

Bombast and piety amid smoke and cinders

VALENCIA
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practice of Valencian carpenters celebrating spring by burning their winter lampposts. A century later, the lampposts had morphed into elaborate satirical figures that would all be burned in a main plaza on St. Joseph's Day (March 19). New construction materials (foam core, polystyrene films stretched over wooden frames) have given the fallero artists flexibility to be ever more absurd, ever more outrageous, and to build up to 10 stories high.

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In 2010, the largest scene cost about \$815,000. It took around a half hour to burn to the ground. Artistic license runs wild. West-end Obama flying through the air as Superman. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi lounged in a hot tub with three noticeably buxom women. One ambitious tableau featuring Charlie Chaplin as a mad mechanic managed to skewer European history from the ancient Greeks (a parody of the Olympics) through the Middle Ages (horny Vikings run amok) to a particularly biting portrait of Valencia's fuming mayor. Images quickly veered from political to politically incorrect. The falleros are equal opportunity offenders — no one's sensitivities are spared.

The artists have their kitschy side as well. The large falla (as the giant tableaux are called) in front of City Hall even included a cherubic boy dunking a buñuelo in hot chocolate. Buñuelos — lumps of pumpkin-flavored fried dough — are the unofficial street food of Fallas. We bought some in the interest of research. Then we bought some more to compare.

March 18, 4 p.m., flower offering
As we walked from scene to scene, our working knowledge of European political scandals was stretched to the limit as we attempted to decipher the iconography of the social commentary — and get all the jokes. (Imagine a Spaniard watching "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart.) Then we turned the corner onto Calle San Vicente and did a double-take.

Thousands of characters seemed to have stepped out of a



Giant tableaux line Valencia's streets during Fallas. Last year, elaborate lighting turned night to day and firemen kept an eye on fireworks and a burning falla. ALBERTO BAZZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE PHOTO



DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Goya painting to march up the street carrying bouquets of pink, white, and red carnations. The men looked like 18th-century dandies, the women like ladies of the court in their full-skirted silk brocade dresses, hair combs, and mantillas. When they reached Plaza de la Virgen, they handed over their flower offerings to be affixed to the skirts of a 46-foot-high Madonna. Then they wept.

Solemn piety is as much a part of Fallas as sly wit. **March 19, 1:30 a.m., "Nit de Foc"** Streets and restaurants alike are crowded during Fallas, and getting a bite to eat requires patience. We were in no rush, though, as the "Night of Fire" would not begin until 1:30 a.m. The last and most spectacular of four nights of fireworks involved more than 11,000 pounds of shells, rockets, and concussion bombs. To stake out a prime viewing spot on one of the bridges over the dry riverbed park, we arrived early (1 a.m.).

March 19, 11 a.m., in the museum Like the White House turkey that gets an annual reprieve, a few figures (called "ninots") are spared from the flames each year. We rose early by fiesta standards to visit the Museu Faller where these "pardoned ninots" are displayed along with historical pho-



ALBERTO BAZZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS/FILE PHOTO

tos and wonderfully gaudy Fallas posters. The ninots range from somber folkloric scenes to the 1956 tale of camera-toting American Indians on a Spanish vacation to a 1971 lascivious take on "hippies." Signage is multilingual, but the language of parody needs little translation. **March 19, 2 p.m., big boom** We really can't explain the "masclera," a pyrotechnic extravaganza whose main purpose must be to sell hearing aids to the locals. Thousands of people crowd the streets around City Hall Plaza waiting for pyrotechnicians to light the fuse on approximately 1 million firecrackers and other concussive devices. They begin exploding with an innocuous pop-pop-boom and build to bone-shaking booms that reach sustained volumes of 120 decibels — several times the level required to induce hearing loss.

As directed, we kept our mouths open during the explosions so that our eardrums would not rupture from wearing earplugs. It was still like a rock concert where the pounding music became more visceral than aural, valencing the concertgoers into one throbbing mass of protest. Valencians experience a similar mind meld during the masclera. After five minutes of this intense bonding, most of us stood in numb silence as billows of gray smoke and bits of burnt paper blew across the square. **March 19, 7 p.m., cavalcade of fire**

As the festival climax approached, we skipped the prancing horses of the Moors and Christians parade in favor of the devils, grim reapers, and jesters of the Fire Parade. This 45-minute "cavalcade" is all about playing with fire. Costumed figures whirl down the streets to the pounding rhythms of drum corps. Many swing scythes or carry hoses that spit streams of

sparks overhead. Metal barricades keep onlookers at a distance, but it hardly matters as the dervishes prance to the edges of the streets to leer, spout fire, and cackle with maniacal glee. **March 19, 11 p.m., up in flames** The happy families and cartoon characters on the children's tableaux are always the first to be put to the torch, starting around 10 p.m. But the main action and crowds were in City Hall Plaza. At 11, a girl in 18th-century costume lit the fuse to burn the biggest children's falla. Sparks fizzed and flames spread from the base. The little Fallas princesses clutched hankies to their faces and wept for the cameras. Reflected flames danced on their brocade dresses.

As in all fairy tales, the end arrived at midnight, when the large fallas began to go up in flames. The live national television broadcast focused on City Hall Plaza. The skin of the little boy with buñuelo and hot chocolate began to melt as flames jumped up from the base of the nine-story-high tableau. His grandmother cooking buñuelos, his father brandishing bottle rockets, his jealous sister — all gutted by flames.

It was a scene repeated in every square, reducing the fallas to heaps of glowing cinders as Valencians banished their sins and vanities, their scandals and obsessions, and all their psychic pains. Las Fallas means "the fires," and in Valencia they cleanse everything. As we walked down the smoke-heavy avenues to our hotel, we lit a few petardos. We had done our own to leave behind. Pop, Pop, Pop, Boom.

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If you go . . .

How to get there
The most convenient flights from Boston to Valencia are with Iberia (and its codeshare partners, American and British Airways) with a change in Madrid or on Air France with a change in Paris. Travelers planning on a Madrid stay can take the 90-minute high-speed train to Valencia. **What to do**

Las Fallas begins in early March and reaches its peak in the days leading up to March 19. A full program of activities is available online at www.fallas.com. Most events are free. Expect to pay \$1.40-17 to explore some of the larger fallas up close. **Museu Faller**
Plaza de Montolivet 4
011-363-525-478, ext. 4625
Tue-Sat 10 a.m.-2 p.m. and 4:30-8:30, Sun 10-3; adults \$3, seniors and students \$1.50.

Where to stay
Costs for lodging and meals reflect fiesta premium pricing.

Hostal Valencia
Plaza Ayuntamiento 3
011-34-963-524-267
www.hostalvalencia.com
This modest 54-room hotel is just off City Hall Plaza in the heart of the action. It will be loud during Fallas. Doubles \$102-\$205.

Hotel Melia Valencia
Calle Monera 22
011-34-963-350-380
www.sohmelia.com
Ultramodern business hotel sits just outside the old part of the city in tranquil setting near the City of Arts and Science. Doubles from \$230.

Where to eat
La Sarderita
Calle Bordadores 10
011-34-963-914-313
This tiny spot off Plaza de la Virgen redefines sardine cookery, with dishes like sardines steamed with orange and cinamom, or grilled with red peppers and served with a fried egg. Main dishes \$10-\$17.

La Riua
Calle del Mar 27
011-34-963-914-571
Central location and several set menus make this one of the most popular places to dine during Fallas. Fish dishes are better bets than paella. Main dishes \$16-\$25.

Arrop
Calle Almirante 14
011-34-963-925-566
www.arrop.com
Elegant fine dining on contemporary Spanish cooking amid Moorish ruins beneath a hip hotel offers a break from the Fallas crowds. Main dishes \$36-\$41, tasting menu \$101.