

WEEKENDER

# Cartagena & the Mar Menor

BY ELLEN HIMELFARB

Combine a Spanish city break with wild coastal walks and glorious beaches on Europe's largest saltwater lagoon



Clockwise from above: View from Castillo de la Concepcion. Marbled boulevard and baroque church. Beach at Calblanque.

## See & Do

**THE CASTLE**

### Castillo de la Concepcion

**Why?** The Carthaginians ruled the affluent Mediterranean port of Cartagena until the Romans forced them out and renamed it Carthago Nova. Then came the Muslims and Castilians, who based their Armada here. Each built successive fortresses on Cartagena's highest point. To find it, take the silo-shaped lift (€2) just south of Gisbert market. The doors open onto tiers of upward-winding walls: Roman, medieval, 18th-century. In the castle proper, a historical chronology draws you into the city's dramatic rise, fall and modern recovery. **Don't miss** the sweeping views from the pinnacle. Peer out onto the Roman amphitheatre, shipyard cranes and a dozen steeples to get a lay of the land. €4.25 1

**THE GALLERY**

### National Museum of Underwater Archaeology

**Why?** This isn't your average maritime museum. The amazing steel and glass building was designed to resemble a ship sinking into the adjacent harbour, and its collection focuses on finding and preserving sunken treasures. Interactive screens show diver-archaeologists in action, and bones, urns and anchors are preserved in huge glass vats of saltwater. Thousands of recovered coins spill forth, bearing a succession of kings' profiles, alongside a fraying Phoenician cargo vessel. **Don't miss** a pleasant stroll along the seafront, passing the pleasure-boat marina, to two sea-facing limestone obelisks, inscribed with 'Carthago' and 'Roma', that commemorate the city's origins. culturaydeporte.gob.es/mnarqua; €3 2



**THE POST-MEAL PROMENADE**

### Calle Mayor

**Why?** Mining money from the 19th century paved Cartagena's car-free boulevard in marble, built its wedding-cake facades and gave its gleaming baroque church a stylish carved doorway. After dinner, the tapas bars on Calle Mayor (Main Street) become cocktail bars, pensioners play cards at the Art Nouveau casino, and parents buy their children ice cream. Join them, keeping an eye out for examples of the prized Beaux Arts architecture of Victor Beltri, such as Casa Cervantes, with its exotic white-iron balconies. His Gran Hotel, with an elaborate zinc dome, is pure pomp. **Don't miss** breakfast sitting outside at delightfully retro Bar Columbus, where a rich chocolate croissant and coffee cost €4. 3

**THE NATURE RESERVE**

### Sierra de la Muela, Cabo Tiñoso and Roldan

**Why?** Drive out of town through rolling desert dappled with olive trees, where the hills climb higher and sharper, and evergreens perfume the air, for some of the

region's best hiking. Park at the far tip of the Sierra de la Muela reserve, near the serpentine walls of Bateria de Castillitos, a mini Great Wall of China. An easy, way-marked walking trail meanders along the coast for miles: taking in 250 metre drops to vacant beaches, rabbits scampering around wild lavender, and processions of caterpillars creeping through the pines. **Need to know** Don't be fooled by the sea breeze – it gets brutally hot here. Wear a hat, bring water and don't attempt to walk in the height of summer. 4

**THE SECRET BEACH**

### Calblanque

**Why?** Wilder, quieter and less developed than the nearby La Manga spit, this coastal National Park thrills you with lizards, bunnies, yellow wagtails and miles of floury beach. Easy paths fan out from the thatch-covered carpark. But if you're up for a medium-sized challenge, hike the flinty-black 1km route to Cala Negrete Oeste (west), where sand the colour of artist's bronze eases into a calm bay backed by pine-coated peaks. Diversions through the brush lead to smaller, even more sheltered coves. These are perfect for private sunning, as evidenced by the occasional bare bottom. **Need to know** You may spot a jellyfish or two littering the shoreline. Swimmers beware. 5



SCALE: 250m

## Sleep

### BUDGET

#### Sercotel Alfonso XIII



**What?** Pristine pit stop  
**Our verdict** A pretty little package on the north side of town, with perfect pillows on the crispest white sheets, at a very affordable price. Bathrooms with rainwater showers are bang up to date, and parking is an easy underground in-and-out for €14 a night. Other cities would charge much more for the privilege.

**We love** the proximity to Churrería Tofi, a kiosk where six piping-hot churros and a huge cup of dipping chocolate cost just €2.30.

**We don't love** the astringent smell of cleaning supplies that never seems to dissipate.

† €72 †† €79 ††† €13 & hotelalfonsoxiii.com

### MID-RANGE

#### NH Cartagena



**What?** Seaview stay  
**Our verdict** Fling open the doors to your Juliet balcony for postcard views of extravagant domed manors and a palm-lined seafront. The decor is weary yet functional, with a whopping bed and bathrooms big enough for a party. Downstairs, there's a late-night wine bar, well stocked with rioja, that faces the lively pedestrian boulevard.

**We love** the 3pm 'lazy Sundays'

checkout, available if you book directly, stay the full weekend and sign up (for free) to NH Rewards.

**We don't love** that amenities will cost you dearly. Parking in a cramped underground carpark, with an anxiety-inducing drive-in lift, is €19 a night. Breakfast will set you back €14 (the same price as dinner).

† €86 †† €86 ††† €14 & nh-hotels.com/hotel/nh-cartagena

### LUXURY

#### Hotel La Manga Club Principe Felipe



**What?** Sweeping sports resort  
**Our verdict** Trainers squeak across a massive marble lobby-lounge with deep wraparound sofas at this seafront mega-hacienda served by multiple golf courses, pools and a tennis centre. Chintzy rooms could use an update – you'll have to unplug a lamp two metres from the bed to charge your device, and plumbing is precarious. Yet everyone gets a sunny terrace.

**We love** the can-do catering. From breakfast onward, there's a restaurant for any time you feel peckish.

**We don't love** Refrain from wandering around in your robe and slippers looking for the spa and indoor pool: they're an annoying shuttle-ride away.

† €185 †† €190 ††† €0 & lamangaclub.com



## Eat

### BUDGET

#### La Uva Jumillana

**What?** Buzzy tapas bar

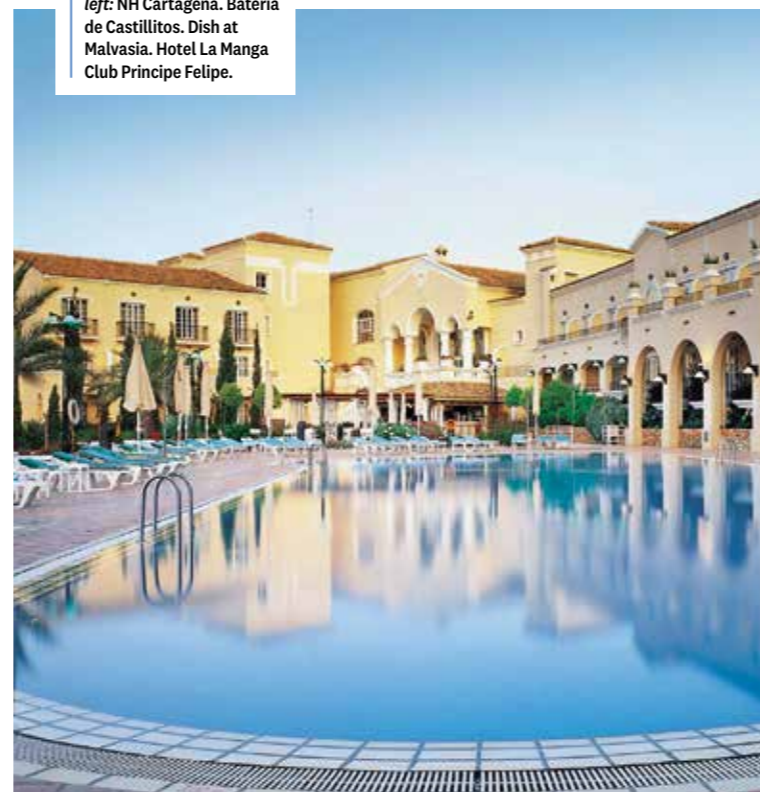
**Our verdict** Sweet-salty cod croquetas, pulled-pork pittas and meaty grilled wings spill out of overstuffed paper cones. But there's lots for veggies to savour too: fried aubergine, ratatouille turnovers and that classic crowd-pleaser patatas bravas. Order at the old mahogany bar, then snag a stool by a barrel outside to slurp it all up. The broad menu lets you combine each tapa with a local beer for pocket change.

**We love** the house wines – Cartagena-made uva merseguera and the eponymous jumilla – start at €1 a glass.

**We don't love** the crowds after 8pm – you'll have to elbow in to order (ask for the English menu if you don't speak 'tapas').

facebook.com/lauvajumillana; tapas avg €1.20, €2.20 with beer

Clockwise from bottom left: NH Cartagena. Bateria de Castillitos. Dish at Malvasia. Hotel La Manga Club Principe Felipe.



### MID-RANGE

#### Bar Sol

**What?** Vintage look, but a modern menu  
**Our verdict** The bowtie-wearing bartender looks as if he's been slinging tortillas since the opening in 1927, alongside the original azulejos (decorative wall tiles). Then he surprises you with fusion fare like artichokes marinated in honey with pine nuts, snails in salsa, and sushi. It all works. And it's so cheap, you can add a long, fat pork brochette into the mix and still come in under €20.

**We love** the old steel bar-top beer keg they haul out in the evenings to heighten the retro vibe.

**We don't love** the warm, woody interior and well-stocked bar say 'stay', but the brusque service says 'don't bother'.

facebook.com/barsolcartagena; mains avg €8

### LUXURY

#### Malvasia

**What?** Succulent cuts, and serious cuisine

**Our verdict** A sanctuary of moody lighting, fine porcelain and true skill with local ingredients in the cheeseburger landscape of Playa Honda. Order a *bacalao* (cod) steak, prime rib or suckling pig and it will come thick as a pillow, swathed in umami rub on a bed of crushed fried potatoes. These, and silky, piquant seafood stews, are balanced by crisp salads and soft-cheese pâtés with home-baked bread. Skip the pricey set

menus, and an a-la-carte starter and main comes to around €22.

**We love** the Michelin approval. Malvasia was recently given a Bib Gourmand for high-quality, good-value food.

**We don't love** The cooking may be hyper-local, but the clientele consists mainly of Dutch, German and British holidaymakers.

restaurantemalvasia.com; mains avg €15

## Drink

#### Bar Albedrío

A thoroughly modern beer'n'tapas bar with streamlined design and convivial wraparound terrace seating doesn't go unappreciated in old-school Cartagena. The taps rotate through the local microbrews, which include Murcia's Estrella de Levante and Another Planet.

**What to drink** The caña especial, or glass of the day, €1.50.

albedrio.es

#### Mostacho

Cartagenans frequent the sun-trap Plaza San Francisco all day, marvelling at the Gaudí-esque Casa Maestre and drinking alfresco. The charming and brand new Mostacho has cool, minimal decor, €3.80 pints and a line in refreshing local wines.

**What to drink** A bottle of bright, fruity El Gordo del Circo verdejo white, €16.

facebook.com/mostachocafebar

## TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

### How to get there

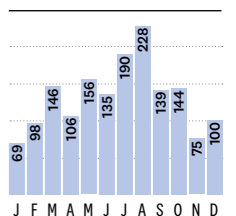
There are frequent flights to Alicante, but Murcia airport is much closer – just 30 minutes by car or taxi to the centre of Cartagena. Car hire is available at the airport from Sixt, or book through recommended brokers, Zest. A taxi from the airport costs around €50.

### More information

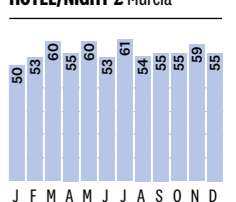
murciaturistica.es/en/cartagena



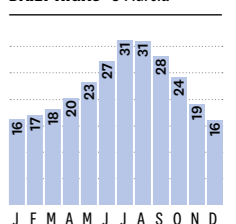
### RETURN FLIGHT £ Murcia



### HOTEL/NIGHT £ Murcia



### DAILY HIGHS °C Murcia



IMAGES: 4 CORNERS, GETTY, ROBERT HARDING