



his equestrian skills. The captains milk the crowd for applause, waving to friends and supporters (everyone in the town belongs to one *filá* or another) and generally playing the part of celeb; to be fair he has paid enough for the privilege—around €6,000 (£4,100) a year—so do wave back.

Volley after volley rends the night air, ricocheting madly around the main square into which the Christian *filás* march to symbolically reclaim the town, or in this case a temporary wooden castle

The principal warriors follow on foot, marching in rows (*'filás'* in Spanish, hence the term). They are invariably covered in war paint, puffing on huge cigars and brandishing fearsome weapons (relax, they are fake). Their entourage follows on foot or on floats, powered by tractors or bullocks, perhaps throwing sweets to the children. There are dancers, fire eaters, floats with rotating platforms and at least one huge set piece that varies each year. In 2005 a 20-foot-high, 50-foot-long scarlet dragon wowed the spectators as it reared high and swept low, just feet away from the crowd, controlled (but only just!) by a dozen burly operators.

The costumes and props are fabulous, blending history and fantasy so that the more outlandish troupes might resemble Orcs from *Lord of the Rings* or characters from *Mad Max*. The quality would not be out of place in a Hollywood blockbuster. It takes about three hours for the Christians to process from one end of the main street to the other, after which there's a break for lunch before it's time for the Moors to strut their stuff. As the night draws in, there's an extra element brought to the procession with the arrival of some spectacularly lit floats.

After the last troupe has passed it's time for a drink or two and that means *mentira*—a deceptively potent mix of coffee liqueur (usually Café Aperol) and icy lemonade slush. You'll see the locals sharing it from communal bucket-like containers which have multiple drinking straws protruding from the top! And you'll find various temporary discos set up in the open air, where the town rocks away into the small hours.

April 24th, St George's Day, is the finale of the festival—the big shoot-out between the Moors and the Christians. "We don't take many guests to the battle," Brian had told me, "because it's just too noisy. They use nine to 10 tons of gunpowder and the firemen are permanently poised because the tarmac literally sets on fire."

"Yeah sure, Brian," I thought, telling myself he must have been talking about sensitive, frail types and thinking back to other noisy Spanish fiestas I'd survived without aural or mental damage. But in as much time as it took for the first volley of gunfire to reverberate around the main square of Alcoy, my Mr-Big-Shot attitude

Pictured: the festival is a wild gathering of loud outfits and even louder gunshots