

# Murcia



Pinched between the more-trodden beaches of Almería to the south and the heaving resorts of Valencia's Costa Blanca to the north, Murcia is one of Spain's least visited and, the peninsula of La Manga apart, least touristy corners.

Its name derives from the Latin *murtae* (mulberry). For centuries mulberry leaves fed silkworms for a flourishing industry that lasted until well after WWII, when local silk could no longer compete against man-made fibres.

Murcia's 250km of coast is aptly called La Costa Cálida (Hot One). With over 3000 hours of sunshine each year, it almost guarantees an all-over tan, whether you spread your towel in the tourist pulls of the Mar Menor or in the quieter, much more Spanish resorts southwards.

So much sunshine means a dry, semidesert interior. Humankind has toiled over the centuries to put the little rain that falls over the region to best use. Muslims from North Africa introduced their irrigation systems: waterwheels, aqueducts and *acequias* (canals). This network, still largely extant, helps to distribute the stingy 300mm of annual rainfall, allowing intensive cultivation, especially of the citrus crops and grapes in the El Guadalentín valley and tomatoes by the tonne, grown in vast plastic greenhouses south of Cartagena.

The busy capital, also called Murcia, is a university town with a splendid cathedral. Cartagena, Spain's premier naval port, is excavating, digging deep to reveal its rich classical heritage. Inland, Lorca, once a frontier town between Christian and Muslim Spain, is famous for its Semana Santa (Easter week) processions, and the unspoilt Parque Natural de Sierra Espuña draws climbers and walkers.

MURCIA

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Steep yourself in the warm, shallow waters of the **Mar Menor** (p680)
- Sip a drink in Murcia's Plaza del Cardenal Belluga, the **cathedral's** (p674) resplendent baroque façade before you
- Tag onto one of Lorca's spectacular **Semana Santa processions** (see p681)
- Visit a selection of Cartagena's well-documented, freshly revealed **Roman and Carthaginian sites** (p677)
- Walk the trails of the **Parque Natural de Sierra Espuña** (p682)



■ AREA: 11,314 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 40°C, LOW 19°C

■ POP: 1.36 MILLION



## MURCIA CITY

pop 410,000

Murcia, bypassed by most tourists and unjustifiably sneered at by too many Spaniards, well merits a visit. Pass through the industrial outskirts and head straight for the river, cathedral and laid-back, partly pedestrianised heart of this attractive university city.

The Muslims founded 'Mursiya' in AD 825 on the site of a former Roman colony. The town was reconquered in 1243 by Alfonso X of Castilla y León, honoured nowadays in the name of one of Murcia's two main thoroughfares (his shrivelled heart, tradition has it, is preserved within the cathedral's altar).

Enriched by the silk industry and by agricultural prosperity, the city was at its grandest in the 18th century, when the cathedral's magnificent baroque façade was built, along with the urban palaces of the nobility and rising bourgeoisie.

Looted by Napoleonic troops in 1810, then victim of plague and cholera, the city fell into understandable decline during the 19th cen-

tury. In 1936, during the Spanish Civil War, it was the scene of bitter fighting and many of its churches were razed.

## ORIENTATION

The city centre spreads north of Río Segura. The main commercial thoroughfare, Gran Vía del Escultor Francisco Salzillo (usually – and thankfully – abbreviated to 'Gran Vía') runs north from the Puente Viejo (Old Bridge).

From the cathedral, pedestrianised Calle de la Trapería, the main street of medieval and Renaissance Murcia, cuts north through the old town.

## INFORMATION

**L@Red** (Calle Antonio Puig 1; per hr €2: 11 10am-2pm & 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Internet access.

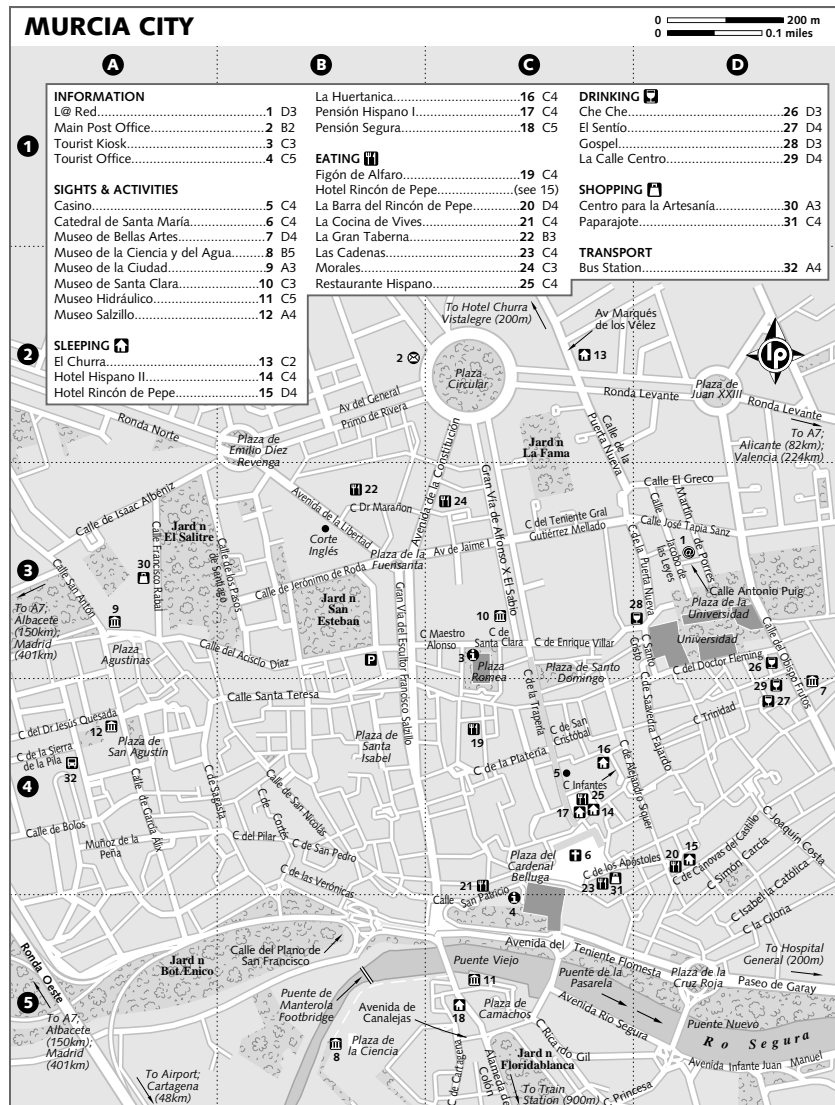
**Main post office** (Plaza Circular)

**Tourist kiosk** (Calle de Santa Clara; 11 10am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm or 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun)

**Tourist office** (☎ 968 35 87 49; www.murciaciudad.com; Plaza del Cardenal Belluga; 11 10am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm or 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun)

**www.murciaturistica.es** This is the website of the regional tourist authority.

MURCIA



## SIGHTS

### Catedral de Santa María

Murcia's sumptuous cathedral (h 7am-1pm & 5-8pm) was raised in 1394 on the site of a mosque. Initially Gothic in style, it was dramatically altered in 1748, when the exuberant baroque façade with its tumbling cherubs was added. A highlight of the interior is the 15th-century

Flamboyant Gothic Capilla de los Vélez, its flutes and curls like piped icing sugar. The fat 92m tower, begun in 1519, took 270 years to be completed.

### Casino

Murcia's resplendent casino (968 21 22 55; Calle de la Trapería 18) first opened as a gentlemen's

club in 1847. Beyond the decorative façade, completed in 1901, are an Arab-style vestibule and a patio. Penetrate as far as the magnificent ballroom and pop €1 in the slot to see the 320 lamps of its candelabra shimmer with light as Strauss' *Radetsky March* wafts from all corners. Closed for improvements when we last visited, it should again be open.

## Museums

**Museo de la Ciudad** (968 27 43 90; Plaza Agustinas 5-7; admission free; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri Jul-Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun), cheerful and well displayed, follows the city's 2000-year history. The ground floor recounts Murcia's Muslim heritage, the 1st floor its early Christian times and the 2nd floor its 18th-century glory days until present times.

**Museo Salzillo** (968 29 18 93; Plaza de San Agustín 1-3; admission €3; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat Jul & Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat Sep-Jun), devoted to the Murcian sculptor Francisco Salzillo (1707-83), is in the baroque chapel of Ermita de Jesús. It displays his impressive *pasos* (figures carried in Semana Santa processions) and his superb miniature Nativity figures carved in wood.

**Museo de Bellas Artes** (968 23 93 46; Calle del Obispo Frutos 12; h 10am-8.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), is a bright, well-documented gallery. Devoted to Spanish artists, its 1st-floor Siglo de Oro gallery, with canvases by Murillo and Ribera, is the highlight.

**Museo de Santa Clara** (969 39 65 44; Gran Vía de Alfonso X El Sabio; admission free; h guided visits 10am-1pm & 4-6.30pm or 5-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is a recently restored Islamic palace. It has an exquisite courtyard and an important collection of Islamic art within a closed-order convent with its own rich treasures, assembled over the centuries. Phone to reserve a 45-minute guided tour in English.

Giant grindstones and delicate working models are the permanent features of **Museo Hidráulico** (968 35 86 00; Calle los Molinos; admission free; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat), a restored water mill that's also used for temporary exhibitions.

**Museo de la Ciencia y del Agua** (968 21 19 98; Plaza de la Ciencia 1; adult/child €1.20/0.60; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun), also beside the river (and best approached on foot along the riverside walk from Puente Viejo), is one for the children. Although everything's in Spanish, this small hands-on science museum has plenty of buttons to press and knobs to twirl and a small planetarium, too.

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Murcia's *Semana Santa* processions rival Cartagena's in their fervency. Two days after Easter Sunday, the mood changes as the city celebrates the *Bando de la Huerta*, recalling its agricultural heritage with parades, food stalls, folklore and fun aplenty.

## SLEEPING

**Pensión Segura** (968 21 12 81; Plaza de Camachos 14; s/d €30/38; a ) We scarcely recognised this long-standing budget favourite of ours when we last passed by. Everything – new beds, and furniture, refurbished bathrooms for its 14 rooms – has changed except the excellent value it offers.

**La Huertanica** (968 21 76 68; www.hotelhuertanica.com; Calle Infantes 3-5; s/d €44/57.50; p a ) The Huertanica with its 31 rooms, some with balcony, makes a reliable midrange choice. Tucked away down a quiet side street, it also runs a more-than-decent restaurant that specialises in local fare. Parking costs €10 to €13.

**Pensión Hispano I** (968 21 61 52; www.hotelhispano.net in Spanish; Calle de la Trapería 8; s with shower/bathroom €24/27, d/tr €38/50; p ) Just around the corner from her fancier sister (below) and something of a Cinderella, Hispano I would benefit from some investment to smarten her up a bit.

**Hotel Hispano II** (968 21 61 52; www.hotelhispano.net in Spanish; Calle Radio Murcia 3; s/d Mon-Thu €52/68, Fri-Sun €45/50; p n a i ) Hotel Hispano II and Pensión Hispano I, umbilically joined but far from identical twins, are under the same ownership (smile – you're on Hispano II's closed-circuit TV when you approach the reception desk). They share telephone, garage (parking €12) and website. The trim, comfortable, modern Hispano II, famous for its excellent restaurant (p676), is reliable and popular with business travellers. Ask for a room on floors two to four; all have been recently refurbished, and wi-fi is available.

**El Churra** (968 23 84 00; www.elchurra.net; Avenida Marqués del los Vélez 12; s €45, d Mon-Thu €65, d Fri-Sun €50; p n a i ) El Churra started life more than 50 years ago as a *merendero* (snack bar), when the area was all fields and orchards. Now it's a reliable hotel with rather small but well-maintained rooms, with wi-fi. Continuing tradition, it runs a superb restaurant that merits a visit in its own right. Parking costs €7.

**Churra Vistalegre** (968 20 17 50; www.elchurra.net; Avenida Arquitecto Juan José Belmonte 4; s €45, d Mon-Thu €65, Fri-Sun €50; p n a i ) El Churra's younger

sister, just up the road, has the same rates and is equally reliable.

**Hotel Rincón de Pepe** (☎ 968 21 22 39; www.nh-hotels.com; Calle los Apóstoles 34; r Mon-Thu €119, Fri-Sun €85; p n a i ) Renowned throughout Spain, 'Pepe's Corner' has spacious, well-equipped rooms and offers every luxury. Its weekend rate, once the commercial trade has headed home, is a particular bargain. Wi-fi is available, and parking costs €12.

## EATING

**Figón de Alfaro** (☎ 968 21 68 62; Calle Alfaro 7; mains €5-12; h Mon-Sat, lunch only Sun) Popular with young folk and families, it offers full meals and a range of juicy *montaditos* (minirolls). Eat in the bar area, where prices are a little lower, or in the more sedate interconnecting dining room.

**La Cocina de Vives** (☎ 968 21 22 66; Calle San Patricio 7; menú €7.50, mains €6-11) For economical eating, you can't beat this bustling place with its huge range of dishes, all on display, to eat in or take away.

**Restaurante Hispano** (Calle Arquitecto Cerdán; mains €13-16; h Mon-Sat, lunch only Sun) Snug between hotels Hispano I and II, this is really two places – the less expensive bar area and the smart restaurant extending deep into the recesses of the building. They share a fabulous display of fresh fish and a common, creative kitchen. The three-course lunch *menú* (set meal) is, at €10 if you eat at the bar, a great deal.

**Las Cadenas** (☎ 968 22 09 24; Calle de los Apóstoles 10; menú €20, mains €10-15; h Mon-Sat) Las Cadenas is all low beams and leaded windows. Cosy and friendly, it offers traditional tasty fare based on fresh local produce. Save a cranny for the homemade ice cream.

**Morales** (☎ 968 23 10 26; Avenida de la Constitución s/n; mains €15-18; h Mon-Fri, lunch only Sat) Your dish won't come smothered in subtle sauces, jus or coulis here. What you'll get at this traditional family-run restaurant is the freshest of fish and first-class quality meat, cooked with care.

**La Gran Taberna** (☎ 968 24 45 22; Avenida de la Libertad 6; mains around €17; h closed Sun & dinner Tue) The walls are an attractive clutter of old menus, posters, programmes and calendars at this highly regarded restaurant. Work your way through its magnificent *menú tradicional* (traditional set menu; €32), chalked up on the blackboard and constant for over a decade, where the dishes just keep coming and

coming. Go down Calle Doctor Marañón, opposite the Corte Inglés department store, and La Gran Taberna is before you.

**Hotel Rincón de Pepe** (☎ 968 21 22 39; mains €18-23; h Mon-Sat & lunch Sun) At the restaurant here, renowned throughout Spain, you are guaranteed a true gourmet experience. Just around the corner, La Barra del Rincón de Pepe, with food from the same kitchen, does an excellent-value *menú del día* (daily set menu; €12).

## DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT

Pedestrianised Plazas Romea and Santo Domingo plus Calle de la Trapería pack in the crowds at *paseo* (strolling) time and well into the night. Most through-the-night life buzzes around the university, particularly south of Calle del Doctor Fleming, which pulsates with small elbow-to-elbow bars.

Our favourites include **Gospel** (cnr Calles de Enrique Villar & Santo Cristo), **Che Che** (Calle Doctor Fleming 16) and **La Calle Centro** (Calle Trinidad 12B).

To wind down later on, award yourself a nightcap at **El Sentio** (Calle Luisa Aledo 14), smaller and quieter than most of the alternatives.

## SHOPPING

Two good places for local handicrafts are the **Centro Para la Artesanía** (Calle Francisco Rabal 6), both exhibition and sales outlet, and **Paparajote** (Calle de los Apóstoles 14), beside the Catedral de Santa María.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Murcia's **San Javier airport** (☎ 968 17 20 00), beside the Mar Menor, is, in fact, much closer to Cartagena. A taxi between the airport and Murcia city costs around €40. Connections to the UK include the following:

**Easyjet** (www.easyjet.com) London (Gatwick) and Bristol.  
**Flybe** (www.flybe.com) Birmingham, Exeter, Norwich and Southampton.

**Jet2.com** (www.jet2.com) Blackpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds/Bradford, Manchester and Newcastle.

**Ryanair** (www.ryanair.com) London (Luton and Stansted), Dublin, Glasgow and Liverpool.

### Bus

For information about buses call ☎ 968 29 22 11. Local services include Cartagena (€3.20, one hour, at least 10 daily via the motorway). For Alicante and Lorca, let the train take the strain.

ALSA has daily buses to Granada (€18, 3½ hours, seven daily), Valencia (€13.95, 3¼ hours, four to seven) and Madrid (€23.45, five hours, up to 10).

## Train

Up to five trains travel daily to/from Madrid (€38.60, 4¼ hours). Hourly trains operate to/from Lorca (€3.95) and Alicante (€5.10, 1½ hours), from where options are greater for Valencia and Barcelona.

## GETTING AROUND

From the bus station, take bus 3 into town; from the train station hop aboard bus 9 or 39.

# MURCIA REGION

## CARTAGENA

pop 203,950

After falling on hard times in the later part of the 20th century, Cartagena is now rejuvenating and redefining itself, with a particular emphasis on bringing to life its Roman and Carthaginian past. In recent years, lead and pyrite mining, a staple of the economy since Roman times, had all but ceased. The naval presence – particularly the American Sixth Fleet that periodically disgorged dollar-laden sailors on R&R – was less evident, and the dingy approach to the city centre, closed shops and dilapidated buildings all spoke recession.

But the town is picking itself up. More seadate cruise passengers outnumber roustabout sailors and the redundant military hospital has been recycled as the campus of the Universidad Politécnica. As for tourism, the city is making huge efforts to pull itself up by its sea-boot straps, digging deep into its past and stripping back more and more of its old quarter to reveal its long-buried Roman and Carthaginian heritage.

## MUD, GLORIOUS MUD

In **Lo Pagán**, beside an old windmill, a walkway, more than 2km long, sticks out into the lagoon. It borders the Salinas (salt pans) de San Pedro, where flocks of flamingos trawl for small fry. From it stick out a number of short wooden jetties. Go to the end of one, dunk yourself in the water and coat yourself in mud (be careful; *el lodo*, the squelchy, inky goo, retains the heat and can be almost scalding). Wallow a little, let it dry, wash it off, then, to really tone yourself up, take a dip in the lagoon on the other side of the walkway. Great fun and therapeutic too, swear many, given the mud's high salt and iodine content.

## History

In 223 BC Hasdrubal marched into the Iberian settlement of Mastia at the head of his invading army from Carthage, North Africa, and renamed it Carthago Nova. The town flourished during Roman occupation, and under Muslim rule became the independent emirate of Cartajana. The Arabs improved agriculture and established the town's reputation for building warships before they were expelled in 1242. The extensive defensive walls were raised in the 18th century.

## Information

**Exit** (Plaza del Rey 5; per hr €2; h noon-midnight Mon-Sat, 4pm-midnight Sun)

**Post office** (Plaza del Rey)

**Tourist office** (☎ 968 50 64 83; www.cartajena.es; Plaza del Almirante Bastarache; h 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

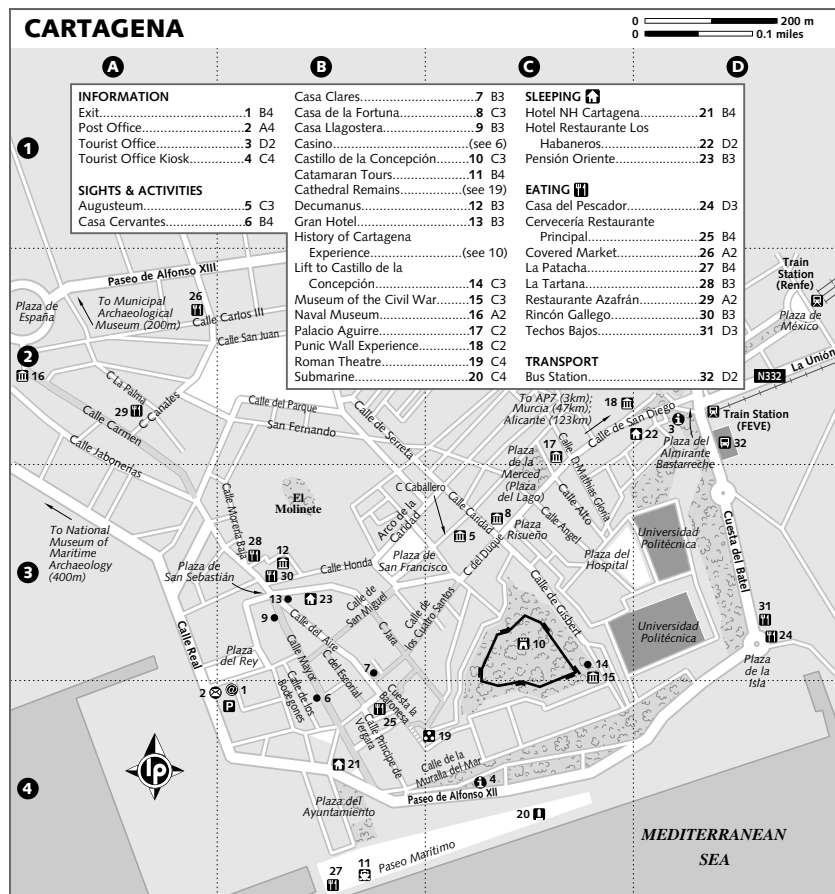
**Tourist office kiosk** (Paseo de Alfonso XII; h 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun)

## Sights & Activities

Several rich sites from Cartagena's past have been restored under the blanket title **Puerto de Culturas** (Port of Cultures; ☎ 968 50 00 93; www.puerto.culturas.com). There are four different combined tickets (€12.50), available at each venue, offering various permutations of sights.

For a start, and for a great panorama of the town and the hills that embrace the harbour, make your way up to **Castillo de la Concepción**, and within its remains, the **History of Cartagena Experience** (adult/child €3.50/2.50; h 10am-2.30pm & 4-8.30pm daily Jul-Sep, 10am-2.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), offering a hi-tech overview of the city through the centuries. Enjoy the uphill walk or take the lift (€1).

A similar visitors centre, the **Punic Wall Experience** (Calle de San Diego; adult/child €3.50/2.50; h 10am-2.30pm & 4-8.30pm daily Jul-Sep, 10am-2.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), built around a section of the



old Punic wall, concentrates on the town's Carthaginian and Roman legacy.

Other Roman sites in Cartagena include the **Augusteum** (Calle Caballero; adult/child €2.50/2; 10am-2.30pm Tue-Sun Jul-Sep, 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), with an exhibition on the Roman forum; the **Decumanus** (adult/child €2/1; 4-6pm Tue-Sun Jul-Sep, 12.30-2.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), off Calle Honda, with the shop-lined remains of one of the town's main Roman streets; and the **Casa de la Fortuna** (Plaza Risuëño; adult/child €2.50/2; 10am-2.30pm & 4-8.30pm Tue-Sun Jul-Sep, 10am-2.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), a Roman villa demonstrating daily life of the time.

The **Museum of the Civil War** (Calle de Gisbert; adult/child €3.50/2.50; 10am-2.30pm & 4-8.30pm daily Jul-Sep, 10am-2.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Jun), in a

former air-raid shelter, presents Cartagena's more recent and more violent history.

The huge grey cigar on Paseo Marítimo is a prototype submarine built in 1888 by local inventor Isaac Peral, who, alas, failed to convince the Spanish navy that such a means of propulsion could have a future.

To the northeast are the remains of the 13th-century cathedral, devastated by aerial bombardment during the Spanish Civil War and originally built from recycled slabs and pillars from the adjacent Roman theatre, which is currently undergoing a fundamental reconstruction so that it can again be a venue for events.

The **Municipal Archaeological Museum** (Calle Ramón y Cajal 45; admission free; 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun), built above a late-Roman

cemetery, has a rich display of Carthaginian, Roman, Visigoth and Muslim artefacts.

The **National Museum of Maritime Archaeology** (adult/student/child €2.40/1.20/free; 9.30am-3pm Tue-Sun), by the lighthouse on the jetty Dique de la Navidad, has a reconstructed Roman galley and a collection of relics recovered from the sea.

The **Naval Museum** (Calle Menéndez Pelayo 8; admission free; 10am-1.30pm Tue-Sun) has a great collection of maps and charts, plus replicas of boats big and small.

Cartagena is also rich in Modernista buildings: **Casa Cervantes** (Calle Mayor 11), the **Casino** (Calle Mayor 13), **Casa Llagostera** (Calle Mayor 25), **Gran Hotel** (Calle del Aire) and **Casa Clares** (Calle del Aire 4) – looking more neglected every time we visit – and the resplendent **Palacio Aguirre** (Plaza de la Merced).

## Tours

A sleek **catamaran** (adult/child €5.50/4.50) does one-hour tours of the harbour and its military defences, offering a wonderful alternative perspective of the city.

## Festivals & Events

Cartagena's haunting **Semana Santa** processions are as elaborate as anything Andalucía can offer.

For 10 days in the second half of September, the townsfolk play war games, re-enacting the battles between rival Carthaginian and Roman occupiers in the spectacular **Carthagenes y Romanos** fiesta.

**La Mar de Músicas** brings the best of world music to Cartagena throughout July.

## Sleeping

**Pensión Oriente** (% /fax 968 50 24 69; 2nd fl, Calle Jara 27; d €35, s/d without bathroom €25/33) The Oriente's 12 simple rooms (there's only one in suite double) occupy two floors. The welcome is warm, there are fans in all rooms and mattresses are springy.

**Hotel Restaurante Los Habaneros** (% 968 50 52 50; www.hotelhabaneros.com in Spanish; Calle de San Diego 60; s €52-57, d €63-73; p n a i ) This hotel is well furnished and welcoming. Ask for a room in its recently completed new wing (there's wi-fi). The ground-floor restaurant, with excellent-value lunch and dinner *menús* (€12), spills onto its ample terrace in summer. Parking costs €6.

**Hotel NH Cartagena** (% 968 12 09 08; www.nh-hotels.com; Calle Real 2; d Mon-Thu €116-140, Fri-Sun & Aug €64; p n a i ) Occupying what were once port

offices, this sensitively renovated building is Cartagena's prime choice. Facing the neoclassical town hall, it's a very stylish number that offers ever better views of the bay the higher your floor. Parking costs €9 and wi-fi is available.

## Eating

There are plenty of bars and restaurants around Plaza del Ayuntamiento and the side streets off Calle Mayor.

**Rincón Gallego** (Calle Honda 3; 1 Mon-Sat) The owner of this tiny, unpretentious place isn't known as the Rey del Pulpo (Octopus King) for nothing; his arm-long menu of fish dishes includes 25 different ways of preparing the suckers.

**La Tartana** (Calle Morería Baja) Whether you nibble at the bar or rest your feet in its large restaurant (bypass the terrace tables alongside the hideously noisy street) you'll enjoy its famed tasty tapas and *montaditos*. It also does a four-course *menú* for €11.

**Cerveceria Restaurante Principal** (% 968 12 30 31; Calle Principe de Vergara 2; mains €10-15.60; 1 Mon-Sat) Fresh green plants, frosted glass, gleaming chrome and soft back lighting; the décor is as stylish as the cuisine at this restaurant-cum-beerhouse.

**Restaurante Azafrán** (% 968 52 31 72; Calle La Palma 3; mains €11-15; 1 closed Sun year-round, plus dinner Mon May-Sep) 'To ensure that the act of eating is transformed into a feast for all the senses' is the Saffron's mission statement. Its cuisine is based on first-class ingredients, either allowed to speak for themselves or creatively blended. Eat in the stylish dining room or on its newly created terrace.

## AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**La Patacha** (% 968 10 39 71; Muelle Alfonso XII; mains €10-18) Originally a fishing platform, though you'd never know it, this boat, reconstructed from dead hulks and permanently moored against the keystone, has varnished wood everywhere. Pillars are masked with coiled rope and the ceiling is papered with old naval charts. Why, as the level drops in your bottle of wine you can almost hear the hawsers creaking. In such a setting, the choice has to be fish, firm and so delightfully fresh it might still be swimming. Even if you don't dine here, do pop in for a drink and a tapa or two.

On Plaza de la Isla, set back from the fishing port from where they buy the freshest of produce, are two large, reasonably priced fish restaurants: **Casa del Pescador** (% 968 50 63 75; mains €9-14;  $\uparrow$  closed dinner Sun & Mon year-round, plus Tue Aug) and its neighbour, **Techos Bajos** (% 968 50 50 20; mains €4-10;  $\uparrow$  lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Fri & Sat).

Cartagena has a big covered market (Calle Carlos III;  $\uparrow$  7am-2pm Mon-Sat), a rich resource for self-caterers.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

You'll recognise the smart new bus station (% 968 50 56 56) by the bizarre lighthouse tower on its roof. There are eight runs daily to/from Alicante (€7.05, two hours) via Los Alcázares (€1.50, 30 minutes), Torrevieja (€3.80, 1¼ hours) and Santa Pola (€5.80, 1¾ hours). At least 10 motorway buses go to/from Murcia (€3.20, one hour) daily and ALSA runs services to/from La Manga (€2.20 to €2.70, one hour, at least 10 daily).

### TAXI

A taxi to/from Murcia airport costs approximately €30.

### TRAIN

For Renfe train destinations, change in Murcia (local train €3.60, 50 minutes, four to seven daily). Beware: the Talgo express alternative costs €14!

Local FEVE trains make the short run to Los Nietos (€1.10, 30 minutes, every 40 minutes) on the Mar Menor.

## THE PRICE OF GOLF

The year 2005 was Spain's driest for well over a century. Compounding the problem, demand for water has been doubling every seven years. The two principal guzzlers are intensive agriculture and tourism, particularly golf courses.

Large areas of Murcia are already semi-desert and much of the remainder is only productive because of intensive irrigation. And yet there are plans for laying out up to 40 new golf courses in the region. Each one sucks in as much water as 10,000 households consume.

You might want to pack your racquet or fins in place of your clubs.

## COSTA CÁLIDA

With more than 300 days of sunshine annually and an average temperature of 18°C, the Hot Coast is aptly named.

## Mar Menor

The Mar Menor is a 170-sq-km saltwater lagoon. Averaging 7m deep, its waters are a good 5°C warmer than the open sea, from which it's separated by **La Manga** (Sleeve). This 22km sliver of land, great for water sports, is punctuated by lots of little beaches (the quietest ones are at its northern tip), ideal for families. But this favourite package-tour destination has been hideously overdeveloped with high-rise accommodation; the world would lose little if the whole isthmus one day cut loose and drifted away.

**Cabo de Palos**, at the peninsula's southern limit, is still a small fishing port. The waters around the tiny offshore **Islas Hormigas** (Ant Islands), a protected marine area, are great for scuba diving. **Atura-Sub** (% 968 56 48 23; www.atura.com in Spanish) and **BuceaYa** (% 968 34 70 33; www.buceaya.com in Spanish), both beside the marina, offer courses and dives year-round.

On the Mar Menor's west bank, **Los Alcázares** is hard to squeeze into during the tourist season (when the population swells from a resident 8500 to over 150,000), but is pleasantly quiet the rest of the year. **Restaurante La Encarnación** (% 968 57 50 48; Calle Condesa 2; rice dishes around €10, mains €14-18) is a wonderful place for lovers of faded glory. Overlooking the lagoon, it occupies part of the old spa hotel, whose taps were recently turned off for the last time. Enjoy a drink or snack in the leafy interior courtyard or loll back in the ample wicker chairs of the dining room, hung with old photos, paintings and programmes.

## Golfo de Mazarrón

To explore the lands west of Cartagena, you really need your own wheels. The coast, fretted with little coves and unspoiled beaches, has a rugged, barren charm. Inland, where agribusiness prevails, is a disappointment. What appear from a distance as shimmering silver lakes turn out to be entire valleys sheathed in plastic, forcing tomatoes and other cheap vegetables for local and export markets.

Driving from Cartagena, if speed matters, take the new stretch of A7 motorway. Otherwise, opt for the more spectacular E22, then E16, which swoop and snake through the

coastal hills. Both bring you to **Puerto de Mazarrón**, a pleasant, modern resort with beaches of shale. Further west and all but nudging the border with Almería, **Águilas** has better beaches. A town with roots, it exists for more than tourism, and fishing remains an important contributor to its economy.

## LORCA

pop 87,150 / elevation 330m

For the Romans Lorca was merely a modest stopover on the road between the Pyrenees and Cádiz. For the Visigoths it became a key bastion in the vain attempts to hold off Muslim armies probing northwards. Finally captured by the Arabs around AD 780, it was from then on known as 'Lurka'. On 23 November 1243, the very day his father, Fernando III, captured Seville, the future Alfonso X El Sabio reclaimed Lorca from the Muslims.

Nowadays, the town is an urban centre for the arid southwestern corner of the Murcia region.

## Orientation & Information

The town's old quarter clings to the slopes between Calle Lope Gisbert and the 13th-century castle that overlooks Lorca from the northwest.

Train and bus stations are beside each other, about 200m southwest of the tourist office (% 968 46 61 57; ofiturismo@ayuntalorca.es; Calle Lope Gisbert 10;  $\uparrow$  9.30am-2pm & 5.30-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun), which occupies part of the Casa de Guevara (right). You'll probably find the town's **Centro de Visitantes** (% 902 40 00 47; www.lorcatallerdel tiempo.com;  $\uparrow$  9.30am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) more informative about the town's sights. It's in the former Convento de la Merced, beside Puente de la Alberca to the northern end of the old town. Its multimedia

exhibition (adult/child €3/2.30) graphically illustrates Lorca's long history.

## Sights

The Centro de Visitantes sells various combined tickets (€12 to €26), offering different packages of visits to Lorca's sights – including a ride on the **tourist train** (adult/child €3/2.30), a painless way of being hauled up to the castle.

The town's castle has been transformed into a veritable theme park, **La Fortaleza del Sol** (adult/child €10/6.80;  $\uparrow$  10.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun Jul-Sep, 10.30am-5.30pm or 6.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-Dec & Apr-Jun, closed Jan-Mar) with dioramas, actors in costume and plenty of gadgetry.

Behind the baroque façade of the 17th-century **Casa de Guevara** (adult/child €3/2.30) is a harmonious patio and, within it, a restored early-20th-century pharmacy.

There are more splendid baroque buildings around **Plaza de España**, also called Plaza Mayor, in the centre of the old town. These include the **Pósito**, a 16th-century public granary that nowadays houses the town archives, the 18th-century **Casa del Corregidor** and the town hall. Most impressive of all is the **Colegiata de San Patricio** ( $\uparrow$  11am-1pm & 4.30-6pm), a collegiate church with a confident baroque façade and predominantly Renaissance interior.

Peculiar to Lorca are four small museums featuring the magnificent embroidered costumes used in the **Semana Santa** processions. Largest are those of the **Azules** and the **Blancos** (see the boxed text, below). The **Museo de Bordados del Paso Azul** (Calle Nogalte 7; adult/child €2/1.50;  $\uparrow$  10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) competes in splendour, as in everything else, with the **Museo de Bordados del Paso Blanco** (Plaza Santo Domingo; adult/child €2/1.50;  $\uparrow$  10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), annexed to the church of Santo Domingo.

## ADDING COLOUR TO SEMANA SANTA

In Lorca, issues are black and white, or rather blue and white, the colours of the two major brotherhoods that have competed every year since 1855 to see who can put on the most lavish **Semana Santa** display.

Lorca's Easter parades beat to a different rhythm, distinct from the slow, sombre processions of Andalucía and elsewhere in Murcia. While still deeply reverential, they're full of colour and vitality, mixing Old and New Testament legend with the Passion story.

If you hail from Lorca, you're passionately **Blanco** (White) or **Azul** (Blue). Each of the brotherhoods has a statue of the Virgin (one draped in a blue mantle, the other in white, naturally), a banner and a spectacular museum. The result of this intense and mostly genial year-round rivalry is just about the most dramatic **Semana Santa** you'll see anywhere in Spain.

Lorca's **Museo Arqueológico** (adult/child €2/1.50; h 10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is in the grand 16th-century Casa de los Salazar, set back from Calle Santo Domingo.

The cavernous **Centro de Artesanía** (Calle Lope Gisbert), beside the tourist office, displays and sells local traditional crafts.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Alameda** (☎ 968 40 66 00; www.hotel-alameda.com; 1st fl, Calle Musso Valiente 8; s/d/tr €30/50/65; p a ) Although a bit on the bland side, this pleasant family hotel with simply furnished rooms, right in the heart of town, compensates by the warmth of its welcome.

**Jardines de Lorca** (☎ 968 47 05 99; www.serco.telhoteles.com; Alameda de Rafael Méndez; r €75-109; p a i s ) Approximately 200m south of the bullring, this well-equipped four-star hotel, popular with business travellers, is in a tranquil residential suburb.

**Restaurante Juan de Toledo** (☎ 968 47 02 15; Calle Juan de Toledo 14; mains €11-15; h Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun) You can pick at tapas in the bar, heavy with hung hams, or dine in the more tranquil rear restaurant. Try the restaurant's signature *trigo* stew, with snails, artichokes and rabbit.

### Getting There & Around

Hourly buses (€4.50) and trains (€3.95) run between Lorca and Murcia.

There's a large **underground car park** (Plaza Colón) 200m west of the tourist office.

#### AUTHOR'S CHOICE

**Pensión del Carmen** (☎ 968 46 64 59; Rincón de los Valientes 3, Lorca; r per person €18; a ) This is a great little budget choice. Cheerful and family-run, it has seven doubles and seven singles, all spotless. You'll find it in a tiny square just off Calle Nogalte, about 50m south of the Museo de Bordados del Paso Azul. Its popular, no-frills restaurant, Rincón de los Valientes (*menú* €9, mains €6 to €9; open for lunch daily and dinner Wednesday to Saturday), serves hearty local fare.

### PARQUE NATURAL DE SIERRA ESPUÑA

The park is a 40-minute drive southwest of Murcia towards Lorca. Just north of the N340, it has more than 250 sq km of unspoilt highlands and blazed trails and beckons to walkers and climbers alike.

Limestone formations tower above its sprawling forests. In the northwest of the park are 26 Pozos de la Nieve (Ice Houses), where snow was compressed into ice then taken to nearby towns in summer, a practice that lasted until the arrival of industrial refrigeration.

Access to the park is best via Alhama de Murcia. Visit the excellent **Centro de Interpretación** in the heart of the park.

The nearby village of El Berro has a couple of restaurants and the friendly **Camping Sierra Espuña** (☎ 968 66 80 38; www.campingsierraespuna.com; sites per person/tent/car €3.50/3.50/3.50; s ).