment during the mining boom of the 1800s. Take a hard hat tour at a depth of 80 metres to experience what life was like in those days. There are 2,300 sq metres open to the public. This mine was still working until the middle of the 20th century. Recommended.

Balneario de Archena Resort And Treatment Centre, Archena. An extremely large and popular tourist resort situated 102mtr above sea level. Ideal for those wishing to get away from it all. The clientele is a mix of families with young children (in one section which includes Thermalium swimming pools, leisure areas etc.) and those with medical conditions who require help from the qualified medical team. There is a choice of 3 hotels on site. Balneario de Archena is the most ancient thermal complex in all of Spain and the current Management team are constantly re-developing and creating new facilities.

EATING

The following restaurants can be recommended;

El Barrio de San Roque in Cartagena - within walking distance of the hotel. Try the tasting menu.

El Arco, Caravaca de la Cruz - in the town square with outside seating available. Serves good lunches. Friendly staff.

La Tapa De las Flores - Murcia, on Plaza of same name. Busy tapas bar/restaurant. Popular with locals.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel NH Cartagena in Plaza Heros de Cavite - tall modern 100 bedroom 4* hotel, part of a Worldwide chain. Great central location beside City Hall and close to the harbour. Rooms very comfortable and good breakfast served to begin the day. Perfect for car owners.

GETTING THERE

Ryanair fly Dublin - San Javier (Murcia). Jet2 fly from Belfast International - San Javier (seasonal)

USEFUL CONTACTS

www.murciaturistica.es www.murciatoday.com www.cartagenapuertodeculturas.com
www.turismocaravaca.org www.museodelvino.bullas.es www.nh-hotels.com/nh-cartagena
www.balneariodearchena.com

TOUR OPERATOR OFFERS

Natural Retreats Increase Villas: The luxury self catering provider Natural Retreats are set to almost double accommodation at their Playa Blanca Resort in Lanzarote with nine new villas (1 bed & 4bed) added to the existing 10 for the 2014 season. Natural Retreats offer customers beautiful secluded locations with personal concierge service. The villas are spacious with open plan living area leading to a large terrace overlooking a private pool area complete with built in BBQ. Prices from €197- €300 per week depending on dates. In their portfolio the company also has 6 locations each in the UK and United States. Here in Ireland there are a total of four which include The Heritage in Co.Laois and Castlemartyr in Co.Cork. Go to www.naturalretreats.ie for details. The company has just announced a 20% reduction on a short break over St.Patrick's Day in either Laois or Cork. A 3 night stay in 2 bedroom residence from €328. T & C apply.

ON LINE SPECIALS

Go-Hop Easter Specials: Travel company Gohop.ie have some value Easter sun packages available including the Algarve, Fuerteventura, Tenerife and Lanzarote. Flights from Dublin, Cork and Shannon. Visit www.gohop.ie

AROUND EUROPE

More Irish Visit Germany: According to the German National Tourist Board (GNTB) many more people from ROI will visit that country during the coming months. The latest predictions are based on an on-going analysis of visitor trends and the most recent figures (Jan-Nov 2013) show an increase of 3.4% compared to the same period the previous year. In 2013 GNTB launched a new 'Barrier Free' accessible tourism campaign to highlight how easy it is for anyone with special needs to move around the country. One of the attractions for 2014 will be the 25th Celebration of the Berlin Wall being knocked. See what Germany has to offer on www.germany.travel.

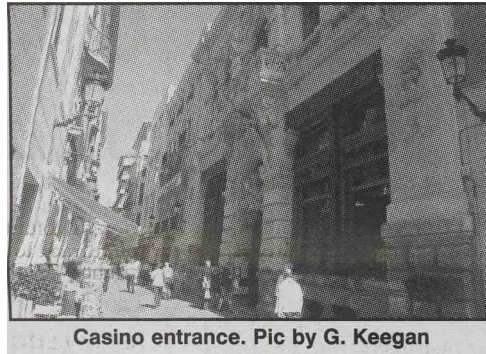
AIRSIDE UPDATES

New Flights To Scotland: Readers in the Midlands and West intending to travel to Scotland this summer can now fly from Ireland West Knock to Glasgow Prestwick International Airport. Ryanair are to begin a direct service on 1st June through to 1st Sept (Mon-Thurs). Click on www.ryanair.com

SAILING AWAY

Stena Landbridge To Europe: Stena Line state they are offering Irish holidaymakers large savings this summer compared to travelling by air. By taking the Dublin - Holyhead sailing and onward from Dover - Calais significant savings can be made and of course there is no restriction on luggage. Stena Line offer a wide route network with 5 Irish sea route to Britain and onward to France, Holland, Spain and Denmark. Visit travel agent or tel 01 2047733.

Something Different From John Galligan Travel: Widely known for their excellent range of cruise products John Galligan Travel are currently offering an exclusive top of the range 'trip of a lifetime' - an exciting De Luxe Rocky Mountaineer Rail Tour & Alaska Cruise for a small group departing exDublin on 15th August 2014. Included is flight to Calgary, Alberta, 2 day journey on the world famous Rocky Mountaineer train, 4 night stay in Vancouver plus 7 nights cruising on the Holland America ship 'Volendam' along the Alaska coast. Places limited. Call 01 2076555 for booking and details.



Casino entrance. Pic by G. Keegan