



Fallas costumes feature richly brocaded gowns and braided hair with gold ornaments.

Katherine Rodeghier/for the Toronto Star

VALENCIA, SPAIN—As the clock ticked down to midnight, sangria-swilling revellers crowded the streets around City Hal. Jammed shoulder-to-shoulder, they inched toward a four-story sculpture about to go up in flames.

With minutes to spare, firefighters sprayed water and fire retardant on nearby buildings, then stationed themselves around the cartoonish effigies incorporated into the towering, plasticized sculpture; a red-bikini-clad woman, a masked man, a drunk holding a bottle of booze, and others. As a news helicopter hovered overhead, the clock in the city square struck 12 times and fireworks draped over the sculpture erupted, catching the figures in a massive blaze. The crowd cheered, cameras were held aloft and the flames licked up the sculpture, sending out waves of heat.

The scene is repeated hundreds of times on March 19 every year during Fallas, Valencia's biggest festival culminating with these city-wide infernos on St. Joseph's Day. The sculptures, also called fallas, are brightly coloured works of art, sometimes erotic and often poking fun at celebrities and world leaders — U.S. President Barack Obama included. Roughly 700 of them populate squares in the Valencia region, each costing thousands of dollars. Every year they draw crowds of admirers for five days before they meet their fiery end.

Fallas mixes the madness of Mardi Gras with massive displays of pyrotechnics. The naughtiness, however, appears to be confined to the irreverent sculptures rather than spilling over into a rowdy crowd. Despite the flames, firecrackers and high spirits, you won't see the behaviour of Bourbon St. during Mardi Gras. And the morning after the final burnings, streets are clean and life is back to normal as if the craziness of the preceding week had never occurred.

All the hoopla that draws visitors from around the world to Valencia for Fallas stems from a modest pagan celebration of the equinox. In medieval Valencia, carpenters worked by candlelight during the dark winter months. Come spring, they dragged their worn wooden candle stands into the street and set them on fire, often adding old clothing to the flames. These fallas, a derivation of "torch" in Latin, became the centerpiece of a religious celebration on March 19, feast day of St. Joseph, patron saint of carpenters.

Eventually, effigies ridiculing public figures were added to the flames and efforts by authorities to tax and outlaw fallas only fuelled the fire of their popularity. By the 19th century, fallas evolved into works of art by sculptors and painters using cardboard and papier-mâché. Now they are made by artists attending a special fallas school where they turn out figures combining the fantasy of Disney with hillbilly kitsch and the zaniness of Mad magazine. Today the figures are covered in polystyrene, a petroleum-based material lightweight enough to build taller, gravity-defying figures.

The tallest falla last spring, "The Kiss," rose more than 88 feet and cost about \$720,000. It consisted of dozens of pastel-coloured figures, some brazenly sexy, others comical with outsized body parts in suggestive poses. In a beach scene, a young woman with bouncy golden ponytail and bulbous breasts barely contained in a Pepto-Bismol pink swimsuit, kissed a prone gentleman, his manhood rising perceptibly in taut lavender trunks. In keeping with the overall theme of the 2010 Fallas—satirizing the world financial crisis—President Obama was shown in red and blue Superman costume taking off to save the world with the first lady held tightly in his embrace, her mustard-yellow pumps kicked high in excitement. French first lady Carla Bruni planted a kiss on the cheek of President Nicholas Sarkozy, sending his thick mink eyebrows into high arch over a comically elongated rosy nose.

On the days and nights leading up to the burnings, visitors make the rounds of Valencia to view the fallas, which are financed by neighbourhood groups that hold fund-raisers throughout the year. Each competes for that year's top prize. Last spring's winner, "Paradise," included a black-hatted Michael Jackson in "Thriller" attire among its ludicrous figures, and a nude of Amazonian proportions, her skin burnished to the gold and rosy hues of a Valencia sunset.

Another fallas contender hit the financial crisis theme hard, depicting the diminutive Sarkozy held aloft by Carla on the bow of a Titanic made of euro notes. President Obama floated in a sea of debt supported by a life-saving ring made of \$100 greenbacks. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero were also subjects of ridicule.

The total cost of all the sculptures in 2010 topped \$8.8 million. By popular vote, one full-sized falla, and a smaller one for children, are saved each year and displayed at the Fallas Museum, open year-round. The rest go up in flames on March 19, when as many as 100,000 spectators gather to watch the biggest burnings.

Firecrackers, parades and a flower pageant

The festival of fire also plays out in daytime firecracker shows and lavish midnight fireworks displays shooting wavy streaks of silver and emerald-green starbursts into the inky sky. Outside City Hall, firecrackers go off for an ear-piercing 10 minutes every afternoon of the festival, filling the crowded plaza with white billows of smoke. The scene is repeated in neighbourhoods and in impromptu street displays when Valencians from tots to grandparents light and throw their own noisemakers. Personal use of fireworks is forbidden by the European Union, but Valencia gets a pass for Fallas.

Perhaps the most colourful—and certainly quieter—festivities are the Fallas parades. Each neighbourhood group chooses a Fallas queen who leads her costumed followers down city streets, around plazas, through markets and past the bullring. One of the most colourful night-time processions, the Moors and Christians Parade, has an oriental flavour with men in billowing golden robes holding swords aloft and women in glossy harem-style gowns, their hair bound in gold ties and clasps. Camels, prancing horses and pulsating Middle Eastern music add to the spectacle.

The biggest procession, the Flower Parade, has deeply religious meaning, bringing tears to the eyes of the women, dressed in brocade gowns with full skirts of candy-apple red and turquoise blue embroidered in gold and silver thread. Their tightly coiled black braids gleam under shiny gold hair ornaments. Some 150,000 participants, from babes in arms to the elderly, make this pilgrimage to a plaza outside the basilica, each family bringing flowers to adorn a 45-foot-high wood frame statue of the Virgin Mary. The procession lasts 48 hours. By its end, the statue and surrounding plaza are filled with 40,000 bouquets.

Just the Facts

ARRIVING

The Spanish airline, Iberia, www.iberia.com flies from North America to Madrid, connecting with several flights a day to Valencia. Another connecting option is the high-speed AVE train that began operations between Madrid and Valencia this past December, making the trip in about 95 minutes, www.renfe.es.

SLEEPING

When streets are closed to traffic, getting around by car or bus can be difficult. Hotel Ayre Astoria Palace, Plaza de Rodrigo Botet, www.hotelastoriapalace.com, 011-34-96-398-10-00, is ideally located within walking distance of many events.

DINING

La Riua, Mar 27, 011-34-96-391-45-71, www.lariua.com, serves traditional Valencian cuisine, including several varieties of paella.

Arrop, Almirante 14, 011-34-963-925-566, www.arrop.com, is a modern, upscale restaurant built around Moorish ruins near the basilica.

WHEN TO GO

Fallas takes place every year in Valencia from March 15-19.

INFORMATION

Contact the Tourist Office of Spain, www.spain.info, 312-642-1992, or the Valencia Tourism and Convention Bureau, Turisvalencia.es, 011-34-963-606-353.

More Photos



"The Kiss" was the tallest falla in the 2010 festival, about 88 feet.

Katherine Rodeghier/for the Toronto Star



Fallas figures often target world leaders, including French President Nicholas Sarkozy and his wife, Carla Bruni.

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Fallas sculptures are often comical, irreverent or sexual, combining the fantasy of Disney with hillbilly kitsch and the satire of "Mad" magazine.

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