

The Best of Barcelona

With its agricultural wealth, excellent harbor, and industrious population, Barcelona has always managed to flourish through both good times and bad. When Madrid was still a dusty Castilian hamlet, the *Ciudad Condal* (as it's popularly known) was a powerful, diverse capital with a Mediterranean empire that extended as far as Athens. Influenced over the centuries by Romans, Visigoths, Franks, and even Castilians, it absorbed a little of each of their influences to become the fascinatingly complete city it is today.

Landmark Gothic buildings and world-class museums fill the historic center, and the whimsical creations of the *modernisme* movement and cutting-edge contemporary architecture line the wide boulevards of the newer city. An array of nightlife (Barcelona is a *big* party town) and shopping possibilities, plus nearby wineries, ensure that you'll be entertained 'round the clock. It makes for some serious sightseeing; you'll need plenty of time to take them all in and just as much to appreciate the city's unique, hidden charm.

The surrounding green and fertile countryside is equally enticing and the cove-indented Costa Brava coastline to the north boasts some of the loveliest scenery in all the Mediterranean. Inland, the towering Pyrénées mountain range that separates the province from France is a paradise for walkers and skiers. In all it's a stimulating and rewarding region to savor and appreciate to the full, and one of the most richly varied in the country.

1 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE BARCELONA EXPERIENCES

- **Strolling Along La Rambla:** Barcelona's most famous promenade pulses with life. The array of living statues, street musicians, performers, hustlers, and eccentrics ensure there is never a dull moment during your kilometer-long stroll. See p. 71.
- **Having a Drink at Sunset on the Beach:** The Catalan capital's 4-mile stretch of new city beaches, whose promenade, jetties, and marinas are lapped by inviting Mediterranean waters, have been transformed from a once-neglected area into a round-the-clock international playground. Their atmospheric *chiringuitos* (waterside bars and eating spots specializing in seafood dishes) are perfect spots either for lunch or a relaxing end-of-day drink, often accompanied by the music of an in-house DJ. See p. 252.
- **Exploring the El Born Neighborhood:** This compact medieval quarter just inland from Barceloneta was once a labyrinth of earthy artisan workshops. Now the "in" crowds converge on its narrow tangle of streets lined by renovated old mansions: by day to check out top museums like the Picasso and smart shops exhibiting the latest in cutting-edge fashion and design; at night to enjoy the plethora of bars and restaurants offering the ultimate in New Catalan cuisine. See p. 211.

- **Attending a Concert at the Palau de la Música Catalana:** This masterpiece of *modernista* (Art Nouveau) architecture must be one of the most lavish concert halls in the world. All strains of classical and jazz are played, but even the most finicky music lover will be moved by the Palau's onslaught of decorative detail. See p. 179.
- **Eating Breakfast at the Boqueria:** There are about a dozen bars and restaurants in the city's main food market, one of the largest and most colorful in Spain. It's become fashionable these days and you can now rub shoulders with Barcelona's top chefs and gourmands over a coffee and croissant as you watch the day's deliveries coming in. See p. 255.
- **Bar-Hopping in the Barri Gòtic:** Whether it's an iconic, smoke-filled tapas bar, an Irish pub frequented by expats, or a cocktail lounge filled with minimalist furniture and minimally clad patrons, Barcelona's Old City is a watering-hole mecca, bar none. One of the best locales is **Ginger**, a comfy, classy tapas and wine bar with the feel of a private club. See p. 249.
- **Spending a Sunday on Montjuïc:** The sharply rising hill of Montjuïc is the first sight that greets visitors arriving at the port. Behind its rocky seaside face are acres of pine-dotted parkland beloved by cyclists, joggers, and strollers on the weekend. Topped by a castle museum with stunning city views, it provides a tranquil alternative to the hustle of the city below and offers some welcome breathing space. See p. 191.
- **Taking a Trip to Tibidabo by Tram and Funicular:** The summit of the city's distinctive inland backdrop is reached in two stages: first by a "blue tram" (*tram-via blau*), which winds past Sarrià district's elegant houses, and then by a creaky Art Deco funicular lift, which rattles its way up the mountainside to

reveal increasingly breathtaking views of the city below. Both of these vintage forms of transport were built over a century ago to transport people to the church and amusement park on the mountain's peak. The exhilarating journey they provide is part of the fun. See p. 203.

- **Dining at Els Quatre Gats:** The original acted as a fraternity house for late-18th-century dandies. It later became a preferred hangout for the young Picasso and his Bohemian contemporaries. While most of the art adorning the walls is now reproductions, this classic Catalan restaurant is still alive with history. The resident pianist and general formality only add to the atmosphere. See p. 134.
- **Taking Your First Glance at the Sagrada Família:** Nothing quite prepares you for the first glimpse of Gaudí's most famous work, which erupts from the center of a suburban city block like some retro-futurist grotto. Draw your eyes skyward from a facade rich in religious symbolism to the temple's four towers. Then step over the threshold to the unfinished interior. See p. 184.
- **People-Watching at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA):** The forecourt of the Museum of Contemporary Art is a snapshot of the new multicultural Barcelona. Spend some time at one of its outside bars watching Pakistani cricket players, local kids playing soccer, and Northern European skateboarders in a fascinating melting pot of recreational activity. See p. 181.
- **Staying Up Until Dawn:** A long dinner, a few drinks at a bar, on to a club, and then before you know it the sun is rising over the Mediterranean's party capital, throwing a warm glow over the city's palm-filled plazas and streets. Nothing beats a slow walk home at this magical hour (preferably through the Old City). If you manage to catch up on your sleep

during the day, chances are you will repeat the experience that night.

- **Looking Up at the Torre Agbar:** Even more controversial than the Sagrada Família when it first appeared, this 470-foot multi-hued phallic-shaped tower erupts surrealistically from the otherwise bland cityscape around the Plaça

de Glòries. The tower was built by architect Jean Nouvel in honor of the city's 2004 Forum. It has over 4,000 multiform light-reflecting windows and currently houses the offices of the Barcelona Water Board. You get a great view of it from the top of Montjuïc. See p. 11.

2 THE BEST SPLURGE HOTELS

- **Hotel 1898,** La Rambla 109 (€ 93-552-95-52): This deluxe hideaway in the Barri Gòtic is a 19th-century building that's been updated with some ultra-sharp interior decor that includes lavish colors on each floor. See p. 99.
- **Hotel Casa Fuster,** Passeig de Gràcia 132 (€ 93-225-30-00): This *modernista* masterpiece was an emblematic building *before* it was recently converted into this luxury five-star. The rooms have been restored to turn-of-the-20th-century opulence, but now have all the modern conveniences. See p. 106.
- **Hotel Arts,** Marina 19–21 (€ 93-221-10-00): The preferred choice of top

models and temperamental rock stars, the Hotel Arts has remained a jet-set playground and symbol of “cool Barcelona” for well over a decade. See p. 122.

- **Hotel España,** Sant Pau 11 (€ 93-318-17-58): This hotel combines comfort and luxury with the evocation of a bygone age. Designed by a contemporary of Gaudí's, the street-level dining room, filled with florid motif and brass fixtures, will whisk you back to the early 1900s, when it was filled with chattering patrons taking supper after a trip to the opera house next door. See p. 104.

3 THE BEST MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS

- **Hotel Peninsular,** Sant Pau 34–36 (€ 93-302-31-38): Serenity and character abound in this nunnery-turned-hotel. Located on a colorful street just off La Rambla, it features an Art Nouveau elevator and a lush inner courtyard that make it feel like a refuge from the hustle and bustle outside. It's understandably popular, so book ahead. See p. 104.
- **Hostal D'Uxelles,** Gran Vía 688 and 667 (€ 93-265-25-60): This *hostal* looks like it has stepped straight off the pages of one of those rustic-interiors magazines. Located on the first floor of

two adjacent buildings, each of the 14 rooms has a distinct character, but all include canopied beds, antique furniture, and Andalusian-style ceramic bathrooms. See p. 115.

- **Marina Folch,** Carrer del Mar 16, principal (€ 93-310-37-09): This small family-run hotel is your best low-cost option in the beachside neighborhood of Barceloneta, where there are plenty of outdoor bars and open spaces for the kids to run wild. Ask for a room at the front for a balcony with a view of the port. See p. 124.

4 THE MOST UNFORGETTABLE DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Having a Paella at the Beach:** This is one of the quintessential Barcelona experiences, and there is no place better to do it than **Can Majó**, Almirall Aixada 23 (☎ 93-221-54-55). Right on the seafront, this restaurant prides itself on its paellas and *fideuàs* (which replace noodles for rice) and is an established favorite among the city's well-heeled families. See p. 164.
- **Tasting the Cuisine of Catalonia's Top Chef:** Carles Abellán has been hailed as one of the most innovative chefs of nouvelle Catalan cuisine. His restaurant, **Comerç 24**, Comerç 24 (☎ 93-319-21-02), was conceived as a playful take on all that's hot in the tapas world. Delights such as "kinder egg surprise" (a soft-boiled egg with truffle-infused yolk) and an intensely flavored mini *suquet* (fish stew) will tempt you. See p. 140.
- **Partaking in a Sunday Dining Tradition:** The lines say it all: **7 Portes**, Passeig Isabel II 14 (☎ 93-319-30-33), one of the oldest restaurants in Barcelona, is a Sunday institution. Extended families dine on their excellent meat and fish dishes in the turn-of-the-20th-century atmosphere. See p. 162.
- **Sampling the Finest Regional Dishes:** In spite of its Italian name, the **Via Veneto**, Ganduxer 10 (☎ 93-200-72-44), is traditional to the core, serving up some of the finest Catalan cooking in the land. The restaurant exudes old-fashioned class. One of the serving methods, such as the sterling silver duck press, seems to belong to another century (as do some of the clients). See p. 167.
- **Eating the Freshest Seafood in Barcelona:** You'll find it at **Els Pescadors**, Plaça Prim 1 (☎ 93-225-20-18), in the atmospheric working-class beachside suburb of Poble Nou. People come here for the food—not the view—to sample prawns, whitebait, or *dorada* (bream). They serve whatever has been caught that day. Book ahead on weekends (p. 161).
- **Trying a Tasting Menu:** Tasting menus, a series of small gourmet dishes resembling deluxe tapas, are all the rage. They can be expensive, though, so if you want the best value head to **Coure**, Pasaje Marimón 20 (☎ 93-200-75-32), in Gràcia and sample chef Albert Ventura's offerings, which include such exquisite delights as lime-flavored tuna and eucalyptus *helado* (ice cream). See p. 156.

5 THE BEST THINGS TO DO FOR FREE

- **Enjoying the Freebie Cultural Treats:** Top visits here are the **Foment de les Arts i del Disseny (FAD)** cultural center, where you can view exhibitions and sometimes buy bargain paintings by promising young unknowns (p. 181); and **Caixaforum** art gallery, which has an ever-changing trio of stimulating exhibitions (p. 191). Around the city you'll find an impressive variety of open-air **public art** displays: Antoni Llena's bizarre metal **David i Goliath**, Frank Gehry's copper **Peix** (Fish) in the Olympic Port, and Colombian sculptor Fernando Botero's rather chubby **Gat** (Cat) in El Raval. There's also Roy Lichtenstein's trademark comic strip-style **Barcelona Head**, near the Columbus statue down by the harbor, and Joan Miró's **Dona i Ocell** (Woman and

Bird), finished in 1981 just before his death, and located in the park named after him in Sants.

- **Strolling in the Parks:** Despite its densely urban appearance, Barcelona is actually filled with parks where you can relax, stroll, and in many cases enjoy fun amenities. (Visit the website www.bcn.es/parcsijardins for the full list.) **Parc de la Ciutadella**, just to the east of the Old City, with its fountains and statues is a relaxing respite from the adjoining claustrophobic medieval labyrinth (p. 179), while **Parc Güell**, higher up in Gràcia district, delights visitors of all ages with its fairy-tale Gaudí structures (p. 189). In Montbau, the **Parc de la Crueta del Coll** has a playground and public summer pool (which in winter reverts to being an artificial lake). To the west, rambling hilltop **Montjuïc**—with its marvelous harbor views, jogging paths, the **Fundació Joan Miró Museum**, **Botanical Gardens**, and illuminated **Font Màgica** (magic fountain)—is a spacious kaleidoscope of greenery and

cultural and sporting attractions. Less well known and more “countrified” is the **Parc d'en Castell de l'Oreneta**, just above the Pedralbes Monastery, where you can enjoy marvelous panoramic city and coastal views as you wander along signposted trails among meadows.

- **Taking in the Ecclesiastical Gems:** The city is full of amazing historical and religious monuments, and many of them are free. For example, unlike in most of Spain's major cities, there is no charge for visiting the **Catedral** (p. 172), though there is a fee for its museum. Other monumental treats are the **Capella de Sant Jordi** (p. 175), and churches of **La Mercé** (p. 174) and **Santa Maria del Pi** (p. 175), each of which makes its own unique contribution to the spiritual and architectural beauty of the city and shows you another aspect of its rich history. Another marvel is the **Santa Maria del Mar** church in the Born section of La Ribera (p. 212).

6 THE BEST STUFF TO BRING HOME

- **Leather:** Leather has long been one of Spain's most highly valued products, and best buys range from stylish belts and handbags to handmade shoes and fine jackets. The top spot for such purchases in Barcelona is **Loewe**, which mails its goods throughout the world (p. 233).
- **Ceramics and Pottery:** Though this is not a Barcelona specialty, you'll find a wide selection of ceramic vases, dishes, and jugs from Valencia, some of which have the style and finesse of fine art. There's also plenty of choices from areas such as Toledo and Seville. **Artesania i Coses** near the Picasso Museum is a good place to browse (p. 236).
- **Porcelain:** Most popular and widely available ornaments in this field are made by the Valencian company Lladró, similar in style to the Italian Capodimonte. Though considered rather twee by some, they're extremely popular with the majority of visitors. **Kastoria**, at Avinguda Catedral, is the place to check out statuettes and friezes (p. 236).
- **Antiques:** If you're looking for some interesting traditional engravings, carvings, or just simple bric-a-brac to take home, you have plenty of options. The best (and most expensive) locale is the three-story **Sala d'Art Artur Ramón** in the Ciutat Vella (p. 223).

- **Hats:** If you yearn to stroll around at home in a genuine wide-brimmed Spanish *sombrero* or a traditional low-key

campesino's beret, the place to look is **Sombrería Obach** in the old Jewish quarter of El Call (p. 232).

7 THE BEST ACTIVITIES FOR FAMILIES

- **In the City:** Anything by Antoni Gaudí, the city's most famous architect, immediately appeals to young eyes and imaginations. His whimsical **Parc Güell** (p. 189), with its imagery from the animal kingdom and hidden grottoes, is a particular favorite. Speaking of animals, the city's world-class **Aquarium** (p. 197), with its walk-through tunnels and superb collection of Mediterranean marine life, is also a good bet. The somewhat older and less-funded **Parc Zoològic** (p. 180) has a fantastic primate collection and is located in the **Parc de la Ciutadella** (p. 179), which also boasts a lake with rowboats for hire, swings, and other assorted kiddie attractions. Museum-wise, a trip to the **Maritime Museum** (p. 198), with its 16th-century galley and early submarine, could be combined with a jaunt on **Las Golondrinas** (p. 206), quaint, double-decker pleasure boats that take you from the port to the breakwater. The **Museu de la Cera (Wax Museum;** p. 174) may not be up to the standard of its counterpart in London, but is interesting enough to make it worth a visit. Older children will also find the **Chocolate Museum** (p. 177) enticing, and the **Science Museum** (p. 199) has excellent hands-on exhibits for all ages. Then, of course, there are the beaches—most with showers, toilets, bars, and hammocks for hire. **Happy Park** (p. 205) in L'Eixample, just off the Passeig de Gràcia, is a vast indoor all-weather fun park where teenies can

enjoy twister slides, ball pools, and other fun activities. There's also a day care center for tots.

- **On the Outskirts:** An all-time favorite is the **Parc d'Atraccions Tibidabo** (p. 203). This veteran amusement park, perched on top of the city's highest peak, provides death-defying attractions and a few gentler ones from bygone days. The **Parc del Laberint d' Horta** (p. 204), meanwhile, is a neoclassical park on the outskirts of the city; and up in the Zona Alta above Pedralbes, the **Parc del Castell de l'Oreneta** has miniature train rides, weekend pony canters, and playgrounds with games for kids.
- **Further Afield:** In Torrelles de Llobregat, just 5 miles out of town, you'll find **Catalunya en Miniatura**, a Lilliputian mock-up of Barcelona and its province that includes a tiny Sagrada Família and Girona cathedral. A suitably dwarf-size train transports young passengers, and there are daily shows by clowns. At Vilassar de Dalt, 15 miles north of Barcelona, is the **Illa Fantasia** (Fantasy Island), a lively and spacious aquatic park with water slides, picnic areas, and a host of children's games and competitions. Visit www.illafantasia.com for more information. **Montserrat** (p. 260), Catalonia's "spiritual heart," offers plenty of walking tracks amid its phantasmagoric terrain of huge rocks and outcrops, caves, and, of course, the monumental monastery.

8 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC):** Located in the imposing Palau Nacional on the northern edge of Montjuïc, this museum overlooks the Font Màgica and is arguably one of the greatest repositories of Romanesque religious works in the world. Many of the icons and frescoes have been moved here from tiny churches high up in the Pyrénées where replicas now fill the spaces they originally occupied. Gothic styles are also well represented, and more recently there have been *moderniste* additions—many taken from the Manzana de la Discordia (p. 194).
- **Fundació Joan Miró:** This museum contains Spain's best collection of the famed Catalan contemporary artist's works (all donated by the great man himself). The museum is tucked away on Montjuïc Hill in a location that enjoys marvelous vistas of port and city from its roof terrace, where there's an attractive sculpture garden. Concerts take place here in summer. Highlights are the **Foundation Tapestry** and **Mercury Fountain**, by his American sculptor friend Alexander Calder (p. 192).
- **Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA):** This is Catalonia's answer to Paris' Pompidou Center, and it's right in the heart of the earthy yet

partially gentrified Raval district, beside a lively square filled with students, passersby, and noisy skateboard fans. It has one of the best collections of modern art in Spain, featuring works by Tàpies and Barcelò; there's also a library, bookshop, and cafeteria (p. 181).

- **The Picasso Museum:** One of the most visited cultural spots in the city, this museum is mainly dedicated to works by the younger Picasso which have been collected and assembled by his friend Jaume Sabartés y Gual. It spreads through a quintet of medieval palaces in La Ribera's atmospheric Calle Montcada. The artist donated many of the works himself, and highlights include the famed *Las Meninas* and *The Harlequin* (p. 178).
- **Museu Frederic Marés:** This charming old palace of secret patios and high ceilings houses one of the most richly varied collections of medieval sculptures in the world, all donated by Marés—a talented sculptor himself. Exhibits can be viewed on two floors—which open on alternative days—and range from polychromatic Roman crucifixes and Gothic statues to a "Ladies' Room" filled with Victorian knickknacks, and "Museu Sentimental" dedicated to Barcelona over the past 2 centuries (p. 174).