**A burning desire**

Works Cited

Abstract
- David Beckham's head is ablaze. Perhaps it's down to a surfeit of hair gel, because the flames catch quickly, licking at those legendary locks and gnawing at that chiselled jaw. I take a slurp of beer and glance at the man next to me in the circle of people around the bonfire. He's a stocky Spaniard and we have few words in common. But he nods and grins. The implication is clear. Goldenballs is done for.

Full text
- Las Fallas Valencia's annual festival is an orgy of explosions, fire and eccentricity. Chris Leadbeater braves the hail of gunpowder
- David Beckham's head is ablaze. Perhaps it's down to a surfeit of hair gel, because the flames catch quickly, licking at those legendary locks and gnawing at that chiselled jaw. I take a slurp of beer and glance at the man next to me in the circle of people around the bonfire. He's a stocky Spaniard and we have few words in common. But he nods and grins. The implication is clear. Goldenballs is done for.

- So am I taking part in an orgy of blood, blithely witnessing the brutal execution of the most celebrated footballer of the past 20 years? Not exactly. The former England captain is just one of a cluster of 15 wooden figures gathered at a crossroads in Valencia. Alongside him, his wife is getting thinner by the second, rictus smile slashed across her face as the inferno devours her lacquered torso. Nor are they alone. At the next junction, Bush and Blair are twisting and melting on a similar pyre. And just behind me, an implausibly tall rabbit is coming to a heated end.

- This, then, is la crema, the grand conclusion of Las Fallas - Valencia's fiery contribution to Europe's festival calendar. Its origins are obscure, built upon medieval tales of the city's many carpenters clearing out their workshops at the end of winter, and torching the various scraps, on 19 March, the holy day of their patron, St Joseph.

- But if the genesis of Las Fallas is fuzzy, its present is anything but. Over the years, the scraps became increasingly elaborate carved figures. Nowadays, they are colossal sculptures of papier mache, wood and cardboard that each district of the city spends a year constructing. Many are satirical, taking wry shots at celebrities. Some are just weird. Last year, the central Plaza del Ayuntamiento, which always hosts the largest sculpture (falla), presented a concoction that featured a huge elephant, giraffes in make-up and gorillas packing suitcases. Some are works of art, breathtaking in ambition and beauty.
By mid-March they have taken over Valencia, around 500 of them in total, cluttering every roundabout and intersection. Although Las Fallas technically begins on 1 March and builds to its climax on the night of 19-20 March, it does not hit its stride until 15 March, when the arrival of the sculptures causes the traffic to hiss to a halt.

I'd felt a twinge of sadness as midnight clanged the arrival of 20 March and petrol was applied to Beckham's precious feet. Ten hours earlier, I had noted him in the nest of streets below the Gran Via Marques Del Turia, part of a celestial line-up of sportsmen: Rafael Nadal and Cristiano Ronaldo preened alongside him. The craftsmanship involved in creation of these sculptures had been obvious, all bright colours and faces bent to caricature. But within moments of the fire being lit, these pinks, greens and yellows are choking to black, and a year's labour is tumbling to ash.

I also feel emotions other than sadness. Bewilderment, for example. And fear. For anyone living in safety-first Britain, watching la crema is a nervy experience. Great conflagrations spit and snarl in roads barely wide enough for two-way passage. I'm relieved when, after 20 minutes, a fire engine pulls up. But instead of putting Beckham out of his misery, the crew begins hosing the sides of the buildings to keep them from catching alight. As they do so, the stocky Spaniard returns from a pavement bar with another beer. He warms his hands theatrically on the hot air. And grins again.

Valencia is a metropolis that wears a cloak of eccentricity. This is the city that in 1957 diverted the flood-prone river Turia around its centre and turned its dry bed into a park. Its main landmark is the Ciudad de las Artes y las Ciencias, an arts and sciences park of incongruously futuristic structures. An anything-goes ethos lurks at the heart of Las Fallas, particularly with the near-incessant firework displays such as the seismic Nit De Foc (Night of Fire) bonanza, ignited at 2am on 20 March. And there's an Alice in Wonderland feel to the daily 8am wake-up call of la despert, during which enthusiastic rabble-rousers run through the streets tooting trumpets and throwing firecrackers to stir the lazy and the hungover from their beds.

I save the most incredulity for the Masclet. Staged each day from 1 March onwards in the Plaza del Ayuntamiento (at 2pm), its an astonishing 10-minute cacophony of explosions that gets louder by the day, reaching a crescendo on the last day of the festival. I linger open-mouthed in the busy square as spent gunpowder rains down, and people dance to the beat of the blasts. What St Joseph makes of it all, if he can hear anything over the din, is anyone's guess.

Travel essentials
Getting there
* EasyJet (0905 8210 905; easyjet.com) operates flights to Valencia from Gatwick airport; Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) flies to Valencia from Stansted airport.

Staying there
* Kirker Holidays (020-7593 1899; kirkerholidays.com) offers three-night's B&B at the Ad Hoc hotel in Valencia from 597 per person including flights and transfers.

More information
* fallasfromvalencia.com