



Catalonia

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Best Places to Eat

- ➔ El Cellar de Can Roca (p316)
- ➔ La Cuina de Can Simon (p305)
- ➔ El Jardinet (p342)
- ➔ l'estel de la Mercè (p346)
- ➔ Cal Ton (p351)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Hotel Platjador (p347)
- ➔ Hotel El Ciervo (p339)
- ➔ Mil Estrelles (p319)
- ➔ Hotel Els Caçadors (p330)
- ➔ Villa Paulita (p331)

Why Go?

Catalonia packs a lot into its four provinces. The stunning cove beaches of the Costa Brava make it one of Spain's loveliest coasts, backed by the top foodie scene and Jewish history of the medieval city of Girona, and Salvador Dalí's gloriously surreal 'theatre-museum' in Figueres.

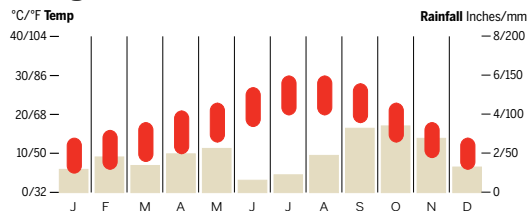
For something utterly different head north to where the Pyrenees rise up to mighty 3000m peaks from a series of stunning valleys crisscrossed with numerous hiking trails.

And if that's not enough, there are the flamingo-tinted wetlands of the Delta de l'Ebre (Ebro Delta), the Roman and Greek ruins of Tarragona and Empuriés, and mighty medieval monasteries, gorgeous Romanesque churches and isolated hilltop villages scattered throughout.

Wherever you venture there is the undeniable sense that Catalonia (Catalunya in Catalan, Cataluña in Spanish) is different from the rest of Spain. It's a difference worth celebrating.

When to Go

Tarragona



May Girona blooms for its flower festival and beaches are gorgeous, though the water's chilly.

Sep The Catalan Pyrenees are aflame in autumnal colours and the hiking is perfect.

Oct & Nov The museums and galleries of the Dalí circuit are at their quiet best.

RODALIES

The network of short-distance rail lines, known as *rodalies* or *cercanías*, is a great way to get around the region. Most lines radiate out from Barcelona, though Girona and Tarragona also have networks. Check www.gencat.cat/portal/site/rodalies for maps and timetables.

Book Ahead For...

- ➔ Top-end restaurants
- ➔ Diving in the Illes Medes (p317)
- ➔ Visits to wineries
- ➔ Casa Museu Dalí (p320) in Portlligat
- ➔ Teatre-Museu Dalí (p322) in Figueres

Parks & Reserves

Catalonia boasts numerous parks and nature reserves. For a rundown on all of them, check out www.parcsdecatalunya.net, which is full of useful background information, though in Spanish and Catalan only.

Online Resources

- ➔ www.gencat.cat – regional government website full of info
- ➔ www.sarfa.com, www.alsa.es – bus services
- ➔ www.magrama.gob.es/es/costas/servicios/guia-playas – guide to

Parles Català?

Get out of Barcelona and away from Costa Brava's beaches and you'll find that *català* (Catalan) is all around you: the menus and street signs are in Catalan and it's pretty much the only language spoken in the villages. Written Catalan resembles both Spanish and French; its roots are in Latin and it's an Occitano-Romance language, stemming from medieval Provençal. It is spoken by over 10 million people in Catalonia (both Spanish and French), Andorra, the Balearic Islands, Valencia (where it's called *valenciano*), Murcia and even Sicily. Though Catalan was severely suppressed under Franco, with books destroyed and the language banned from schools, since his death it has made a strong comeback and become a focus of regional identity.

CATALAN WINE

Looking for local wine? You're in the right region: Greeks and Romans were making it here millennia ago and Catalonia has no fewer than 12 Denominaciones de Origen (DO). The most famous drop is *cava*, a Champagne-style sparkling wine that ranges from ultra-dry (*brut nature*) to sweet. The Penedès region that produces most of it also makes light, fruit-driven whites from macabeo, xarel·lo and other varietals.

Other notable winemaking zones include Priorat, which produces aromatic, full-bodied reds, particularly from *cariñena* (carignan) and *garnacha* (grenache) grapes, and Costers del Segre, which comprises several fairly distinct subregions and produces quality whites and reds from a wide variety of grapes including macabeo, chardonnay, monastrell and cabernet sauvignon. The Raimat subregion is particularly worthy of attention. The general Catalunya appellation includes various quality wines produced in wineries outside of the other regions.

Top Five Food Experiences

- ➔ **Olot's 'volcanic' cuisine** (p327) Delicious combinations involving fresher-than-fresh ingredients from the region's fertile volcanic soil.
- ➔ **Cava tasting in Penedès** (p350) Largely a Christmas drink in the rest of Spain, the refreshing sparkling wine is a year-round staple here in its home region.
- ➔ **Girona's El Celler de Can Roca** (p316) Expect to be wowed by top-drawer molecular gastronomy. Book 11 months ahead or pray for a cancellation.
- ➔ **Local rice with duck in the Delta de l'Ebre** (p357) This paella-like dish has zero food miles involved – the ducks are hunted on the flooded rice paddies in winter.
- ➔ **Calçots with romesco sauce** (p307) Highly addictive barbecued leek-like onions. Peel off the blackened outer layer and dip the juicy interior in this nutty sauce. Repeat.