

# Elche – Numerous Cultures, One Civilization

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The city of Elche is located in the southern part of the Autonomous Region of Valencia, just a few kilometers from the beautiful beaches of the Mediterranean. Elche or Elx, as the name of the city is written in the local Valencian language (the letter X is spelled "tcheh"), has a rich history stretching back more than five thousand years. The symbol of the city's distant past is the Dama d'Elx, a sculpture of a lady dating back to the fourth century BC, which is considered by scholars to be a masterpiece of ancient Iberian art. Iberians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs and Catalonians have all left their fingerprints on the landscape of modern Elche. While the ruins of the Roman town "Colonia Iulia Ilice Augusta" are to be seen at the archaeological site of Alcludia, two kilometers to the south of the city, the Arabic and the Catalan heritages dominate the city center.

Elche is mentioned twice on the UNESCO lists of world heritage sites; The Elche Palmeral (palm grove) has been on the World Cultural Heritage list since 2000 and the Mystery Play of Elche has been on the

list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity since 2001. The splendid palm groves are a manmade oasis with a network of irrigation canals that transformed the arid soil into an intensive

agricultural area. The history of the palm groves is indeed the history of the city itself. Historians believe that the Carthaginians introduced the date palms to the area and the Arabs cultivated them later by ▶



The Alcasser Fortress

قلعة القصر



The Imperial Palm Tree النخلة الامبراطورية

introducing agricultural techniques appropriate to the oasis. It was the Andalusian and Valencian peasants who have propagated the groves and have further developed them in the last 500 years. The determination of the people of Elche to preserve the palm groves became a major effort when traditional farming declined and was no longer economically profitable. The city-palm tree relationship has survived to the present day in a harmony which is evinced by over two hundred thousand trees in the district, the much appreciated environmental heritage and the fact that many groves have become public gardens.

Today Elche is considered the biggest and the most unique oasis in Europe. Elche is on its way to becoming a global center for the research on palm trees and oasis heritage. The Phoenix Station International Research Center was founded to develop research programs in the date palm field. The First International Congress on Oasis and Sustainable Tourism took place in the city in December 2006.

Historians believe that the Arab culture of irrigation and palm trees was transferred by the Spanish peasants to North America. Manmade oases with networks of irrigation canals (Sequia) are to be found in Baja California (Mexico) and in the southwest states of the USA. Near the city of



The Palm Groves

بساتين النخيل

Albuquerque in New Mexico, the descendents of the early colonists from Spain call themselves the Acequia People and are struggling to keep their Acequia culture alive in around 50 communities. The focus of their life for more than 400 years has been developing manmade oases, maintaining networks of irrigation canals and cultivating palm trees in the manner of the traditional Arab oasis.

The people of Elche have also managed to preserve a drama event of medieval origin which takes place every year in the Basilica of Santa Maria of Elche representing the last

days of Mary's life, her death, her assumption and her coronation: the Festa or the Mystery Play of Elche. It is the only medieval play which has been kept alive until today. The Play is divided into two chanted acts that are traditionally performed on the afternoons of the 14th and the 15th of August in the Church. The text is written in Valencian and the music includes melodies of Gregorian repertoire and of Renaissance and Baroque composers. Three days before the Festa, dress rehearsals are also held in the Church - which was already declared a National



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Monument of Culture in 1931. The original and authentic character of the Play was declared a World Heritage Masterpiece by UNESCO.

Landmarks of the city are the Arab architectural monuments from the Almohade period (11th – 13th centuries); the impressive defensive Calaforra Tower, the fortress building of Alcasser, a part of the city Wall and the Arab Baths in the cellar of the magnificent medieval Convent of our Lady of Mercy. The Town Hall, the Calendura Tower and the Basilica of Saint Mary are other architectural landmarks in gothic and baroque styles. Two other attractions are connected to palm trees; first the Palm Groves Museum situated in a gorgeous farmhouse built in the 19th century with a splendid garden; and second the "Huerto del Cura" Artistic Garden with

the famous "Imperial Palm Tree" named after Empress Elisabeth of Austria who visited the Garden in 1894.

Beyond culture, gardens and architectural monuments, the modern city of Elche offers excellent museums, first-class shopping and entertainment facilities and one of the most rapidly developing universities in Spain. Elche is one of the biggest producers of shoes in Europe; leather of high quality and excellent shoemakers make all footwear a real experience. The region is well-known for its famous cuisine that involves mainly local products such as dates, palm hearts, figs, almonds, fish, snails and rabbits.

Walking down the streets of Elche, a mixture of cultures and epochs is to be distinguished in the friendly faces of the people, in the astonishing facades of the

buildings, in the smells of the parks and the ring of the languages. What languages do the people speak here? Castilian, Catalanian, Valencian or maybe English or German? For non-Spaniards it is very difficult to differentiate between all the native languages spoken in Spain; nevertheless, it is important to know that in Spain itself, there is no Spanish language. The language known worldwide as "Spanish" is known here as the Castilian language. Modern Spain is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Elche demonstrates how people and places can be home to various cultures, allow them to develop, and even to promote and to spread them with the resulting conglomeration. It is one world, one civilization and many different cultures. Enjoy them in Elche. ■