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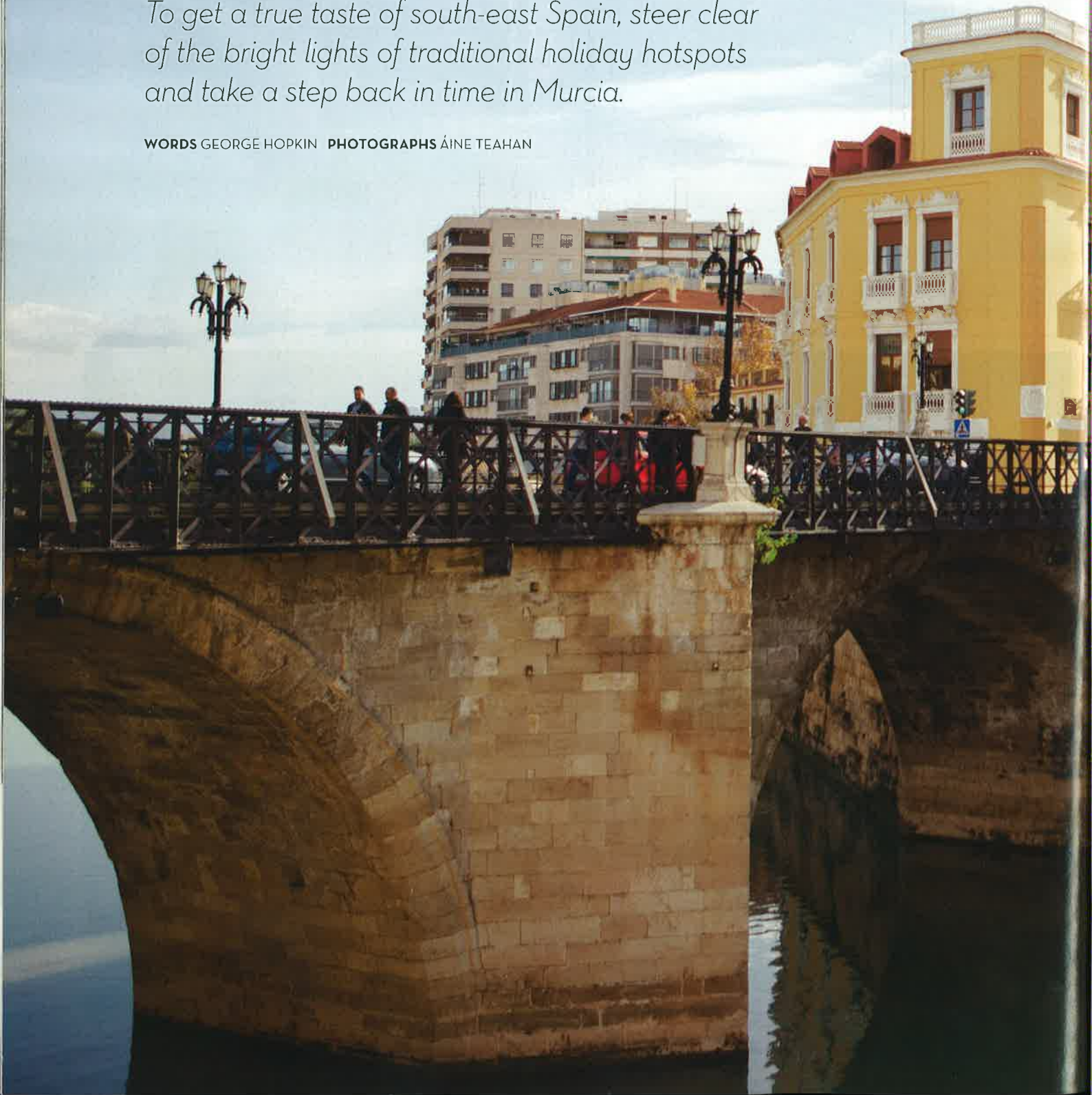
ALL RISE

**1916 CENTENARY
HIGHLIGHTS**

Magical Murcia

To get a true taste of south-east Spain, steer clear of the bright lights of traditional holiday hotspots and take a step back in time in Murcia.

WORDS GEORGE HOPKIN **PHOTOGRAPHS** ÁINE TEAHAN



Legend
1991-2000





"M

urcia is Spain for people who want more than just

tapas and paella," says one long-term resident in this part of the country, as I'm about to make my most recent visit from my adopted hometown of Alicante. "Ironically, the tapas and paella in Murcia are some of the best in the world, so if they don't give it a try, they're missing out."

Make no mistake about it, Murcia is a true city. With a population well in excess of 400,000, it is bigger than near neighbour Alicante and dwarfs that tiny little tourist attraction you may have heard of, Benidorm. Murcia is a proper, grown-up metropolitan centre – when Ikea decided where to locate its stores in the south-east of Spain it was Murcia and Valencia that benefited from the deluge of flat-pack shoppers. And while it's certainly a great place to hold a party, those expecting street after street of theme pubs and bars would be better served at the more brash, hedonistic coastal resorts such as La Manga.

It's not difficult to see the attraction of this part of Spain, with its hot, subtropical, semi-arid climate and 300 days of sunshine;



Murcia boasts a bounty of ornate architecture, such as the Palacio Episcopal, left, and the city's Cathedral, above – and a fair few orange trees, below.



head inland and you could be forgiven for thinking you've stumbled across some sprawling spaghetti western theme park, such as the landscapes and scenery. And that weather makes Murcia the ideal city for a day or two of walking; taxis are available but its layout is such that travellers can start the day with a *café con leche* and then set out to take in dozens of landmarks, museums and cultural attractions on foot.

Perhaps the most popular starting point would be the **Catedral de Santa María**, or the Cathedral of Murcia as it is more commonly known, on the **Plaza del Cardenal Belluga**. This majestic Baroque building is home to some ✈



3 MUST-DOS ...

1 MUSEO DEL TEATRO ROMANO
Cartagena's Roman Theatre is a layer cake of history going back over 2,000 years. Completed in 1BC, the site was subsequently turned into a market then a cathedral, before it was rediscovered during building work in 1988. Renovated and now back on display to all, it's the kind of old school, Old World history that Southern Europe does so well. (Plaza del Ayuntamiento 9, Cartagena, +34 968 504 802, teatroromanocartagena.org)

2 PARQUE REGIONAL DE SIERRA ESPUNA
South-east Spain is a great place to take in a dramatic change of scenery. Located between the districts of Alhama de Murcia, Totana and Mula, the Sierra Espuna offers forests, steppes, rivers and,

of course, high-mountain scenery just a short drive from the city of Murcia. Those high-mountain peaks get very cold, so visitors can even enjoy snow, sand and sea in the same sweeping vista.

3 WATER SPORTS (OR BIRD WATCHING) IN MAR MENOR
This salty lagoon cut off from the Mediterranean by La Manga, a 22-kilometre sandbar, is worth the visit just to see first-hand how it can divide opinion so much. Romans, Phoenicians and Moorish kings used Mar Menor (it means "minor sea") as a holiday home and today it is the region's main beachside getaway. Environmentalists think it is overdeveloped; water sports fans think it rocks. They both have a point, so best go see which camp you're in.

Opposite, the City Hall's contemporary façade. Below, a celestial ceiling in the Ladies Dressing Room (Tocador de Señoras) at the Real Casino, right, the Teatro de Romea, and, bottom, taking street art to another level.



of the region's most striking Gothic designs, as well as the heart and the entrails of King Alfonso X the Wise, buried beneath the main altar. The king bequeathed them to the cathedral to prove his love of Murcia; that's true commitment. Also high on the must-see list is the **Real Casino de Murcia** on Trapería Street (*realcasinomurcia.com*). Like many of Murcia's famous landmarks, this former gentleman's club – first opened in 1847 – is another architectural wonder, mixing classical and Modernist styles. Inside are many opulently decorated rooms to explore, including the Ladies' Dressing Room, which has a roof canvas featuring a winged woman whose eyes are said to follow visitors as they move around the space below. The city's Old Quarter is home to **Teatro Romea de Murcia** (Plaza de Julián Romea; *teatroromea.es*), a 19th-century theatre, which has been closed twice by fires and reopened again in 2012, after another major renovation. It has been restored to retain its original features but to incorporate – invisibly, where possible – modern



technology. Modern theatre technology is front and centre at the **Teatro Circo Murcia** (Calle de Enrique Villar; *teatrocircomurcia.es*). The city has a burgeoning Modern Art culture and this is one of the best places to see the best of what artists in Murcia have to offer in 2016. Murcia's rich and varied past (the city can trace its roots back to 825AD when it was founded by the emir of Cordoba Abd ar-Rahman II) means it is the natural home of some of the region's leading museums, including some that may raise an eyebrow thanks to their speciality

SMART FLIERS

- AERLINGUS** flies from Dublin to **MURCIA** four times per week from March 27 to October 29.
- ARRIVALS** Murcia-San Javier Airport is around 50 kilometres from Murcia itself. Even with recent developments and expansion, negotiating the airport is a straightforward experience.
- GETTING AROUND** Watch out when crossing roads, not only to avoid being flattened by a wayward Seat, but also because police in Murcia have been cracking down on what most would call jaywalking: €80 for walking on the road next to a perfectly good pavement, for example.



Above, bright and breezy El Continental Bistro on Calle Simon García. Bottom, miniature bikes, anyone?

EAT AT ...

TAPAS El Pasaje de Zabalburu is friendly and welcoming (as exemplified by staffer Gabriel Aguilar, right), and up there with the very best of them when it comes to tapas. And, let's face it, if this is your first time in Murcia that's pretty high on your wish list, if not the reason you came). Surprisingly good value considering the quality. (Plaza San Pedro 3, +34 622 622 167)

MEDITERRANEAN Restaurante Salzillo boasts an absolute embarrassment of riches for those who love their seafood and Mediterranean cuisine, with a menu that could leave some diners stunned in the headlights of options. Wine lovers are equally well catered for – try the local cavas, nearly always sublime in this part of Spain. (Calle Cánovas del Castillo 28, +34 968 220 194; restaurantesalzillo.com)

CHEAP EATS Since 1989, the deli Los Bocatas de Antonio has been serving up honest, filling sandwiches, pizzas, croissants and anything else that can be stuffed full of the good stuff. Very popular with locals, calorie counters should probably go elsewhere. The rest of us can just dig in. (Calle de Salvador de Madariaga, +34 968 292 769; losbocatasdeantonio.com)



SMART TIPS

SEMANA SANTA The Spanish have seized on every opportunity presented over the past few thousand years to throw a party and the end of March sees one of the biggest: Holy Week - Semana Santa - from March 20-27. Cartagena's and Lorca's processions are the region's favourites. This is the kind of spectacle Hollywood uses to paint a grand picture of rural Spain in celebration.

BURIAL OF THE SARDINE Although taking its timing from Holy Week - being held on the weekend after Easter Sunday - this Murcia street party (April 1-3) is very much pagan in nature and history. It dates back to 1851, when a group of students decided they would dress up in black hoods and grab coffins and axes. Sounds grisly, but the coffin contained a single sardine, which was burned to symbolise the end of Lent.



exhibits. Spanish sculptor Francisco Salzillo has an entire museum dedicated to his works at the **Museo Salzillo** (museosalzillo.es) on Plaza San Agustín. Made in the 18th century, his works were dispersed to multiple collectors in the 19th century, then reunited and put back on display in 2014. **Santa Clara Monastery and Museum** offers the chance to take a first-hand look at a cloistered monastery. Visitors are often amazed at the wealth of relics and antiquities on display. A free, guided tour is available, providing you book ahead, but families should keep in mind that this might not be the most kid-friendly attraction Murcia has to offer as silence is golden.

Like it or not, Spain has bullfighting in its blood. And for those who'd like to know more about this divisive sport without seeing a live bullfight (spoiler: the bull rarely wins), the **Museo Taurino** – Bullfighting Museum of Murcia – is an insight (Travesía Francisco Rabal 2; clubtaurinomurcia.es). Yes, there



Wing and a prayer - a statue overlooks the Museo Salzillo, left. Above right, patron-sainting and, below, Paparajote Factory design inspo at boutique La Post Street. Bottom, Murcia skyline is a surprise from every turn.

SLEEP AT ...

TOP END **Nelva Hotel** is a top-notch, four-star establishment with a spa, pool and gym that you won't find elsewhere this close to the centre. And there's parking for those who are driving - never unappreciated in Spanish cities. The Nelva's Oro Negro restaurant is a popular spot for the well-heeled hungry, serving Mediterranean cuisine with a modern twist. Rooms from €60. (Avenida del Primero de Mayo 5, +34 968 060 200; hotelmurcianelva.com)

MID-RANGE Well-executed three-star facilities at the **Hotel Zenit Murcia**, centrally located, with a wealth of great restaurants and shopping within a few minutes' walk. Has a business feel, so hipsters need not apply if they're looking for a boutique experience. Great option for early risers, thanks to a busy breakfast buffet. Rooms from €55. (Plaza de San Pedro 5-6, +34 912 182 028; murcia.zenithoteles.com)

Also hitting the mark for location, location, location is the **TRYP Murcia Rincón de Pepe**. This distinctive building has bright, airy and generous-sized guest rooms, some of which have private terraces with artificial grass underfoot, as well as city and mountain view options. Rooms from €54. (Calle Apostoles 34, +34 968 212 239; melia.com)

BUDGET A popular option for business stopovers, **Ibis Murcia** delivers the typical Accor value for money and is close enough to the action to make it a frontrunner for the penny conscious. Rooms can feel a little on the small side, and keep in mind that some of these are still smoker-friendly ... But rates aren't to be sniffed at. Rooms from €43. (Calle Madre Paula Gil Cano S/N - Junto Carrefour Zaraiche, +34 968 274 939; accorhotels.com)

are bulls' heads on display, but there are also the costumes of matadors who met their end in the bullring. There's also a handy tapas bar for those who have worked up an appetite, one way or another. Less blood-thirsty museums include the **Museo de Arqueología**, the **Museo de la Catedral** - and the **Museo Gaya**, dedicated to the Spanish artist Ramón Gaya Pomés, who was born in Murcia and died in neighbouring Valencia.

Visitors who'd like to travel further afield can make use of **Tranvia de Murcia** (tranviademurcia.es), the city's light-rail tram system. A single ticket, valid for 45 minutes, will cost around €1.50, or €10 buys a rechargeable card that includes over a dozen trips. Sports fans can take the tram to **Estadio Nueva Condomina** - the New Condomina Stadium - home of local football team Real Murcia (realmurcia.es).

When you've had your fill of culture and are ready for a cold drink or two, head to the university area for the more vibrant drinking spots frequented by the city's significant student population. And, no matter which bar you find yourself in, don't forget to try the tapas while you're there. They're the real thing in Murcia. 🍀

HOME RUN
Stock up on stylish souvenirs - or, shamelessly self-gift - at hip homewares boutique **La Post Street** (C/ Andrés Baquero, 11, Bis, +34 673 459 354), which sells pieces by ace design studio **Paparajote Factory** (paparajote.com).

