Does the smell of gunpowder excite you? Does the sight of flames make you smile? Do you secretly harbor pyrotechnic urges that are only socially acceptable on the Fourth of July? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then *Las Fallas* of Valencia is your kind of event--a loud, smoky, high-spirited fiesta where the whole town is literally set ablaze!

Las Fallas de Valencia

Las Fallas is undoubtedly one of the most unique and crazy festivals in Spain. Then again, Spain is a country known for its unique and odd *fiestas*. What started as a feast day for St. Joseph, the patron saint of carpenters, has evolved into a 5-day, multifaceted celebration involving fire. Valencia, a quiet city with a population of just over 1 million, swells to an estimated three million flame-loving revelers during Las Fallas celebrations.

*Las Fallas* literally means "the fires" in Valencian. The focus of the fiesta is the creation and destruction of *ninots* (“puppets” or “dolls”), which are huge cardboard, wood, paper-machè and plaster statues. The ninots are extremely lifelike and usually depict funny, sarcastic scenes and current events. A popular theme is poking fun at corrupt politicians and Spanish celebrities. The labor intensive ninots, often costing up to US$75,000, are crafted by neighborhood organizations and take almost the entire year to construct. Many ninots are several stories tall and need to be moved into their final location of over 350 key intersections and parks around the city with the aid of cranes on the day of *la plantà* (the rising).

The ninots remain in place until March 19th, the day known as *La Cremá* (the burning). Starting in the early evening, young men with axes chop cleverly hidden holes in the statues and stuff them with fireworks. The crowds start to chant, the streetlights are turned off, and all of the ninots are set on fire at exactly 12 a.m. (midnight). Over the years, the local *bomberos* (firemen) have devised unique ways to protect the town's buildings from being accidentally set on fire by the ninots: such as neatly covering storefronts with fireproof tarps. Each year, one of the ninots is spared from destruction by popular vote. This ninot is called the *ninot indultat* (the pardoned puppet) and is exhibited in the local *Museum of the Ninot* along with the other favorites from years past.

Traveler and pyromaniac Janet Morton says, "The scene at *Las Fallas* is extremely cathartic and difficult to describe, but resembles a cross between Disneyland, the Fourth of July, and the end of the world!"

The origin of las Fallas is a bit murky, but most credit the fires as an evolution of pagan rituals that celebrated the onset of spring and the planting season. In the sixteenth century, Valencia used streetlights only during the longer nights of winter. The street lamps were hung on wooden structures, called parots, and as the days became longer the now-unneeded parots were ceremoniously burned on St. Joseph's Day. Even today the fiesta has retained its satirical and working-class roots, and the well-to-do and faint-of-heart of Valencia often ditch out of town during Las Fallas.

Besides the burning of the ninots, there is a myriad of other activities during the fiesta. During the day, you can enjoy an extensive roster of bullfights, parades, paella contests and beauty pageants around the city. Spontaneous fireworks displays explode everywhere during the days leading up to *La Crema*, but the highlight is the daily *mascletá* which occurs in the Plaza Ayuntamiento at exactly 2pm. When the string-lined firecrackers are ignited, the thunderous, rythmic sounds they make can be considered music as the sound intensifies in volume. Those firecrackers timed to fall to the ground literally shake the floor for next ten minutes, as the *mascletá* is more for auditive enjoyment than visual.

Another pyrotechnic *cremá* takes place in June throughout many towns in Spain. The most famous one is in the city of Alicante, as it celebrates Hogueras de San Juan, "The Bonfires of Saint John."

This article can be found at:

http://www.donquijote.org/culture/spain/society/holidays/las-fallas.asp