

The Best of Barcelona

Not since the 14th century, when the Catalan capital was the most powerful city in the Mediterranean, has Barcelona's future looked so promising. The catalysts for change have been many. The first—political—was in 1975, when General Francisco Franco, who had systematically and often brutally tried to eradicate the treasured Catalan language and culture, died. The city in turn started to live and breathe again independently. Today Barcelona is a proud, bilingual metropolis with street signs, newspapers, and television programs in both Catalan and Spanish. In 2006, a progressive statute granted an even greater degree of self-rule to the whole region.

The second—more cosmetic—catalyst came just before the 1992 Olympic Games, when feverish renovation work changed the city's image from that of a drab, gray burg to a new gleaming metropolis. The *Barri Gòtic*, many of whose central medieval buildings had for countless decades been coated with grime, could at last be seen in all its pristine glory, with newly sandblasted facades quietly glowing in the light of the quarter's atmospheric narrow alleys. The waterfront, once lined with large oily containers and sad-looking palm trees, was transformed into an open, sunlit area of promenades, marinas, and modern restaurants stretching several kilometers from beachside Barceloneta via the Vila Olímpica and the 2004 Forum site to Sant Adrià de Besòs.

Suddenly Barcelona has become the weekender capital of Europe. Visitors jet in on low-cost flights for the fun lifestyle, superb Mediterranean climate, and an unrivalled location that offers easy access to the delectable coves of the Costa Brava, scenic mountain trails of the Pyrénées, historic cities of Gerona and Tarragona, and wealth of Gothic and Romanesque monuments that fill the countryside.

They also come to see Barcelona's many offerings in the world of art, architecture, and haute cuisine: the Picassos, Dalís, Tàpies, and Mirós; the *moderniste* extravaganzas of Gaudí and modern eccentricities of Gehry and Nouvel; and Ferran Adrià's "New Catalan Cuisine," lauded even by the French and spearheading a culinary revival that's resulted in half a dozen Michelin rated restaurants to date.

Yet for all its outward changes the city remains at heart what it's always been: practical, businesslike, proletarian, nonconformist, rebellious, artistic, and unabashedly hedonistic. It's a heady, complex blend that has survived many a dark time and whose freewheeling Mediterranean spirit is epitomized in the bustling Rambla avenue, which runs all the way down to the port from Plaza Catalunya along the source of a former riverbed. All this makes for a spirit as communal and sociable as the city's traditional Sardana dance, in which no one leads and no one follows and everyone moves together in unison.

1 The Most Unforgettable Barcelona Experiences

- **Strolling along La Rambla:** Barcelona's most famous promenade pulses with life. The array of street musicians, performers, hustlers, and eccentrics ensures that there is never a dull moment during your kilometer-long stroll. See p. 51.
- **Having a Drink at Sunset on the Beach:** The Catalan capital's 6.4km (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. 242.
- **Exploring the El Born Neighborhood:** This compact medieval quarter, just inland from Barceloneta, was once one of its seediest corners. 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 many bars and restaurants offering the ultimate in New Catalan cuisine. See p. 69.
- **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. 233.
- **Eating Breakfast at the Boqueria:** There are about a dozen bars and restaurants in the city's main food market. Rub shoulders with Barcelona's top chefs and gourmands over a coffee and croissant and watch the day's deliveries coming in. See p. 220.
- **Bar-Hopping in the Barri Gòtic:** With its iconic, smoke-filled tapas bars, Irish pubs frequented by expats, and cocktail lounges filled with minimalist furniture and minimally clad patrons, Barcelona's Old City is a watering-hole mecca. One of the best locales is **Ginger**, a comfy, classy tapas and wine bar with the feel of a private club. See p. 239.
- **Spending a Sunday on Montjuïc:** The mountain 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. 181.
- **Going by Tram and Funicular to Tibidabo:** The summit of the city's distinctive inland backdrop is reached in two stages: first by a "blue tram" (Tramvia Blau), which winds past Sarrà 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. 192.
- **Dining at Els Quatre Gats:** The original served 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. 126.

- **Taking Your First Look 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. 175.
- **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. 172.

- **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.

2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Hotel Ritz**, Gran Vía 668 (☎ 93-318-52-00): Since it opened its doors in 1919, it has survived a civil war, a world war, an anarchist occupation, and the fall of a dictatorship—all while retaining an impeccable level of service and tradition. During all this, distinguished guests such as the Duke of Windsor, Ava Gardner, and Salvador Dalí have chosen to stay in its gilt and marble surroundings and to take refuge in the elegant tearoom and restaurant. See p. 100.
- **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. 97.
- **Hotel Arts**, Marina 19–21 (☎ 93-221-10-00): The preferred choice of top models and temperamental rock stars (P. Diddy reportedly partied up a storm when he came to Barcelona to host the 2002 MTV Awards), the Hotel Arts has remained a jet-set playground and symbol of “cool Barcelona” for over a decade. See p. 112.
- **Hotel España**, Sant Pau 11 (☎ 93-318-17-58): This place combines comfort and luxury while evoking a bygone age. Designed by a contemporary of Gaudí, 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. 96.

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 Les Rambles, the Peninsular's Art Nouveau elevator, long green and white hallways, and lush inner courtyard make it an oasis from the hustle and bustle outside. But book ahead. See p. 96.
- **Hostal D'Uxelles**, Gran Vía 688 and 667 (☎ 93-265-25-60): This *hostal* looks as though 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. 105.
- **Marina Folch**, Carrer del Mar 16, principal (☎ 93-310-37-09): Family-run, this hotel is the only one in the beachside neighborhood of Barceloneta, with plenty of open-air 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. 115.

4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **Having a Paella at the Beach:** 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 substitute noodles for rice) and is an established favorite among the city's well-heeled families. See p. 155.
- **Trying the Cuisine of Catalonia's Top Chef:** Carles Abellán has been hailed as the new wunderkind 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 tuna sashimi pizza await the adventurous. See p. 132.
- **Having Barcelona's Best Sunday Lunch:** 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. 153.
- **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, and one of the serving methods, the sterling silver duck press, seems to belong to another century (as do some of the clients). See p. 158.
- **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 suburb of Poble Nou, is the place for you. People come here for the food, not the view; they serve whatever has been caught that day. Book ahead on weekends. See p. 152.

5 The Best Things to Do For Free

- **Enjoying the Freebie Cultural Treats:** Top visits here are the **Foment de les Arts Decoratives i del Disseny (FAD)** cultural center where you can view exhibitions and sometimes buy bargain paintings by promising young unknowns (p. 171) and **CaixaForum** art gallery, which has an ever-changing trio of stimulating exhibitions (p. 181). Around the city you'll find an impressive variety of open-air **public art** displays: Antoni Llena's bizarre metal **David i Goliat**, Frank Gehry's copper **Peix** (Fish) in the Olímpic 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. 170), while **Parc Güell**, higher up in Gràcia district, delights visitors of all ages with its fairy-tale Gaudí structures (p. 180). 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 an airy kaleidoscope of greenery and cultural and sporting attractions (p. 185). Less well known but more “countrified” is the **Parc d'en Castell de l'Oreneta**, just above the Pedralbes Monastery, where you get a chance to enjoy marvelous panoramic city and coastal views as you picnic and wander along sign-posted trails among meadows in the grounds of a long since disappeared castle.

- **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. 160). Other monumental treats are the **Capella de Sant Jordi** (p. 165), and churches of **La Mercè** (p. 164) and **Santa Maria del Pi** (p. 166), 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. An additional marvel is **Santa Maria del Mar** in the Born section of La Ribera (p. 166).

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. See p. 222.

- **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 choice from areas such as Toledo and Seville. **Artesana i Coses**, near the Picasso Museum, is a good place to browse. See p. 226.

- **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 affected 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. 225.

- **Antiques:** If you're looking for some interesting traditional engravings, carvings, or just simple bric-a-brac to take home, you have an abundance of options. The best stocked (and most expensive) locale is the three-story **Sala d'Art Artur Ramón** in the Ciutat Vella. See p. 213.
- **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. See p. 221.

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. 180) with its imagery from the animal kingdom and hidden grottoes is a particular favorite. Speaking of animals, the city's world-class **Aquarium** (p. 187) 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. 170) has a fantastic primate collection and is located in the **Parc de la Ciutadella** (p. 170), which also boasts a lake with rowboats for hire, swings, and other assorted kiddie attractions. Museum-wise, a trip to the **Maritime Museum** (p. 188), with its 16th-century galley and early submarine, could be combined with a jaunt on **Las Golondrinas** (p. 195), quaint, double-decker pleasure boats that take you from the port to the breakwater. The **Museu de la Cera** (**Wax Museum**; p. 165), 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**; p. 169) enticing and the newly opened **Science Museum** (p. 189) has excellent hands-on exhibits for all ages. Then, of course, there are the beaches—most with showers, toilets, bars, and hammocks for rent. **Happy Park** (p. 195) 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. 192). 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. 194), meanwhile, is a neoclassical park complete with eponymous maze 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 aged 3 and up.
- **Farther Afield:** **Montserrat** (p. 250), Catalonia's "spiritual heart," offers

plenty of walking trails amid its phantasmagoric terrain of huge

rocks, caves, and, of course, the monumental monastery itself.

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. Renovated a couple of years back, it's 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. 184.
- **Fundació Joan Miró:** Found here is 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 in a location that enjoys marvelous vistas of port and city from its roof terrace, where there's an attractive garden filled with sculptures. Concerts take place here in summer. Highlights are the **Foundation Tapestry** and **Mercury Fountain**, by his American sculptor friend Alexander Calder. See p. 182.
- **Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA):** This is Catalonia's answer to Paris's Pompidou

Center, and it's right in the heart of the earthy yet partially gentrified Raval district. It has one of the best collections of modern art in Spain, featuring works by Tàpies and Barcelò, and there's also a library, bookshop, and cafeteria. See p. 172.

- **The Picasso Museum:** One of the most visited cultural spots in the city, the 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.
- **Museu Frederic Marès:** 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 Marès—a talented sculptor himself. Exhibits can be viewed on two floors—which open on alternate days—and range from polychromatic Roman crucifixes and Gothic statues to a "Ladies' Room" filled with Victorian knickknacks. See p. 165.