

Travel

Romans in a friendly war

Murcia is battling to attract visitors to this little known corner

By STEVE SINGLETON

Spanish holidays do not have to be all about sangria and sunbeds.

Have you ever fancied a trip back in time – to be the eye witness to an epic Roman invasion?

Watch breathtaking battles beneath city walls and follow legions of sword-wielding soldiers as they march proudly through the streets.

Then join them at their temples and villas for their celebration feast – rub shoulders with centurions and gladiators as they eat, drink and be merry until the early hours!

If a crash course in history appeals – then make room in your holiday diary now for a visit to Murcia in the little known South east corner of Spain next September – with regular flights from Blackpool and Manchester.

The port of Cartagena compresses 200 years of history during the 10-day Carthaginians and Romans Festival – and it is a truly surreal experience!

You could be forgiven for thinking you were on a film set....as thousands of townsfolk gather in the ancient town transformed into 'actors' and



TOGA PARTY Actors and locals dress to impress with the annual historical festival in Cartagena

'actresses' by the most colourful and detailed costumes.

The annual festival starts on the second last Friday of September and begins with the lighting of a sacred fire followed by a host of re-enactments, everything from bloody battles on land and

sea, to the wedding of Hannibal, before he sets out with his elephants on his journey to Rome.

There are circus acts, fun-fairs - and yet more battles-which culminate in grand night time parades, lasting several hours, when trium-

phant legions march through the city, to the incessant beat of the drums.

For 10 days and nights all the heroic deeds which took place during the years of the Carthaginian rule as well as the defeat and invasion by the Roman Empire – are revived

in an amazing atmosphere, which have got to be seen and sampled to be believed!

Year-round visitors will discover that Cartagena – originally known as the New Carthage – has been an important port strategically since it was founded around 227BC

and today is a Spanish Navy base – as well as a popular Mediterranean cruise destination.

Its narrow streets are crammed with historic buildings and landmarks, the finest being the Roman Theatre – remarkably only discovered in

Don't score an own goal with 2014 World Cup

By JEREMY GATES

The summer of 2014 might feel some way off to most of us, but football fans have already kicked off their search for cheap accommodation during the mighty World Cup. Until the draw on December 6, nobody yet knows where the England team will play their key matches among the 12 host cities in Brazil, starting on June 12, but that isn't putting people off booking up now. Claire Chamberlain, Latin America product manager at tour operator DialAFlight, says: "The best priced flights sold more or less the first week after England qualified, but some do remain and it's best to book

sooner rather than later. "In Rio, all hotels are selling minimum five-night but mostly seven or eight-night packages with set check-in dates, no flexibility, and full non-refundable payment at time of booking. "Our best buy is currently eight nights from June 11 or 18 at the three-star Atlantis Copacabana from £2,250 per room, though prices rise slightly in the final two weeks." Thomas Cook Sport is also currently offering return British Airways flights to Rio, ex-Heathrow on June 12 and back on June 30, from £999. While this might seem inaccessible pricey, fans who have not yet secured accommodation and

transport should not lose heart. Richard Laker, South American expert at tour operator Bailey Robinson, says: "Most Rio hotels are only bookable via the FIFA website with even average ones at inflated prices. "It's probably easier to see matches in the Northeast, at Salvador or Fortaleza, although we don't know where England will play until the draw." Opting for a cruise around the area is another way of dodging sky-high prices. Cruise Nation, for example, offers an 18-night voyage from Miami on MSC Divina, with flights ex-Heathrow on May 22 and three free nights' room-only in Rio in packages from £1,899, saving £800, if booked

by November 4. Regional departures are available at a supplement. Ports of call also include a number of Caribbean islands, plus two World Cup host cities - Fortaleza, and Salvador. Or, bearing the glorious Brazilian climate in mind, why not try camping? Real Holidays, a North London travel agent, offers week-long stays at three camp sites: one in Rio with pitches for up to 3,000 people and two in the north-east of the country, in Salvador and Pipa, near Natal. Seven-day camping packages from £895 include daily beach transfers and transfers to the matches, with flights extra.

Another brilliant option for bargain-hunters is holiday rentals website HouseTrip.com, listing over 250,000 addresses worldwide. It claims its apartments in Brazil in the World Cup are up to 30% cheaper than equivalent quality hotel rooms. One possible HouseTrip stay is a three-bedroom house, sleeping eight, in the bohemian neighbourhood of Santa Teresa, including whirlpool bath, balcony and roof terrace, from £181 per night. Another slightly less luxurious apartment in downtown Rio, sleeping up to four, starts at only £48 per night - leaving no reason why you can't support the boys, and stay safely on-side with the bank manager.

The facts

DialA Flight (0844 556 6060 and www.dialaflight.com);
Cruise Nation (0800 408 0758 and www.cruisenation.com);
Bailey Robinson (01488 689700 and www.baileyrobinson.com)
HouseTrip.com (0203 463 0087 and www.housetrip.com)
Real Holidays (0207 359 3938 and www.realholidays.co.uk)

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against Spain!

of Iberia by turning back the clock

the facts

- Murcia Tourist Board: www.murciaturistica.es
- Monarch Airlines: operates year round flights from Manchester airport with fares, including taxes, starting from £40.99 one way (£79.98 return). For further information visit www.monarch.co.uk

the 1980s but since excavated from the heart of the city to become its number one attraction.

But despite a rich history Murcia remains one of Spain's least known regions. Even the Spanish themselves do not seem to know this region particularly well (or could it be their best kept secret) being a leisure and sport destination that can boast 3,000 hours of sunshine each year.

Its balmy coast called Costa Calida is home to 200 beaches and small coves, bathed by the warm water of not just one but two seas.

A narrow ribbon of land separates the shallow, warm lagoon which is the Menor Sea from the Med, and here you will find the luxurious gated resort of La Manga, a well known destination known

particularly for tennis, water sports and golf - with 21 courses all within easy reach of each other.

Nearby you'll find long white sandy beaches in Mar Menor - and many open air spas where for centuries visitors have taken advantage of the hyper saline waters and its therapeutic mud.

Pay a visit to San Pedro del Pinatar and there are well-signposted nature walks and free bikes to enjoy the coastal cycle ways which provide unrivalled views of the pink flamingos who flock to make their home on the undisturbed salt beds.

Murcia is also the name of the capital city of the province. Spain's seventh largest city founded in 828 on the Segura river has many attractions none finer than the 15th Century Cathedral de Santa Maria.

The city, about 75km south of Alicante, is known as 'Europe's orchard' due to its long agricultural tradition as a fruits, vegetables and flowers producer and exporter, which all began with the Phoenicians and Greeks.

It is the ideal touring base from which to explore the coast, while inland the beautiful countryside has nature parks and rich wine-producing districts.



TENNIS RESORT La Manga



IMPERIAL POWER The Romans prepare to invade

London is the ideal festive present



RIVER VIEW The Thames with London's impressive skyline

If you are looking for ideas for Christmas presents, why not treat our loved ones to a weekend break to London?

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Subject to availability we can offer tickets in all price

bands, add this to our choice of hotels and the option to travel by train, coach or self drive, we can offer weekend breaks to suit most budgets.

Our weekend breaks programme offers a choice of three and four star hotels, mainly situated in central London or within easy reach of transport links.

Not everyone wants to do the same things in London so whilst many of our breaks let you do your own thing, some have a fixed itinerary and include excursions and visits to specified events or places of interest.

For further information on all these trips please visit our website www.blackpool.holidaytoday.co.uk or ring Omega Holidays quoting Blackpool Gazette on (01524) 37500.



FIFA FEVER Brazil is gearing up to welcome thousands of football fans for next summer's World Cup Finals