

Festa Major de Vilafranca del Penedès

Short guide

Vilafranca's calendar of festivity reaches its peak on the 29th August at noon, when the Town Festivity begins. This feast has been declared of National interest, due the preservation of its folklore and its cultural richness.

During these three days the streets are crowded, who follow the evolution of dances and who express their emotion on St. Fèlix's day. They also love the show of music and fire that points out the entry of the Saint into Santa Maria's basilica. Dances on the streets, theatre and concerts complete a festivity where the people are the main characters.

SHORT GUIDE OF THE "TOWN FESTIVITY"

1.- Introduction

Throughout the 22nd and 23rd August there is *LA CAPTA*. The Festivity administrators (five different people each year are responsible for the organisation) walk around the town selling the program cards, bearing Saint Felix's image and some presents. The objective is to raise some money for the Festivity. They are accompanied by the *Grallers*, people who play the *gralla*, a high-pitch wind instrument used in many acts of the "Festivity" in combination with drums.

On the 22nd August takes place a *NOVENA* offered to St. Felix. This is a religious and solemn act, which finishes with the *GOIGS* singing. They are sung by a group of people from Vilafranca and each year more and more people gather in the basilica to listen to them. The act takes place every day at 20:30 hours until St. Felix's day.

Quite a recent event (it was celebrated for the first time in 1963) takes place on the 28th August. This is the *OPENING SPEECH* of the town festivity, which gathers the whole town in St. Jaume I square after the end of the *Novena*. The people gathered love to hear all the activities announced by the person who inaugurates the festivities.

2.- The three core days of the Festivity

29th August.

BELL RINGING AND FIRECRACKERS. Everybody is nervous. Everybody wants to hear the start of the Festivity and it is a magic and emotional moment, which indicates that the festivity has started one more time.

PASSACAGLIA. Primarily a display of more than twenty folkloric groups (popular dances, human towers, music band, etc.) who walk in a procession, showing their still immaculate clothes to the audience and indicating the start of the festivity.

It is difficult to state a specific hour for the end of the passacaglia, but it can be said that it finishes in the Vila square (Council square) where the first human tower is built. This first tower display is known as *Castells, torres i pilars*.

ST. FELIX'S PROCESSION. The spectators and the groups accompany the Saint from the Administrator's house to St. Maria's basilica. The itinerary is different each year and for this reason, it is unknown until it is published in the official program. Once the Town Festivity finishes, the Administrators take turns at keeping St. Felix's image in their houses, until they return it to the basilica the following year.

After dinner, at 23.00 hours, an extraordinary **FIREWORKS** display takes place at Camp del Cellerot, which captivates natives and visitors alike.

Night shows follow the fireworks, there are around six shows which take place simultaneously and it is necessary to hurry in order to find a seat (if there are seats, of course). Normally there is a formal concert by the Music Band, theatre shows, *sardanes* (typical Catalan dance), recitals, festivals... and lately the *EMPALMADA*, a good excuse for those who don't feel like going to sleep: dance and an official party until next morning.

30th August. Saint Felix

At seven in the morning, the bell ringing announces the festivity and St. Felix's relics are on display in order for the faithful to venerate them. Simultaneously the *grallers* gather at the Vila Square and they start playing the *MATINADES*. Many groups and spectators accompany them, with the purpose of waking everyone up. Some

associations, shops and citizens offer food and drinks to the people who walk, to ensure that they end up having a proper breakfast.

After having breakfast around 9:30 in the morning, there is the arrival of the INVITED GROUPS OF HUMAN TOWERS, dances, *grallers*, *falcons*, *castellers* and the musical groups, who accompany the Administrators from the Town hall to the Basilica of Santa Maria. Where they celebrate the SOLEMN MASS, in honour of St. Felix and witness the offering of all the groups.

After the solemn mass in the Basilica, the "human towers" erect their columns in front of the "Castellers monument". Afterwards, the Administrators, accompanied by the above-mentioned train of followers, head towards the council where they will preside over a short folkloric display of dances with the Town Authorities. The most important act of the day takes place after the dances display: THE DISPLAY OF HUMAN TOWERS organised by the best groups in the world in this field. Together, they make a huge effort to show that the expression "*Vilafranca, la Plaça més Castellera*" (Vilafranca, the best square for human towers), which is shown in one of the tiles of the square porch, remains true.

After a deliciously rich meal, the afternoon starts with a BAND CONCERT. After that, the TRADITIONAL PROCESSION OF ST. FELIX, formed by the usual procession, the Council authorities and many ex-administrators, as well as other citizens who want to accompany the image of the Saint, go out of St.Maria's Basilica. The procession finishes in the Basilica, where ST. FELIX ENTRANCE takes place. It is a very deep and intense moment. The simultaneous firework display, the evolution of the dances and the mix of "grallas" and music band sounds constitute a unique show.

After dinner, one must choose from a wide range of activities.

31st August.

Like the day before, the morning starts with the *MATINADES* which are only followed by those who still have some energy left.

At 9:30 takes place the act of accompanying the Administrators to the Basilica where the SOLEMN MASS is celebrated to commemorate the deceased of Vilafranca. Once the mass finishes, everyone goes to the Vila Square. There a FOLKLORIC EXHIBITION takes place. The 31st August is without any doubts the day of the dances. Many different kinds of dances are shown on top of a stage located in the centre of the Vila Square. Even though the dances are repeated every year, the evolution of the different dances is one of the most massively attended acts of the Festivity.

After that, the LOCAL HUMAN TOWER GROUPS make their last exhibition. When the act finishes, all the "grallers" (around 50) gather to play the *TOC DE VERMUT*, which they repeat until the end of the avenue. Meanwhile the people, hand on shoulder, are accompanied by the music and dance along to the melody.

In the evening, the last PROCESSION departs from St. Maria and, as we have already mentioned, from there it goes inside one of the Administrator's houses. From here the FIREWORKS will take place, accompanying the dances are the "human towers" and the music band.

At night the only dilemma is the same before: choosing among the different options -theatre, concerts, music, dances, etc.- offered in the Vila.

3.- Epilogue.

1st and 2nd September are the most relaxed days of the Festivity. The folkloric groups do not perform, but there are many shows and acts all around the Vila.

One of the most outstanding shows is the *CORREFOC* on 1st September. It is a wonderful display of fire and dance, which takes place in the most central streets of Vilafranca. The main characters are "The Devils and Ex devils of Vilafranca".

Above all the 2nd September is a day devoted to the children and for that reason the "FESTIVITY OF THE CHILDREN" takes place. There the children who do not belong to any of the groups of the Town Festivity gather to imitate the adult groups - and they cooperate in the passacaglia and in the Vila Square celebrations.

It is a small imitation of the "adult Town Festivity" which satisfies young and old people, as the proudly parents that watch their children parading the streets.

A spectacular FIREWORKS SHOW during the break of the CLOSING DANCE marks the end of the "most typical festivity of Catalonia".