

Episode 43: The Islamic Festival

Summary

Nick and Wendy recently went to the Portuguese town of Mértola to experience the Islamic Festival that is held there every two years. They talk about the markets and other activities of the festival.

Transcript

Nick: Today Wendy and I are coming to you from the small town of Mértola, which is in the Alentejo region of Portugal. And we're here because there's a big festival going on right now.

Wendy: There is!

Nick: And so it's quite exciting. It's an Islamic Festival, and they hold it only once every two years.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: And so we found out about it, uhh, just as we were moving to Portugal, and first I read that there was this festival that took place every two years and I wasn't quite sure exactly what the dates were, and then I found out that they were going to be holding the next one just a couple of months after we moved to Portugal, so the timing was really great.

Wendy: It was, and now we're here.

Nick: And so I think it's really interesting that they have this festival here for a couple of reasons. And the first is that obviously there's a lot of religious animosity¹ in the world, and so I think to have an Islamic festival in a Catholic country in Europe is just brilliant.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

¹ animosity: feeling of strong dislike

Nick: Umm, I think, you know, it helps people connect with other people from different cultures, it helps break down barriers², it helps people learn about the world and about the other people in the world and so I think it's really fantastic that they have it.

Wendy: Yeah, and especially with everything that's happening in the world right now. I think that kind of connection and interaction is more important than ever. Umm, and Mértola and this whole region, this whole part of Portugal, does have a strong Islamic heritage. Umm, obviously it is a Catholic area now but, uhh, it used to be, uhh, an Islamic place. It was ruled by the Moors, uhh, several centuries ago. And they seem to be quite proud of that heritage and to really be showcasing³ it, not only here at the festival but also in museums and other sites that are open year-round. We've visited a few of those and they really do hold onto that heritage and take pride in it which is great to see.

Nick: Yeah, and that was my second point as well, was that, yeah, it's not just a random town that they've chosen to hold this festival. It does have real Muslim roots, Muslim heritage here. And I think that's interesting as well because if you look at Spain, for example, if you look at Andalusia in Spain, the visual, umm, heritage of the Muslim the presence is so grand, because you have these incredible structures that are still there and they're some of the most famous things that you have in Spain, such as the Alhambra in Granada, the Mezquita in Córdoba, et cetera. And here in Portugal you don't really have these grand buildings that are still there, so the vestiges⁴ of the Muslim presence here are much less. And so I think it's important to have a festival like this to really bring it all together again.

Wendy: Mmm-hmm.

Nick: Because people don't have those reminders just by looking up at great buildings that they have in their towns that date from that era.

Wendy: Right, and it's not something that people often think of about Portugal, either, umm, whereas I would say that it is something that's very well known about Spain. It's ... especially in Andalusia and the southern areas of Spain, umm, the Muslim heritage is something that's a big part of the history and that's widely understood, and I wouldn't really say that that's true of Portugal.

Nick: And so as you said, it's not just the festival, but there are other things that they have here in Mértola which remind us about the past here. So there's an Islamic Art Museum, uhh, there's a Centre for Islamic Studies, and there are some small

² break down barriers (phrase): bring people together by eliminating obstacles between them

³ showcasing: putting on display

⁴ vestiges: remains, traces

remains which I don't think are open to the public but you can, if you go to the top of the castle, you can look down and see some ruins from what they call the *Bairro Islâmico*, so the Islamic neighbourhood of the town of Mértola.

Wendy: And also the main church here, umm, it is now a Catholic church but at one time it was a mosque and there's still evidence of that. There's actually a *mihrab*, umm, which is, uhh, the niche that indicates the direction for prayer, the direction of Mecca, umm, that's right there in the front of the church. And it's still being kept up, you know, you can still see vestiges of the decorations there. So you really do see, umm, these little reminders throughout the city.

Nick: And so all of this means that Mértola is a really great place for this festival. The one this year I believe is the ninth one, so they've been doing it since about 2000, and, as I said, it's once every two years. And so it lasts for four days, and they really do a fantastic job with it. It's not a half-hearted⁵ or a token⁶ effort at all, it's really a fully-fledged, fully-blown festival that they have. And basically walking around the town, you could easily be in Morocco.

Wendy: Yeah, yeah, that's pretty true. Except that there are not as many, like, you know, people trying to haggle⁷ with you and, uhh, trying to annoy you and getting ... convince you to buy their things. So it's a different atmosphere in that respect but otherwise, yeah, they basically turn the centre of the town into a *souq*, into, you know, a market. Umm, an ancient Muslim market, and they have ... the whole area is covered. Umm, the streets are ... they put tarps⁸ and old sheets and things, uhh, across the narrow streets, uhh, to make a kind of cover, which is nice because it does get hot here, umm, and so, yeah, it really feels very much like a covered market.

Nick: Right, so the old town of Mértola is these narrow streets and they've just all been completely taken over by this market. It's not just that it's one street, it's really quite a lot of them. And so you see all of these things for sale. There are just these stalls set up along the streets, and so, umm, you can buy anything you'd want that would be typical of a Muslim market. There are spices, there are, umm, bags and clothing and you can buy *shishas* and tagine pots and all these kind of things.

Wendy: Yeah, and nuts and dried fruits and, umm, yeah, clothing like you said. Also lamps, really beautiful, uhh, decorative lamps. Umm, yeah, lots of things that you would see in Morocco or in, uhh, Turkey, in other places that we've been.

⁵ half-hearted: unenthusiastic

⁶ token (as an adjective): just for show with no real depth

⁷ haggle: debate between the seller and the buyer about the price of an item

⁸ tarps (short for *tarpaulins*): protective cover for the ground or on a roof

Nick: So we bought a few things. We bought some spices which seem to be hard to get, uhh, in Lisbon, and then you bought some clothes.

Wendy: I did, yeah, I'm not usually one to go shopping but, uhh, they had really beautiful clothes here, and they are the kinds of clothes that I tend to like, the long, flowing dresses and skirts, and they were beautiful and they were reasonably priced too, so I did pick up a few things.

Nick: And we also bought a small carpet for our house.

Wendy: Of course, yeah.

Nick: As you do.

Wendy: You have to buy a carpet.

Nick: And so ... but it's not just about commercial activity. I mean that's kind of the visual heart of this festival but there are also lots of activities and events going on throughout each day as well. And we went to one yesterday morning that I thought was really great. It was just a ... it was at the library here in town and it was a storytelling session for young kids. So there were two groups of schoolchildren and they were, what, five or six years old?

Wendy: They were very young, yeah. I'd say no older than that.

Nick: Uhh, and so we went along. We were the only adults who weren't parents of these children who went there but, umm, you know, my level of Portuguese is akin to⁹ about a five or six-year-old anyway, and so, uhh, the stories were quite, umm, appropriate for my level. Umm, but the storyteller, before she told her stories which were about camels and other, kind of, desert and Muslim stories like that, umm, she said to the children, 'So you know what's happening here? There's this festival.' She said, 'And so the people that are here that you're seeing, they're a little bit different, aren't they? They have different clothing and they were different things on their heads and they're not like us, are they?' But then she kind of brought that around and basically in the end said, 'You know, even though they do look different, we're all the same in the end.' And I thought that was a really nice message for the kids to get.

Wendy: Yeah.

⁹ akin to: similar to, the same as

Nick: Umm, going back to what we were talking about right at the beginning which was bringing people together and bringing different cultures together and having them be exposed to that at a young age I think is really nice.

Wendy: Yeah, absolutely.

Nick: And so there's lots of other things going on as well. There are some academic presentations, there are dance performances and all sorts of things, so, umm, we're just here on the Thursday and the Friday and I think it'll get even more crowded and busy on the weekend but it was actually really hard to get accommodation, because it's a small town and then everybody just descends on¹⁰ the town during this festival so it's hard to find places to sleep.

Wendy: Yeah, and we actually have quite unusual accommodation, umm, which was basically the only thing that we could find. So we didn't really realise what kind of place it was but we're actually staying in, like a, uhh, a sports centre. There's a gym and there's a swimming club here and so if we want to take a shower we have to go to the communal shower that, you know, people who are using the gym also use. So, and we have a room with two bunk beds in it. Uhh, so, you know, it's not a romantic boutique hotel, but it's what we needed. We just needed a place to sleep so it works out fine.

Nick: Yeah, it's basically all we could get and so this is the only way that we could come here and enjoy the festival and it's been completely worth it in the end.

Wendy: Definitely.

¹⁰ descends on: converges on, goes in great numbers to (unrelated, in this usage, to going downhill)

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the two reasons Nick gives for the importance of the Islamic Festival?
2. What did Nick and Wendy buy at the market?
3. What was the important message that local children heard at the storytelling session?

Exercises

Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.

1. We're _____ our latest products at a trade fair this weekend. People will be able to test and buy them.
2. If you go to Morocco and want to buy things at the markets, you have to be prepared to _____, otherwise you'll pay too much.
3. If it rains during a tennis match, the grounds crew roll _____ onto the court to protect the surface.
4. During the Muslim *hajj* (pilgrimage), everybody _____ Mecca, the birthplace of Muhammed. It's the biggest gathering of people in the world.
5. It was a very _____ effort by their team. They were hardly even trying.
6. His dinner plate consisted of an enormous steak with some side potatoes as the _____ vegetable.
7. She doesn't get on at all with her mother-in-law. There's a lot of _____ there.
8. The Egyptian city of Alexandria was one of the great cities of the ancient world, but nowadays there aren't many _____ from that era that you can still see.
9. Multicultural companies organising social outings is a great way to _____ between employees who come from different backgrounds.
10. Even though he didn't like her and actively tried to get her fired, he felt something _____ guilt when she lost her job.

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. What do you think about having an Islamic festival in a Christian country?
2. Have you ever been to a typical market in a Muslim country such as Morocco, Egypt or Turkey? If so, what was it like? If not, what do you imagine it would be like?
3. How important do you think it is for towns and regions to celebrate their past like Mértola does with the Islamic Festival?

Answers

Comprehension Questions

1. He thinks it's important because it helps connect people from different cultures during a time of religious animosity and because it helps highlight the history of Mértola.
2. They bought spices and a carpet, and Wendy bought some clothes.
3. That while people from different cultures may seem different in appearance, they are not that different in the end.

Exercises

1. showcasing
2. haggle
3. tarps
4. descends on
5. half-hearted
6. token
7. animosity
8. vestiges
9. break down barriers
10. akin to