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THE ROYAL TOWN OF MORELLA

MORELLA, WATCHTOWER OF THE REGION OF ELS PORTS, A ROYAL TOWN SINCE THE FOUNDING OF THE KINGDOM OF VALENCIA AND A CITY SINCE 1878, IS A BUSY, LIVING TOWN WHICH HAS PRESERVED ITS CHARACTER INTACT IN THE MIDST OF A CONSTANTLY CHANGING WORLD.

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Morella is the capital of the mountainous Valencian region of els Ports. To get there from the A-7 motorway, the backbone of the Països Catalans, we have to take a beautiful, winding road that climbs up mountains and drops down again to the river, over

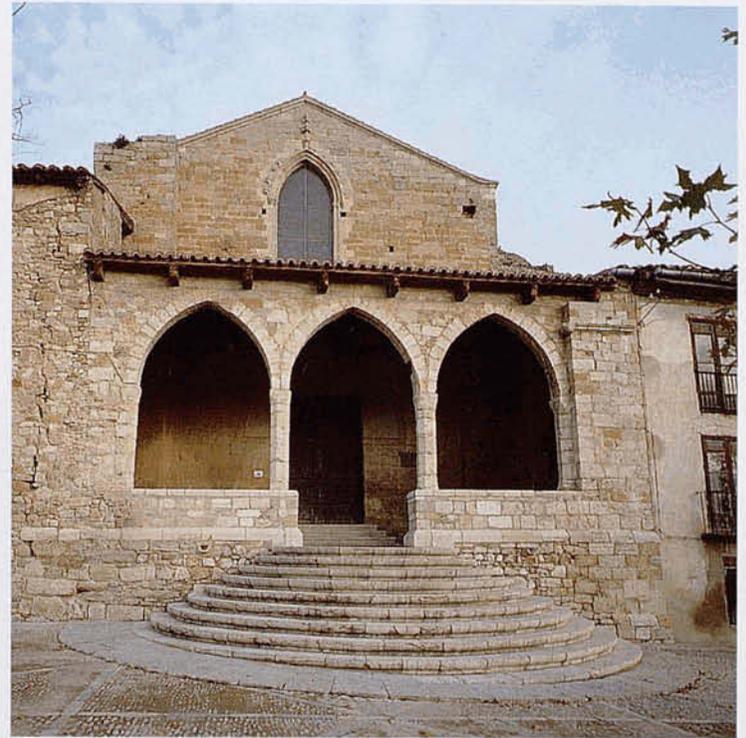
mountain passes and through ravines. The effort is well worth it. From the distance the view of the town is striking as it hangs suspended between heaven and earth, like a mirage in the desert. It seems incredible that in the very heart of these tangled mountains with their

forests and cliffs, man managed to build this military and religious complex, like a shepherd watching over the flock of old, red-roofed houses, with such power and grandeur.

The Valencian writer and anthropologist Joan F.Mira has called it a “work



FORMER CONVENT OF SAINT FRANCIS



FORMER CONVENT OF SAINT FRANCIS. CLOISTER

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by man of powerful beauty”, and he’s right. This is the sensation today’s traveller gets when the town of Morella comes into view. Its commanding position was immediately adopted by its inhabitants as a fortress. Today, almost 2,500 metres of the wall that defended it and marked the town limits are still standing, a beautiful circle of stone which mercifully opens its ancient doors of Sant Mateu, Sant Miquel, el Rei, els Estudis, el Forcall, la Nevera and Ferrisa to the curiosity of the traveller attracted by the beauty of the place and the warmth of its inhabitants. To the charm of the location, with the double castle towering above, is added a labyrinth of concentric and radial streets full of surprises. Public and private buildings with Gothic elements, porches, baroque facades, the houses of nobles and craftsmen, little shops, bars, restaurants and hotels, tiled altarpieces and little shrines accompany us on our enchanted way into the heart of the town: the square of the Archpriest’s Church of Santa Maria.

From here, sitting on the stone bench made from the fifteenth century altar-

stone, we can contemplate the solemn wall of the church, sweetened and softened by the two delightfully elegant fourteenth century doors. This, in fact, is the most important Gothic church in the País Valencià, a Catalan, Mediterranean, horizontal, very human form of Gothic. Here, the immensity is provided by the towering cliffs and castle walls at whose feet the church was built. The interior, dark but never gloomy, gets gradually lighter as the eye drinks everything in. The wonder of ancient stone is dressed in the glory of gold and woodwork. The choir, with its fifteenth century steps that seem to climb to the heavens; the chief altarpiece, in Valencian baroque; the monumental organ of 1724 which has just recovered its former voice; lamps and stained-glass windows; the fine communion chapel. Santa Maria de Morella deserves a careful tour, followed by a visit to the magnificent archpriest’s museum, especially rich in precious metals and medieval fabrics.

Leaving the church, on the right, is a cobbled street leading to the former convent of Saint Francis, from the fi-

nest Gothic period, which forms the gateway to Morella’s other chief attraction: the castle. The living rock blends in with the stonework. How many steps must be climbed and doorways crossed to get to the top, to the parade ground? Don’t stop to count them; climb the steepest slopes slowly and pause at each bastion, door or sentry box. The ground you are treading has been inhabited and defended without a break since the remotest times of prehistory. This site has witnessed the passing of a dozen civilizations or more. Look beyond the surface, beyond the latest constructions going back to the Carlist wars of the nineteenth century. History with a capital “H” has left its footprints here. Follow them. And when you reach the top, the old parade ground, look out over the landscape and let the immensity illuminate you.

But Morella, a royal town since the founding of the Kingdom of Valencia and a city since 1878, is a busy, living town fighting a daily battle to survive in the midst of a world that has changed a lot in recent years. Its population reached a peak in 1900, with 7,335 inhabi-



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CATHEDRAL OF SANTA MARIA DE MORELLA

tants, but since then it has dropped steadily: in 1981 it had 3,337 and today it has at most 2,300. Emigration has taken many of the town's inhabitants to Barcelona, mainly, but also to Castelló de la Plana and Valencia. However, the ties between Morella and its emigrants have withstood years and generations and remain lively and fertile. It's not unusual for the population to grow to 5,000 inhabitants in summer, and the figure takes off for the celebrations of the "Sexenni", held every six years since 1678 in honour of Our Lady of la Vallivana, to whom is attributed the end of a plague that was ravaging the region. In 1994, the year of the 50th six-yearly celebrations, the number of visitors reached the incredible figure of 200,000! Such is the power and the attraction of Morella amongst the people of the Principality and the País Valencià.

This attraction, this magic that is always conjured up by the name of Morella—a name going back before the Muslim domination, when the town first began to take shape under the eaves of the castle—, springs from the earth, but

is expressed in the open, enterprising character of the locals. With imagination and hard work, they have managed to make their town, and the region of els Ports, a place of welcome and refuge where those of us who live in the large cities can rediscover that natural manner and the food that we thought were lost for ever. A great effort has been made by private businesses and by the Valencian institutions to save Morella and prevent its becoming a museum town more dead than alive, although it contains one of the most important museums of dinosaurs in Europe.

The offer in privately owned hotels and restaurants, complemented for some years now by the Hostal del Cardenal Ram belonging to the Provincial Corporation of Castelló de la Plana, has in recent months been added to with the opening of a new complex by the Valencian Institute of Tourism, the Hotel-Restaurant Fàbrica Giner, a completely restored and converted nineteenth century manufacturing complex, the only example of an industrial "colony" or estate in the region of Els Ports. Now equipped with 24 double rooms with

bath, "minibar" and TV, as well as a restaurant, cafeteria and leisure area, it stands 8 kilometres from Morella on the road to Sorita, in a delightful spot surrounded by countryside. But we mustn't forget the town, with its porticoed streets and flights of stairs, welcoming all the year round, with its varied and suggestive shopping and catering offer. If you want my own personal opinion, I would recommend a visit in the heart of winter. The extreme cold, which keeps away the less discerning tourists, makes everything more intimate and doesn't prevent the locals from celebrating their *fiesta major* in honour of their patron, Saint Julian, on 7 January, the day the Christian troops under the noble Balasc d'Alagó entered the town. This Aragonese knight took the town in 1232, much to the annoyance of King James I the Conqueror, the founder of the País Valencià. The King justified his annoyance in his *Crònica*, saying that Morella was so important that it should belong to no-one "except to a king". In some ways, James I's predilection for Morella lives on amongst the people of our country. ■