

travel

SCUBA DUPER!

Lee Irving samples the delights of sunny Murcia



From scuba diving to spa treatments, from relaxing on the beach to a thriving night life, the Murcia region in southern Spain has something for everyone.

It was my first trip to the area but the sun-kissed idyllic location was exactly what I hoped it would be.

Myself and the group I was travelling with landed late on the Friday night after a comfortable flight on Monarch Airways and as we touched down in Alicante, the temperature was at a toasty 30 degrees.

We were whisked from the airport to the Mangalan Hotel, nestled beautifully in the heart of the main strip. The four-star hotel boasts wonderful panoramic views of the Mediterranean Sea and of the Mar Menor – a peaceful saltwater lagoon that often has water sports enthusiasts buzzing about in – plus large and comfortable rooms.

After a hurried check in, we were taken to the Area Sunset restaurant overlooking the lagoon. Despite our late arrival, the waiters and chefs were incredibly welcoming and cooked us a beautifully-prepared meal as we sat in the restaurant admiring the views.

The morning after, we woke up at around 6.30am to enjoy a very quick breakfast before embarking on our next adventure, the highly-anticipated scuba-dive.

Now, I have never been scuba diving and was filled with nervous anticipation and excitement rolled into one.

We arrived at Planeta Azul at around

7.30am in the picturesque Cabo De Palos region. We were given a debrief by our instructor Claudio, before pulling on our wetsuits and clambering onboard a speedboat, before setting off into the Mediterranean.

It was a fascinating experience. Claudio stayed with me for the entire time we were down below, swimming through shoals of fish and to around six metres or so below the surface, although I am sure we went further.

Looking back on the trip now, the scuba diving was certainly the highlight, although as the group organiser said, I went into the water like James Bond and came back out like Ron Weasley.

After arriving back on Terra Firma, we were treated to an interesting explanation of the historic nautical events of the area before heading off on a winding trek along the coastline of Cabo De Palos.

As the rest of La Manga proved to be, it is an area adorned with beautiful views in every direction, with jagged cliff edges jutting out on to golden sandy beaches.

We were then treated to a Spanish speciality, a form of Paella at a local restaurant called Pescado Rojo. The charismatic chef, who spoke no English, even performed a demonstration for us of how he cooked the meal.

We were then whisked away to the historic town of Cartagena.

It is a beautiful, vibrant city with the perfect mix of integrating a new, modern

look with its illustrious past.

We first went to the museum that houses a Roman amphitheatre. The museum literally walks you through the history of the area and of the Romans' settlement in the area, before you exit the museum into the still-standing amphitheatre.

The aura of the theatre was simply mesmerising, and you can walk through all of the concrete terraces, before climbing down onto the stage.

We were then taken to an aqua museum to learn about some of the shipwrecks that had been found on the coast of southern Spain, before going to our hotel, NH Cartagena.

This was an up-market, stylish boutique hotel with a lovely bathroom and large double room which was excellent to relax and unwind in.

For the evening meal, we were taken to a restaurant above the aqua museum, before we headed out for a few drinks in the town.

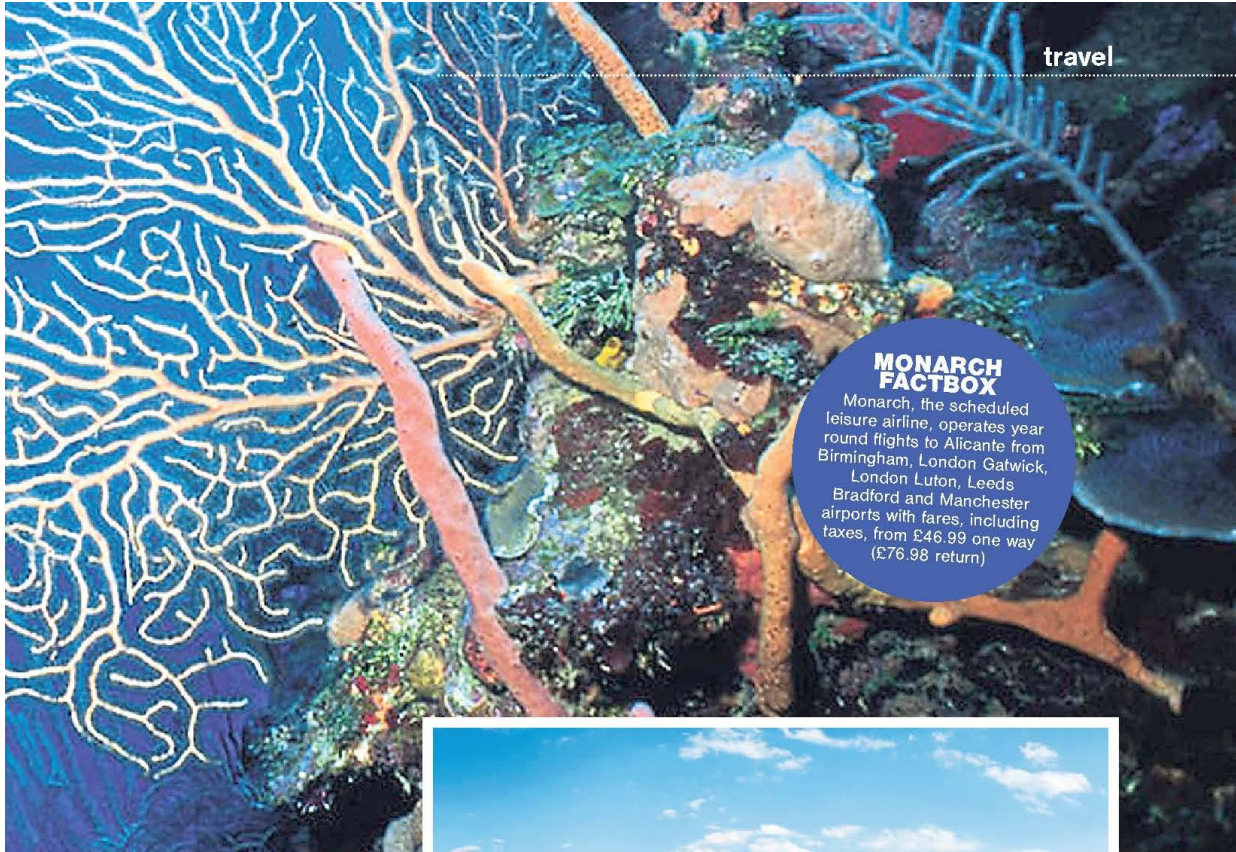
Cartagena was bustling with activity and it provided a real flavour of what a proper night out in southern Spain is like.

We were the only tourists in the area, and the streets thronged with people in high spirits enjoying the night.

As we woke with slightly sore heads the following morning, we were taken to Agullas, roughly an hour's drive from Cartagena.

We were taken straight on to a boat called Don Pacho, and sailed off the coast

26 seven days



travel

MONARCH FACTBOX

Monarch, the scheduled leisure airline, operates year round flights to Alicante from Birmingham, London Gatwick, London Luton, Leeds Bradford and Manchester airports with fares, including taxes, from £46.99 one way (£76.98 return)

for around an hour. During the trip, the captain of the boat anchored about 100 metres off the coast so we could jump into the Mediterranean for a quick swim.

After the boat trip, we were taken to our next hotel for the night, the Hotel Puerto Juan Montiel. This hotel is a beautifully located, modern building that even boasts its own harbour.

We checked into the rooms, which were huge and comprised a lounge, a bedroom and a kitchen – before we were taken to the spa treatment facility at the hotel.

It really is a superb spa, boasting saunas, hot tubs and whirlpools, steam room plus massage treatments, although I didn't try one myself.

The hotel's bosses treated us to lunch in the all-you-can-eat buffet-style restaurant, before we went on our next watersports adventure, kayaking.

Leaving the hotel's harbour and going into the sea we paddled in our own individual kayaks for around an hour, before retreating to the beach nearby to relax and unwind after the physical exertion.

For the evening, we were taken to Aguilas and to the Zoco Del Mar bar.

The bar is perched high up on the cliff edge, and provides superb views of the town of Aguilas and the Med. The bar is so high up the cliff face that the owners provide a shuttle service from the ground to the bar.

I can't speak highly enough of this



bar, and that's not down to the several mojitos that were consumed. It has a great atmosphere and presence to it, and looking out across the town as the sun set was captivating.

Following our drinks, we walked around Aguilas before going back to the hotel to eat at the hotel's restaurant. Despite it being an all-you-can eat buffet, the various foods on offer were delicious.

The following morning, we were whisked away to San Pedro del Pinatar where in the scorching heat, we were taken on a dragon-boating excursion in the town's harbour.

After that, we were taken to San Pedro del Pinatar's most famous attraction, the natural mud baths. I am led to believe that this treatment is excellent for your skin, and for us it involved walking into the lake, smearing the mud at the bottom of the

water onto our skins, before walking along the coast allowing it to dry, before then washing it off.

This was quite a therapeutic experience, despite my early reservations and the horrible pungent smell, but it is meant to be good for the skin and there were hundreds of people also taking part in the activity.

After we washed the mud off, we were taken to see the flamenco birds in their natural habitat, before going for a lovely steak at one of the local restaurants.

For our final night's stay, we stopped at the Hotel Costa Narejos, a massive hotel opposite the La Manga strip on the coast of inland Spain.

In summary, this was an excellent trip. The hotels we stayed in were brilliant, the views the Murcia region boasted were superb and there is an activity for all.

seven days 27