

Once a well-kept secret, the treasures of the region of Valencia are becoming better known to both tourists and language students looking for a true Spanish experience.

GILLIAN EVANS reports.



Valencia's secrets

The Valencia region possesses untold attractions. It has, according to Andreas Tessmer at Costa de Valencia language school in Valencia city, a 485 kilometre-long coastline peppered with some of Europe's finest beaches, including, in 2006, 94 Blue Banner beaches. It is also a very green area with palm trees, orange and lemon groves, date palm plantations, and rice fields fed by irrigation systems dating back to the Moors. Indeed, the region's rich history is reflected today in much of its architecture; a rich legacy of churches, palaces and other monuments left by the Iberians, Carthaginians, Romans, Moors and Christians.

Growing numbers of international travellers are discovering the delights of the region and its eponymous city, according to Fernando Ribas, Marketing Director at AIP Language Institute. "Valencia [city] has experienced the biggest jump in tourism of any European city," he states. "The 1.6 million visitors who came here in 2006 were nearly five times the number who came to visit in 1992."

This is not surprising when you consider that, according to Fernando Batalla at Taronja School, Valencia is "one of the most beautiful [cities] in the country". A mix of Gothic and Baroque architecture, Valencia's stunning old quarter is buzzing with shops,

bars, restaurants and nightclubs, making it a favourite haunt for students both day and night. "[Students] love going at night to the historical part of Valencia, full of very traditional and beautiful buildings, with a lot of cultural places and full of clubs, bars, pubs and terraces," confirms Victoria Sanahuja Gimeno at Hispania language school.

Batalla mentions that students enjoy going to *barrios* (districts) like El Carmen, Ruzafa and Cánovas during the evenings, while Tessmer highlights some of the historic centre's main tourist sites as being El Miguelete (1), the cathedral tower; Marqués de Dos Aguas palace (2); the Torres de Serrano (3) and Torres de Quart city gates (4); and La Lonja de la Seda silk exchange (5), which has been declared a Unesco World Heritage Site.

As well as the historical attractions of the city, Valencia is home to Europe's largest cultural centre, the impressive, modern Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias (City of Arts and Sciences), which comprises the Museo de las Ciencias (Science Museum), the Parque Oceanográfico – one of the world's largest aquariums, the iconic kidney-shaped Palacio de las Artes, and the astonishing Hemisfèric, an eye-shaped building – complete with eyelashes – with an eyeball that makes up a huge Imax cinema screen.

For language students, the city of Valencia is perfect for learning Spanish, as according to Pio Darcangelo at Intereuropa school, "the Spanish spoken here is clear and people do not have an accent". What's more, says Sanahuja Gimeno, the city "has



Torres de Serrano
Still considered the main entrance to the city, these giant towers date back to 1382 and formed part of the defensive wall that surrounded Valencia. In later years they were used as a jail



everything". She explains further, "It has the life of a big city: pubs, discothèques, cinemas, a lot of shops, theatres and a lot of cultural and amusement life, and also it has the [city] beach, where you can relax."

Ribas adds that the region's mild climate adds to its appeal. "Valencia is a beautiful city and it's not as crowded as other cities at the seaside, especially during the summer. Its warm climate allows people to enjoy the beach eight months a year. There are not many tourists here, which really allows the students to get to know the Spanish culture and their way of living."

Batalla goes as far as claiming that Valencia's famous La Malvarrosa beach is "one of the greatest city beaches in Spain". Not only is it a popular meeting point for those wanting to swim, relax or play volleyball, but, says Darcangelo, it is also full of lively restaurants, bars and pubs, and, on 24 June each year, it plays host to one of Valencia's oldest traditions. Vanessa Canet at Cilce explains, "On the first day of the summer [24 June], all Valencian people go to the beach and, at 12 o'clock at night, they all go to the sea to bathe their feet. That [brings] good luck for the following year."

According to Tessmer, there are 392 official festivals in the community of Valencia during the year, meaning that there is plenty of opportunity to celebrate while soaking up the Valencian traditions. The biggest two festivals are the Tomatina – where, according to Darcangelo, "thousands of people gather together and it is basically a war with tomatoes" – and the Fallas, where large wooden caricatures of eminent people are paraded through the streets before being burnt. "[Students] love Fallas because it is



a 24-hour party, seven days a week," states Sanahuja Gimeno. "[During] this period, the streets are filled with music and [have] a very enjoyable atmosphere." Canet says Fallas is such good fun – it attracts around a million tourists each year – that most want to go back for Fallas the next year.

As well as being a popular party venue, Valencia is also becoming an important >>

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Agent viewpoint

"[The] city of Valencia has a mild Mediterranean climate [with] long summers and cool winters. The city breathes a young, creative atmosphere and has a varied and vibrant nightlife, partly due to the many Erasmus students. Valencia isn't as crowded by foreign tourists as comparable destinations such as Barcelona and Malaga can be in high season. The region is right in between must-see tourist destinations [like] Madrid, Barcelona and the Balearic Islands. [Students] choose Valencia because of the variety of activities on offer and the status it has as an innovative city where 'things are happening'. The

America's Cup sailing and Formula 1 play an important role in creating that image. There are beautiful natural parks, small, typically Spanish villages and quiet beaches [nearby]. The locals are regarded as welcoming, ambitious and proud of their city and region. The region has good quality food and many local specialities. Students cannot leave without having tasted the local pride, the *paella*."

Martijn Goedegebure, Lingua Spanish Courses Abroad, Netherlands

"Our clients choose to study in Valencia because of the weather, the sea and the beach. They like the people and the food and are generally surprised that there are so many things to do. They enjoy viting the

beach and the town centre in their free time."

Sabrina Masotti, International Study Vacation, Italy

"Valencia is our most popular Spanish destination. It is a very unique city, not quite as big as Barcelona but still a vibrant and exciting city with a lot to do and investigate. It also maintains a very Spanish spirit, so students have the opportunity for complete immersion in the Spanish language and culture. The Arts and Sciences Museum is a great sight to see... Valencia's incredible architecture and historical sights keep students busy for weeks. There are also flamenco shows all over the city."

Lauren Richardson, World Endeavors, USA

host to sporting events. The 32nd America's Cup took place here this year and will return again in 2009, while 2008 will see the city launch its Formula one Grand Prix. Soccer

Most schools arrange many interesting excursions and activities for their students to get to know the region. Sanahuja Gimeno at Hispania relates, "[Students] love going to towns like Xativa, which has a lot of history; Peñíscola – where the Papa Luna (a pope in the 14th century) used to live – a very beautiful town with sea and mountains together; Calpe and its natural park; and Requena, famous for its wine."

Food is an important pleasure throughout the region – Valencia city was the birthplace of paella – and, at Cilce, they arrange a paella evening in a *barraca* (a 19th-century house) where all the students help make the dish. The school also organises cooking classes to learn how to make *tortilla de patatas* (Spanish omelette) or *gazpacho andaluz* (chilled soup made with tomatoes).

Indeed, one adventure often leads to another in Valencia as Batalla recounts. He says, "[One of our] students went to a paella party, met a handsome Valencian sailor and then started working for the America's Cup!"

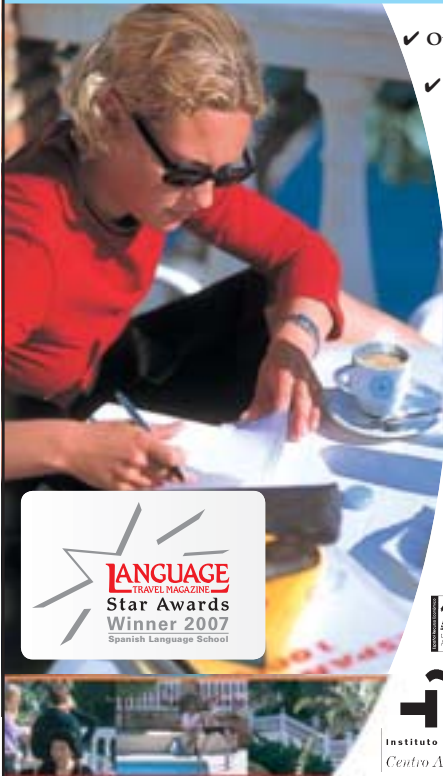
Ciudad de la Ciencias

The City of Arts and Sciences is an awe-inspiring display of architecture. Designed to celebrate the arrival of the 21st century, the "city" houses an aquarium, an opera house and a planetarium



is also a big attraction, with many students attending Valencia CF football matches, and says Canet, going home the proud owners of a Valencia soccer shirt.

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