

Spain's Fiery Rite of Spring

Las Fallas, culminating on St. Joseph's Day, began as medieval pagan celebration

By Katherine Rodeghier



During the Flower Parade, bouquets are brought to the Plaza of the Virgin, where they are placed on a 45-foot wooden sculpture.

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The biggest festival of the year in Valencia, Spain, is a harbinger of spring, but it looks and sounds more like America's Fourth of July.

For five days in mid-March, thousands of Valencians step away from their homes and offices to watch mass firecracker explosions, nightly fireworks displays and colorful parades during Las Fallas. They stroll past comical sculptures set up in neighborhood squares, vote for their favorites and return to see them go up in flames at the festival's fiery conclusion.

Through Las Fallas now draws visitors from around the world, it began in the Middle Ages as a local pagan celebration of the equinox. **Carpenters** who worked by candlelight all winter carried their waxy, worn candle stands into the streets and set them on fire along with old clothing and other debris. The burning of these *fallas*—a derivation of the Latin word for "torch"—evolved into a religious festival on St. Joseph's Day, March 19, honoring the patron saint of carpenters.

The religious connotations have waned, but Las Fallas still wraps up on March 19 after months of preparation by Valencians passionate about their tradition.

Flowers and Firecrackers

During afternoon *masclatas*, or fireworks, more than 260 pounds of explosives ignite in City Hall Square during a five-minute show that sends ear-piercing booms reverberating against surrounding buildings and white smoke billowing

over the heads of hundreds of spectators. Smaller displays erupt in neighborhoods. Everyone from children to the elderly gets a kick out of setting off *petardos*, firecrackers, in the streets.

"I see myself when I look at my son doing the same as I did when I was a child," said Valencia-born Maximo Caletrio, who remembers being given a 100-peseta coin to buy *petardos* at a kiosk so elaborate it left him wide-eyed and begging his parents for more. When Spain joined the European Union, which bans personal pyrotechnics, Caletrio says Valencia successfully petitioned for an exemption arguing in favor of the cultural and traditional significance of Las Fallas.

Now an official with the Valencia City Tourist Board, Caletrio has seen Las Fallas grow larger and more spectacular every year. But firecrackers are only part of the festival, he said. Street parades also draw crowds.

Neighborhood groups choose a Las Fallas queen who leads her followers and musicians along city streets and plazas, past the bullring and through markets. Marchers dress in folk costumes, the women in elaborate brocade gowns, their hair tightly coiled in braids held by silver ornaments. The biggest Las Fallas procession, the Flower Parade, goes on for 48 hours and includes more than 150,000 participants. The flowers they carry decorate a 45-foot statue of the Virgin Mary set up in the square outside Valencia's basilica.

The smaller Moors and Christians parade takes place at night, with men dressed in Middle Eastern robes and women in billowy harem pants. Sword-carrying marchers keep time with the oriental music as horses prance and camels lope down streets lined with cheering spectators.

Sculptures

Early in the history of Las Fallas, the celebration evolved from a religious festival to a secular one as effigies of public figures were added to the flames in a mild form of social protest. The tradition continues, but on a much grander scale.

The sculptures, also called *fallas*, once were amateur affairs made of papier-mâché. Now created by artists attending a special *fallas* school, they are constructed of lightweight polystyrene that enables them to be built to towering heights. Some soar more than 85 feet and cost as much as \$1.1 million, the money coming from sponsors and fundraisers held by the neighborhood Fallas organizations throughout the year. Painted in bright pastels, some fallas take mythical shapes; others include caricatures ridiculing world leaders or celebrities. Outlandish, often erotic, they use humor to address social issues, such as politics or the world financial crisis. In the year following his election, President Barack Obama was depicted in a Superman costume.



Spectators mill around a *falla* for a last look before it is set on fire in a neighborhood square.

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More than 700 *fallas* are scattered around neighborhood squares in the Valencia region and draw a steady stream of onlookers. Vendors cater to their appetites with traditional fare. "I love to walk around and visit fallas while I eat *bunuelos* (fried pumpkin dough) with lots of sugar," said Caletrio.

Though Valencians vote for their favorite *fallas* in a popular ballot, the official winners are chosen by a jury of the Central Fallas Committee, Caletrio said. And each year, one *ninot*, a small figure in a *falla*, is saved from the flames to be displayed in the Fallas Museum. Open year-round, the museum has figures dating to the 1930s.

Night on Fire

On the night of March 19, crowds gather to watch all the *fallas* set on fire in a series of infernos across the Valencia region. For the biggest burning, as many as 100,000 people crowd into City Hall Square, where the last *falla* goes up in smoke as news helicopters hover overhead.

Chicago firefighter Brooks Watson was in the crowd, invited by friends to take vacation time and volunteer his professional services assisting local firemen with the blaze. He was awestruck by the size and number of sculptures. "I'm surprised by how elaborate each of these is," he said, and how well the burnings are managed. "People enjoy the experience. There is a huge focus on safety," he said as the last embers died. "The organization and prep that goes into this is remarkable."

Planning Your Trip

Fallas festivities begin to build in early March and peak for the official celebration March 15–19. Bookings should be made at least five months in advance. For information, contact the Tourist Office of Spain at (312) 642-1992 or www.spain.info. Information is also available at the Valencia Tourism and Convention Bureau, 011-34-963-606-353 or www.turisvalencia.es/. For help planning your [Spain vacation](#), contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel.

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