



As Spain's third city, Valencia often gets overshadowed by Madrid or Barcelona. It might lack the cultural glamour of the capital city or the cosmopolitan cool of its Catalan big sister but lately this Spanish Cinderella has had a makeover and is putting herself out there.

Situated on the Mediterranean coast (south of Barcelona and north of the Costa del Sol), Valencia has a lot more going on than it initially seems.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Valencia is a lot smaller than it is. At first glance, the quaint and historic town centre around the *Barrio del Carmen* gives the impression that Valencia is a small medieval city. However, beyond the old town, there are commercial and residential streets that sprawl to make Valencia much bigger than Dublin.

The city was badly flooded in the 1950s so the river Turia was re-routed. The old riverbed is now a huge park that forms the backbone of the city and provides a home for an impressive range of amenities from gardens to sports facilities. Locals take full advantage of the park using it for walking, jogging, cycling, and rollerblading – often on their way to or from work.

At one end of the 10km park is the *Bioparc*, a surprising zoo that lets you get up-close-and-personal with the wildlife, while at the other end sits the jaw-droppingly futuristic

City of Arts and Sciences. Designed by local architect Santiago Calatrava, who also designed two bridges in Dublin, this cluster of state-of-the-art architecture includes a Science Museum, a Planetarium, an IMAX cinema, an Aquarium and the Opera house. Whether you choose to pay in, the exterior is definitely worth a look.



The redirected river Turia now flows into the sea south of the busy *Port of Valencia* area, which is also the location for the Formula One Grand Prix. From 2013, this annual event will be shared with Barcelona, with Valencia hosting it every alternate June. This is also when the annual Gay Pride festival takes place.

That said, Valencia's biggest party is *Las Fallas*. Every March, they construct huge papier-maché models and parade them through the streets before burning them in a dramatic finale. Think Macnas – but with a big finish! Thrilled with themselves and their pyromania, the Valencians then celebrate for days, as you would if you set fire to those Macnas models.

North of the port are the more established beach strips of *Playa Cabanyal* and *Playa Malvarossa*. Public transport from the city centre takes only twenty minutes so these win for convenience even though there are nicer beaches to the south of the port (like *El Saler* and the gay beach at *Playa Pinedo*). You can also skip the sand altogether and take a Catamaran trip from the port out into the Med. Bring sunscreen and Sangría! If you prefer fresh-water swimming, just south of the city lies Spain's largest lake in the *Albufera* nature park. This is the birthplace of paella and many of the restaurants in the village of *El Palmar* claim to make the best paella in Spain.

Spanish cuisine caters for all tastes – even you weirdos who insist on McDonalds when you 'go foreign'. In the old town, the area between Plaza de la Reina and Plaza de la Virgen is home to a great collection of small restaurants. If you like steak or seafood, you are in heaven but there are other local dishes to try. **LA LOLA** (Calle de la Subida del Toledano, 8) serves a great Gazpacho, which you can enjoy while watching a flamenco show. Try the local Valenciano white wine.

The gay scene in Valencia is small but it spills over into a huge number of mixed venues. As is often the case with smaller cities, knowing the venues is not enough. You also need to know what days to visit them. Information online gets dated very quickly so you'll need to get your hands on the local gay guide so pop into **CAFÉ DE LAS HORAS** (Calle del Conde de Almodóvar, 1) and grab one. Better still, stay for a cocktail and ask the lovely owners Marc and Manolo for their tips.

The Spanish gays head out late and, once out, stay out until the sun comes out again. However, since all the bars in the Barrio del Carmen have to close by 2PM, you might have to cross the town to keep your evening going.



ADN (Calle del Ángel Custodio, 10) is small but it's a lively, friendly and fun start to the evening's proceedings. More of an appetizer than a main course, it is the gay club in Valencia most likely to be visited by local hen parties. **JAVALON** (Calle Doctor Montoro, 29) is bigger, with drag queen hostesses and better looking fellas.

You'll have to walk a bit to get to **DESEO 54** (just north of the riverbed at Calle de la Pepita, 13) but they return the favour by putting on a big old party. The music is electro-house, with regular stage-shows and theme nights. *Caliente!*

The *Ruzafa* area of Valencia (east of the train station and south of the Gran Vía) is a lot less touristy but it is also home to a lot of mixed, gay and lesbian bars. **SOM COM COM**

(Calle Cadiz, 75) is a bar that was heaving with local women and female tourists when I visited while, just around the corner, **EXCUSE ME?** (Calle Dels Tomasos 12) is a busy late bar for men. For a more clubby feel, try **NYLON** (Calle Gran Vía Germanías 31). It'll keep you and your gay galpals together and it'll keep you up way past bedtime.

If you do lay the head down, your choices of accommodation are legion. At the top end (and starting at €200 per night), the **WESTIN** (Amadeo de Saboya 16) has been refurbished recently and is five-star fabulous and very gay-friendly. I stayed in the **SH VALENCIA PALACE** (Paseo de la Alameda, 32), which is perfectly located by the Turia near the City of Arts and Sciences and halfway between the beach and the old town centre. It has a great roof terrace with a pool and rooms are about €70 per night. Cheaper still, the **HOLIDAY INN** (Paseo de la Alameda, 38) isn't as nice but the roof terrace and pool have amazing views.

RYANAIR offer the cheapest peak time flights to Valencia (€280 return) but you can also get there easily via Madrid or Barcelona on the high speed rail links.

OTHER TIPS:



Take a bus ride to **BONAIRE** (a few KM out of the city centre to the west) to visit a range of European high street stores (Zara, H&M, Al Campo, Primark) and outlet stores (Tommy Hilfiger, Hollister, Benetton) in one massive location.

It is well worth calling into one of their many Spanish Tourist Information offices around the city to pick up maps, brochures and the cash-saving **VALENCIA TOURIST CARD**. The card gives you unlimited travel around the city as well as discounts or even free entry into many tourist attractions. Ask at your hotel.

The **VALENCIA CLUB COCINA** (Plaza San Filipe Neri, 6) offers short Spanish Tapas cooking classes. In three hours, you will learn to shop locally, prepare the food and enjoy a delicious self-prepared tapas meal. Best still, you bring home mad tapas skillz!