



THE  
**MAGDALENE**  
FESTIVITIES



CASTELLÓN DE LA PLANA





# HISTORICAL

## Rights

■ The Mary Magdalene Festivities offer some of the most fundamentally ancient and entertaining aspects of Mediterranean fiestas, of any Mediterranean fiesta. This statement alone would indicate that they are quite important, but there is more than meets the eye in these fiestas. Behind them lies a complicated festive framework, with a unique historical background that sets them apart from all other fiestas.

What is it that makes them so special? It is the underlying feeling. Because, to quote the traditional Proclamation that marks the start of the feast, [ ***“Going to Magdalene hill is more than a way to have fun, it is a duty that proclaims pride in one’s ancestry”.*** ] It is the pride of hailing from a given place. This is indeed the reason, the motive, the ethos that makes these festivities so meaningful.





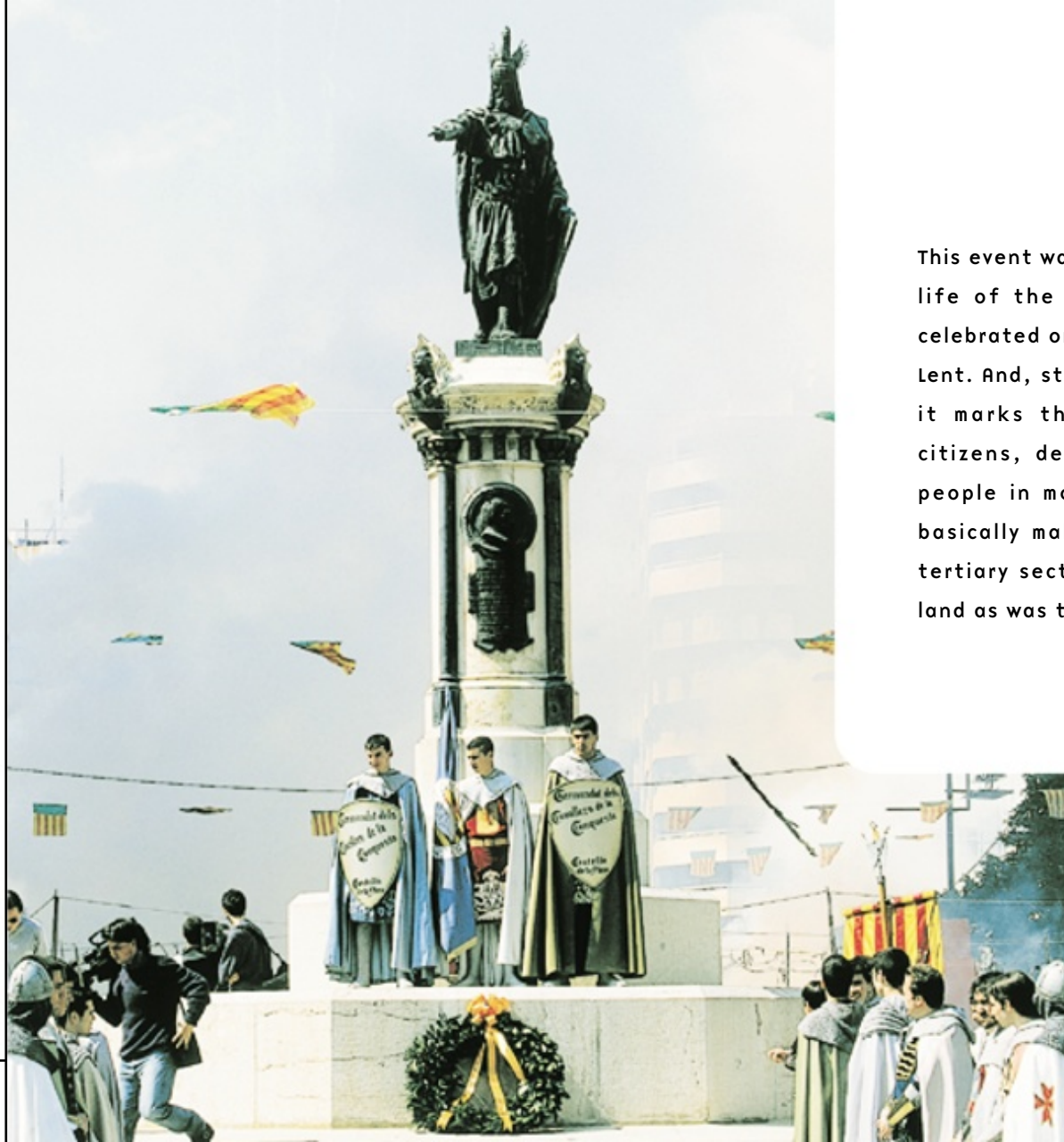
Of course, as with all fiestas, these too include all the most basic demonstrations of popular feelings steeped in centuries-old tradition: dances, food, parades, games... and fireworks, naturally.

It is precisely because of this deeply-rooted sense of history that any festive celebration in the provincial capital is accompanied by some reference to its origin, which was none other than the transfer of the city of Castellón from the mount of Magdalene to the coastal plain, "la Plana". This was due to the force of circumstance. With a view to continuing his expansion policy, King Jaime I the Conqueror decided to grant permission to the inhabitants of this insignificant village located on top of a hillock to cultivate all the land that lay below. This was in the year 1251. The Christians were gaining power, and the Muslims were good at farming the land.









This event was so important in the life of the city that it is now celebrated on the third Sunday of Lent. And, strange as it may seem, it marks the lifestyle of the citizens, despite the fact that people in modern-day Castellón basically make a living from the tertiary sector, and not off the land as was the case in the past.



**[ All the activities, the parades, the “collas” or groups that ensure the fiesta never wanes, or the official ceremonies, evoke this move to the plain. There is no more to it, but certainly no less. ]**

An awareness of the city history is enlightening because, in the end, the most important and significant events on the festive programme are only a reminder of its origins. The official opening, with the parade on the eve of the celebrations, the *Romería de Les Canyes* on Sunday morning, and the procession of *Les Gaiates* at nightfall on the same day, merely proclaim and enhance the historic meaning and the feeling of the fiesta.







# The “GAIATA”

*the symbol and the strength*

■ The popular Valencian saying clearly explains what a “gaiata” should be: *un esclat de llum sense foc ni fum*, an explosion of light with neither smoke nor flame.

But the “gaiata” is much more than this, because it has become one of the symbols, if not the prime symbol, that represent the age-old tradition. Because tradition has it that the day the people of Castellón decided to descend to the plain, a day of rain and bad weather, night fell as they made their way and, to avoid getting lost, the travellers decided to put a lantern on the end of a cane to light their path.

So, a cane, a crook and a source of light, and we have the symbol. Over the years, as befits true Valencians, the symbol has gradually been transformed into a brightly coloured overelaborate contraption.



The “gaiatas”, 19 in all, are distributed throughout the city, each representing a neighbourhood and serving to unite the inhabitants. They have been and continue to be a key vehicle for social integration, enabling a large number of outsiders to become part of the festivities.



There is a children’s “gaiata” too, of course. And a court of honour made up of young girls from the neighbourhood: a matron and her ladies-in-waiting elected by the locals. Standing in a prominent place in the neighbourhood throughout the week-long festivities, the “gaiata” is lit up at night, vying with its shapes and luminosity for the first prize awarded each year by the city Fiestas Committee.



The high point in the fiesta of the “gaiatas” is at night when the people return from the Magdalene hermitage and the monuments are paraded through the city centre streets. The night is filled with a serpent of light formed by the 19 “gaiatas”. This is the moment each commission parades alongside the result of an entire year’s work done with evident pride, because it is the time when the whole city sees them, and judges them. The “gaiata”, now more than ever, has to be a perfect explosion of light, an *esclat de llum*, which is precisely what the “gaiata” is. It is the natural result of applying local ingenuity to an ancient custom. Behind each “gaiata” marches the band playing the popular official song *Rotllo i Canya* almost nonstop. The crowds lining the streets would never let them play anything else!



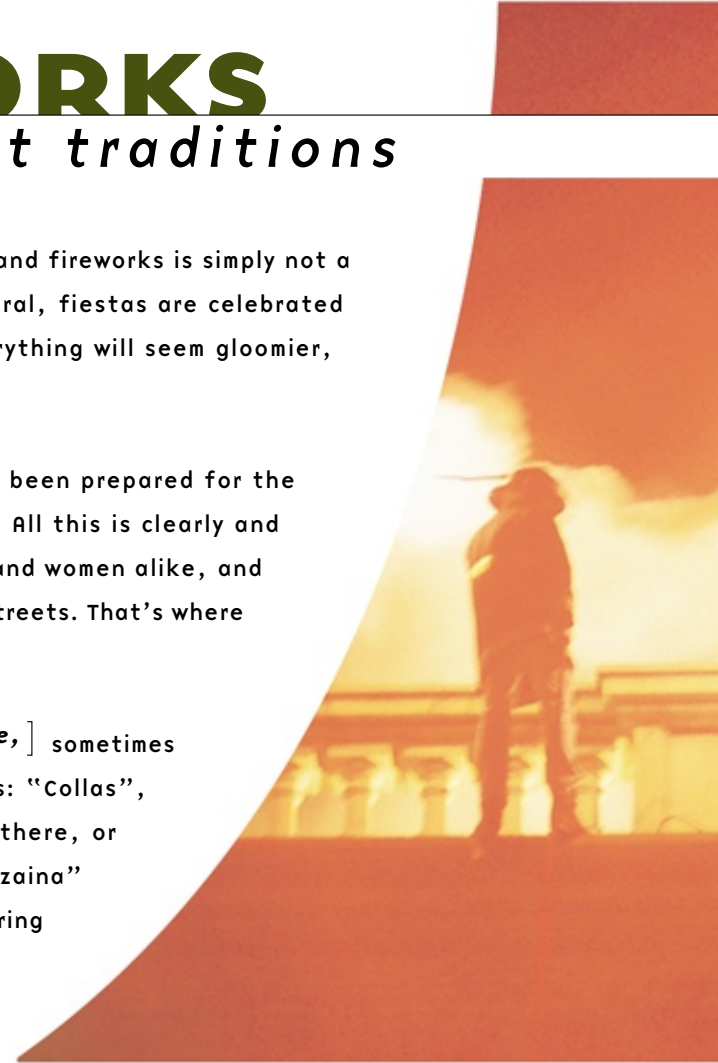


# Light, **FIREWORKS** *and past traditions*

■ As mentioned above, a fiesta without smoke, food and fireworks is simply not a fiesta. In Castellón, as in the Valencia region in general, fiestas are celebrated out in the streets. Maybe one day it will rain and everything will seem gloomier, but these are days of light! Make no mistake.

In the streets the people walk to and fro. Sites have been prepared for the fairs, the bullfights, popular dances and exhibitions. All this is clearly and properly organized. But the people of Castellón, men and women alike, and many of the visitors from outside have to be out in the streets. That's where the essence of the fiesta really is.

[ *Passers-by will come across festive sights everywhere,* ] sometimes formal and solemn, but very often totally spontaneous: "Collas", or more or less improvised groups of people here and there, or simply a group of citizens playing the clarinet-like "dulzaina" and dancing; over there a family or a few friends preparing a *pa i porta* or picnic lunch; or a mother whisking her daughter with neatly combed hair off to a "gaiata" meeting... the streets are a beehive of activity.









Then there's the noisy spontaneous presence of thousands of children setting off fireworks all around. In the squares the people take over, banning cars and recovering a sense of fun and festivity. At midday, there's the *masclatá*, or sound fireworks, and at night numerous firework displays. And, needless to say, every morning the *despertá* fireworks and the playing of pipes and drums announce that the fiesta continues that day as well.





There can be no fiesta without a feast. There never has been and there never will be. On the day of the pilgrimage to the Magdalene hermitage, eating an omelette made with tender broad beans, freshly picked because this is their season, is a must. But in the days that follow the *colles*, *gaiates* or spontaneous groups of feasters never miss an opportunity to cook meals in the open air. There is no special dish for these occasions, other than the paella that reigns supreme. Everyone brings along or cooks whatever they fancy, not forgetting the drink!

In the afternoon, there may be a bullfight or various sports events to go to, fairground attractions for the children and the Alternative Fair for the young-at-heart. The city is full of all kinds of activities. The end result is as it should be: streets filled with light and fireworks, and everyone eagerly doing what has always been done.



## A central event: walking to the **HERMITAGE**

■ All festivities and celebrations have their core activities. The Magdalene fiestas are no exception, but one is of prime importance – the Magdalene procession on the third Sunday of Lent when everyone goes to the site of the old *Castelló* village.









It is a visit to one's forefathers. [ ***No citizen who prides him or herself on being from Castellón would fail to take part in the pilgrimage at least once, following the ritual path of old.*** ] Setting out from the Plaza Mayor, they make a stop for a mid-morning snack at Sant Roc de Canet, always taking the traditional paths that pass through this part of the market gardens, and up to the hill where the ruins of the village and its spotless white hermitage remain. They go to see the blood of the Moors, whether real or imaginary, that is repainted every year. A visit at some point to the little fair installed nearby and, after lunch, the return journey. Tired and happy, the pilgrims make their way home. They will soon have to dress up in their costumes because shortly after nightfall comes the parade of the "gaiatas".





There are other more fun-based activities during the week, but none has the ethnic, ancestral feeling of

the historic climb to the Magdalene hermitage. The pilgrims carry canes with green ribbons and wear neckerchiefs: the attributes that identify them as belonging to the group. These details are taken very seriously! Civic and religious authorities take part, of course, but their presence merely confirms the prime importance of how the people take pride in their roots. Visiting the old walls, ringing the hermitage bell, performing the minor rituals of the fiesta are simply statements of Castellonism – deeds that must be carried out by those born in Castellón and all outsiders who wish to become

integrated. And the climb to the hermitage is a good time to show it.







# The PROCLAMATION

*a symbol and a living force*

■ It would be hard to say which act is the most important of all. For some it may be the climb to the ruins of the castle, for others perhaps the speech that proclaims the start of the fiestas.

As with all such speeches, the intention is to encourage the people to join in the festivities. This is similar to what happens in other places. What makes it so different is the way it subsequently develops. Perhaps to reaffirm the status of Castellón as the provincial capital, this event was an exhortation to embrace the people and lands of its province in a spectacularly festive manner. And the way to do this was to invite the towns to join in as they saw fit. And the towns, grateful for the chance to show themselves off, responded and continue to do so with pleasure and enjoyment and an enormous desire to impress.





The Proclamation comprises three parts: the mythological, the historical and the popular. In the first part appear characters that, invented by popular imagination and recorded in book form by the hand of a learned local, are familiar to all the people of Castellón. Josep Pascual i Tirado brought to life the giant Tombatossals, the good-for-nothing Cagueme, the powerful Bufanúvols, Garxolí del Senillar, the Princess and King Barbut... all easily recognizable archetypal characters.

**[The historical part refers to deeds of great importance to the city, long proven by historians: the granting of the Town Charter and the founding of the city,]**

the arrival of the Knights of the Conquest with King Jaime I the Conqueror, the Moors who continued to farm the land, and the royal courts of Moors and Christians. A town's whole history in one parade.





As for the participation of the populace, it is simply massive. Practically no town fails to be represented. Sometimes the envoy may be just a couple dressed in local costume and a few local farm products. In other cases it includes a group of musicians and dancers, or the local band that gives its very best all along the way. This last part also encompasses the representatives of the “gaiatas”: matrons and ladies-in-waiting dressed in traditional fiesta costume, together with the main body of the commission and, of course, the festival Queen accompanied by her counterparts from the sister cities of Valencia and Alicante, the Fallas Queen and the Beauty of the Bonfires of St. John.

Needless to say, the three groups have features in common. The corresponding costumes are the very best to be had: representative, richly adorned where necessary, prestigious and well chosen. And of course this is all accompanied by music.

All together this makes up the Proclamation, a colourful exhibition where, for a few hours, people enjoy a superb display of local history, deeply-rooted folklore that still survives, and the drive of a modern, thriving city and its surrounding districts strongly devoted to their origins.









The “collas” and “gaiata” commissions

# ORTHODOXY AND INFORMALITY

■ Not too long ago, the only way the people were grouped together during the Magdalene festivities was through the “gaiata” commissions. But times change. Imperceptibly, spontaneous groups began to form among the people who understood that the fiesta should be free from hierarchy, without the conventionality of the “gaiatas”. The result was the *colles*.

The former, with their territorial division and hierarchy, represent the orthodox festival. The latter opted for informality from the start. The “gaiata” commissions had always participated, and continue to do so, in the formal structure of the fiesta. The *colles* have only formed part of this structure in recent years. But their *raison d’être* is the *cau*, their headquarters or den. And the street.

The “gaiatas” and their commissions have a territorial base. A total of 19 are spread throughout the city of Castellón. Each has a committee with a president, treasurer and members... A matron and ladies-in-waiting are also elected. These groups have official places reserved for them at all festive events and activities.

The *colles*, on the other hand, are not territorially based but correspond to interest-related groups whose members may come from any part of the city. Many of these exist and the number gradually grows each year.

The activities they promote vary considerably. The “gaiatas” go by the book and take part in activities organized by the local Fiestas Committee, whereas the *colles* organize their own activities or participate in the official programme when, how and where it suits them. Not many of the “gaiata” commissions share the *colles*’ philosophy and tradition of having headquarters where they can meet – a base from which they enjoy the whole week of fiestas together. Although some of

the “gaiatas” are starting to have their own premises, these commissions have always had the use of official buildings to hold their formal meetings. In the *colles* equality rules, in the “gaiates”, although they have recently become more democratic, a criteria of presidential authority still persists.





***[ But despite their differences, the general atmosphere is one of harmony and cooperation. All in all, their visions of the fiestas and how to take part are fairly complementary. ]*** Each has its place. And in the end, the effect of the combination is to enhance the festivities for the benefit of one and all.

Outsiders will find it relatively easy to tell them apart. Spending some time with each, even though no more than an evening, would prove a highly interesting way to discover the riches the fiestas have to offer: costume rituals, meals together, flower offerings, social visits and popular shows and cultural visits. Between the “colla” and the “gaiata” there’s room for everything. It is obvious that these groups play an important role when it comes to integrating the various social levels that exist within the city. Because what pervades the air is a feeling of enjoyment, and in this kind of atmosphere social relations relax and improve considerably.

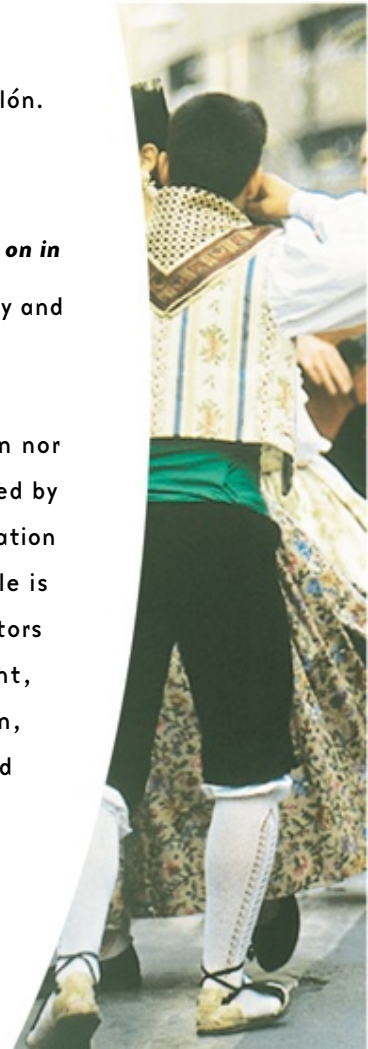


# KNIGHTS, COSTUMES AND

■ The Magdalene fiestas are not akin to others. Not even like the majority of those in Castellón. The reason is one of indisputable force: history.

The Magdalene festivities are historic [ *in that they commemorate a historical event that lives on in the feelings of the people.* ] Everything connected with the event is tinged with the authenticity and recognition that comes with the passing of time.

At the forefront is the key figure of Jaime I, without whom the fiestas have neither origin nor meaning. In his conquests of land and people, towns and villages, King Jaime was accompanied by several knights. Today, these feudal gentlemen are incorporated into the festivities in an association called *Els Cavallers de la Conquesta*, the Knights of the Conquest. Today, in a way, their role is to safeguard the memory of the epic founding of the city. The knights have become the protectors of certain historic values, their promulgators and crusaders. Other key elements are Na Violant, the wife of Jaime I, and her court, the watching of arms in the *Castell Vell*, or Old Castellón, the ritual ceremonies, meticulous costumes, participation in the Proclamation Procession and other markedly symbolic events... All this confirms their role as defenders of the historic deed.





# SONGS





Wearing the corresponding costumes is obviously a way to do this. One of the most striking sights is the huge amount of people seen out and about dressed for the occasion. Whether it is the costumes of the knights or the traditional festive attire of the men, women and children, dress adds an air of joy and colour to city life during the fiestas.

One can dress up in the ancient garb of farmers, Castellón townsfolk, Knights of the Conquest, Ladies of the city or, like the large majority, simply don a farmworker's blouson and a neckerchief. The important thing is to show that you want to be part of the festivities and add to the colour. A richly embroidered doublet, a lace-edged apron, an embroidered silk "Manila" shawl, a warrior's cuirasse or *els saragüells*, the farmworkers' trousers... Representatives from other towns also have their own rich attire. The costumes vary considerably, certain proof of the chronological and social differences that prevail.





Music always accompanies the groups. Perhaps in the form of the bands the Valencians love so much and that play so magnificently at the Ancient Crown of Aragon Dance Festival. Or the simple groups of musicians who parade the streets and squares. Or spontaneous locals playing the typical drum and pipe. It could well be the *Colla de Dolçainers*, contributing their music to the festivities.

More modern but equally popular music is also present in the form of huge shows and open-air concerts: opera, “zarzuela” (traditional Spanish operetta), rock, jazz. People from these parts cannot conceive of fiestas without a good helping of sound. And just about any music seems to move them.

# *Festival* **WEEK**

■ The following year's week of fiestas commences on the same night that the festival Queen brings this year's to a close, inviting the cheers of the crowd with the cry of *Magdalena Vítol*.

What is seen during the week of fiestas is the summary of an entire year, of concern and care, of disillusion and moments of brilliance. *Colles*, commissions, committees and families are already planning what to do. And how they are going to make things better.





The festive week can be divided into three basic parts, chronologically speaking. The first weekend with the Proclamation, the Magdalene pilgrimage and the “Gaiata” parade. During the week, when most people take holidays or at least only work in the morning, most of the activities are staged in the afternoon and evening: the visits and events in which the “collas” and commissions take part, packed with music, feasting and fun.

The third part is the second weekend, bringing more festivities. The most important is the final parade and the strings of firecrackers (with thousands of people running through fire and smoke) along the main streets of the city. It’s a spectacle well worth seeing and little known except by the locals. Finally the *Magdalena Vítol* firework display brings the week to a close.



# A FESTIVE MINI-VOCABULARY

■ There are words that anyone can understand. Others, however, are peculiar to these fiestas and have a specific meaning that it is useful to know. Here are some examples:

**Colla:** informal group of people with common interests who celebrate the fiestas together.

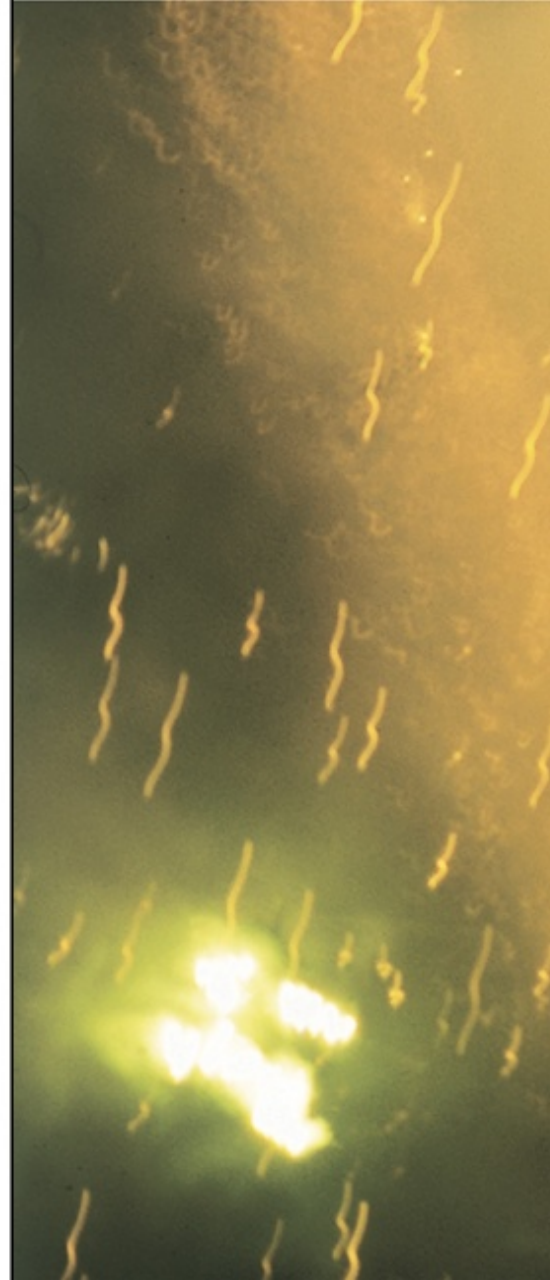
**Comissió:** formal group that elects a matron and ladies-in-waiting to represent an area of the city.

**Gaiata:** monument of light that symbolizes the staff the ancient settlers used to make their way to the site of today's city.

**Rotllo i canya:** popular official festival song

**Rotllo:** ring-shaped loaf

**Magdalena:** hill and hermitage on the ancient site of Castelló.





### **TO FIND OUT MORE...**

Visit the Valencia region tourist website to get further details and plan your trip. You'll find all kinds of information: events agenda, accommodation, tourist routes, etc. Everything you need to enjoy your stay.

**[www.landofvalencia.com](http://www.landofvalencia.com)**

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