

THE BEST OF BARCELONA

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Barcelona is unlike any other Spanish city. Its entrepreneurial energy and artistic creativity have shone through even in the hardest times, and its complex and brilliant cultural world is the envy of the country, although arch-rival Madrid would be the last to admit this. Gothic buildings and world-class museums fill the historic center, while the whimsical creations of the *modernisme* movement and cutting-edge contemporary architecture line the wide boulevards of the newer city.

You'll find more sophisticated shops, avant-garde restaurants, and sleek hotels here than anywhere else in Spain, plus an eclectic nightlife that extends way around the clock.

Nature, too, plays a surprisingly prominent role. Wooded hills enclose the Catalan capital, oasis-like parks alleviate the urban sprawl, and sandy beaches extend north from Barcelona's lively port area. North toward France the cove-indented Costa Brava offers what many regard as the loveliest scenery in all the Mediterranean, while inland the towering Pyrénées boasts some of the finest mountain walks and skiing in Europe.

So what really rates as the "best" in and around this ever-changing, 21st-century city? Where are the real high spots among all those Gothic and *moderniste* gems? Where can you savor a truly fabulous meal? Where's the chicest place to bed down? Which nightspot is the place of the moment? Where to shop until you drop? And which particular aspect of Barcelona's magical Mediterranean setting stays with you forever?

Here are our personal choices.

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 ensures there is never a dull moment during your kilometer-long stroll. Don't forget to stop and drink the water at the historic Canaletas fountain halfway down. It's said those who drink here will return to the city. See p. 62.
- **Having a Drink on the Beach at Sunset:** The Catalan capital's 6km (4 miles) stretch of new city beaches, where the 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 *chiriguitos* (waterside bars and eating spots specializing in seafood dishes) are perfect spots for either lunch or a relaxing end-of-day drink, often accompanied by the music of an in-house DJ. See p. 76.
- **Exploring the El Born Neighborhood:** This compact medieval quarter just inland from Barceloneta was once a labyrinth of earthy artisan workshops. Now a cool crowd converges on its narrow tangle of streets lined with 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. 204.
- **Attending a Concert at the Palau de la Música Catalana:** This masterpiece of *moderniste* (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. 240.
- **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 the height of fashion these days, and in the early morning you can rub shoulders with Barcelona's top chefs and gourmands over coffee and croissants as you watch the day's deliveries coming in. See p. 226.
- **Bar-Hopping in the Barri Gòtic:** Whether it's an iconic tapas bar, a traditional *cava* bar, or a cocktail lounge filled with minimalist furniture and minimally clad patrons, Barcelona's Ciutat Vella (Old City) is a watering-hole mecca, bar none. One of the best choices is Mam i Teca, a dinky Raval delight with the accent on revamped Catalan specialties. See p. 243.
- **Spending a Sunday on Montjuïc:** The sharply rising hill of Montjuïc is the first sight that greets visitors arriving at the port. Behind the rocky slopes facing the sea are acres of pine-dotted parkland beloved by cyclists, joggers, and strollers on the weekend. Topped by the castle-museum of El Museu Militar de Montjuïc, which has stunning city views, its slopes provide a tranquil alternative to the hustle of the city below and offer welcome breathing space. The most exhilarating way to get up there is by the spectacular Transbordador Aeri cable car (p. 189), which swings high above the harbor from Barceloneta, giving views over sea and city. See p. 183.

- **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 the Tramvia Blau (Blue Tram), which winds past the 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 the Parc d'Atraccions del Tibidabo, Barcelona's famous amusement park, on the mountain's peak. The exhilarating journey up to the top is all part of the fun. See p. 48.
- **Dining at Els Quatre Gats:** The original bar at Els Quatre Gats acted as a fraternity house for late-18th-century dandies. It later became the preferred hang-out for the young Picasso and his bohemian contemporaries. While most of the art adorning the walls is now reproduction, this classic Catalan restaurant is still alive with history. The resident pianist and general formality only add to the atmosphere. See p. 127.
- **Taking Your First Glance at the Sagrada Família:** Nothing quite prepares you for the first glimpse of Gaudí's most famous work; the cathedral erupts from the center of a suburban city block like some retro-futurist grotto. Look closely at the facade covered in religious symbolism and before stepping over the threshold into the undulating, unfinished interior. See p. 176.
- **People-Watching outside 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 the multinational local kids playing cricket, soccer, and skateboarding in a fascinating melting pot of recreational activity. See p. 173.
- **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 Barcelona's palm-filled plazas and streets. Nothing beats a lazy walk home through the Ciutat Vella (Old City) at this magical hour. See p. 236.
- **Seeing the Torre Agbar Lit Up by Night:** Even more controversial than the Sagrada Família when it first appeared, this 140-m (460-feet)-high, multi-hued, phallic-shaped tower erupts surreally from the otherwise bland cityscape around the Plaça de les Glòries. The tower was built by architect Jean Nouvel in honor of the city's Forum, the conference center that opened to great fanfare in 2004. 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. 24.
- **Walking in the Collserola Hills:** You'd think you were a hundred miles from the city as you wander along endless trails through lush oak and pine forests. That is, until you get one of those breathtaking views of the city way below through the trees. Tucked away in the midst of all the greenery is a tiny museum, once the summer villa of 19th-century Catalan poet Jacint Verdaguer. A half-hour FGC train ride to Baixada de Vallvidrera drops you right on the edge of this leafy wonderland. See p. 81.

- **Taking a Day Trip to Tossa de Mar:** This quintessential Costa Brava resort, complete with tiny intact old town and a perfect pine-fringed crescent beach, has kept its character in spite of the tourist invasion. Some of the Mediterranean magic that the likes of Marc Chagall, Ava Gardner, and James Mason found here in the 1950s still lingers on. It's only an hour away by bus from the Estació Nort, so you'll even have time to take in a short *crucero* (boat trip) along the rugged coast, popping in and out of sea caves lapped by pellucid waters. See p. 287.

THE best **SPLURGE HOTELS**

- **Hotel Arts Barcelona**, Marina 19–21 (☎ 93-221-10-00; www.hotelartsbarcelona.com): 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. 115.
- **Hotel Casa Fuster**, Passeig de Gràcia 132 (☎ 93-225-30-00; www.hotelescenter.es/casafuster): This *moderniste* masterpiece was an emblematic building before it was converted into this luxury five-star hotel. The rooms have been restored to turn-of-the-20th-century opulence, and its clubby VIP ambience makes you feel very special. Impeccable service and extra touches like fresh flowers in your room add to the agreeable sensation of being pampered. See p. 98.
- **Hotel España**, Sant Pau 9-11 (☎ 93-318-17-58; www.hotelespanya.com): 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 motifs 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. 97.
- **Mandarin Oriental**, Passeig de Gràcia 38-40 (☎ 93-151-88-88; www.mandarinoriental.com/barcelona): One of the newest additions to the city's truly luxurious waterholes, this elegant “East meets West” hostelry is part of the famed worldwide Mandarin chain. The sumptuous interiors were created by top Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola, and its Thai-style spa facilities are among the best in town. See p. 103.

THE best **MODERATELY PRICED HOTELS**

- **Gat Raval**, Joaquín Costa 44, 1st floor (☎ 93-481-66-70): Cool, chic and stylish (although you may have to share a bathroom), the spotless and colorful Gat Raval is a great bargain stopover choice in the Ciutat Vella's liveliest and most richly international quarter. See p. 96.
- **Hostal D'Uxelles**, Gran Vía 688 and 667 (☎ 93-265-25-60; www.hotelduxelles.com): 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. 109.

- **Hotel Peninsular**, Sant Pau 34 (☎ 93-302-31-38; www.hotelpeninsular.net): 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. 97.
- **Marina Folch**, Carrer del Mar 16, principal (☎ 93-310-37-09; www.hotelmarinafolchbcn.com): 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. 116.

THE most unforgettable DINING EXPERIENCES

- **Having a Paella Overlooking the Harbor:** Ignore the pushy neighboring eating spots on Barceloneta's main portside boulevard and give yourself to a seafood treat at the homely, laidback Puda Can Manel, Passeig Don Joan Borbó Comte 60 (☎ 93-221-50-13). The succulent paellas and *fideuàs* (seafood with noodles instead of rice) are the genuine article and also excellent value, which is why you see so many locals here, especially on Sundays. See p. 157.
- **Tasting the Cuisine of Catalonia's Top Chef:** Still the talk of the town, Carles Abellán has long been hailed as one of the most innovative chefs of New Catalan cuisine. His restaurant, **Comerc 24**, Comerc 24 (☎ 93-319-21-02, comerc24.com.mialias.net), 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) continue to exert their gourmet siren appeal. See p. 133.
- **Partaking in a Sunday Dining Tradition:** The lines say it all: **7 Portes**, Passeig Isabel II 14 (☎ 93-319-30-33; www.7portes.com), one of the oldest restaurants in Barcelona, is a Sunday institution. Extended families dine on excellent meat and fish dishes in a turn-of-the-20th-century atmosphere. See p. 154.
- **Sampling the Finest Regional Dishes:** In spite of its Italian name, the **Via Veneto**, Ganduxer 10 (☎ 93-200-72-44; www.viavenetorestaurant.com), is traditional to the core, serving up some of the finest Catalan cooking in the land. The restaurant exudes old-fashioned class. The serving methods, such as the sterling-silver duck press, seem to belong to another century—as do some of the clients. See p. 150.
- **Eating the Freshest Seafood in Barcelona:** You'll find it at **Els Pescadors**, Plaça Prim 1 (☎ 93-225-20-18; www.elspescadors.com), 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. See p. 153.

- **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. 148.

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; and **Caixaforum** art gallery, which has an ever-changing trio of stimulating exhibitions. Around the city you'll find an impressive variety of open-air public art displays: Antoni Llena's bizarre metal *David i Goliat* in Plaça dels Voluntaris, Frank Gehry's copper *Peix* (Fish) in Port Olímpic, 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. See chapter 7, "What to See & Do."
- **Wandering Around 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, while Parc Güell, higher up in Gràcia district, delights visitors of all ages with its fairy-tale Gaudí structures. 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, Botanical Gardens, and illuminated Font Màgica (Magic Fountain)—is a spacious kaleidoscope of greenery and cultural and sporting attractions. Less well known and more rural is the **Parc d'en Castell de l'Oreneta**, just above the Monastir (monastery) de Pedralbes, where you can enjoy marvelous panoramic city and coastal views as you wander along signposted trails among meadows. See chapter 7, "What to See & Do."
- **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**, although there is a fee for its museum. Other monumental treats are the **Capella de Sant Jordi**, and the churches of **La Mercè** and **Santa Maria del Pi**, each of which makes its own special 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. See chapter 7, "What to See & Do."

THE best STUFF TO BRING HOME

- **Leather:** Leather is 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** (p. 228). An economy-conscious choice is **Acosta** at Avinguda Diagonal 262. This family-run chain offers a well-priced selection of leather goods. See p. 228.
- **Ceramics & 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 are also plenty of choices from areas such as Toledo and Seville. **Artesania i Coses** near the Picasso Museum is a good place to browse. See p. 231.
- **Porcelain:** The 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. See p. 231.
- **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) option is the three-story **Sala d'Art Artur Ramón** in the Ciutat Vella. See p. 218.
- **Hats:** If you yearn to stroll around at home in a genuine Catalan *barretina* (cap) or a traditional low-key campesino's beret, the place to look is **Sombrería Obach** in the old Jewish quarter of El Call. See p. 227.

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**, with its imagery from the animal kingdom and hidden grottoes, is a particular favorite. Speaking of animals, the city's world-class Aquarium, with its walk-through tunnels and superb collection of Mediterranean marine life, is also a good bet. The **Parc Zoològic** has a fantastic primate collection and is located in the **Parc de la Ciutadella**, which also boasts a lake with rowboats for hire, swings, and other assorted kiddies' attractions. Museum-wise, a trip to the Maritime Museum, with its 16th-century galley and early submarine, could be combined with a jaunt on **Las Golondrinas**—quaint, double-decker pleasure boats that take you from the port to the breakwater. The **Museu de la Cera** (Wax Museum) 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 **Museu de la Xocolata** (Chocolate Museum) enticing, and the **Museu de la Ciència** (Science Museum) has excellent hands-on exhibits for all ages. Then, of course, there are the beaches—most with showers, toilets, bars, and recliners

for hire. **Happy Park** in L'Eixample, just off the Passeig de Gràcia, is a vast indoor all-weather fun park where tots can enjoy twister slides, ball pools, and other fun activities. There's also a day-care center for tots. See chapter 7, "What to See & Do."

- **On the Outskirts:** An all-time favorite is the **Parc d'Atraccions Tibidabo**. 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**, 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. See chapter 7, "What to See & Do."
- **Further Afield:** In Torrelles de Llobregat, just 8km (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, 24km (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**, 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. See chapter 11, "Side Trips In Catalonia."

THE best MUSEUMS

- **Fundació Joan Miró:** This museum contains Spain's best collection of the famed surrealist Catalan'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. See p. 184.
- **Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA):** This is Catalonia's answer to Paris's Pompidou Centre, 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 cafe. See p. 173.
- **Museu Frederic Marès:** This charming old palace of secret patios and high ceilings houses one of the most richly varied collections of medieval sculpture in the world, all donated by Marès—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 knick-knacks, and a Museu Sentimental dedicated to Barcelona over the past 2 centuries. See p. 166.

- **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 (Magic Fountain, p. 188) 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. See p. 186.
- **Museu Picasso:** 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*. See p. 169.