

TRAVEL



Built on passion



Cindy Weller immerses herself in the Catalan city of Barcelona.

Barcelona is the kind of place that makes you want to run around madly, ticking off places on your 'must see/must do' list before retiring gratefully to a pavement café to quaff a goldfish bowl-sized glass of Sangria de Cava in the hope that your aching feet will at least regain partial feeling before the next museum/palace/park.

A city of contrasts where gracious, tree-lined streets and narrow Gothic alleyways radiate from the Plaça de Catalunya – the main pick-up and drop-off point for the excellent airport bus service – and architectural oddities adorn every corner; it's an overdose of culture and history in a compact, easily navigable environment.

Needing that cultural hit after too much time in the desert sun, a five-day escape to Spain's second city also presented the opportunity to try out my recently rediscovered Spanish skills, although after centuries of suppression the 'Barcelonins' – a

fiercely nationalistic people – consider Catalan their first language.

Catalan's origins can be traced back to 801 and the marauding Franks who, along with Romans, Visigoths and various Muslim invaders, each left their own distinct mark upon the region. As the centuries passed, Catalonia's reach extended across the sea to Ibiza and even as far as Provence at one point. But empires rise and fall and by 1410 Castilian power took hold, dominating the region.

The late 19th century saw a resurgence in Catalan nationalism and the middle/upper classes once again reverted to Catalan as their language of choice, but wars soon sank the country into depression and several unsettled decades followed. General Franco, who came to power in 1936, suppressed all aspects of national identity until, after his death, the royal seal of approval for autonomy was given in 1979.

All that history makes for a fascinating city and with the promise of Barcelona's legendary October rainfall thwarted by clear blue skies and 25°C it was a case of dump the luggage and hit the sights once we tracked down our B&B, which turned out to be in the heart of the Gothic quarter and a few minutes stroll from the famous La Rambla boulevard.

The focal point of the city, La Rambla is tourist central with a Spanish soul. Shaded by leafy green trees, the street is lined with a mixture of cafés, cheesy souvenir shops and stalls selling everything from fresh flowers and chirping lovebirds to Spanish turrón (nougat) and 'paint while-you-wait' pictures of famous sites or unflattering caricatures.

Street entertainers, licensed by the municipality and limited to 50 per year, play the statue game, dance the Flamenco or mimic curious onlookers while doe-eyed gypsy women – baby



latched to nipple – hold out their hands for a few coins. The city's opera house is here, as is the requisite wax museum (Madame Tussaud's makeover needed) and the Museu de l'Eròtica whose first floor balcony has a great view and whose exhibits will certainly not be found in the UAE.

The Ciutat Vella (old city) encompasses much of the area directly to the east and west of La Rambla and is a warren of dark streets filled with historic significance and shopping and eating opportunities. The medieval heart of the city, the Barri Gòtic, is where the original Roman outpost was sited and just further east is La Ribera – home to the Picasso Museum as well as the tiny museum of chocolate where the exhibits are all but eclipsed by the cups of pure liquid chocolate in the museum café, perfect for that mid-afternoon energy boost. To the west of La Rambla is the slightly shabbier district of El Raval with its profusion of halal meat stores, disenfranchised youth and file toting students heading to the National Library.

Emerging blinking into the sun from the alleyways of the old city, we were ready for bigger picture Barcelona and, as in every major city, there was a bus tour to be boarded.

The Bus Turistic's three routes cover the length and breadth of Barcelona from the seafront Port Olympic to the east (one of four sites used for the 1992 games) to the tram stop at the base of Tibidabo, the city's highest peak and panoramic vantage point.

Barcelona is home to no less than five UNESCO World Heritage sites and as architecture goes it runs the gamut of design from the simple Gothic beauty of peaceful Monestir de Pedralbes (a museum and working convent for nuns of the Order of St Clare) to the ornate palatial splendour of the Palau Reial in the university district and the utterly bizarre and astonishingly intricate façade of the as yet unfinished Sagrada Família cathedral. The creation of Antonio Gaudi, Barcelona's most famous son and Modernista movement exponent, this vast structure – funded entirely by

churchgoers and tourists – still echoes to the daily sound of hammer and chisel and is tentatively scheduled for completion in 2041.

Gaudi's gaudy reputation can also be viewed at La Pedrera, the stone clad, wrought-iron balconied apartment block on the rather grand Passeig de Gràcia. If you don't look up – and that's where open top buses come in very handy – you could easily miss the profusion of jumbled chimney pots and undulating contours of the building (built without a single straight line in sight), though the flashes of camera-wielding Japanese tourists lined up on the roof terrace give the game away.

With some 2,000 buildings in the Modernista style located throughout the city it's a wonder there's room for anything else, but Gaudi's love of nature even influenced green spaces with Parc Güell – located in the city's ultra-steep northern heights – the tranquil if slightly surreal setting for a relaxed stroll among brightly-coloured, mosaic-tiled sculptures and his house, now a popular museum.

Equally verdant – and thankfully accessible by tourist bus – is the park of Montjuic, setting for the 1929 world exhibition and the grandiose Palau Nacional which doubles as the national art museum. Halfway up the hill is a full-scale replica of a Spanish village – Poble Espanyol – built for the 1929

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exhibition where traditional architecture from every region is incorporated into a Truman Show-esque setting now filled with craft shops, cafés and bus loads of French schoolkids. Continue on up the winding road to the summit and you can visit the Olympic Ring, site of the opening and closing ceremonies of the 1992 Games as well as track and field and pool events. On the other side of the city, and a 100-year old bastion of Catalan pride, is FC Barcelona stadium where ground tours allow a glimpse of hallowed turf where sporting legends including Cruyff, Maradona and Eusebio thrilled the crowds.

If sport isn't your cup of tea and contemporary art doesn't float your boat – although the museums dedicated to Joan Miró and Pablo Picasso come highly recommended – then perhaps an evening of opera at the Gran Teatre de Liceu or a choral affair under the stunning glass ceiling and flower garlanded columns of the Palau de la Música Catalana (another UNESCO listed site and my favourite building with its booming organ and striking rainbow-tiled exterior). Ordinary folk come together on Sunday afternoons in front of the cathedral to dance the Sardana – the traditional Catalan dance – and street performers on numerous city squares strut their stuff with a passionate tango or burst of Flamenco.

And if your idea of a relaxing break is simply to sit and watch the world go by with a dish of black squid-inked rice and glass of excellent Rioja, then Barcelona will feed you up and spit you out a few kilos heavier. From a daily breakfast *bocadillo* (sandwich) of cured ham and excellent *café con leche* – the best coffee I've had in Europe I dare to venture – to a simple three-course set lunch in the old fishermen's area of Barceloneta or an early evening beer and tapas session in a local side street café; there's a surfeit of venues on offer. If you're looking for an authentic Catalan experience then try a light tapas lunch at one of the bars at the fabulous La Boqueria food market at the top of La Rambla, where traders go about their business while you munch. Or for dinner, take the Metro to the real residential scene in Poble Nou – once known as the Manchester of Catalonia and now re-energised – and check out a family-run restaurant with tomato and garlic rubbed bread replacing stale rolls and snails, salted cod and crema Catalana among other traditional favourites.

Five days later, waiting for the airport bus at Plaça de Catalunya, we were definitely a few kilos heavier, decidedly footsore and all Gaudi-ed out; clutching last-minute purchases of Chorizo and Manchego cheese as the good weather finally broke and a Catalan shower bid us 'adiós'.



TRAVEL INFO

Getting there

Flight time from Dubai is around eight hours, excluding transfer time in Europe.

Getting around

Barcelona's international airport, El Prat de Llobregat, has excellent bus and train connections. The A1 Aerobús departs for the city centre every 15 minutes and the journey takes 30-45 minutes. €3.5 each way.

Many of the major tourist attractions are within easy walking distance of the city centre, however for sites further afield the Metro system is clean, efficient and cheap and open until midnight or 1am at the weekend.

The open top bus tour – Bus Turístic – operates three routes and tickets can be purchased for 24 or 48 hours (prices from €16 and also includes a discount voucher book for major attractions and fast food venues across the city).

Accommodation

From cheap and cheerful guesthouses in the heart of the city to luxury five star hotels on the grand avenues, there are accommodation options to suit all budgets. These also vary depending on the season. We paid €70 per night for a basic guesthouse, room only. www.barcelona-on-line.es offers local tourist centre advice on accommodation options.

