

Moors and Christians never understood each other better than at their party in Murcia

The celebration intends to be soon a Festival of International Tourist Interest

In Spain there are hundreds of parties and recreations that remember and try to reproduce some fundamental moments of our history. In many cases, these are clashes between cultures and races, between social positions, between kingdoms and kings. Romans against Carthaginians, imperialists against commoners, dynasty against dynasty... Taking into account the 800 years of Arab presence in the peninsula, inhabited mainly by Christians, battles and the peaceful coexistence of Christians and Moors (as the Romans baptized them since they came from Mauretania, which was all of North Africa).



It is estimated that in Spain there are more than 220 towns and cities that celebrate a festival of Moors and Christians, especially in the Valencian Community, Murcia and Andalusia, but there are also some in Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha and even in the Balearic and Canary Islands. Several of them are Festivals of International Tourist Interest and the next one that wants to achieve it is that of the city of Murcia, one of the oldest, whose origins date back to the fifteenth century.



Merits are not lacking, above all because the participants – actually the entire city – do not revive the confrontation, but rather focus on the character of a "party" and thus the protagonism is of joy, coexistence, in common effort... want to have fun. That is why it is common to find "Mudejars" and

"Templars", followers of Ibn Arabí and the Infante Don Juan Manuel, knights of the Order of Santiago or Saint John of Jerusalem together with "Almoravids" and "Almohads" arm in arm through the streets and numerous squares forming a charanga or sharing a table, enjoying a fresh beer or a local wine with a Murcian seafood and roe, mojama and fried almonds.

Spectacular parades

When they do compete with each other, even if they mix their steps, it is in the parades, especially in the most solemn one that takes place on Saturday at sunset on the Gran Vía and other streets and that lasts almost four hours, when kabilas and mesnadas show off their best suits, armor and weapons and match the rhythm of their bodies in a closed parade, marked by the sensual movement, both of women and men, of their "corpses" who preside over it, crossing from one side of the line to the other wearing their weapons and waving to the public. Abayas and hijabs with rich gold thread embroidery adorn the Moorish female bodies, sober black and white robes with scant gold or red trim on the bodies of Christian men. But next to them, overflowing multicolored dresses, breastplates, helmets, turbans, swords and spears that, surely, have little to do with tradition but with the party. Many of those outfits change each year with new designs and embellishments.



And from time to time some floats of strange shapes and colors on which the flag-bearers, ambassadors, festivity of the year, Moorish kings and Christian infants salute with their most elegant finery and also groups of horses and horsemen who do extraordinary direct and inverse pirouettes, side steps, bows, posadas or the more complicated passage or piaffe. And between them, hundreds of musicians forming bands that have often come from outside the city and interpret festive music with their trumpets, bugles and drums that includes the Moorish and Christian march, pasodobles and even some daring version of "La saeta" that would raise Machado from his grave or make Joan Manuel Serrat tremble or the "mora march" We Will Rock You by Queen.

A millennial origin

Although the festival as such was conceived in 1981 and the first parade took place two years later with only five groups, the idea arose during the commemorative acts of the 1150 years of the Foundation of Murcia. Before creating the "new" Murcia, two Arab families lived on these lands, but a fig leaf came between them. Legend has it, or history, that a peasant from the Mudari faction who was drinking water from the Sangonera river and to cover his pitcher tore a vine leaf from the vineyards of a Yemeni who was nearby, from the argument for "theft" It turned into a fight that ended in tragedy. Emir Abderraman II, who was not joking around, pacified things by ordering the destruction of the city of Eio where the dispute had begun and ordered Governor Abd al-Malik to found a site that would serve to control the city from a central point. middle valley of the Segura and, by extension, the entire kura. Thus, Murcia was born.

The Arabs continued there until the Reconquest reached their lands and the keys were handed over from Muslims to Christians, in the hands of the Infante Alfonso de Castilla and later King Alfonso X El Sabio in the year 1243. The cultured king, who spoke several languages, who composed a large

part of the Cantigas de Santa María, a good gastronome and inventor, it is said, of the tapa that should accompany a drink of wine in order to “delay drunkenness and prevent the fights and trouble caused by it when leaving the taverns, taverns and inns” Murcia liked, although he toured much of the reconquered Spain, and asked that his heart be buried there. And so it was done and to this day it occupies a chest in the main altar of the splendid cathedral.

A good part of this story is performed on the final days of the festivities, just in front of the cathedral, by local amateur actors – a taxi driver, a computer scientist, a teacher... – who recite in verse, while choirs and a delicate musical instrument play in the background. string that at first sight, or first ear, looks like a recording, but is later discovered to be a single man, a virtuoso who seems to be playing a whole orchestra.



During the days that the festival lasts, there are many other outstanding acts, parades, brass bands, dinners, meals, quemadas, proclamation, presentations of flag bearers and kings, contests, chess tournaments, tributes to historical figures, processions... and two others, very concurred: offering of flowers and presentation of the children born the previous year to the Virgin of Arrixaca and the parade of arcabucería, with thunder of a thousand demons.



And every day, at nightfall, Moors and Christians get together, once again, in the Medieval Camp, which this year is located from the Plaza de la Cruz to the Romea Theatre, very close to the Segura

boardwalk, where each Kabila o mesnada has its own space, a meeting place, fun and coexistence, with different gastronomic specialties to share until dawn.

Of international interest

Los Moros y Cristianos de Murcia is part of the Association of Festivals and Historical Receptions and has been a Festival of National Tourist Interest since May 2012, 10 years ago, and aspires to soon become one of International Interest, thus joining three others that already they are in the city, such as Holy Week, the Burial of the Sardine and the Bando de la Huerta and another eight throughout the Region of Murcia, completing 11, the largest number in the case of a single-provincial Community. For its concession, its age, continuity over time, roots and citizen participation are taken into account, as well as the originality and diversity of the acts and promotional actions carried out for this purpose.

The file for National Interest was promoted by the Federation of Associations of Moors and Christians of Murcia and had the favorable report of the Ministry. The declaration of Festival of National Tourist Interest is an honorary distinction granted by the Government of Spain to festivals or events that represent manifestations of cultural values and popular tradition, with special consideration for their ethnological characteristics and that have special importance as tourist attraction.

Among the many reasons for the Moors and Christians of Murcia to obtain the title of Festival of International Tourist Interest is that, despite the fact that there are more than 200 towns in Spain that celebrate similar festivals, Murcia is the only capital that does so; It is also one of the greatest with the participation of fifteen groups between kabilas and mesnadas that, together with the numerous bands and orchestras, make up a great parade of some 2,000 people, from children of months who dress for the first time, to the most veterans who wear almost 40 years doing it. The ancient history of its origins, the sumptuousness and originality of its costumes and accessories, the uniqueness of its music, the involvement of the entire city, without distinction of colors or parties, the example of coexistence that they give in an endearing and peaceful environment... are so many other reasons why you will soon obtain this distinction.

A grand stage

To all this we must add the place where the party is celebrated. The city of Murcia offers its fantastic cultural and historical heritage, its renowned gastronomy, its nature and its wide range of leisure activities. It is a lively, dynamic, entrepreneurial city with an enviable climate throughout the year. Its Arab origin closely linked to the fertile orchard of the Segura River can be found in the architectural remains of the Almunia Real or second residence of the Arab kings and in the Santa Clara Museum where many pieces collected in it can be seen. The old city sits next to the Segura, with historic streets that have preserved the names of the guilds that occupied them, such as the commercial Platería, Trajería and Glaziers.



The Plaza del Cardenal Belluga concentrates two of the architectural gems of Murcia capital, the Episcopal Palace from the 18th century, with a rococo façade and a Churrigueresque patio, and the Cathedral. This temple, which began to be built at the end of the 14th century, stands out for the

superposition of styles, highlighting its unique Baroque façade, with great sculptural richness and, next to it, stands the formidable 92-meter-high tower, the second tallest of Spain, while, inside, the Capilla de los Vélez stands out, a magnificent example of flowery Gothic.



Much more recent are some of the most important nineteenth-century buildings in the city, such as the Town Hall, the Romea Theater and the Casino, the latter with a neoclassical façade and a beautiful Arab-influenced interior patio. And you have to make time to visit the Salzillo Museum, which contains a precious collection of processional carvings by this sculptor, one of the most emblematic of the 18th century. The neighborhoods of San Pedro, Santa Catalina and the surroundings of the Plaza de las Flores offer some of the most picturesque corners of the Murcian capital. The tour can end at the beautiful Paseo del Malecón, a link between the city and the orchard. And everywhere, places where you can enjoy what this garden gives, in tasty dishes or in small miniatures in the form of tapas or portions. Murcian gastronomy is based on the excellent fruits, vegetables and vegetables that its garden provides. Stews and typical dishes are made with these raw materials, such as ratatouille (with pepper, onion and tomato), chickpea and chard stew or zarangollo (zucchini, egg and onion), to name just a few. As an accompaniment, you can choose between any of the Murcian wines with Denomination of Origin: Bullas, Yecla and Jumilla or their always fresh and generous beers.



Text and photos: Enrique Sancho