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Las Fallas: Spain's Most Fiery Fiesta

By Marsha Scarbrough

Hundreds of years before Burning Man lit up a desolate American desert, Spanish people were building elaborate works of art for the sole purpose of burning them down at the end of a week of fiestas. This tradition lives on in the city of Valencia on Spain's Southeast Coast, where the Las Fallas festival celebrates Vernal Equinox.

Las Fallas is an epic fiesta that tests your celebratory stamina, but if you love fireworks, explosions, whimsy, flowers, parades, bands, food, drink, all-night street parties, and blazing bonfires in the middle of the city, save the dates March 14 to 19, 2020. Book your hotel far in advance because you will literally be one of a million tourists.

Las Fallas may have started as far back as the Middle Ages. Legend has it that after the long winter, carpenters put debris from their demolitions into the street and burned it. "Las Fallas" means "the failures," so the name comes from the discarded windows, cupboards, and lumber consumed by bonfires. Over the years, this trash was shaped into increasingly artistic effigies. Today, each neighborhood builds an elaborate sculpture of wood, cork, foam, and paint. In 2016, UNESCO declared Las Fallas an "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity."

The festival literally begins with a bang! To experience deafening, earth-shaking explosions called the "Mascletà," head to city hall plaza at 2 p.m. every day from March 1 to 19. Be warned that you must keep your mouth slightly open to protect your ear drums from being damaged by high decibels.

More than 750 fantastic, fanciful sculptures, called "monuments," spring up in the streets. From March 16 to 19, locals and tourists alike wander the city viewing these colorful, whimsical, satirical, imaginative creations. After awards are presented, only one figure is "pardoned" and spared from the flames on the final night. That one is taken to the Fallas Museum, which is open all year.

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Spectacular fireworks displays fill the night skies from March 16 to 18. Rockets shoot up from the riverbed park at midnight, elegantly choreographed to music. Each show is more dramatic than the night before. During the final performance, called "the night of fire," the dark sky blazes with luminous beauty.

On March 17 to 18, parades of men and women in exquisite traditional costumes offer fresh flowers to the Virgin of the Forsaken. A 45-foot high replica of the Virgin is raised in the center of the Plaza de la Virgin, and bouquets are arranged between its wooden slats. By the end of March 18, she wears a glorious, fragrant, floral cape.

March 19 is "La Cremà," the flaming finale when all the monuments are burned, under the expert supervision of the fire department. By midnight, raging infernos blaze on almost every corner, just feet from historic buildings and apartment complexes. At 1 a.m., the final fire begins to consume the monument in front of city hall to the cheers of the delirious crowd.

When the flames die down, a year of work, creative accomplishment, and metaphorical failures has been reduced to smoldering ashes. The next morning, the spirit of Las Fallas wakes to ignite again.