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VALENCIA REGION “THE ORCHARD OF SPAIN” IS RIPE FOR ACTIVE TRAVELERS

By Carolyn Worthington and David Chauner



Recently, Carolyn Worthington, editor-in-chief of Healthy Aging® Magazine had the opportunity to visit the Region of Valencia, Spain to learn about the active travel options there. Her experiences, recommendations and insider tips for what not to miss in the Region of Valencia, Spain appear here, as a five-part Healthy Aging® website series and on the Healthy Aging® Magazine YouTube Channel.

*Cycling-friendly region
of Valencia, Spain.*



*Crujiente de manitas de cerdo con ceps
(crispy pork with mushrooms appetizer).*

When you think of **The Region of Valencia**, Spain, images of oranges and paella may first come to mind. And why not? The Region of Valencia bears the mantle “the Orchard of Spain” because more oranges are grown here than anywhere else in Spain. Since the Moors introduced rice to the area more than 1,200 years ago, Valencia has the additional honor of being the birthplace of paella, a rice dish made of chicken, rabbit, and vegetables but no sausage! (More on that factoid later.)

The Valencia region is, however, much, much more than rice and oranges, as delicious as they are. It is an amazing part of the world that’s made up of delightful contrasts from the beaches along the Mediterranean to the fertile inland and mountainous areas to the west, the cosmopolitan city of Valencia juxtaposed against the old city and the ancient ones in the region like Morella and Sant Mateu.

Valencia Region for Active Travelers: Cyclists, Walkers, Foodies, Culture Seekers

The contrasts of the Region of Valencia, along with some of the world’s most beautiful countryside, first piqued our interests as a place where my cycling-crazed husband and I could combine many of our varied interests.

Full disclosure: After 35 years of marriage, I have realized that my surefire secret weapon for getting uplifted brows from my husband on a trip suggestion is to include cycling. Over the years, I have gotten his attention with such ideas as, “Let’s go to Aruba and see the Tour of Aruba!” Or, “How about Jamaica? Can’t miss the Tour of Jamaica!” And, of course there have been trips to the Tour de France many times as well as World Championships in places like Spain and Italy. What can you do when your husband is a two-time Olympic cyclist and journalist in his own right?

And as crazy as this sounds, organizing a trip that weaves in cycling, combining some road rides, a day as a spectator to the start or finish line of a big or even local bike race, an afternoon

Right from top: Monasterio de Santa Maria; Cycling along Benicassim beach.



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Valencia Tourism



Valencia Region of Spain (in purple) on Mediterranean Sea.

picnicking in the mountains, munching on local cheese and sausage slices, sipping a local wine while waiting for the pros to pass by, puts a very fun and different spin on travel.

Our trips are not just cycling, cycling, cycling. We look for places with beautiful beaches; countrysides and cities for walking, local, chef-owned restaurants, local tour guides to open our eyes to the history of the land, and special places to have a drink and watch the sunset.

So, this year, when I realized *La Vuelta*, Spain's world-class tour similar to the Tour de France, was in part passing through Valencia, I was on it! Ta-da—Valencia! Our choice was made, hands down as a destination.

If you have not been to this part of Spain, Valencia should definitely be high on your list. Here is the inside story of what a foodie-photographer-journalist discovered with her cycling-dimensional, journalist, active-traveling husband.

Where Is The Region of Valencia?

Spain is made up of “autonomous communities,” or regions, as we would say in the states. The autonomous community of Valencia lies along the Mediterranean, is flanked by Catalonia to the north, Aragon and Castilla-La Mancha to the west, and Murcia to the south. Valencia is also the name of the region's capital, home to almost five million people.

The layered history and cultural influences began with the founding of the city of Valencia in 138 B.C.; passing through the rulings of the Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, and Arabs; was taken back by El Cid, followed by James the Conqueror; and





Black silhouette image of bull along the highway.

Deposit Photos/Philipus



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later, the 19th century War of Independence; the dictatorship of Franco; and up to today as a democracy. During the 20th century, Valencia was a mostly industrial city. Now, you would not know this with its stunning beaches, harbor, and impressive City of Arts and Sciences—a cultural and architectural complex built in various stages from 1998 to 2009.

All this historical tapestry has greatly influenced Valencia from a cultural, architectural, and gastronomic perspective.

Getting There

We caught up on this bit of Valencia's history before the six-hour plane ride from Philadelphia to Madrid, got our tiny Fiat 50 rental car at the massive Madrid Airport, and took off on the four-hour drive to Valencia on the coast.

Once out of Madrid, most of the drive was over wide-open, sparsely populated countryside through La Mancha on the A-3 superhighway.

You could fly into Valencia or take the high-speed train and get there in under two hours

from Madrid, but you would miss the chance to see the countryside through the region of Castilla-La Mancha, well-known as the backdrop for the 17th century novel *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes.

Along the A-3 route, you will see vast plains, mountain ranges, castles, and fertile fields. You will be surprised to see a few giant black silhouette images of bulls along the highway. The bulls are apparently left over from a past sherry promotion that began in 1956. Rather than promoting the sherry, today, thanks to popular demand, the bull billboards have been painted black and preserved.

Another benefit of driving is the chance to visit one of the roadside rest stops where you will be surprised to find full restaurants with quality food, including cheeses, local fruits, and vegetables and meats.

Gandia

First stop, **Gandia**, a stunning beach town just 40 miles south of Valencia, and the very special **Hotel La Gastrocasa**.

Gandia is known for its

beautiful four-and-a-half-mile beach. During the summer months, people bring picnics, games to play, and spend the entire day on this unspoiled beach.

Hotel La Gastrocasa is a stylish, adults only, boutique hotel with just five beautifully decorated rooms and an in-town setting to die for.

Opened for just two years but with an amazing feel of historical elegance, this welcoming hideaway boasts a pool, outdoor bar, relaxing conversation areas, and a wine cellar with 150 types of wine.

During the winter months, the *Gastrocasa* (culinary house) offers cooking classes with its renowned chef, Juanvi Mas. Agustín Gómez, who runs this family hotel, is welcoming and happy to talk about the area and its history. Oh, and if you're there during the summer, it's less than a mile (2,000 steps!) from the beach.

Opposite clockwise from top left: Agustín Gómez gives a tour of the hotel's extensive wine cellar; La Gastrocasa breakfast buffet; Agustín Gómez welcomes guests at the pool bar; The unspoiled beach of Gandia at dusk with its gradual sandy and clean sea bottom; La Gastrocasa pool and outdoor bar.



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Fideua, the area's national dish.

Birthplace of Fideua, A Version of Paella

While Valencia has its paella, Gandia has *fideua*, a dish like paella but made with small noodles. Gandia claims the honor of being the birthplace of *fideua*.

Lore has it that the first rendition of paella using noodles was done in Gandia and so *fideua* has become the area's national dish. *Fideua* is so popular that there are even competitions to see who can make the most flavorful dish.

The most famous competition is the **International Fideua Competition of Gandia** and Gastronomy, held each June and now approaching its 44th year. Attracting food lovers and chefs from around the world, the award is for the best chef of Gandia's "emblematic" dish.

Within a few hours of arriving at *Gastrocasa*, our hosts Desam Garcia and her boyfriend, Fernando Gallego, thought it would be great if we experienced a more casual, mini-version of the grand competitions. So—never mind the jet lag—we were whisked off to one such event on the patio of the **RH Bayren Hotel and Spa**, overlooking the beach in the heart of Gandia.

Thanks to the gourmet chef and *fideua* *impresario*, we were cajoled into competing against three other teams of visiting hotel guest families and their friends. We sautéed our shrimp, mixed in our noodles, flavored our *fideua* with saffron and paprika in the giant, wide, flat, round paella pan set over burners. It was great fun and amazing to taste the final results. All of us used the same ingredients but each dish still tasted slightly different.

Best of all, the team with a wide-eyed little girl won. I think she would have been heartbroken if she hadn't!

This hotel, by the way, is a perfect place to stay for a beach vacation, complete with rooms overlooking the beach, a spa, pool, and with even bicycles to rent.

Pleasantly full and bleary-eyed from the trip, we ended the day with a cerveza at the rooftop bar with a spectacular view of the beach.

Opposite clockwise from top left: Sauteeing shrimp; Salva Bellver, our team member adding seasoning to fideua; Carolyn Worthington learning how to make fideua with chef in competition; Perfect way to end the day at the Bayren Hotel's rooftop bar; The other members of the team: Carolyn Worthington, Desam Garcia and Olatz Megia; Winners of competition.



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D. Chauner





Ducal Palace, the site for the evening's dinner.



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Welcome to the Ducal Palace with chamber music.

Ducal Palace

For our next and final night in Gandia, Desam and Fernando (an avid cyclist as it turned out) took us on a unique and very special evening tour outside and dinner in the 14th century **Ducal Palace of Gandia**, formerly the home of the royal dukes of Gandia and later from 1485, the Borgia family. If your history is rusty, you may perhaps know the Borgias from Netflix?

This Spanish family was prominent in political and ecclesiastical arenas during the 15th and 16th centuries. They produced two popes, Alfons de Borja, ruling as Pope Callixtus III from 1455–1458, and Rodrigo Lanzol Borgia, as Pope Alexander VI, from 1492–1503. It was Pope Alexander VI who inspired the Netflix series *The Borgias*, filled with stories of incest, adultery, bribery, murder, and lots of drama.

The Ducal Palace is a stunning backdrop for a special evening under the stars on certain nights of the summer. Called “Borgian Dinners of the Senses,” the event is an effort to combine history, culture, and gastronomy in the unique setting.

First, we met with other diners as a group outside the palace in Escuelas Pías Square to hear some history from a local guide and then were welcomed into the palace while being serenaded by chamber music.

Evarist Miralles, twice named best chef in Spain, prepared an unforgettable meal of local ingredients with a creative flair.

Our menu was four courses of local specialties such as appetizers of local sardine and olives, duck with a splash of orange, the local specialty “jelly” soup, followed by a main course of lamb and eggplant with a hint of lavender, and also a dessert of wonderful sweets. All of this goes for around \$90.

We ate in the most amazing outdoor courtyard within the high walls of the palace. I couldn’t help but marvel at the wealth and opulence of the long Borjia rein from so many centuries ago.

But I had to chuckle as my husband and Fernando chattered on, comparing Spanish and American cycling and also discussing our most infamous icon Lance Armstrong!



C. Worthington



Valencia Tourism



Time to Head Up the Coast With Stops at a Monastery, Rice Fields and Albufera

After two nights in Gandia and fading jetlag, it was time to head up the coast to the city of Valencia. But not before making a few side trips to **Real Monasterio De Santa Maria de la Valldigna**, the famous rice fields around **El Saler**, and the popular village itself, just five minutes from Valencia and in the sprawling **Natural Park of l'Albufera**, site of Spain's largest lake and a birder's paradise.

First stop: Monasterio De Santa Maria

We followed Desam and Fernando by car to the countryside just northwest of Gandia to the imposing 14th century

Cistercian monastery in Valldigna, a valley about 30 miles south of Valencia.

The first thing my husband noticed was the steady stream of cyclists riding through the bordering town Simat and congregating at an outdoor cafe in Abadia Square, across from the entrance to the monastery. Fernando told us (remember he's one of them), that this area has some of the most popular weekend cycling routes around Valencia, with many backroads through the surrounding hills and valleys of Valldigna.

The Monasterio De Santa Maria is a step back in time when Spain was made up of walled cities and villages around an imposing central cathedral. Under restoration by the Valencia Regional Government since 1991, the monastery

went through construction phases, ranging from gothic design in the 14th century in accordance with Cistercian canons to the baroque style of the 17th and 18th centuries.

By the time we finished checking out the monastery, the village square was jam-packed with colorful lycra-clad cyclists and fancy bikes everywhere. It's a scene we saw over and over again on this trip, and it reinforced my husband's point that cycling is one of the world's most popular sports and clearly here in Spain, as well.

On the way to El Saler, our lunch destination, we drove through **Albufera National Park** with what at first appeared to be green grasses (if you visit in August). A closer look revealed it to be endless rice paddies. In fact, some 250

square miles of them, some thing we'd never expected to see within a few kilometers of Valencia. As we learned, rice has been grown there for over a millennium.

These fields are painstakingly cultivated, in many cases by hand, by the farmers. We came upon two of them who looked more like corporate CEOs than farmers. They lifted themselves out of the bogs to have a chat. They were essentially weeding out the portions of the rice field that needed to be cut before the final harvest. They told us that they had been cutting the unwanted rice stalks since 7 a.m. It was now 2 p.m. "And now we go to lunch!"

It was truly amazing that these two men had been weeding by hand all morning in this vast rice field. And still,

they were smiling from ear to ear. We figured while one man's flood is a disaster, wetlands are another man's gold.

Lunch at Last!

We arrived in the energetic village of El Saler on the edge of **La Albufera Natural Park** and a favorite weekend destination for locals. The main drag bustles with groups and families who pack the many bars and restaurants, one of the most popular of which was **Casa Carmina**, our destination.

This cozy restaurant, clearly a favorite of the locals, has been open since 1988 and is today managed by the daughters, Carmen and Ma Jose, of the couple who started it all. This was a perfect spot to taste local seafood and vegetable appetizers, along with several different

types of paella, including seafood, vegetable, and mixed. We ate like the locals: It's polite to eat straight out of the pan!

We were learning more and more about how important the farm-to-table movement is in the region, one that Valencia Tourism calls the "Del Tros al Plat" program.

With busy sightseeing and a late afternoon lunch behind us, we looked forward to checking into our next hotel, **AC Hotel Valencia**, a comfortable Marriott property in downtown Valencia, midway between the old city and the modern beachfront.

From top left: Real Monasterio de Santa Maria de la Valldigna; Cycling is a way of life in Spain with plenty of safe roads and bike-friendly drivers of cars; Local cycling club lunch after a long ride. Cheers!; El Saler Beach; Rice harvester: "and now we go to lunch!"; Chef Ma Jose, Carolyn Worthington, David Chauner and Carmen; Paella with lobster.

THE CITY OF VALENCIA: A BLEND OF YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW



To most Americans, Madrid, Barcelona, and Seville are the main cities of Spain. Less discovered but arguably just as historic, cosmopolitan, and exuding Spanish flare is Valencia.

Our comfortable hotel clearly catered to tourists and was conveniently located near major shopping and a five-minute walk from **Valencia's City of Arts and Sciences**. Although you are in a city, the beach is a stone's throw away. We found Malvarrosa Beach, for example, to be a five-minute drive away and only a 15 minute cab ride to the old city. So, we ditched our car in the underground parking garage and then decided to get around by foot and cab for the next two days.

We were up at the crack of dawn for a brisk walk along the more than six-mile Garden of the Turia a few blocks from our hotel. This greenway in the middle of the city was once the bed of the Turia River.

How this greenway came to be is a fascinating story. For years, the river would overflow. The last straw was in 1957. The Turia flooded the city once again, causing loss of life and significant property damage. The "Great Flood of Valencia" resulted in a decision by the government to divert the river completely, leaving behind a riverbed that was turned into a sunken park for cyclists and pedestrians. Today, throughout the park, there are many ponds, gardens, fountains, and calisthenics stations.

Dawn turned out to be the best time to enjoy the park (for those who did not stay out until the wee hours last night!), along with other early rising cyclists, joggers, and dog walkers. It is very safe and traffic free as the cars pass overhead via the many stone bridges bypassing the area.

Guided Tour of Old Valencia

You can scour the guidebooks, Yelp, and Trip Advisor, but nothing beats a one-on-one guide to trim hours of research time and to make a destination come alive.

Ours was Josep Alberola, a professional world traveler and walking encyclopedia when it came to the history of Valencia. He marched us through the maze of the historic old city and entertained us with picturesque anecdotes about such spots as the Silk Exchange, the Central Market, the Cathedral of Valencia, and more.

Clockwise from top left: Aerial view of Turia Gardens, formerly a river bed; One of the many sculptures in Turia Garden; Scenes from Turia Gardens: early morning walkers; calisthenics station; One of the many bars actually on the beach; Josep Alberola, tour guide.





Some Quick Not-to-Miss Highlights:

The Silk Exchange

The Silk Exchange, *La Lonja de Seda*, was built in the 15th century and was the epicenter of the trading of the famous Valencian silk, which was sold throughout Europe. Climb the 144 stone steps for a sensational view of the city from the tower.

Catedral de Valencia

Mimicking the changing of the rulers throughout Valencia's history, the cathedral was built on top of an Islamic mosque. The mosque was built on a Visigothic cathedral, which was constructed over a Roman Temple.

On display is the "Holy Chalice," which is said to have been the actual cup Jesus drank from during the Last Supper.

Serrans Gate, *Porta dels Serrans*

One of 12 gates of the ancient Valencia wall, the Serrans Gate, dates back to the 14th century. The wall was sadly torn down in 1865, but this is one of the remaining gates.

La Casa Mas Estrecha

Literally translated, La Casa Mas Estrecha is the narrowest building and wins the honor for all of Europe. At one time, the house was actually occupied by a family. But today, it has joined the bar next door. It is only 42 inches wide—not wide enough for today's flat screen TV to fit across!

The Plaza of Almoina

A little over 30 years ago, ancient Roman thermal baths were discovered below this more than 2000-year-old ancient square by metro line workers. Today, the thermal baths can be viewed through a glass floor, shimmering below shallow water from the street level.

Guided Tour Contact: Josep Alberola josepalberola@hotmail.com 667.219.717

Tired from a long day on our feet, we were happy to tuck into one of the many touristy sidewalk cafes just outside our hotel for wine, cerveza, and salad.

Clockwise from top left: Ornate ceiling of Silk Exchange; Catedral de Valencia; Holy Chalice on display in Catedral de Valencia; Serrans Gate; La Casa Mas Estrecha, narrowest building in Europe.

AAAHH
PAELLA, PAELLA,
PAELLA!



Paella cooking classmates at Escuela de Arroces y Paella.

Refreshed and ready to go for day two in Valencia, it was time for a serious exploration of Paella, the famous Spanish dish that seems to have many “authentic” variations.

A Little History of Paella and What I Did Not Know...

Paella may be considered the national dish of Spain, but Valencia claims it as its own.

It's said that paella was born in the outskirts of the city of Valencia. Its origins (as those of many other rice dishes) lie in the rice paddies around Albufera Lake that we visited. As the Moslems conquered the Iberian Peninsula in the 7th century A.D., they brought with them several new cultivations. Among those was the rice plant from China.

Albufera Lake provided the perfect conditions for the cultivation of rice, since it is a plant that needs plenty of water and mild weather conditions to grow. And so, a culture of rice grew in the area that was followed by the Christians after they took back the region during the 12th century. Although recipes of paella seem to have been around since the late Middle Ages, the current recipe for the paella appears to date back to the 17th/18th century, when ingredients like the tomato (some peeled tomatoes are fried and mixed with the broth and the rice), were brought from the Americas and began to be more widely used in Europe.

I've been making it since the '70s but had an awakening when I discovered that authentic paella for purists is not what I'd thought.

This led me to sign us up for a unique paella cooking course at **Escuela de Arroz y Paella**, an experience that I highly recommend for anyone who really wants to explore the art of making this traditional dish.

Held in a small backstreet bistro on Calle Obispo Don Jeronimo, we joined couples from Australia and France and also a young Sri-Lankan fellow in a day that started with selecting ingredients at the local market with our guide and ended with eating our own fully cooked paellas, salad, and free-flowing wine led by showman Chef Beni.

The Central Market is a must visit for foodies. The massive building was built in the early 1900s and is an architectural marvel with its giant columns, vaulted ceiling and some 1000 food stalls. It is the ultimate farmers market.

In between were several magical hours of conjuring the perfect pure Valencia paella, complete with just-right heating, chopping, tossing, boiling, sniffing, and simmering as directed by Chef Beni, a tall, ruggedly handsome Valencian who had us dancing

Clockwise from top left: Entrance to Escuela de Arroz y Paella; Buying paella ingredients at The Central Market; Domingo Rodriguez Lopez, La Parada de las Especies, selling saffron to be used in the paella class; Seasoning the paella dish in the class; Rodriguez Lopez family photo depicting one of the four generations of the family business that began 125 years ago.



and singing around the stoves in order to inject each pan with love and happiness.

Just like many Texans say “chili should have no beans,” we discovered that the original paella of Valencia is made with white rice (they use la bomba rice), chicken and rabbit (cut in small pieces and must have the bone so thighs are good), fresh beans (green and white like lima beans), tiny snails, flavored with saffron (a pinch, please!) and paprika, and also seasoned with salt.

That’s it. No garlic, no onion, and no chorizo!

We learned that there are other types, of course, like seafood paella, vegetable paella, and mixed paella. But this one from Valencia is considered the standard.

The secrets are in the shallow pan, using the right rice to absorb the water, choosing meat with the bone for flavor, and patience.

The bomba rice is better than regular long-grain rice because of its ability to absorb much more water than long grain, while keeping its structure and not turning to mush.

Best part, Valencians say, is the crusty bottom of the rice in the pan. Of course, you must have the right paella pan. It helps if you have a gas burner to fit the large pan. Or, cook your paella on the barbecue.

Paella is a one-pot and one-serving dish meal. Local custom is to share the paella, eating it directly from the pan. Smack the hand of the person who dares eat from your side!

Inspired by a day immersed in Valencia history and culture, we decided to end it with a late night supper of tapas and found the perfect spot in the Ensanche district, just a few blocks south of the old city, where there were many good choices.

City of Arts and Sciences

There is no better example of modern Spanish culture than Valencia’s City of Arts and Sciences, a complex of impressive buildings that’s located at the southern end of what was the Turia river bed where we spent most of our final day in Valencia.

Here Are Some of the Highlights:

L’Hemisfèric IMAX Cinema, planetarium, and laserium. Looking like a giant eye, it has been dubbed “the eye of knowledge.”

El Museu de les Ciències Príncepe Felipe, a science museum that looks like the skeleton of a whale.

L’Umbracle, a sculpture and plant garden featuring native plants.

L’Oceanografic, considered the largest aquarium in Europe.

The design displays the creativity of Felix Candela with the aquarium built in the shape of a water lily.

El Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia is a performing arts center and opera house.



Clockwise: City of Arts and Sciences complex—L’Hemisfèric, Imax, Planetarium and Laserium and El Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia Opera House and Performing Arts Center; Museum visitors having a ball trying to balance; El Museu de les Ciències Príncepe Felipe, the science museum with its building designed to look like skeleton of whale.



The Port of Valencia

No visit to Valencia is complete without a stop here. Its port is considered the largest on the western coast of the Mediterranean and is Spain's second busiest in terms of seagoing traffic.

Probably most famous for hosting the 32nd America's Cup in 2007, Valencia's port is a great and often rare example of how a city successfully turned the opportunity of a major sporting event into a sustainable way to beautify its landscape and seaport.

The port is now divided into two sections with one side exclusively for pleasure craft and the other for its maritime industry. A new harbor was built, complete with buildings for each of the racing teams.

The America's Cup Building, known as Veles I Vents, is the centerpiece of the harbor. It is a four level, spectacular structure of seemingly floating floors. The name was inspired by a 15th century poem by Ausias March about the strength of the wind. Designed by British architect, David Chipperfield, the building has won numerous architectural awards.

We took time to visit the exhibition "The House of the Americas Cup" to learn about the history of the race from 1851 to 2013 and to enjoy the amazing views.

Where to Eat

We found a spectacular view of the marina and had an amazing lunch at, La Maritima, a five-star restaurant and National Gastronomy Award-winner led by the Andres Salvador family.

You can enjoy the Mediterranean breeze on the deck and watch the sailboats pass by through the massive glass windows. We couldn't resist the fried salty plantain chips with a cold local beer to start. We tried the local seafood, which is its specialty, including the mussels and sea urchin.

La Maritima Marina of Valencia Muelle de la Aduana s / n, 46024 Valencia

Clockwise from top left: America's Cup Building, known as Veles I Vents; Mussels and sea urchin seafood starters to be found at La Maritima restaurant; Vintage America's Cup sail boat from 2007.



The tourism departments of Spain are enormously helpful and passionate about their country with insider advice. Ernesto Tonda Serrano, www.turisme.gva.es, www.comunitatvalenciana.com, is one such person and we like to call him "the magician."



17th century clay jar used for wine making at Celler del Roure.

Valencia's Wine Region

As we left Valencia for our final leg of the trip, we of course had to taste the wine of at least one of the more than 17 wineries across 150 square miles covering the 10 municipalities surrounding Valencia.

Spain boasts some 26 wine routes. And Valencia is no exception to the production of great wine. The official route for the Valencia area is “**Ruta del Vino Utiel Requena**.” The region produces mainly red and rosé wines from grapes such as Bobal, Tempranilla, and Garnacha and also delicious whites made from the chardonnay, sauvignon blanc, and macabeo grapes.

The drive to **Celler del Roure**, a small producer of excellent red wines, reminded us of the Simi and Napa Valleys of California, a dry sunny climate with acres and acres of well-tended vineyards and, as my husband noticed, great cycling roads!

Bearing the symbol of the dragonfly, Celler del Roure got its start in 1996 as a small family winery. Today, it's on a mission to learn more about winemaking from its ancestors by researching old methods of using buried clay jars in its cellar from the 17th century. They say the buried mud jars may be as good as or even better than French and American oak barrels.

We were lucky to have a private tour of the cellar and a tasting of Celler del Roure's wines.

It's interesting to note that toward the end of the 19th century, an epidemic wiped out most of the vineyards in France and throughout Europe, thanks to botanists from England who brought cuttings from America. Unfortunately, the phylloxera, a microscopic insect, hitched a ride and caused utter devastation to the grape vines. Spain, however, was spared. Something to think about should you ever try to sneak local plants into your luggage.

You can buy some of the Celler del Roure's wines in New York through the importer **European Cellars**. Do check out the winery's **Facebook page** for a fun video on crushing grapes by “foot.”

More information about wineries in the area: **Terres dels Alforins**

Clockwise from top: Celler del Roure vineyards; Buried clay jars in Celler del Roure's wine cellar from the 17th century; Selection of Celler del Roure's wines in their boutique; Wine tasting.



C. Worthington



NOW ON TO THE VUELTA



The 21-day Vuelta a España showcases the country of Spain.

Vuelta España 2017. Photo: ASO Unipublic. Gomez Sport. Luis Angel Gomez



As we saw every day, the region around Valencia is perfect cycling country. From the seemingly ubiquitous well-marked bike paths in cities to the quiet country roads that led to the vineyard we visited, rolling countryside, and winding passes through the mountains, cyclists are everywhere.

So, as we left the wine country and headed north to the coast, my husband finally got his wish, a chance to witness Spain's most famous cycling event—**La Vuelta**.

Of course, everyone has heard of the Tour de France. But how many know that “Le Tour” is just one of three, 21 day “Grand Tours” of cycling that take place every year? The Giro d'Italia in May and the

Vuelta d'Espana in August and September bookend the Tour. And they all feature the world's top professional cyclists racing through each country's amazing countryside. Not only are they the three most grueling endurance sports contests on the planet, but they can also lay realistic claim to being the backdrop for the most unique travel shows ever conceived.

The Vuelta is the youngest of the three, having a history dating back to 1935. This year, 198 of the world's best pros in 22 teams raced for 21 days and 2,044 miles throughout Spain. Cities and regions throughout the country pay big euros to host a stage for its economic wind-fall and international recognition.

Benicassim – Beach Town and Start of La Vuelta Stage

Benicassim is a gorgeous beach town along the *Costa del Azahar*, which literally means Orange Blossom Coast. Since the town is hugged by the Desert de les Palmes mountain range, the strong north winds are blocked. Hence, you do not see a lot of hotels with glass windscreens up everywhere like you do at some along the Mediterranean.

Of course, the best thing to do here is to spend a day at the beach on the clean white sand and in the warm sea with the gentle waves. But not for us! Tomorrow, on a hot day in August, Benicassim would play host to the start of stage five

of the 21-day Vuelta a España, and we couldn't miss it.

But first, our hotel...

At the north end of the broad Almadra Beach sits the hill-side spa of **El Palasiet**. Known for its indoor and outdoor salt-water pools, this 19th century classic villa is surrounded by magnificent gardens and great views of the beach that's only 60 steps away.

Totally remodeled between 2002 and 2005, there is no better place from which to start and finish (or watch!) a leisurely or vigorous bike ride. We arrived in the late afternoon and, from the sea-facing balcony of our comfortable suite at El Palasiet, we saw a steady stream of cyclists from easy pedaling families to lycra-clad

enthusiasts riding the bike path.

After a long day in the car, we opted for a couple of glasses of fine Valencia region wine and a leisurely early dinner at poolside.

Benicassim for Cyclists and Walkers

Cyclists and walkers love the **Via Verde del Mar** (Greenway of the Sea), which runs about 3.5 miles between Benicassim and Oropesa del Mar, another seaside town. This dedicated cycling-walking path along the beach is part of Spain's rails-to-trails program, sponsored by the **Foundation of the Spanish Railways**. This particular path has a long illuminated tunnel to ride through, metal bridges to ride

over, and amazing views. It is perfect for novice riders since it is very flat and smooth.

For those wanting longer rides, you can check out the cycling website **Map My Ride**, which lists over 69 great routes from Benicassim.

There are more than 4,700 miles of railroad beds in Spain that are no longer in use and are part of the program, started in 1993, that turns them into paths for cycling and walking. Over 1,600 miles have been converted today at the national level, led by the **Greenways of Spain**.

From left: Start of the Vuelta in Benicassim, one of the tour stage starting points. Chris Froome, Team Sky and multiple Tour de France winner, sits on the start line ready for the race; Scene from the pop-up race start village in the center of Benicassim; Costumed mascots pose with children; Souvenirs given away; Team bikes ready for the race.

Spending the Day Following the Race

We had passes to the pop-up start village in the center of Benicassim where all the pro teams, officials, and fans come together for the day's start. Sponsor tents, stage performers, huge team buses, and even an official barber occupy race watchers for an hour or two before the whole entourage of official cars, motorcycles, and camera crews eventually pull out, surrounding the pack of lean racers.

It's a loud, colorful scene as they pull away from the start to carnival music, blaring car horns, and the *whump, whump, whump* of television helicopters overhead.

To get the full flavor of this amazing event, we picked La Serratella, a small village just past the summit of the biggest hill climb, 78 miles into the 110 miles that would be covered in the day's stage. We headed there by car.

This is where the popularity of Spanish cycling is most obvious. On our way up the mountain, we passed hundreds of club cyclists who were pedaling to the top and also less active fans who were setting up awnings and picnic tables on the switchback turns.

La Serratella was an out-of-the-way, small mountain village with only one smoky café where all the cycling fans converged to wait for the riders. One big-screen TV projected the live action from the road below, and the café owners hustled to fill orders on what had to be their biggest day of the year.

Excitement built as word spread that the riders were coming. Cheers erupted every time an official motorcycle or flashing car came through. Most of the drivers waved.

And then, the first racers. A group of eight, riding impossibly fast up and through town, were met with hysterical cheering and finger pointing at one of the recognized stars. The big pack came through five minutes later to even more cheering.

Then it was all over. Fans dispersed and the few who were left behind clapped for the stragglers. Traffic cones and caution tape were taken down, and most everyone there headed back down the mountain, leaving the villagers of La Serratella with something to talk about for years to come.

We talked about the race on the way back to Benicassim and the spa at Hotel El Palasiet. The riders would race on for another two hours today and finish up the coast in Alcossebre. They would race for another 17 days around Spain before finishing in Madrid over two weeks later.

A few hours in the spa sounded a lot better.

Clockwise from top left: TV helicopters signal the arrival of the race; Amateur cyclists test the race course; Racers enter the small town of La Serratella; Fans cheer as racers charge through town; Amateur cyclist watches how the pros do it.





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Our Final Day

On our way to La Serratella to catch the race, we had seen what appeared to be a picturesque hilltop fortress off in the distance and a sign pointing to it—Morella.

The place beckoned. We decided to check it out on our last morning...

Morella

As we drove along the CV-14 on the clear August morning, **Morella**, the ancient walled city perched on a hilltop came into view. I felt like I had stepped back into the 1961 movie *El Cid*, which starred Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren.

Like in the movie, many battles were held over this town because of its prime property and location between the Ebro River and the Valencian coastal plain. The Greeks, the Romans, the Visigoths, and even the Moors just had to have it.

Even the Plague grabbed it but was ousted in the 17th century after 20 years of clenching the city with an iron fist. Lore has it that someone brought a statue of the Virgin Mary to Morella and paraded it all around with the result of ending the plague. Every six years, a festival to celebrate this feat, called “the Sexenni festival,” complete with a procession and dancing, is held for nine days in August.

Morella was at one time a popular place to live. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the population was 9,000. Today, there are some 2,500 people who live there and who primarily focus on tourism.

We had the chance to be guided through the ancient town by Angela, a contemporary, upbeat 20-something-year-old guide who gave us a flavor of a place that is much more than just historic sites.

Angela told us that for just a small population, there is a lot going on there with four butcher shops, 10 hairdressers (that’s like 240 customers per shop if they share), 15 to 20 bars, and 15 or so restaurants.

With the winding narrow streets filled with staircases to the next street, the stunning views are what make Morella very special.

The young people are hip, too. While many have families in the tourism business, they are well-educated and get out to local towns and beaches just like any other upwardly mobile youth their ages.

Clockwise from top left: The ancient city of Morella; Narrow streets are often connected by narrow staircases in Morella; View from Morella; Garden of La Iglesia de Santa María Morella.





Croquetas Morellanas Meson del Pastor.

Thanks to Angela, too, I now know what *vale* means in Spanish, and I can add it to my glossary of Spanish words and phrases. (It means “okay” and everyone says it, just like we do in English).

Highlights to not miss here are the Sanctuary of the Virgen of Vallivana, *Castillo de Morella* (Morella Castle), the aqueduct, *La Iglesia de Santa María Morella* (Saint Mary’s Church), *Convento de San Francisc Morella* (St. Francis’ Convent), and the *Morella Museo Temps de Dinsaures* (Dinosaur Museum).

For shopping, don’t miss out on the local cheese and honey, *flaons* (a roundish, sweet pastry), and also pick up a horizontally striped, multicolored Morella blanket—a wool and cotton blanket that reflects the heritage of wool textiles dating back to the 13th century.

Visit [Morella Tourism](#) to learn more.

Where to Eat

Angela introduced us to [Meson del Pastor](#) as the place in town for local specialties. Raquel Ferrer is the second-generation chef for this very popular local restaurant run by her parents for over 30 years. “We try to keep the traditional cuisine while introducing new techniques,” Ferrer said. She studied cooking at the School of Hospitality in Castellon and brought back with her many creative and forward-thinking ideas.

The restaurant, obviously popular with the locals and tourists, was packed on the day we had lunch there.

Some of the wonderful dishes that we tried were *Croquetas Morellanas*, *Crujiente de Manitas de Cerdo* (crunchy pork), *Fideos Fritos con Setas de Cardo y foie* (fried noodles with mushrooms and liver), with *grand Paletilla de cordero ternasco* (lamb shoulder).

Clockwise from top left: La Iglesia de Santa María Morella (St. Mary’s Church); Meson de Morella cheese shop, a place to find local cheese and honey; Alter of Saint Mary’s Church; Classic Morella blankets for sale.



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Thalasso Hotel El Palasiet



Two More Historic Cities to Not Miss

We could not pack much more into this week of sampling what Valencia had to offer, but we did squeeze in two brief stops that you may want to check out.

San Mateu

Iglesia Arciprestal Sant Mateu—Sant Mateu Archiprestal Church with its hexagonal tower is quintessential San Mateu with its combination of Gothic and Romanesque architecture.

Peniscola

Peniscola is otherwise known as the “Gibraltar of Valencia.” The Knights Templar built the 13th century castle there. The imposing castle became known

as the Castell del Papa Luna after Pope Benedict XIII.

Where to Eat

Casa Jaime for traditional cuisine of the area, including seafood and rice dishes. **Casa Jaime** Avinguda del Papa Luna, 5 12598 Peniscola.

Back to the Spa

We had waited for this since we had arrived in Benicassim two days ago—an afternoon of pampering and *thalassotherapy*, Greek for “sea”, which roughly interpreted means use of seawater and other marine products for therapeutic purposes. Sounded pretty good!

Thalasso Hotel El Palasiet

The province of Castellon is known for its many natural mineral springs and medicinal waters. There are a number of designated “Spa Town Resorts” in the province.

Thalasso Hotel El Palasiet is a perfect place to combine a summer beach trip while staying in a classical mansion, boasting a state-of-the-art thalassotherapy center. The hotel has been developing the use of thalassotherapy as a medical treatment for over 40 years. The concept, of course, dates back thousands of years to Roman times and through the 19th and 20th centuries throughout Europe and other countries.

Nestled in a grove of pine

trees, the hotel overlooks the Benicassim beach, which is just a two-minute walk away from a quiet corner.

For those who wish for a whole health evaluation and program, this service is offered. Or you can choose à la carte spa treatments, such as a relaxing 40-minute massage, mud bath, shiatsu, foot reflexology sessions, and such services as facials, peels, and a “facial vitalift,” described as a global age-defying treatment for mature skins that smooths wrinkles and eliminates puffiness.

The spa offer packages like the “Slimming,” a five-day one that includes medical and dietetic supervision, sessions of the phlebotic walking pool, hydro massage baths with algae, weight-

training sessions, and more.

If you’ve ever done circuit training in a gym, you may find the “biomarine circuit” fun. You follow a timed program, starting with the spa’s salt-water indoor pool, heated to 96.8 degrees Fahrenheit, followed by waterbeds in the pool, water jets to help with stiff necks and backs, a sauna, and whirlpool baths back in the pool.

We tried the massage (wonderful!) and soaked in the salt-water indoor and outdoor pools. There were moments where we thought that perhaps we had stumbled into the movie *Cocoon*, wondering if we would look light years younger when we left. **Thalasso Hotel El Palasiet** C / Pontazgo, 11 – 12.560 Benicassim

We left the spa with tingling skin and wobbly legs and decided that our last night’s dinner needed to be very close by. From our balcony, we overlooked a majestic beachfront hotel and, each evening, watched a steady stream of guests being dropped off by both shabby taxis and gleaming Bentleys.

It was the Hotel Voramar, the Grand Dame of Benicassim. We *had* to go there for our final dining experience!

From top left: Alter in San Mateu Archiprestal Church; Scenes from Peniscola; Thalasso Hotel El Palasiet spa services.

Hotel Voramar: The Hotel With a Soul; The Manager With a Passion

We met Rafael Pallaares Dols, director of the hotel. He told us with deep conviction in his eyes about the history of the Hotel Voramar...

Hotel Voramar began in 1930. Since then, the hotel has transformed many times, reflecting the era, from restaurant to a hotel, to a military hospital to a movie theater, and then back to a hotel. The history of the building began, however, some 43 years earlier when it was built as a villa by an engineer with the construction of the Northern Railway as a place where his wife could be during the construction. The town was called Villa Pilar back then.

Looking at the beach area today, developed like many modern beaches, one can imagine the wonderful serenity here before the population grew. The original plan was to build just a social club with a bathroom on the beach. The Voramar Restaurant opened in 1930 with the addition of the hotel three years later.

During the Civil War (1936 to 1939), the hotel was seized by the military and used as a hospital. Post-war, the hotel eventually became popular with visitors from the local area. The '60s, however, brought not only a social revolution but mass tourism to the area. Apartments and new hotels were built seemingly nonstop.

According to Pallaares, "The urban development completely transformed the traditional landscape, so that the oldest photos of Benicassim are practically unrecognizable."

Pallaares' dedication and sincerity for quality and the importance of sustainability exuded when he spoke of his goals for the hotel. In addition to serving the finest quality, creative, and locally sourced foods to its guests, the hotel is extremely passionate about reducing energy consumption, minimizing waste, and reducing its carbon footprint.

To that end, Hotel Voramar has installed solar energy panels, uses fresh vegetables from its own garden in its recipes, use recycled paper for its paper cups and napkins, make donations to a local nonprofit called Action Against Hunger, and uses an electric car.

Clockwise from top left: Hotel Voramar and its beautiful beach on the Mediterranean; Historic photo of Hotel Voramar before the area was built up; Relaxing view from one of the hotel rooms; Vintage photo of Hotel Voramar; Upstairs restaurant overlooking the sea as it is today; Vintage photo of Hotel Voramar original restaurant.





The view from the Hotel Voramar's upstairs dining room.

To dine at the Hotel Voramar is not only an experience with a breathtaking view but also a chance to taste local Mediterranean recipes with a creative flair. These recipes include artichokes with squid, skewers of shrimp, scallops and octopus with yogurt and mustard sauce, and also lamb shoulder cooked over 12 hours and served with hummus.

That dinner pretty much wrapped it up for us and, ironically, summed up an amazing week-long introduction to the Valencia region.

We saw the classic and the modern in everything: cuisine, lodging, sport, and landscape—even in the people who were excited to meet us and proud to share their country and its passions. We found Valencia to be authentic, safe, welcoming, beautiful, and a perfect destination for those who want to be active while feeling like a local.

Hotel Voramar Paseo Marítimo Pilar Coloma 1 12560 – Benicàssim Tel: 964 300 150

Clockwise from top left: Hotel Voramar's white sand beach; Rafael Pallaes Dols, director of the hotel; One of many culinary creations; Special drink made with Mandarin liquor; Gracious staff is a hallmark of the hotel and restaurant.



Hotel Voramar



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Valencia Tourism

Turia Garden sculpture.

PLANNING YOUR TRIP

The Spain and Valencia tourism websites are a treasure-trove of information and the best places to start your research. You can always find a person to talk to at the tourism departments who are not only knowledgeable but passionate about their country and loaded with insider things to do and see. We found both the Tourist Offices of Spain in the U.S. and the offices located in the Valencia region to be enormously helpful in planning our visit to the region.

HERE ARE SOME IMPORTANT LINKS

Tourist Offices of Spain http://www.spain.info/en_US/
Province of Castellon <http://www.turismodecastellon.com/en>
The Valencia Tourist Card <http://www.valenciatouristcard.com/en/home>
(For discounts in shops, restaurants, and for shows)
Tourism in the Region of Valencia <http://en.comunitatvalenciana.com/>
Valencia Tourism Official Site <http://www.visitvalencia.com/en/home>
Michelin's The Green Guide—Spain <https://travelguide.michelin.com/>
Tarjeta Dorada http://www.renfe.com/EN/viajeros/tarifas/tarjeta_dorada.html
(Card available for “seniors,” 60-plus and those with disabilities for the train.)