

Elche

Famous for its huge palm tree forest, Elche (Elx) has a history stretching back to ancient times, originally built by the Iberians (as Helike) in an area known as L'Alcudia, the city was later moved to its present location by the Moors during their occupation of the region. The original site some 10 km from its present location was later occupied by Carthaginians and by the Romans, who called the city Ilici.

The Moors were defeated and expelled by the Christian king Jaime I (The Conquistador) towards the end of the 13th Century (1265) and the walled section of the city (Vila Murada) was occupied by the Christians while the remaining Moors relocated to the Ravel district. Elche remained a predominantly agricultural area right up until the 19th Century when the city became an important centre for shoemaking.



The famous Lady of Elche bust (Dama de Elche or Dama D'Elx) discovered in 1897 on the original site of the city dates from the Iberian period (4th Century BC) and can now be seen in the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid.

Elche (Elx) is perhaps best known for its huge palm forest (Palmerar D'Elx), the palm trees, originally introduced by the Phoenicians in the 6th Century BC and later consolidated by the Arabs, now number over 200,000 covering an area of around 430 hectares and forming the largest palm forest in Europe. The Elche Palm Grove was named a World Heritage Site in the year 2000 by U.N.E.S.C.O and every palm tree is now protected.

Elche is also famous all over the world for its elaborate reenactment of the life of the Virgin Mary - known as the Misteri D'Elx (Mystery of Elche). This medieval drama dating from the 15th Century takes place over 2 days in August (14th and 15th) and is held in the Basilica of Saint Mary. The Misteri D'Elx was declared a World Heritage Event by U.N.E.S.C.O in 2002.

The city is split in two by the River Vinalopo (river is a rather grand word for it, as it is little more than a creek) and many of the best attractions can be seen in the area around the river. The ancient part of Elche houses the most interesting and important buildings and these include the Altamira Palace, the Moorish fortress, the Basilica of Santa Maria and the Moorish Baths.

Another place that is well worth a visit whilst in Elche is the famous Huerto del Cura (Priest's Garden), here you will find a huge variety of palm tree species, including the incredible 7-armed Imperial Palm. There is also a cactus garden and a shop where you can buy dates from the date palms that grow in the garden or perhaps even buy your own small palm tree.

One the road to Santa Pola you will find the Rio Safari Elche, a popular animal park with a 'train' ride, animal shows, swimming pool, go-karts and various other attractions. To the north try visiting the traditional Spanish town of Aspe.



For its economy, Elche relies mostly on tourism, the shoemaking industry, agriculture, clothing and sweets. The footwear industry is very important and the city has over 1,000 shoe factories - so if you are looking for Spanish made shoes, Elche is the first place to go