

Cartagena

A mere 15minute drive away, the Mediterranean port city of Cartagena teems with delights ranging from the commercial and culinary to the historical and cultural.

Here you'll find trendy boutiques, major European retailers and department store El Corte Inglés, a sort of Spanish John Lewis. Here, too, are cafés, bars and restaurants serving everything from paella and pizza to the stews, meats and rice dishes particular to the region. Shops are open from 9am to 2pm and 5pm until 8pm or 9pm; restaurants keep buzzing until 4pm and reopen for the evening at 8pm.

Cartagena has a history going back several thousand years – and the archaeological remains from the Carthaginian, Roman and Byzantine



periods to prove it. Check out the free Archaeological Museum – constructed around a burial ground in an ancient lagoon – and the recently excavated ruins of an 11,000-seater Roman amphitheatre, its auditorium sculpted out of rock. The city plays host to a wealth

of festivals throughout the year, with jazz in November, a massive Holy Week procession in the lead-up to Easter and the sprawling La Mar de Músicas festival, a three-week celebration featuring some of the biggest names in world music, in July.

Easy on the

El Portús: Nudity is permitted around the clock at Spain's original naturist resort, where nervous first-timer **JANE CORNWELL** took a little time before fully appreciating the view

It feels like I have X-ray vision. I see naked people. The view from our hilltop cabana is straightforward enough: a picturesque bay nestling in an amphitheatre of mountains. Three swimming pools, some tennis courts. Palm trees. Mobile homes and caravans decorated with flowerpots. And then I see my first bare bottom, as a fellow guest here at El Portús – a naturist resort in Murcia, south-east Spain – makes his way down a steep pathway to the beach.

'Hola! How's that for a view?' shouts my neighbour from his porch, where he and his wife are sipping rioja, as naked as the day they were born. Naturism is going to take some getting used to. I am with my friend, who has been holidaying in El Portús for years and has no compunction about getting her kit off. I do, however, and set off for a walk with my sarong wrapped around me. Everywhere we go – into the shop and the bar/restaurant, past cyclists and hikers, around the children's playground – people have no clothes on. A group of French pensioners are playing boules naked. Yikes.

Beachside, I've never seen so many willies or boobs at once. The bodies they belong to are fat and thin, young and old, short and tall. As I sit there, conspicuous in my bikini bottoms, I realise they are simply that – bodies. There is nothing erotic or pervy about it. The atmosphere is laid-back, friendly and overwhelmingly democratic. The owners of the boats bobbing near the diving centre might be more flushed than the rest of us, just like the clients of the resort's day spa might be a bit more exfoliated, but without clothes we're all essentially the same. I take off my pants and walk into the clear blue sea, disarmed and anonymous.

Boasting 500 camping pitches, 50 cabanas-cum-mobile-homes and a hotel with 15 air-conditioned apartments, El Portús is a paid-up member of the Spanish and International naturist federations, and part of an ever-growing sector in the tourism industry. Spain has some 500 beaches where nudism is



Resort with a difference: El Portús is the most popular of Spain's 500 nude beaches

practised. El Portús, set in the protected Sierra de la Muelas and the country's first naturist campsite, is the most popular.

'In the beginning we had a lot of voyeurs,' says resort manager Aurelio Vaquero. 'The beach was like a circus. Fully dressed people would come over the mountain from the next beach expecting to see a show. But the geography of this place means they always have to take the same way back again. Then the naturists would stand and slow clap them until they were the ones who felt naked.'

John and Clara Slater, from Dorset, spend a few weeks of each year in El Portus. Clara, 38, has just completed her 100th scuba dive with the resort's grizzled, Neptune-like dive master, Juan Norte. John, 42, is more into mini-tennis, which he plays with gusto on a purpose-built court. Naturism, they say as we whizz along in their motorboat, is energising and rejuvenating. As John cuts the motor next to a tiny rocky landmass called Isla Paloma and Ruth springs overboard and on to the island like a tanned water nymph, we have to agree they've got a point.

Communing with nature becomes addictive. In nothing but our walking shoes we climb deserted mountain trails and marvel at the area's geology, at the different coloured rocks running through the cliffs. We see rock pigeons and wildflowers and, in the clear blue below, schools of fish. (El Portus regulars sometimes take long breadsticks into the water that are eaten from their hands by fish that mercifully leave other dangling bits alone). We play tennis naked but for our trainers and bras (you have to put the balls somewhere) and watch the (clothed) rock climbers, too chicken to do it ourselves.

A week in, I sit on our porch and watch our new neighbours arrive. 'Hola!' I say, liberated from clothes and inhibitions. 'How's that for a view?'

Jane Cornwell flew to Murcia with Easyjet (www.easyjet.com). Returns from San Javier airport currently start from £200. She stayed in a self-catering bungalow at El Portus (www.elportus.com). Prices start from €50 per night.

Local tip

'For the most authentic Spanish food in the whole of the state of Murcia, go to El Pincho de Castilla in Cartagena, which has been run by the same family for three generations,' says on-site doctor **Trinitario Ruiz Mompean**. 'Sit at a wooden table underneath a ceiling strung with legs of ham and try plate after plate of delicious tapas.'



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