

# LAS FALLAS 2000

## Photos and text by Marysia Lachowicz



“Open invitation to Valencia” Rob said when he left the dreary streets of Catford for a new life teaching art in an English School in Spain. Red flag to a bull. It didn’t take me long to take him up on his offer. I was planning to go in March and Rob advised me to make sure I was in Valencia for Las Fallas, an annual fiesta. To me, it doesn’t matter when or where you go in Spain you’re sure to stumble across a fiesta of some description; what Rob had omitted to tell me was that this was one of Spain’s most important ranking with the Pamplona bull run and Semana Santa in Sevilla.



Although I’d stay with Rob on the outskirts of Valencia for a few days, I also decided I want to be in the heart of it for the actual fiesta. “Best to book” my Spanish friend, Maria, casually warned me. After a couple of weeks of stilted telephone conversations using my poor Spanish I begin to realise that every hotel in Valencia was booked, from the most expensive hotel to the campsites on the edge of town. I tried through websites, through tourist guides, by sending Rob out traipsing the streets ... nothing. Eventually another friend said his ex-girlfriend now lived in Valencia and her and her family always left town during Las Fallas. Through these friends, I managed to find a hotel that nobody knew about it and wasn’t in any tourist guide because it wasn’t open yet, but would be ready in time for Las Fallas and was only 10 minute walk to the main square. Fantastic.



Despite these warning signs, I still imagined I was going to a small local fiesta. So, arriving at the station in Valencia 6 days before the Crema, the main night of the fiesta, I was surprised to find the city skyline ablaze with street lights and the intermittent sound of fire crackers: it took me at least three days before I could hear the sound of petardos (small fire crackers which everyone, particularly young children, delight in lighting and throwing constantly), exploding without jumping with fright. As I sat eating tapas on my first night in Valencia, Rob told me what he’d learnt about the fiesta: it seemed I’d walked into the biggest firework festival in Spain, if not the world. The next day, exploring the bustling streets of Valencia, I jumped nervously as a petardo exploded a few inches from my sandaled foot. In my head I clearly heard Maria’s voice again warning me not only to book a hotel but also to always wear good walking shoes and long trousers, preferably fireproof! Naturally I’d taken no notice of her advice. But now I fought back the rising panic in my heart. I’d always feared fireworks as a child and even now as an adult I dreaded the approach of Guy Fawkes night at home in London. What was I doing here?!



I was making my way to Plaza del Ayuntamiento, the main square, where at 2pm every day for a week the Mascleta fills the air, an exclusively Valencian invention and an experience beyond comparison. “Keep your mouth open or your eardrums will explode” Rob had said over breakfast. Ridiculous, it couldn’t be that loud. Mascletas take place in most neighbourhoods in Valencia but by far the most important one is in the Ayuntamiento. For 10 minutes firecrackers and fireworks explode in a building crescendo of sound, about a hundred kilos of gunpowder explodes and a million pesetas go up in smoke. As I stood in the blazing sunshine, close to the cordoned area watching the men prepare the strings of firecrackers, the crowds began to swell. There were people of all ages as far as I could see across the square and down all the adjoining streets. On the dot of 2pm, the first firecracker exploded. There is a definite art to Mascleta but the sole purpose is to produce as much noise as possible. Slowly at first,

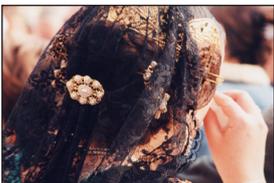




then rising in volume until the sounds are ricocheting off the buildings and, yes, as it builds to the grand finale, your whole body vibrates and your eardrums are almost fit to burst. The smoke consumes the square and a huge cheer goes up as the last thunderous explosion fades. Staggering to a coffee shop to recover, I felt I'd been as near as I'd ever want to be to a war zone! But I was hooked. I returned three more times to Mascleta; once disappointingly too late to get into the main square so I didn't feel the shock through my body; but on the last day, having eaten, drunk and generally partyed for 18 hours a day for five days, I discovered the perfect answer to a hangover. Ten minutes of Mascleta clears the brain completely!



After a strong coffee and a few tapas, I continued my search for some of the other elements of Las Fallas. The streets were alive with people fervently putting finishing touches to their fallas creations or blocking the streets as the different elements arrived in vans and lorries and were hoisted into position by cranes. All fallas must be in position by midnight on 15 March. This is no mean feat. Each district has its own Fallas Commission which is responsible for planning and building an adult fallas and a childrens' fallas, electing an adult and child Fallas queen and organising their part of the parades. Throughout Valencia, there are some 500 fallas of varying sizes and complexity. Fallas are basically huge constructions comprising a number of different elements or ninots which together make a humorous, critical, political or satirical comment on the world. Originally they were made of wood and papier-maché, now they are mix of wood, paper, plastic and resins. And when I say huge, I mean huge. The main and largest constructions can be as high as a four storey building and as wide as the road or square where they are to be erected will allow. Hence the need for cranes to ship in individual elements. It can take two days just to erect one fallas. And what happens to them after a year of work devising and building them? They're burnt to the ground for the climax of the festival, Crema on 19 March, accompanied, of course, by a few hand thrown rockets.



I hate to say it but only the Spanish could come up with such an astonishing idea! And only a place like Valencia, the third largest city in Spain, which has always had economic and cultural wealth, could sustain it. The city basically comes to a standstill during Las Fallas; it's a local public holiday, the schools shut down and people take annual leave to enjoy it or to leave the city for some peace and quiet. Of course, it also brings the tourists; Spanish hospitality goes into overdrive and the hotels, restaurants and bars thrive, rarely closing their doors. The party starts at 8am when brass bands roam the streets and lasts until 6am interspersed with fireworks, parades, street parties and more fireworks. Don't expect to sleep if you come to Las Fallas.



The origins of the festival are a matter of debate. Records show its existence on a much smaller scale back in the eighteenth century but it may well have existed before this time and contains a rich mix of pagan and Christian ritual. Dedicated to fire and to San José, the patron saint of carpenters, in essence Las Fallas signifies rebirth and honours the summer solstice. The fiesta is the culmination of a year of fundraising, communal planning and creativity. It's carefully orchestrated by the Fallas Commissions to a strict timetable so that during the key days of 15-19 March, everything runs smoothly.



Once the fallas are in position, artists and craftsmen make the finishing touches. Sadly to me as an outsider some of the satirical meaning of these masterpieces was lost, partly due to a lack of Spanish cultural knowledge and partly as much of the text alongside the fallas was in the local Valenciano dialect. Nevertheless it's easy to wonder at the skill, ingenuity and sheer scale of them. So for the next couple of days I wandered the streets of Valencia visiting fallas - some of them you can pay a few pesetas to actually enter and wander around more freely away from the bustling crowds. By 18 March, the streets



of Valencia are packed from 11am (probably earlier but I never managed to get out of bed before this time) until 6am. It's a matter of following the flow. And much as I dislike crowds, Spanish crowds are somehow very unthreatening; they seem to respect your personal space. More importantly this is a community affair, the whole of Valencia is involved in this fiesta, including the children who have their own rituals and celebrations. The atmosphere is celebratory and family orientated: even at 3am you'll find children as young as 5 years and adults as old as 75 years out on the streets.



With growing anticipation and awe, I visited most of the central fallas. I imagined that not only would the themes be different but also the styles. Disappointingly, the art of fallas making appears to rest with a few families with the result that they all take on a very similar style: a little too Disney-esque for my liking. I had a couple of favourites and decided I'd like to see one of these burn during the Crema. It's important to plan where you want to be for key events and get there early otherwise you see nothing because of the crowds.



One of my favourites Mister Money was in Plaza del Pilar: the desire for wealth and its ability to corrupt were represented in scenes of El Dorado, Egyptian tombs, and pirates juxtaposed with figures of prostitution, football, media and commercialism where money is the driving force. The fallas rose as high as the buildings in the square and almost touched them. I decided this would not be a good place to be for Crema. I opted for a more open square, Plaza de la Merced, where the fallas was a comment on the press and the history of journalism with a rather manic looking giant baby holding a cd-rom representing the future and the world wide web. Some of the representations appear stereotyped even disturbingly racist which detracts from the overall effect. For example, one of the main official tourist guides describing the press fallas states: 'Gossip magazines are represented by a curious Arab. The yellow, sensationalist press is represented by a Chinaman. The tabloid press with its dark stories of catastrophes and intrigues, is represented by a little black girl'.



The Crema was still two days off, in the meantime, came the Ofrenda de Flores. For two days, the falleros and falleras, young and old, dressed in traditional handwoven silk dress, parade the streets accompanied by bands heading for the Plaza de la Virgen where thousands of baskets and bunches of flowers are offered to the Virgin. The falleras are filled with emotion as they hand over their offering and many leave the square in tears, watched by thousands of spectators. A specially erected fourteen meter high figure of the Virgin is slowly decorated with the flowers and the square begins to fill with the delicate smell of carnations. By 19 March the Virgin and square are completely covered in flowers and there they remain for two or three days until they begin to wither. It's an incredible sight.



Navigating through the streets of Valencia is difficult during Ofrenda because of the thousands taking part in the parade. It's a good time to resort to a bar to try the local cocktail, Agua de Valencia; but don't be fooled by the name, this drink has little to do with water. It's a delicious mix of champagne, orange juice and vodka not to be missed. During Las Fallas the Fallas Commissions in each district set up camp in the streets and prepare paella on open wood fires. It's the main dish of the day and if you're lucky you'll be invited to join them. If not, it's down to the nearest restaurant. The other traditional culinary delight of the fiesta is buñuelos accompanied by a thick chocolate sauce. Made of flour, water, yeast and salt and then deep-fried, these are like the more commonly found churros but are unique to Las Fallas and stalls can be found all over the city at any time of the day or night.





Fireworks at midnight are really the start of the night time festivities when street bands come out and the music and drink flows through the night. The 18 March is known as Nit de Foc (night of fire) when the most important firework display takes place. The Spanish are amongst the best firework makers in the world and their creativity and ingenuity is seen at its best during the castillo when over 2,500 kilos of pyrotechnics light the skyline and cover the Alameda (a dry river bed surrounding the city) in dazzling lights of every shape and colour. Better than any millenium celebration, I'd never seen fireworks like it: rockets, shells, explosions, even what looked like little space ships going up and down in the night sky. Amazing. I was so inspired and possibly rather too full of Aqua de Valencia that I later begged a petardo from a young child so I could light and throw it in true Valencian style! Me scared of fireworks? Never!



I'd been in Valencia five days and felt several decades older through lack of sleep. The hotel was great but situated round the corner from one of the main fallas squares with a live band until 5am. Still, after experiencing the last Mascleta, I felt rather sad that by the next morning, the streets would be clear (and amazingly clean), the tourists would leave in their thousands and the locals would resume their jobs and a sense of normality return to the city. But still to come on the last night, 19 March, was Crema when all the fallas are burnt to the ground. The night begins around 10pm with the burning of the children's ninots lit by the young falleras queen and accompanied by music and firecrackers; then the main fallas go up, again with the falleras queen leading the celebration. At midnight, the fallas in the main square goes under the torch and finally the winner of the competition: each year about 20 fallas are in competition and some of the best elements or ninots are selected and kept in the Fallas Museum for posterity. Otherwise nothing remains of the hard work over the year apart from photos. Built to be burnt, these immense constructions are hollow inside and once lit burn fast and ferociously. Black toxic-looking smoke from the resins bellows out and the heat is overpowering. Strange figures dance and crumble in the fire and the crowds cheer as the ninots one by one are consumed by flames and collapse.



Normally the fire brigade are on standby in case of accidents, to direct and control the burning fallas and to dampen or enliven the spirits of local revellers by hoseing them with water. Sadly around 11pm, the heavens opened. Many drenched people returned home leaving better views of burning fallas to those who remained huddled under umbrellas; sadly some fallas were so wet that not even the fire brigade could get them burning. Cheered on by the spectators, they threw gallons of kerosene over one fallas but with no effect - they were reduced to attacking it with axes to demolish it. Saddened by this damp ending to the festivities and soaked to the skin I returned to the hotel and wondered if my rainsoaked camera would survive the ordeal.



The next morning the rain continued, Rob returned to school and I hired a car to drive down the coast to relax. By the end of March the Fallas Commissions are already meeting to plan the next year's festivities ... and so the ritual continues. If you're planning a trip to Las Fallas - and I highly recommend it - just remember to book well in advance, take earplugs and have a holiday afterwards!