

# Understand Barcelona

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Independence is the hot topic of the day; in the background, the Catalan capital continues to be a leader in innovation and sustainability.

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Folk dancing, traditional festivals, towering human *castells* (castles) and one powerhouse football team are essential elements of the Catalan experience.

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Nova Cançó, la rumba and cutting-edge rock have shaped the Catalan sound, while flamenco and *sardana* (Catalonia's national folk dance) still flourish.

# Barcelona Today

Take a stroll through the streets of Barcelona, and you'll likely see more than a few *esteladas*, the flag with the lone star (and red and yellow bars) that symbolises Catalonia's drive towards independence. Talk of separatism has reached a fever pitch, and raised deep concerns across Europe. Of course, there's much more brewing in Barcelona than just self-rule. The city's deep commitment to innovation has led to improvements in transport, communications and urban design.

## Best on Film

**All About My Mother** (director Pedro Almodóvar, 1999) One of Almodóvar's best-loved films is full of plot twists and dark humour, complete with transsexual prostitutes and doe-eyed nuns.

**Vicky Cristina Barcelona** (director Woody Allen, 2008) Allen gives Barcelona the *Manhattan* treatment, showing a city of startling beauty and neuroticism.

**L'Auberge Espagnol** (director Cédric Klapisch, 2002) A warmly told coming-of-age story about a mish-mash of foreign-exchange students thrown together in Barcelona.

**Barcelona** (director Whit Stillman, 1994) A sharp and witty romantic comedy about two Americans living in Barcelona during the end of the Cold War.

## Best in Print

**Barcelona** (Robert Hughes, 1992) Witty and passionate study of 2000 years of history.

**The Shadow of the Wind** (Carlos Ruiz Zafón, 2001) Page-turning mystery set in post-Civil-War Barcelona.

**Homage to Catalonia** (George Orwell, 1938) Orwell's classic account of the early days of the Spanish Civil War.

## The Nation of Catalonia?

It's an historic moment in Barcelona. The drive towards independence is under way, with the very real possibility that Catalonia could break away from Spain and become a sovereign republic in 2018. With its own language, unique traditions and proud history (at least prior to its conquest by Spain in 1714), Catalonia has always thought of itself as distinct from other parts of the country. But until recently, only a small fringe group sought a permanent and irrevocable break from Madrid.

In the last few years, however, the number of self-proclaimed separatists has skyrocketed. Back in November 2014 Catalonia held a nonbinding referendum, and over 80% of those who voted backed Catalan independence (the turnout however, was low, with less than half of eligible voters participating). Spain's Constitutional Court wasted little time in declaring the vote (and all future votes) on independence to be illegal. Then in the following year (September 2015) Catalan nationalists won a majority of the 135-seat regional assembly, which they viewed as an implicit endorsement of secession. Catalan leader Artur Mas i Gavarró promised to press ahead with independence.

Hostilities quickly flared between Artur Mas and Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, who vowed to use the judiciary to block any Catalan moves towards independence. This didn't deter the parliament of Catalonia, however. Shortly after the elections (November 2015) a resolution was passed laying out the road map to independence, with legislation under way to draft a Catalan constitution, create a new treasury and design a social security system. Self-rule was to be achieved within 18 months.

Fuelling the drive is the ongoing economic crisis – some 19% of Catalans are unemployed (versus 21%