

INTRODUCING BARCELONA

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Feast on the work of Gaudí, the city's favourite son, at his quirky Modernista gem Casa Batlló (p107)

Sun-kissed and lapped by the Mediterranean, Barcelona is a dynamo where people work hard and play hard. A magnet for architecture buffs, foodies and night owls, it is a pleasure for all the senses.

Life pulsates at high pressure through the streets of this compact city. An economic powerhouse, 'Barna' displays a zest for life, artistic genius and sense of style few cities can rival. It also seems to be in a permanent state of self-renewal, its skyline constantly altering as neglected districts come in for their beauty treatment.

Barcelona's medieval boom period left it with one of Europe's most impressive Gothic legacies. Centuries later the Modernistas, led by Antoni Gaudí, cast an unparalleled whimsical Art Nouveau splash across the city. Today a phalanx of international design stars is adding to this impressive heritage with landmark 21st-century buildings.

In this cauldron of culinary activity, monument-gazing can create a substantial appetite. Traditional restaurants and alfresco seafood eateries rub shoulders with a new wave of designer dens run by the city's avant-garde chefs.

Barcelona's hedonistic streak infects everyone, from the voluble gents playing dominos at La Barceloneta's beaches to the gay body builders sun-worshipping nearby. Club sounds waft over the sand from waterfront chill-out lounges. At night students pack century-old taverns while fashionistas sip *caipirinhas* in designer cocktail bars before hitting the clubs.

BARCELONA LIFE

With 1.59 million inhabitants (and 3.1 million more in the greater Barcelona area), Barcelona is Spain's second city. Compact and densely inhabited, it manages to exude both a metropolitan *and* small-town air. It has some enviable trump cards: a beautiful medieval core, the wacky delights of Modernista architecture and a sunny disposition.

The bulk of Barcelonins wouldn't live anywhere else. Many outsiders seem to agree – the city's resident foreign population tripled between 2000 and 2006. Tourism increases year on year, with 7.1 million visitors pouring in during 2007.

Some view this growth as a mixed blessing. Noise and drunkenness in the streets are unpleasant side effects, and prices are being pushed up. Everything from rent to eating out has risen sharply in recent years, and a study in early 2007 had Barcelona at number 31 in a list of the 143 most expensive cities in the world.

The city's leaders also promote Barcelona as a business, conference and research centre. Half the city's visitors are there on business and, by 2009, Barcelona will be second only to Milan in available trade-fair space in Europe.

Ordinary Barcelonins love their city but are aware of its shortcomings. They watched in disbelief as much of the city was left without power during a major blackout in August 2007 and the suburban train network descended into chaos, largely due to work on the long delayed AVE high-speed rail link with Madrid.

Sensitivity over regional identity is never far from Spanish political debates. As Prime Minister Zapatero tried to negotiate a more generous Catalan devolution statute in 2005–06 (see [p31](#)), the right-wing Partido Popular (PP) accused him of 'breaking up Spain'. In the run-up to the March 2008 national elections, the PP railed against the use of Catalan in Catalan schools.

In the end, the political sparring provides juice for lively chat in the bars – at the very least adding animation to an already animated city!

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GETTING STARTED

Compact and easy to get around by public transport, Barcelona is geared to tourism and you will find plenty of information on all major tourist attractions. At the same time, it is full of mystery and invites you to spend long days of meandering and discovering. The monuments and museums, mainly concentrated in a relatively small area, could keep you busy for a week or more, but inevitably some of your time will be dedicated to simply hanging out in cafés, bars, eateries and at the beach. Consider setting aside a day or two for excursions (p244), most easily done by train. Consider booking hotels, sought-after restaurants and shows before leaving home (see p20). Take care on arrival, as petty crime directed at tourists laden with cameras and bags is, unfortunately, common.

WHEN TO GO

Barcelona is a year-round destination, as ideal for a long weekend city break as for a six-month sabbatical. It is a good idea to time a trip with one eye on events and the other on the weather (see p271). Many associate Barcelona with the summer sun, but August can be a poor choice – the city broils and swarms with tourists as the locals disappear to more salubrious climes. It is certainly better to come around mid-June or September. If beach time is not a priority, you can easily find sunny (if chilly) weather and fewer crowds in January and February. You stand a good chance of striking rain from April to May and October through November.

FESTIVALS

Whether it's being chased by fire-spitting demons or joining parades of giants, meandering through the decorated streets of Barcelona's *barris* (neighbourhoods) with beer in hand, or crowding into a mega-concert at the Fòrum, the city proffers a plethora of festivals. Many are steeped in colourful tradition, while others are modern affairs focused on concerts, theatre or sport. Some envelop the entire city; other lively local *festes* are limited to a particular *barri*. Events take place throughout much of the year, although there is more activity in the warmer months. For a list of official public holidays in Barcelona, see p274.

January

ANY NOU/AÑO NUEVO (NEW YEAR'S DAY)

Like Cap d'Any/Noche Vieja (New Year's Eve) anywhere, this occasion can create

but not always fulfil expectations. Many locals arrange parties in their homes as restaurants, bars and clubs fill to bursting and charge like wounded bulls. Rowdy folks also gather around Plaça de Catalunya.

REIS/REYES

Epifania (Epiphany) on 6 January is also known as the Dia dels Reis Mags/Día de los Reyes Magos (Three Kings' Day), or simply Reis/Reyes, perhaps the most important day on a Barcelona kid's calendar. According to tradition, this is when they receive gifts (although Christmas has made heavy inroads). The holiday itself is quiet, but on 5 January children delight in the Cavalcada dels Reis Mags (Parade of the Three Kings), a colourful parade of floats and music.

FESTES DELS TRES TOMBS

A key part of the festival of Sant Antoni Abat, the patron saint of domestic and carriage animals, is this Feast of the Three Circuits, a parade of horse-drawn carts in the Eixample near the Mercat de Sant Antoni every 17 January.

February

BARCELONA VISUALSOUND

www.barcelonavisualsound.org, in Catalan

This 10-day festival brings together audiovisual creators in a celebration of emerging stars in the making of anything from video to multimedia art.

BARNASANTS

Each year the city's main live-music venues host a bevy of Spanish and Latin American

singer-songwriters for concerts spread over a period from the end of January until about mid-March.

CARNESTOLTES/CARNAVAL

Celebrated in February or March, this festival involves several days of fancy-dress parades and merrymaking, ending on the Tuesday 47 days before Easter Sunday. The *Gran Rua* (Grand Parade) takes place on the Saturday evening from 5.30pm. Down in Sitges (p255) a much wilder version takes place. The gay community stages gaudy parades and party-goers keep the bars and clubs heaving for several days running.

FESTES DE SANTA EULÀLIA

www.bcn.cat/santaaulalia

Coinciding roughly with Carnival, this is the feast of Barcelona's first patron saint, Eulàlia (or 'la Laia' for short). The Ajuntament (town hall) organises a week of cultural events, from concerts through to performances by *castellers* (human-castle builders; see p227).

FESTIVAL DE JAZZ

www.jazzterrasa.org, in Catalan

A major season of jazz concerts from mid-February to mid-March in the nearby city of Terrassa.

March & April

DIVENDRES SANT/VIERNES SANTO (GOOD FRIDAY)

Transport yourself to southern Spain with the Easter processions from the Església de Sant Agustí in El Raval on Good Friday. They start at 5pm and end in front of La Catedral three hours later.

RAL.LI BARCELONA-SITGES

www.rallyesitges.com

Dozens of classic cars converge on Barcelona towards the end of March for this annual rally. You can see the cars on show on the Saturday morning in Plaça de Sant Jaume, or position yourself on the route here or in Sitges.

DIA DE SANT JORDI

Catalonia celebrates the feast of its patron saint, St George, on 23 April. At the same time, the Dia del Llibre (Day of the Book)

is observed – men give women a rose, women give men a book, publishers launch new titles and La Rambla and Plaça de Sant Jaume fill with book and flower stalls.

FERIA DE ABRIL DE CATALUNYA

Andalucía comes to town with this traditional southern festival staged by and for the city's big Andalusian population. It lasts for about a week from late April and has recently been held in the Fòrum.

FESTIVAL DE MÚSICA ANTIGA DE BARCELONA

www.auditori.com

A month-long festival of ancient music, which reaches back centuries and across cultures to create a varied series of concerts at l'Auditori.

May

L'OU COM BALLA

A curious tradition, the 'Dancing Egg' is an empty shell that bobs on top of the flower-festooned fountain in the cloister of La Catedral. This spectacle is Barcelona's way of celebrating Corpus Christi (the Thursday following the eighth Sunday after Easter Sunday).

FESTA DE SANT PONÇ

To commemorate the patron saint of beekeepers and herbalists, locals fill Carrer de l'Hospital in El Raval on 11 May with the chatter and bustle of a street market.

PRIMAVERA SOUND

www.primaverasound.com

For three days in late May (or early June) the Auditori Fòrum and other locations around town a host of international DJs and musicians.

FESTIVAL DE FLAMENCO DE CIUTAT VELLA

www.tallerdemusics.com

One of the best occasions to see great flamenco in Barcelona, this festival is held over four days at the CCCB (p80). In the district of Nou Barris, a smaller three-day festival is usually held around the middle of the month in a local civic centre. Keep your eyes open for flyers.

June

SÓNAR

www.sonar.es

Sónar is Barcelona's celebration of electronic music and is said to be Europe's biggest such event. Locations and dates change each year.

DE CAJÓN FESTIVAL FLAMENCO

www.theproject.es

A major flamenco fest running for a week in June and early July in one of the city's major venues.

FESTIVAL DEL GREC

www.barcelonafestival.com, in Catalan

This eclectic programme of theatre, dance and music runs for most of the summer. Performances are held all over the city, including at the **Teatre Grec** (Map pp140–1; Passeig de Santa Madrona; **M** Espanya) amphitheatre on Montjuïc from which the festival takes its name.

DIA DE SANT JOAN/DÍA DE SAN JUAN BAUTISTA

The night before the Feast of St John the Baptist (24 June), the people of Barcelona hit the streets or hold parties at home to celebrate the Berbena de Sant Joan (St John's Night), which involves drinking, dancing, bonfires and fireworks.

DIA PER L'ALLIBERAMENT LESBIÀ I GAI

Día del Orgullo Gay (Gay Pride Day) celebrations take place on the Saturday nearest 28 June and are a boisterous affair, centering on a demonstration and party on Plaça de l'Universitat. Various organisations (including the Arena clubs, p205) are planning a more ambitious event for celebrations in 2009 and beyond.

July

SUMMERCASE

www.summertime.com

Since 2006 this weekend music festival in mid-July has drawn huge crowds for top contemporary acts (among those in 2008 were M.I.A., Primal Scream, Blondie and, in revival, The Stranglers) to the Parc del Fòrum.

August

FESTA MAJOR DE GRÀCIA

www.festamajordegracia.org, in Catalan

This local festival, which takes place over about nine days around 15 August, is one of the biggest in Barcelona. More than a dozen streets in Gràcia are decorated by their inhabitants as part of a competition for the most imaginative street. People pour in to listen to bands in the streets and squares, fuel on snacks and drink at countless street stands.

FESTA MAJOR DE SANTS

The district of Sants launches its own week-long version of decorated mayhem, held around 24 August, hard on the heels of Gràcia.

FESTES DE SANT ROC

For four days in mid-August, Plaça Nova in the Barri Gòtic becomes the scene of parades, *correfoc* (fire race), a market, traditional music and magic shows for kids.

September

DIADA NACIONAL DE CATALUNYA

Catalonia's national day commemorates, curiously, Barcelona's surrender on 11 September 1714 to the Bourbon monarchy of Spain, at the conclusion of the War of the Spanish Succession (see p21).

FESTES DE LA MERCÈ

www.bcn.cat/merce

This four-day fest sparks a final burst of pre-winter madness. Nostra Senyora de la Mercè (Our Lady of Mercy), Barcelona's co-patron saint, is celebrated in the city's *fiesta major*. There's a swimming race across the harbour, a fun run, outstanding free concerts (such as Barcelona Acció Musica, or BAM; www.bcn.cat/bam) and a bewildering programme of cultural events. Adding to the local colour are all the ingredients of a major Catalan *fiesta*: *castellers*, *sardanes* (traditional Catalan folk dancing), parades of *gegants* and *capgrossos* (giants and big heads), and a huge *correfoc*.

WEEKEND DANCE

www.weekendance.es

This two-city dance-music festival takes place over a weekend in Madrid and

POO-POING CHRISTMAS

A Catalan Christmas wouldn't be the same without the *pessebres* (nativity scenes). A giant one is set up in Plaça de Sant Jaume and you can see a display of them in an annex of the *Església de Betlem* (p61). These cribs are common throughout the Catholic world, particularly in the Mediterranean.

What makes them different here is the scatological presence – along with the baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the three kings – of the *caganer* (crapper), a chap who has dropped his pants and is doing number twos (a symbol of fertility for the coming year).

On a similar note, the *caga tió* (poop log) is a wooden beast that 'lives' in the kitchen or dining room in the run-up to Christmas and has to be 'fed' (traditionally things like dry bread and water) so that on Christmas Day it will *cagar* (shit) gifts. Once, the gifts were sweets. In some families they tend to be more substantial nowadays.

The whole thing developed from a country tradition of placing a huge *tió* (tree trunk) in the fireplace – its gifts in the misty past were simply the benefits of heat and light. Somewhere along the line the story became more, shall we say, sophisticated. You can buy your own *caganers* and let kids have a go hitting a *caga tió* with a stick to get a present at the Fira de Santa Llúcia, a Christmas market in front of La Catedral, in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Barcelona's Parc Forùm. Half the bands play each in one city the first night and swap over for the other.

MOSTRA DE VINS I CAVES DE CATALUNYA

An excellent chance to taste a wide range of Catalan wine and *cava*, this expo is usually held at Maremàgnum (p92) over four days towards the end of September.

FESTA MAJOR DE LA BARCELONETA

Barcelona's party-goers usually have only a short wait until the next opportunity for merrymaking. Although on a small scale, La Barceloneta's gig, to celebrate the local patron saint, Sant Miquel, on 29 September, lasts about a week and involves plenty of dancing and drinking (especially on the beach).

October

FESTIVAL DE TARDOR

www.ribermusica.org, in Catalan

Four days of live music, workshops and more in bars and other locations around La Ribera.

FESTIVAL DE CINE ERÓTICO

www.faceb.com

One of Europe's biggest porn-film fairs takes place in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, between Barcelona and El Prat airport, over about five days during early October. Whatever you make of this business, there's no doubting it attracts a lot of attention!

November

FESTIVAL INTERNACIONAL DE JAZZ DE BARCELONA

www.theproject.es

For most of the month, the big venues (from the Auditori down) across town host a plethora of international jazz acts. At the same time, a more home-spun jazz fest takes place for about a month in bars across Ciutat Vella.

December

NADAL/NAVIDAD (CHRISTMAS)

Catalans tend to have their main Christmas dinner on Christmas Eve, although many have a big lunch the following day. An odd event to mark the occasion is the annual (freezing) 200m swimming dash from Maremàgnum to the Moll de les Drassanes.

PRIMAVERA CLUB

www.primaverasound.com

The winter equivalent of Primavera Sound in May (p17).

COSTS & MONEY

A 2008 study showed that Barcelona had, in one year, shot from 56th to 31st in a ranking of more than 100 cities by expense. A mid-range hotel double room can cost anything from €70 to €250, and a midrange dinner averages €21 to €70. On the other hand, simple, filling set lunchtime meals cost around €10. Many museums have free admission days (see the Neighbourhoods chapter, p94). Staying in

a modest hotel, sticking to set lunches and dining out well (but without splurging), you can bargain on spending €100 to €150 a day. Those on a strict budget, who stay in hostel dorms and survive on *entrepans* (filled rolls) or make up their own meals, should be able to get by on about €50 to €60 a day.

INTERNET RESOURCES

The following sites will get you started on a virtual research tour of Barcelona:

Barcelona (www.bcn.cat) The Town Hall's official website, with plenty of links.

Barcelona in Progress (<http://bcnip.blogspot.com>, in Spanish) A blog that captures swathes of news on Barcelona.

Barcelona Turisme (www.barcelonaturisme.com) The city's official tourism website.

Barcelonareporter.com (www.barcelonareporter.com) An English language news site.

BCN Nightlife (www.bcn-nightlife.com) Info on bars, clubs and parties across town.

Le Cool (<http://lecool.com>) A free weekly guide to what's happening in Barcelona (and other cities).

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com)

Ruta del Modernisme (www.rutadelmodernisme.com) The site that covers Barcelona's Modernista heritage, sites, events and more.

SUSTAINABLE BARCELONA

Water shortages are a problem throughout Spain. A severe drought in the past years has left Catalan dams at a low ebb and, in 2008, Barcelona began to import boatloads of water from as far off as Almería (southern Spain) and Marseille (France). Heavy rains in May alleviated the situation but water waste remains an issue. You can do your part, for

ADVANCE PLANNING

You might want to book a few things in advance. Many of the more popular hotels fill up fast, especially during trade fairs. To know which dates to avoid, check the trade-fair calendar at www.firabcn.com.

If you are keen to eat in certain restaurants, book a table (by phone) to avoid disappointment on arrival. Similarly, those planning a night at the opera or similar outings should consider booking through the venues' websites or ticketing agencies like: **Tel-Entrada** (www.telentrada.com); **ServiCaixa** (www.servicaixa.com); **Tick Tack Ticket** (www.ticktackticket.com); and **El Corte Inglés** (www.elcorteingles.es/entradas, in Spanish).

example, by not sending off towels for washing each day in your hotel and making sure you don't litter in the streets (a problem that has led to the hosing down of the city every night).

Air pollution is a problem (see p43) and driving around Barcelona is impractical anyway, so consider using public transport (most buses run on gas). Bike hire is an option but the introduction of a system of bicycles as public transport, the exponential explosion of bike tour companies and the wholly inadequate network of bike lanes can make getting around by bike frustrating for cyclists, pedestrians and drivers alike!

Instead of flying to Barcelona, consider lengthening your trip and travel there by train. Direct overnight sleepers run from Paris, Geneva and Milan. From London you could start with the Eurostar and spend a day in Paris en route.

In 2008 Catalonia and 23 other European regions (including Tuscany and Provence) formed a sustainable tourism network aimed at rendering tourism compatible with the environment, local quality of life and maintenance of local traditions.

THE AUTHOR

Damien Simonis



In 1990, during a continental foray from a rain-sodden London, Damien found himself in pre-Olympics Barcelona. He had never before set foot in Spain. What was it about this town? The crowded produce markets, the dimly-

lit *colmados* (treasure caverns of all sorts of weird and wonderful foods), the noisy terraces where chatter mixed so easily with wine, the Gaudi colours, the mysterious narrow lanes of the Barri Gòtic, the seaside? Perhaps it was all this and some unifying, undefinable quality that got under his skin. Eight years later Damien turned up in a Rambla-side *pensión* on assignment for Lonely Planet and that old magic started flowing again. A chat in a bar and he had scored a room in a top-floor flat in Gran Via. Barcelona was for years a second home and is now our restless correspondent's main base.

DAMIEN'S TOP BARCELONA DAY

A great way to kick-start the day is with everyone else, leaning up against a bar over a *café amb llet* (coffee with milk), an orange juice and a pastry (preferably something nice

and creamy like a *canya*). A quick read of the paper to find out where we stand on the latest round of squabbling over Catalan autonomy and FC Barcelona's results and it's time to hit the streets.

There are few monuments in the world like La Sagrada Família (p104), not only for its uniqueness but because it is one of the few where you never quite know what it will look like each time you pass by! A visit to the Museu Picasso (p83) or the CaixaForum (p142) to catch the latest temporary art exhibition takes care of the day's artistic nourishment.

Lunch beckons. I head into the narrow lanes of La Barceloneta for a slap-up meal of fish or finger-licking *mariscos* (seafood; p178). The choice of area has a double purpose, for what's a day in Barcelona without a couple of hours lazing on the beach? I then like to wander back through El Born, poking my nose into cheese and sweet shops, lingering for a glass of wine at La Vinya del Senyor (p202) and working north to the Mercat de Santa Caterina (p87). A little gourmet shopping here and off home for a late siesta before heading out again into the night.

First an elegant meal in one of the many gems scattered across the grid maze of l'Eixample. From there, it's a short taxi ride into the heart of the Barri Gòtic for some jazz at the Harlem (p200). If the spirit is willing, another taxi whisks us up into La Zona Alta for a dance at Sutton the Club (p212). As dawn breaks, it is a short and somewhat dazed stroll home.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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