

It's a backpackers' dream – throwing around a bunch of squishy tomatoes in a Spanish village. But what is La Tomatina like for grown-ups? **Abigail King** gets suited up

O-MA-TOES

I'm halfway through laughing at my friend when a flying object smacks me in the mouth. Seeing as I'm standing in the middle of the world's largest tomato fight, I might have expected this to happen. But it's not a tomato, it's a slimy and substantial lump of industrial grease. And it's absolutely disgusting.

Every year, more than 40,000 visitors descend on the tiny town of Buñol, near Valencia, Spain, for La Tomatina. What began in the 1940s as an impromptu scuffle during a carnival procession has grown into an international circus – involving all-night parties, more than 120,000kg of tomatoes and, as I'm finding out, buckets of white, whipped grease. At my age, I should know better, but it's too late for that now. I've thrown myself headlong into La Tomatina, albeit in a practical, 30-something kind of way.

We assemble before dawn on a deserted train platform, dressed in white, with zip-tight pockets and a pair of goggles each.

"Good job we got here so early," says Nick, a wry Essex boy with a pint in one hand and a Valencian girl in the other.

"This wouldn't have happened 10 years ago," mutters Alan, an Irishman in our group, as he surveys the town square. He has a point. Now that we're older, we've researched this – looked online and checked what to bring, where we should go and what time we need to get there. We're even wearing sensible shoes.

The result? We're loitering in Plaza de Pueblo in the empty, grey-morning light. The high-walled square is the size of a basketball court and has all the atmosphere of a laundry basket. There's little sign of the all-night party.

Laurene, a French girl, shrugs. "So where is everyone?"

By 11am we have our answer. Now the square heaves like a mosh pit beneath the heat of the angry sun. A nonsense local ties a leg of ham to one end of a telegraph pole, smears the wood in an inch-thick layer of grease and hoists the contraption up until the jamón tickles the palm fronds near the third-floor windows.

The aim of the game is to shimmy up the greasy pole to claim the ham in the name of honour, courage, tomatoes. ▶



AFTER HOURS IN THE HEAT, THE WATER IS WELCOME

Seeing red

• Wearing goggles will protect your eyes, but won't stop you being made into human tomato soup

or something like that – and it's a great crowd-pleaser. At first, the young, the fit, the toned and the brave scramble up, grab handfuls of grease and fling them into the air to make it easier for the next man. My dollop, that curious blend of Fairy Liquid and burnt bacon rind, sticks to my eyelids and melts in my hair, but the crowd is so dense I can't wipe it away.

"What a douchebag!" yells a Californian beside me, all of 20 years old in denim hotpants and a Hollywood smile. I feel old. The international coalition of backpackers have united against a common enemy, the tomato, and for a common cause, the ham. Not for the first time, I wonder what I'm doing here.

On the narrow balconies overhead, deft fingers secure the plastic sheets that cover the shop fronts. A few houses away, lenses glint in the sunlight as the press stand ready. The temperature rises and my tongue feels thick, soapy and dry. Everyone is waiting.

Something else hits me in the face. It's water, from a washing-up bowl on the rooftop. Splat. A saucepan empties out, followed by a bucket and then another loaded washing-up bowl. After hours in the heat, the water is welcome – oh, so welcome. A low-throated rumbling filters through the crowd, and over the hum of the engines a chant becomes clear. "Tomate! Tomate! Tomate!"

Call me Sherlock, but I think I know what's coming. A lorry crawls to the edge of the square, and I feel a rising edge of panic. The wing mirrors almost graze the plastic sheeting yet we're already crammed in tight. The lorry enters Plaza de Pueblo, pressing us against the wall. It's a mathematical situation that doesn't make sense. The buildings shudder, the firecracker launches, the fight begins.

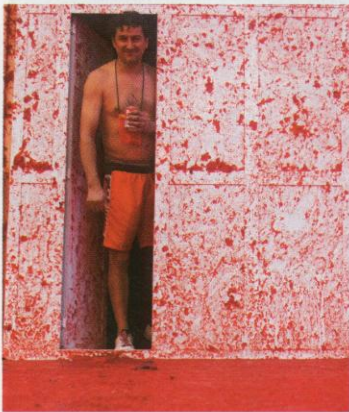
I'm not sure what I had expected; perhaps heaps of round tomatoes like coloured balls in a children's playground, or those old-fashioned scenes of women lifting up their petticoats and squelching grapes beneath their feet. The reality is more bizarre – and brutal.

Staff huri tomatoes at the defenceless crowd, a human sacrifice for the vengeful gods of the rotten tomato. The goggles were pointless, that's the first thing to learn. >





AGAIN AND AGAIN, SCARLET MISSILES THUMP ONTO OUR SKULLS



Carrie on

- 📍 Inspector Juan surveys the crime scene...
- 📍 Buñol: a quiet and tranquil village 364 days a year

With or without them, you can't see a thing. Again and again, scarlet missiles thump onto our skulls and, packed this tight, we're powerless to respond. What are we doing here?

The lorry leaves and suddenly I understand the term "breathing space". I grab the tomatoey remnants from my shoulders and get ready to join in, but there's no time. A second lorry rumbles through, followed by a third, then a fourth and, well, by then I've lost count. When the last lorry rolls away, leading a Pied Piper procession of shoeless backpackers, we find ourselves immersed in an alfresco Neapolitan sauce. Flip-flops float on the surface, and a sticky mesh of tomato seeds covers my face.

Now our battle begins. It's just ridiculously enjoyable to scoop up macerated fruit and pelt it at your friends. Better still is diving into the pools on the floor and rolling around in homemade tomato soup. Tomato juice is said to be an antioxidant cleanser, but who cares? None of us look pretty – yet we're all having fun. When the final firecracker sounds I emerge, bedraggled, my hair matted with furred tomato skins, my eyes blurry with red juice. To my surprise, I'm in demand. "Please, just one hug to show we came," says a teenage girl in a spotless T-shirt, envying my tomato-drenched state. "We couldn't get anywhere near the fight."

As we stride towards the hosepipes, full of childish glee, more and more people stop and stare. "How did you get so much tomato?" asks a German backpacker. "Right place, right time," I reply, smiling to myself. You see, we 30-somethings have secret weapons when it comes to fighting tomatoes: tenacity, luck, alarm clocks and sensible shoes. 🍅

📍 FOR MORE DETAILS ON LA TOMATINA, 25 AUGUST, VISIT WWW.LATOMATINA.ES

TIPS FOR ENJOYING LA TOMATINA

- Reach Plaza de Pueblo by 8am
- Don't wear sandals or flip-flops
- Don't wear jewellery or watches
- Have pockets with zips for keys
- Expect anything you take to get lost
- Expect anything you wear to get ruined
- Girls, wear sports bras
- Don't go if you don't like crowds – or tomatoes