



## A MEDITERRANEAN CITY OF HIDDEN DEPTHS

**Alicante combines sweeping beaches with a layered cultural heritage and a distinctive culinary scene, revealing far more than its sun-soaked coastline first suggests.**

Alicante is often cast as the archetypal Spanish sunshine destination. And while it certainly delivers on that promise, the city and its surrounding province also reveal a quieter Mediterranean rhythm – one shaped by centuries of history, cultural exchange, and coastal life.

Here, the pace slows. A distinct culinary identity emerges in the markets, taverns, and seaside restaurants, where tradition and seasonality still guide the table. Life unfolds at an unhurried tempo, carried by sea breezes and long afternoons.

Beyond its well-known (and rightly celebrated) stretches of golden sand, Alicante offers something more subtle: a landscape where history and everyday living sit comfortably side by side, and where the Mediterranean feel is as much about atmosphere as it is about sunshine.

### THE SHAPE OF TIME

Alicante is a city with a surprisingly layered past for a place so often defined by *sol y playa* – Spain’s familiar ‘sun and beach’ tourism. Beneath its modern coastal energy lies a history stretching back thousands of years.

The earliest known settlement here, Akra Leuke (meaning ‘white summit’), was founded by Iberian peoples around 1000 BCE. Greek and Phoenician traders moving along the Mediterranean coastline later left their imprint, quietly shaping the identity of this early coastal outpost.

Under Roman rule, the settlement became Lucentum – an important port in Hispania that was connected to trade routes that bound Iberia to the wider empire. Today, this chapter of history is still visible at the Lucentum

archaeological site in Tossal de Manises, where low stone walls trace the outlines of streets, homes, and public spaces, offering a rare sense of the Roman city in situ.

After Rome’s decline, the region passed through Visigothic and then Islamic rule. During the Moorish period, Alicante developed as a fertile agricultural and trading hub, woven into the wider fabric of Mediterranean commerce. It was during this era that Santa Bárbara Castle first rose to prominence in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE, its commanding position atop Mount Benacantil turning it into a vital point of defence overlooking the sea and settlement.

Open to visitors year round, the castle remains one of the best places to understand Alicante’s layered history. Its oldest and highest section, called La Torre, contains the Torre del Homenaje, whose foundations date back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, a striking reminder of this medieval stronghold’s past.

Lower down, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century expansion reveals more structured military architecture: the Salón Felipe II, a former guardhouse, a parade ground, and the Queen’s Bastion. The 18<sup>th</sup>-century lower enclosure adds another layer, with preserved cannons at the Revellín del Bon Repós hinting at centuries of strategic importance. From the ramparts, the view stretches across the city and out to the Mediterranean Sea and is particularly magical at sunset.

At street level, the Archaeological Museum of Alicante offers one of Spain’s finest archaeological collections. Set within the former Hospital of San Juan de Dios, its galleries chart an extraordinary timeline, from prehistoric

Santa Bárbara Castle offers sweeping views over the city and coastline.



The region is famed for its lush palm groves.



The city blends modern life with atmospheric old streets.



For a quick escape, visit the coastal town of Dénia.

artefacts and Iberian ceramics to Roman remains and medieval treasures, alongside more recent finds from the region. Rather than simply displaying objects, the museum builds a narrative across millennia, with thematic exhibitions that draw together discoveries from archaeological sites across the province.

In the Middle Ages, Alicante grew as a strategic coastal port and was repeatedly exposed to raids from pirates and rival powers. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, it flourished as a key export hub, trading wine, olive oil, almonds, and other regional produce across the Mediterranean world. Just 20 kilometres away, the fishing town of Santa Pola offers another perspective on this maritime identity. Inside a 16<sup>th</sup>-century fortress on Plaza del Castillo, the Museo del Mar brings together archaeology, ethnography, and seafaring heritage. Its collections trace the coastline's story from the nearby Roman port of Portus Ilicitanus through centuries shaped by fishing, salt, and life at sea.

**THE ALICANTE OF TODAY**

From the waterfront into the Old Town, each neighbourhood of Alicante reveals its own distinct character.

The Explanada de España is a natural starting point for exploring the city. This waterfront boulevard serves as a social hub, where locals (known as *alicantinos*) gather to stroll and linger by the Mediterranean. Built in 1950, it's paved with 75 million tiles in white, cream, pink, and black marble. The wave-shaped pattern the tiles make was designed to evoke the movement of the sea and was inspired by the Praça do Rossio in Lisbon.

From here, the city rises into the historical centre and towards Santa Bárbara Castle. One of the most distinctive areas of the Old Town is the Santa Cruz neighbourhood with its narrow streets, whitewashed houses, and hillside views. Throughout the year, residents decorate their building façades and balconies with plants and flowers, giving the area a quietly lived-in charm. From the upper streets, the beautiful views across the rooftops towards the sea are among the finest in the city.

Nearby stands the Santa María Church, Alicante's oldest church. Built between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Gothic style on the foundations of a former mosque, it acquired its Baroque main portal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Right next to the church, the Museum of Contemporary Art (MACA) is housed in the Casa de la Asegurada, the oldest civil building in Alicante. Originally constructed as a granary, it has also served as a prison, a gunpowder store, a school of commerce, and even a temporary seat of the city council. Today, it stands as a well-preserved example of Alicante's Baroque architecture.

The contrast between the historical building and its contemporary collection is central to the museum's appeal. It presents works from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day, including pieces by internationally recognised artists such as Joan Miró and Salvador Dalí. Admission is free.

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Alicante moves to a distinctly Mediterranean rhythm.



Here, aperitif culture lingers long into the golden hours.



The region is renowned for its rice and seafood dishes.



The Central Market is the culinary heart of the city.

### THE MEDITERRANEAN WAY OF LIFE

Alicante follows a distinctly Mediterranean rhythm, with late mornings, long lunches, slow afternoons, and evenings that come alive well after dark. More than a lifestyle cliché, it's a pace of life that becomes evident within hours of arrival.

Late in the morning or early in the afternoon, and especially on weekends, locals observe the ritual of *vermut*. The vermouth is served chilled with a slice of orange and an olive and is accompanied by small tapas such as olives and *gildas* (skewers of olive, anchovy, and guindilla pepper). Here, vermouth isn't just a drink; it's a social ceremony.

At *Pipirrana*, there are more than 20 varieties of white and red vermouth on offer, including several locally produced labels. *La Guapa Vermutería* offers a more traditional experience inside the historic Mercado Central, with a rotating selection of Spanish and regional vermouths.

In summer, *horchata* becomes the city's essential refreshment. Made from tigernuts (*chufa*) that have been cultivated in the Valencian region for centuries, the drink is cold, lightly sweet, and intensely refreshing – precisely the kind of drink suited to temperatures in the 30s Celsius.

*Horchatería Azul* is perhaps the most iconic address in the city. Simple and unpretentious, it remains firmly rooted in tradition rather than trend. Horchata is served smooth, granita-style, or as a 'half and half' mix of the two. It's traditionally enjoyed with *fartons*, which are soft, slightly sweet sponge pastries designed for dipping.

### THE CULINARY IDENTITY

Food in Alicante is closely tied to the city's Mediterranean identity. The local cuisine is defined by richness and variety and is based on fresh regional produce and recipes passed down through generations.

Rice is the central pillar here. *Arroz a banda*, prepared with rockfish and served with aioli, is one of the essential dishes. *Caldero*, *fideuà*, and the celebrated paella – which combine seafood and garden produce – complete a repertoire shaped by both land and sea. King prawns from Santa Pola and the renowned red prawns from Dénia, as well as squid and cuttlefish, are also staples on local menus.

Tapas culture in Alicante is equally a way of life, particularly in the Old Town and traditional neighbourhoods. The key, as any local will tell you, is to move from bar to bar, tasting as you go.

*Cervecería Sento Rambla* is known for its tightly run counter service and excellent *montaditos* (small sandwiches), which are displayed in a glass case for easy selection. The roast beef with foie is among its most popular creations. Always lively, especially in the evenings and on weekends, it's an ideal spot to mingle with locals.

*Nou Manolín* is a respected institution. Renowned for its high-quality seafood and classic counter-style dining, it's particularly known for *gambas rojas* (red prawns) and *calamares* – tender grilled squid finished simply with olive oil and lemon.

The Central Market is the culinary heart of Alicante. Housed in a striking Modernist building with elegant

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Alicante's beaches are made for sunbathing and swimming.



The coast is known for its crystal-clear waters and fine golden sands.



Each June, the city comes alive with light, colour, music, and fireworks.



On the evening of June 23, people celebrate Hogueras de San Juan on the beaches with bonfires and music.

Art Deco flourishes, it spans two levels and more than 200 stalls, offering freshly caught fish, cured meats, vibrant local produce, and Alicante's famous *turrón* – the honey and almond nougat traditionally enjoyed at Christmas.

For fine dining, chef Joaquín Baeza Rufete presents *Michelin*-starred cuisine at *Baeza & Rufete*, with a focus on seasonal ingredients sourced from the Alicante region.

**THE COASTAL STRETCH**

Set along more than 200 kilometres of coastline and enjoying around 300 days of sunshine a year, Alicante's Costa Blanca offers a distinctive Mediterranean setting where city and sea sit side by side.

Beneath the Santa Bárbara Castle, the Playa del Postiguet is Alicante's most recognisable stretch of sand and one of its most immediate expressions of coastal life. Its central location, just steps from the city centre, makes it ideal for a morning swim or a dip before lunch.

A short tram ride away, the Playa de San Juan offers a striking contrast to the city beach. Stretching for several kilometres, it's one of the most expansive beaches on the Costa Blanca and a favourite with locals spending full days by the sea. Here, *chiringuitos* (beach bars), restaurants, and watersports operators line the shore. Mornings bring runners tracing the water's edge, while long afternoons unfold at an unhurried pace. Set directly on the sand, *Xeven Beach Club* is a popular spot for cocktails, music, and sunset views over the Mediterranean.

Just north of the Playa de San Juan, the coves of Cabo de las Huertas offer a more rugged, secluded alternative for those seeking a quieter moment among rocks and cliffs. The area is also popular with snorkellers, who are drawn to its marine life, which includes Mediterranean damselfish, bream, and octopus.

South of the city, the Playa de Urbanova presents a long, relatively undeveloped stretch of coastline that feels removed from the busier northern beaches. Less frequented by visitors, it offers space and simplicity for those in search of tranquillity without travelling far. It's also one of the best places to watch the sunset-tinted sky over the Mediterranean Sea.

**TIME FOR A FIESTA**

Every June, the city takes on a distinctly celebratory atmosphere. The Hogueras de San Juan (Bonfires of Saint John) mark the arrival of summer with fire, art, and music. More than a festival, it's the defining cultural moment of Alicante's calendar: a ritual of renewal that blends ancient solstice traditions with Christian symbolism linked to Saint John.

Over several days, the city is transformed by monumental sculptures constructed from wood, papier-mâché, and other materials, which are installed across various neighbourhoods. Often satirical and sometimes political, these elaborate works take months to craft and are displayed for only a few days. The sculptures are then judged, awarded, and ultimately burned – echoing Valencia's Fallas, one of Spain's most spectacular and culturally significant celebrations.

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Valencia is a vibrant summer city and a natural companion to Alicante.



Fonts de l'Algar is a series of waterfalls and clear pools that are ideal for swimming and jumping in.



Guadalest is a small inland village in the Alicante province and one of Spain's most beautiful.



Tabarca Island lies just 30 minutes by ferry from Alicante.



The climax of the festivities takes place on the night of June 23 to 24, during La Nit de la Cremà, or the Night of Burning. One by one, the monuments are set alight in a carefully orchestrated sequence across the city, as families and visitors gather to witness the ritual of fire and renewal.

June is also the month of Moros y Cristianos, a theatrical and cultural celebration commemorating the medieval conflicts between Muslim and Christian communities on the Iberian Peninsula. The festival takes place in various towns across the province, with Elda and Moraira among the most notable. Highlights include elaborate parades in richly detailed historical costumes and staged battles that symbolically recreate both sides of the conflict.

### BEYOND THE CITY

Beyond the city limits, the province of Alicante reveals a different perspective, with day trips that contrast sharply with the coastal energy and urban bustle.

The picturesque village of Guadalest, located around an hour and a half from the city, is perched dramatically on a rocky outcrop above a turquoise-coloured reservoir. The remains of its medieval castle crown the village, while the Portal de Sant Josep – carved directly into the rock – remains the only surviving access point to the former walled settlement.

Another popular excursion is the Fonts de l'Algar, a series of natural waterfalls and pools in the Algar River valley. The river cuts through a lush limestone landscape before cascading into a sequence of swimming spots and clear pools. In peak summer, an early arrival is essential to avoid the crowds.

Around 50 minutes north, Altea offers a quieter alternative to the larger coastal resorts. Known for its whitewashed Old Town rising above the sea, it's instantly recognisable by the blue-domed church that overlooks the Mediterranean.

For a more urban contrast, Valencia – which lies less than two hours away by train – brings together a medieval cathedral and historic central market with the futuristic City of Arts and Sciences. As the birthplace of paella and one of Spain's most vibrant summer cities, it makes a natural companion to Alicante.

Closer to home, Tabarca Island lies just 30 minutes by ferry from Alicante's port. The only inhabited fortified island in the Spanish Mediterranean, it's enclosed by historical defensive walls once built to protect against pirate attacks. Today, it's best explored on foot, the narrow streets reflecting centuries of maritime history. At the far edge of the island, the lighthouse offers sweeping views back towards the mainland, which are particularly striking at sunset.

All that remains is to arrive and experience it all first-hand. From the beaches and Mediterranean cuisine to the festivals, villages, and historical quarters, Alicante and the surrounding province offer a blend that invites exploration from the moment you arrive. **bo**

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