

Valencia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Tip-toeing under the huge, overhanging limestone cliffs near the Portell de l'Infern on the **Els Ports Loop** (p219)
- Oohing and ahing over the gorgeous views from the medieval city of **Morella** (p219)
- Eating great Valencian cuisine in the mountain restaurant of El Trestellador, overlooking the Valle de Guadalest, on the **Ruta La Marina Alta** walk (p228)
- Dipping your toes into the crystal clear waters of the Mediterranean after the spectacular ridge walk along the **Sierra de Bernia Traverse** (p232)

Area: 23,255 sq km

Average summer high: 32°C

Population: 4.4 million

Mention to someone that you're going off hiking in Valencia and you'll probably be rewarded with a quizzical stare. Valencia, they will tell you, just isn't walking country. Valencia, they will knowingly nod, is sun, sea and sangria country. Well move over sangria and make way for Valencia's rugged interior. A region of extreme beauty that's well covered by long- and short-distance footpaths all little travelled by hikers. In fact, of all the areas of Spain covered in this book Valencia – the land of Benidorm – is, ironically, the most adventurous area to explore.

On the northwestern fringes of the Comunidad Valenciana (region of Valencia), abutting both Aragón and Catalonia, the end of the Sistema Ibérico forms a complex of ravines and craggy summits known as Els Ports – 'the region of the mountain passes'. The fairy-tale-like walled city of Morella is the gateway to these seemingly endless *sierras*.

In the south, closer to Alicante, the rocky, arid mountains of La Marina tower above the Mediterranean, tempting walkers to explore thin gullies and narrow ridges.

With a variety of terrain and a long walking season, the region's mountains are a great alternative to the skyscrapers and sun lounges of the Costa Blanca.



HISTORY

Valencia's Iberian peoples were already trading with Greek and Phoenician merchants by 800BC, and the Mediterranean coast ensured prosperity for Valencian communities through Roman, Visigoth and Islamic occupations.

Islamic influence on the region was considerable between the conquest in AD 709 and 1238 when the Christian armies of Jaime I of Aragón captured the city of Valencia. By 1245 the Christian *Reconquista* (Reconquest) of the region was complete, but Valencia retained considerable political and legal independence. The marriage of Fernando II of Aragón and Isobel I of Castilla in 1469 unified Castilla and Valencia, with other counties of the Aragonese crown following suit in 1479.

Despite the *Reconquista* thousands of Muslims remained, not least in order to tend the irrigation systems that watered the inland terraces and coastal *huerta* (fertile plain). The final Muslim expulsion began in 1609 and was an economic disaster that the region didn't fully recover from until the 19th century. While tourism is now the region's biggest money-spinner, Valencia's fertile lands produce vast amounts of fruit (oranges in particular), vegetables and cereals, including rice.

The Comunidad Valenciana was established in 1982 and includes the provinces of Castellón, Valencia and Alicante.

ENVIRONMENT

Away from the resorts Valencia has a diverse coastline containing *salinas* (salt pans; at Santa Pola, close to Alicante, you'll see flamingos), freshwater lagoons teeming with bird life, towering cliffs and rugged outcrops as well as miles of beautiful beach.

Move west, inland from the coastal plain, and sierras, stepped with stone terraces where almond and fruit trees once thrived, roll to the horizon. Further west the *meseta* (high tableland of central Spain) begins, although down south on the border with Murcia are areas of semi-desert.

Valencia's mountains are contrasting. The relatively low, arid peaks in the south (such as the red-and-white limestone massifs of La Marina) are offshoots from the Sistema

Bético that rises up in Andalucía. In the northwest El Maestrazgo is an extension of the Sistema Ibérico and the mountains are higher and wetter.

These different habitats support contrasting fauna and flora and 22 *parques naturales* (nature parks) have been established since 1982. Each is a necessary corrective since Valencia's wildlife has suffered significantly from agricultural and tourist development.

CLIMATE

Valencia has a mild Mediterranean climate. When it rains (around 400mm to 500mm per year) it does so in downpours, and mostly between September and December, with another burst from April to June.

