

## Festival of the Upside-Down

Mid-August Spain is overflowing with fiesta energy, every town and village it seems letting loose a few anguished bulls, throwing buckets of vegetables at one another, or staging fairly abysmal rock acts until seven in the morning each night. But here in Faura, Valencia, a village barely big enough to tie its own shoelaces, a pyrotechnic display competes with the Big Bang for deafening, snow-blinding effect.

Rounding a bend in the narrow main street comes the first flashes of fireworks; not dug into the ground, as the instructions tell you to, but held by the barrel in gloved hands, or carried with wooden tongs, and - certainly not as the instructions tell you to - upside-down. Rushes of sparks start to fill the darkness like neon fountainheads, screaming in stereo as a hundred or so young men, and a few young women, carry them at arm's length in single file down each side of the road. They cover their noses and mouths with red cowboy neckerchiefs to keep out the itch of the gunpowder that saturates this confined space. Villagers stand with their children in their doorways, nonplussed as an incandescent shower rains down on their neat chignons. Troupes of housewives cart their kids along in pushchairs, dressed to the last in medieval frocks and knickerbockers.

With cardboard cartridges littering the floor like machine gun magazines, you would be forgiven for mistaking Faura's Feast of Saint Barbara for a midnight raid. In the midst of this thundering, dazzling spectacle, for all the world like the birthing of new galaxies between flat, terraced facades, lies the horrifying reminder of the sudden deaths by misfiring artillery that Saint Barbara was invoked to protect against. To this day, the U.S. Army and Marines reward bravery on the artillery field with the Order of Saint Barbara.

These festivities are a kind of memorial-cum-invocation of the Saint, who is said to have avenged her martyrdom c. 235 CE by striking her killer - her heathen father - with a bolt of lightning or fire from heaven, killing him instantly. Now patroness to some 56 causes, including bomb disposal technicians, sailors, stonemasons, tilers, milliners and Puerto Rico, Santa Barbara is called upon for protection from storms and explosions, and although her memorial was officially December 4th, the numerous storms on the Costa Blanca at this time of year call for her guardianship in August. Fireworks, the incarnation of heavenly fire in the mortal realm, are tonight carried by all those daring enough to bang on Saint Barbara's door.

After a parade of brass bands, dancing girls dressed as horses and a pantheon of giant-headed characters, their bodies dwarfed by cartoonish masks, comes at last the Saint herself. Her effigy coasts along on a bier of plastic flowers and upturned gilt ceiling lamps, another manifestation of the skyward light of the fireworks. In all this conflagration, only one ambulance medic is in attendance, a sure sign of the community's confidence in her defensive powers. An insider tells me that local councils in Spain spend so much on their spectacular fiestas that their fire departments are left sorely lacking - one explanation for the forest fires currently ravaging the North.

What clinches tonight's celebration as the true Festival of the Upside-Down, though, is that the Vatican ruled Saint Barbara officially mythical in the revised Catholic liturgical calendar of 1969. A 'pious fiction mistaken for history', relics attributed to Saint Barbara lie at Burano, Italy and Kiev, Russia. But long, long live her explosive fiesta.

*For more information on Spanish fiestas, visit the Spanish Tourist Board's website, [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info).*

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