

Get Your Kits Out Travel

Barcelona

The Complete Guide



A Get Your Kits Out Travel Production
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Barcelona -

"Barcelona is always looking outwards, northwards, over the frontier, to where the new things come from."

- Jan Morris, Spain, 1964

1. A CITY IN TRANSITION YET THAT CLINGS TO TRADITION

Few cities in Europe have reinvented themselves so quickly, or with such panache, as Barcelona. This was once a decidedly provincial, B-list sort of town that lived in the shadow of Madrid. Then came the Olympics of 1992, widely regarded as one of the most successful in the history of the Games.

Barcelona grabbed its chance with both hands, and in ten years it has consolidated its position as one of the world's great tourist cities, a vital centre for art and design, and a place whose quality of life is second to none.

The city is Mediterranean in character, climate and culture. To the north is the great white wall of the Pyrenees, to the west the hills of Collserola, and to the east the sea - Barcelona's defining influence. The climate is near-perfect, with bright winters that seem more like spring, and summer days when the heat is mitigated by cool sea breezes. Barcelona is a cultural capital par excellence. In terms of art and architecture there is masses to see. The old town or Barri Gòtic is a medieval maze of churches and palaces, while the 19th-century Eixample with its wide avenues, harbours the fantastical and much-photographed creations of Antoni Gaudí. The city's connections with the 20th century avant-garde have left an impressive legacy, ranging from Picasso and Juan Miró to Antoni Tàpies (all of whom have museums devoted to their work). Contemporary art and disseny (design) are staples of Barcelona's cultural life, as is the cutting-edge theatre of groups like La Fura dels Baus. These riches are already showcased in the city's annual festivals such as Grec, Merce, and Sonar. But Forum 2004, an ambitious event bringing together cultures from all over the world, promises excitements to rival the sporting thrills of 1992.



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For many visitors the prime attraction of Barcelona is something less tangible. It is the city's enticing cocktail of relaxation and excitement, of traditionalism side-by-side with raging modernity, and of a newly cosmopolitan ethnic mix coexisting happily with Catalan culture and language. Barcelona is permanently on the move, yet in essence it remains the same - a Mediterranean city brimful of optimism, colour and celebration.

2. TRAVELLING DEEPER: under the skin of the city BEST KEPT SECRET

- Sant Pau del Camp is a tiny jewel of a Romanesque church on the edge of the Raval, called "del camp" because when it was built (in the year 911) it was surrounded by rolling fields. The little cloister (look for Picasso's early painting of it in the Museu Picasso) is one of the Barcelona's leastvisited and most magical places.

INSIDER INTELLIGENCE - Lluís Bassat, president and creative director of the advertising agency Bassat, Ogilvy & Mather,

- What visitors to Barcelona need to do is, "walk around the city." For local-born Lluís there are certain streets that must be seen, on foot if possible. "The Paseo de Gracia, the Rambla de Catalunya and its continuation towards the sea, the Puerta del Angel, the Cathedral, the Barrio Gòtico and Calle Montcada, the Avenida Diagonal from Paseo de Gracia to the Placa Pio XII. For many people their first visit to Barcelona is a surprise. For others, a confirmation. And for some, it's the lightning flash that makes them change their plans and start everything anew in a place where the quality of life is unbeatable."

SOUNDTRACK TO THE CITY

Barcelona's most famous voice - and possibly the best-known Spanish singer of our time, with the exception of Julio Iglesias - is the great soprano Montserrat Caballé. Inextricably associated with Barcelona's Liceo opera house, the Catalan diva made an emotional visit to the smoking ruins of the theatre when it burned down in 1994. La Caballé's duet with Freddie Mercury at the opening of the 1992 Olympics still brings back memories of Barcelona's annus mirabilis. For a reminder of her peerless artistry in the operatic repertoire, try the compilation Grosse Stimmen: Montserrat Caballé (Deutsche Grammophon 431 103-2).

WE LOVE

· The **sardana**. Worldly and mercantile, Barcelona seems on the surface to be little given to pagan rites. So this peculiar urban ritual comes as a surprise. The sardana is the Catalan national dance and is thought to have its origins in an ancient ritual of homage to the sun. Every Sunday morning in front of the Cathedral, fascinated visitors gather to watch the dancers as they form a ring and raise their hands to heaven. It is a lovely, strange and touching sight.

· **Pa amb tomaquet**. If there is a dish that typifies Barcelona eating more than anything else, it must be "bread with tomato". Nothing more, and nothing less, than a piece of bread or toast rubbed with tomato, drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with salt, pa amb tomaquet is the subject of fierce local pride and, when carefully made, one of the most delicious things imaginable.

Famous constructors of pa amb tomaquet are Casa Leopoldo (c/Sant Rafael 24), Taverna Can Margarit (c/Concordia 21) and Bar Pinotxo (Mercat de la Boqueria, stalls 42-43)

3. ESSENTIAL INFORMATION: up to the minute reconnaissance

WHERE TO EAT

Star-studded, chic or genuine local hangout - three you should try

The classic:

Cal Isidre, c/Les Flors 12 (0034 93 441 1139)

A national treasure

For the past two decades Don Isidre Girones has run this place on the edge of the Raval district, little suspecting that in time it would inch up the league table to become one of the best-loved restaurants in Spain. Cal Isidre combines formality with lack of pretension - a winning formula. The menu manages to be down-home and elegant at the same time: bacalla a la llauna, a stalwart Catalan dish of roast salt cod with olive oil, garlic and pimentón, is as beautifully presented as you will find anywhere in Barcelona. Isidre visits the Boqueria market every morning. Seasonal dishes are therefore a strong point, and if you're visiting in early spring, it would be a crime not to try the minuscule broad beans with fried baby squid and fresh mint - a sensational reworking of a Catalan classic. Recently Isidre's daughter Nuria has taken over the reins in the kitchen, bringing a fresh perspective on some of the more traditional elements of the menu.

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Cutting edge:

Abac, c/Rec 78-89 (0034 93 319 6600)

The surreal thing

In a city where restaurants jostle furiously to be in the front rank of modernity in cuisine and décor, Abac is still way ahead of the game. The room itself is spacious, clean-lined yet comfortable - an oasis of calm in the sometimes frenetic trendiness of the Born district - and chef Xavier Pellicer has consolidated his position as one of Barcelona's half-a-dozen culinary maestros. Virtuoso treatment of impeccable raw materials is reined in by a natural sense of balance and good taste. Some of his dishes, daring though they may seem, have taken on the status of post-modern classics - such as the tarte tatin of eel with apples, or the foie gras steamed with bamboo. Could Pellicer be the new Ferran Adria? It seems entirely possible.

The hip option:

Oven, c/Ramon Turro 126 (0034 93 221 0602)

The next big thing

Now that the Born has become a self-consciously arty zone with little real life left in it, the race is on to find the next hipster's paradise. The Raval, the dingy and decadent area beside the Ramblas, is forging ahead. But the smart money is on Poble Nou, a kind of East End formerly given over to light industry, workshops and blue-collar housing. Proof of the area's emerging grooviness is this stunning transformation of an old garage into an open-plan restaurant/bar/gallery/hangout with a glassed in kitchen at one end and a dance space at the other. Most so-called DJ restaurants fail on account of the food, but not this one: chef Angel Muntaner provides a delicious fusion-influenced menu, perfectly in tune with the knowing cool of the venue.

WHERE TO SHOP

One hundred per cent design - unless you're shopping for food, of course

Vincon, Passeig de Gracia 96 (0034 93 215 6050)

For funky homeware

Here is an address that no self-respecting design junkie can afford to ignore. Vincon is to Barcelona what the Conran Shop is to London - a cathedral of design, and an urban institution. The little sister of Vincon, Tincon (Rosello 246) does a less rigorously avant-garde line in bedclothes, linens, books, etc.

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Viniteca, c/Agullers 7 (0034 93 268 3227; www.vilaviniteca.es)

A dream wine shop

Not so big as to be anonymous and warehouse-like, but just sizeable enough to harbour an anthological collection of Spain's greatest wines. Owner Quim Vila, born and bred in the same old town street, is a likeable man whose vinous knowledge is practically encyclopaedic. For the wine lover who knows the score, Viniteca is a delight.

E&A Gispert, c/Sombrerers 23 (0034 93 319 7535)

Sugar and spice and ...

An ancient grocery beside Santa Maria del Mar which the passage of time has transformed into something truly unique. "Master Roasters, Colonial Spices, Saffron Deposit" reads the legend on the street. Inside, little appears to have changed in the 152 years since the shop was founded. A woodfired oven at the back still roasts the best Catalan almonds, hazelnuts, pistachios and peanuts. In reality Gispert is now a first-class deli, and everything it sells - coffee, tea, spices of all kinds, oils, vinegars, bottled goods and conserves, wines - is of top quality.

Cacao Sampaka, c/Consell de Cent 292 (0034 93 272 0833)

Chocolate as you may not have encountered it

This shop calls itself (a little pretentiously perhaps) the New Cacao Market. Its mission? To boldly go where no chocolate shop has gone before. Sampaka is a Catalan manufacturer in which Ferran Adria and his brother have a hand. At this, their attractive Barcelona HQ, you can find Sampaka's range of 100 different bars made with fine cacaos from such far-flung origins as Madagascar or Ecuador, their chocolate powders, creams and dragees, and their truffles flavoured with tea, along with balsamic vinegar, black olives, Parmesan cheese, anchovies and black truffle. The café at the back serves such novelties as toast with chocolate and tomato jam.

FNAC, Centro Comercial El Triangle, Placa Catalunya 4 (0034 93 344 1800)

Books are just a start

This French-owned bookstore chain has added substantially to Barcelona's quality of life by opening a huge store on four floors right beside the Placa Catalunya. Sensibly enough the FNAC combines books with CDs, videos, DVDs, magazines, and all the other paraphernalia of home entertainment, making you wonder why no one has done the same thing in the UK. It is a pleasant air-conditioned place in which to kill an hour or so in the afternoon when everything else is closed.

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Bands give free live gigs in the small auditorium. The café on the ground floor is a popular meeting-place.

Custo Barcelona, c/Ferran 36 (0034 93 342 6698) and Placa de les Olles 7 & 9 (0034 93 268 7893)

Rich in kitsch

Catalunya's answer to London street style comes in the shape of Custo Dalmau. Though Custo now habitually shows his clothes in New York there is no doubt where they truly belong: on the streets of downtown Barcelona. In our chillier climes Custo's wildly colourful, kitschy designs may seem a little OTT. Here in the South they go down a storm, and no Spanish dance floor is complete without a garish Custo T-shirt or a madly multicoloured pair of low-slung jeans.

CULTURE/SIGHTS

Music, monuments, markets and museums

Palau de la Musica Catalana, c/Sant Francesc de Paula 2 (0034 93 295 7200)

It is hard to imagine how a mere concert hall can constitute a "sight" in itself - until you set foot in the Palau de la Musica Catalana. This jewel-box of a building was built in 1908 to a design by Lluís Domènech i Montaner and extravagantly decorated in a variety of techniques, from stained glass to enamelling. The sculptures of Art Deco Valkyries above the stage are by Catalan sculptor Pablo Gargallo. The central skylight is a mesmerising collage of coloured glass, allowing natural light to pour into the hall. As if such visual splendour were not enough, it happens that the Palau's acoustics come as close to perfection as any concert hall in Europe, making it a favourite with top-rank musicians and singers. (A guided tour of the building runs at various times throughout the day.)

Mercat de Sant Josep (La Boqueria), Rambla de les Flors

The Mercat de Sant Josep, usually known by its nickname La Boqueria, was once a Carmelite monastery until the convent burned down in 1835 and a fine new market was set up in its place. In 1914 it was given a roof and a stained-glass Modernista entrance at the front, where it leads directly off the Ramblas. It is a cause for celebration that this huge and vibrant market - at 6,000 sq m the largest in Spain - is still alive and kicking at the heart of the city centre and hasn't been hauled out to the suburbs to make way for ritzy shops and apartments. Spain's largest, and possibly best, covered market is a glorious spectacle and a showcase for all that is best in local gastronomy. And it's not just for the tourists: many barcelonins do their daily shop here.

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The spectacular fish section is especially worth a visit - as are the various market bars, especially El Quim de la Boqueria (stall number 584-585) and the Bar Pinotxo (42-43) where owner Juanito is the market's best-known personality and the home-cooked tapas and lunches are famously delicious.

Museu Picasso, c/Montcada 15-19 (0034 93 319 6310)

The Picasso Museum, housed in a 14th-century palace in the Barri Gòtic, is one of those classic Barcelona attractions you simply have to see if you have even the slightest interest in the 20th century's grand master of art. For the amateur art fan, the great thing about Picasso is the value for money he offers: where other painters hit and miss, almost everything he did was an out-and-out masterpiece. Consequently the pleasures of this museum are enormous. The recent reorganisation of the collection (it boasts more than 3,600 individual works) brings it into even clearer focus. Grit your teeth and go with the flow; you won't regret it.

BARS AND NIGHTLIFE

Bohemian, retro or relaxed - three worth sampling

TAG: Ba Ra, Placa de la Gardunya 7 (0034 93 301 4163)

Something of an Ibiza vibe seems to hang in the air at this effortlessly groovy bar. The Ra's position on a square at the back of the Boqueria market means that the morning sun hits it full in the face. (Ray-Bans are therefore de rigueur.) The terrace with its sunshades and gently drifting music (jazz, ambient, bossa nova) is a perfect place to while away the morning over a café con leche and a newspaper in the company of hipsters from all over the world. Night times are busier, and the music louder. Open 10am-1.30am, Monday to Saturday.

TAG: La Concha, c/Guardia 14 (0034 93 302 4118)

A slice of bohemian Barcelona, this small smoky bar in the Raval district is multi-cultural, omni-sexual and winningly eccentric. It has long been famous for its design scheme, which has thousands of images of camp Spanish singer Sara Montiel plastered all over the walls. But things were given a bizarre twist when the bar was taken over by a group of young Moroccans who like to play loud Arabic and flamenco pop for dancing till the early hours. The atmosphere is hilarious and good-natured, and the place is packed.

TAG: Boadas Cocktail Bar, c/Tallers 1 (0034 93 318 8826)

The aristocrat among Barcelona's cocktail dens, the Boadas was founded in 1933 by a Catalan émigré returning from Cuba. Hidden away in a side-street just a few steps away from the Plaza Catalunya, this small wood-panelled bar maintains a discreet and un-touristed charm. The barmen are past masters of the art of the cocktail - if you want to see how a martini is made and drunk, Boadas is the place. The mojito here is widely agreed to be the best in the city.

CLUBS

Two top dance destinations

La Paloma, c/Tigre 27

Originally a working-class dance hall, La Paloma has miraculously survived the ravages of time and celebrated its 100th birthday in 2003. A painted ceiling, stucco mouldings and a massive dance floor where most nights of the week couples do the tango and paso doble under a vast chandelier. On Thursdays the place is transformed into a hip party venue for the dance club Bongo Lounge. It is worth going any day just to see the old place - there is nowhere on earth like La Paloma.

Nitsa, Sala Apolo, c/Nou de la Rambla 113

Barcelona took a while to latch on to electronica but is now in the vanguard of the scene, with a proliferation of techno clubs and an annual festival, Sonar, regarded as one of Europe's pace-setters.

Saturday nights see the city's techno kids come out to play at Nitsa, a club night held in a converted theatre and Barcelona's prime dance club of the moment. Expect wild scenes, hard music and an electric atmosphere.

KIDS' DAYS OUT

Barcelona is a kid-friendly town, and there are few times and places when your little ones will not be welcome. As far as attractions go, the most accessible is the funfair at the top of Tibidabo mountain, reached by a short ride on an old-fashioned cable car from the foot of the hill. At 512m above sea level the views from the hilltop are breathtaking in themselves, not to mention the effect of a ride on the noria (big wheel). Further afield lies the fun factory of Port Aventura. This Disney-style theme park (reached off the A-7 motorway an hour south of the city at exit 35) is a riotously tacky but brilliantly entertaining experience that should leave the most demanding visitor exhausted and silent.

CAVEATS

- A spate of bag-snatching, often at knife-point, is currently giving the Raval district a bad name.

Exercise caution in this still down-at-heel neighbourhood.

- Don't wear jewellery or expensive clothes, keep your guide book out of sight, and try to look as if you know where you're going.

- Beware of Spain's late dining times - if you sit down to eat before 10pm, you may well be the only table in the restaurant.

- August in Barcelona should be avoided if at all possible - almost everything is shut, the locals are absent, and the humid heat can make life a misery.

FIVE KEY FACTS

Currency: the euro

Flight time from UK: 2 hours

Population: 1,6m

Time difference: Spain operates on CET. It is usually one hour ahead of the UK.

Transfers: Trains from El Prat, 12km southwest of the city, run every half hour and take 15-25 minutes, depending on your destination station. Taxis cost €20-25.

4. BE THERE NOW: prepare for Barcelona

LITERARY JOURNEYS

The best-known portrait of Barcelona in English scarcely shows the city in its most appealing light. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* (Penguin, £5.99), written in 1937, is the writer's hard-hitting report from the horrors of the Civil War. As an idealistic young socialist committed to the ideals of the Republic, he shuttles between the Aragon front and a Barcelona shattered by sectarian violence. As a chronicle of misery and incompetence, as well as the sheer stupidity of civil war, Orwell's "homage" has few rivals.

For a glimpse of the old debauched Barcelona of the Barrio Chino (now more commonly known as the Raval), it is worth dipping into Jean Genet's *A Thief's Journal* (Penguin, £5.99). Genet knew the city's murky depths better than anyone, and a little square at the southern end of the Raval now bears his name. "In Barcelona we hung around the Calle Mediodia and the Calle Carmen", he wrote. "We sometimes slept six in a bed without sheets, and at dawn we would go begging in a group and scatter over the Paralelo, carrying shopping baskets, for the housewives would give us a

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leek or turnip rather than a coin. At noon we would return, and with the gleanings we would make our soup."

GUIDE OF GUIDES

The Time Out Guide to Barcelona (Penguin, £11.99) is arguably the most authoritative and up-to date handbook on the city.

LANGUAGE

Castilian Spanish may be the official language, but Català (Catalan) is used on street signs and increasingly spoken in Barcelona (there are 14 million Català speakers in this part of Europe). If you speak Spanish, you will be understood and responded to, but try a little Català, and you may also elicit a smile.

English Spanish Català

Hello Hola Hola

Good afternoon/evening Buenas tardes Bona tarde

Do you speak English? Habla usted inglés Parleu anglès

Please Por favor Si us plau

Thank you Gracias Graciès/merci

Excuse me Perdon/con permiso Perdoni

Two beers Dos cervezas, por favor Dos cervesas, si us plau

Cheers Salud Salut

The bill please La cuenta, por favor El compte, si us plau

Goodbye Adios Adéu

THE AIRMILES TRAVEL COMPANY RECOMMENDS

The following hotels can be booked through The AirMiles Travel Company on 0870 60 747 11.

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Hotel Alexandra, C/ Mallorca 251

Located in the centre of Barcelona, between two of the city's most lively thoroughfares - the Paseo de Gracia and the famous Rambla de Catalunya, this four star hotel was completely renovated in 2001, introducing contemporary style to a traditional property. Its 100 rooms and suites are nicely appointed.

L'Altell Restaurant, serving Mediterranean cuisine and a cocktail bar complete the facilities.

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Hotel Arts, C/ de la Marina 19-21

The Hotel Arts could easily be described as classic or hip - it straddles all categories

- but its cutting edge is as sharp as ever. The Arts occupies the top floors of a 154-metre high tower designed by Bruce Graham and Frank Gehry, built for the 1992 Olympics and still one of the city's most striking and emblematic buildings. While the exterior is high-tech steel and glass, the interior plays with the softer tones of marble, wood and aluminium. Its 397 rooms, 56 suites, 2 presidential suites and 27 duplex apartments are an exercise in High Design - "high" being the operative word. Talk about "sea views" falls short of the mark: from some of the rooms, almost all you can see is the sea. The rooftop pool is one of Barcelona's most sizzling glamour hotspots.

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