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The fires that cleanse

Playful and pyrotechnic, Fallas sets a city alight with deafening frenzy

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SPAIN — Valencia is not for the faint of heart. Or the easily startled. When we arrived in Valencia a few days before the climax of Spain's most outrageous festival, Valencians were setting off firecrackers with wild abandon. "Don't worry," a Fallas veteran reassured us when a small "petardo" exploded inches away. "It's tradition."

Things would get only more bombastic. A few firecrackers tossed by small children cannot hold a Roman candle to daily choreographed explosions at City Hall, fire-spewing devils parading down darkened streets, or the premeditated arson that sends dozens of city squares up in synchronized flames.

Spain always forces us to jettison our routines and stretch our comfort zone as we embrace an 11 p.m. dinner hour followed by live music into the early morning. But Fallas takes that to an extreme. Here's a diary of how, to borrow the subtitle of

the classic "Dr. Strangelove," we "learned to stop worrying and love the bomb."

March 18, 2 p.m. A madcap spectacle

Fallas makes a mockery of the calendar, with the days beginning around noon and ending around dawn. At midafternoon we joined the throngs milling from square to square to see the elaborate sculptured scenes — sweet ones for children and bigger, bawdier ones for adults — erected at every crossroads.

The origins of the Fallas festival are vague but seem to lie in the 18th century

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During Valencia's Fallas festival last March, which ends each year on St. Joseph's Day, jesters, top, spewed sparks in the Fire Parade; figures on display represented a "Supersman" President Obama and his wife, Michelle; fireworks exploded over the city; and, left, a multistory structure is engulfed in the final fiery maelstrom that concluded the festival.