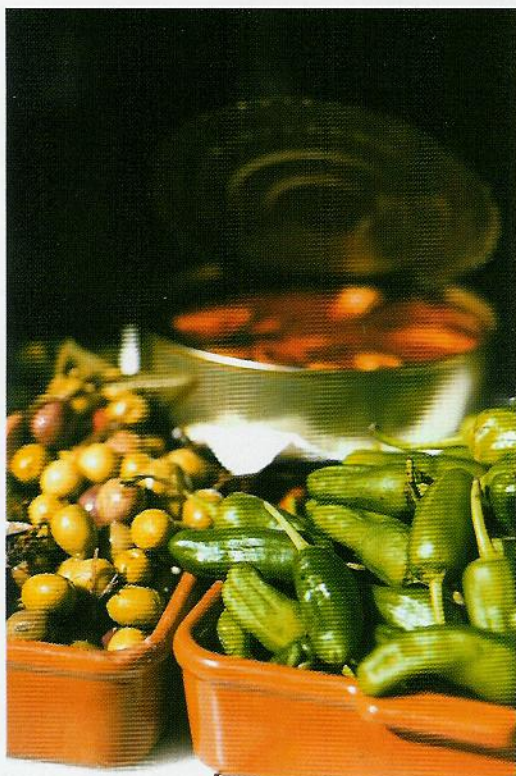


Hola Barcelona!



More than just another sunny seaside getaway, this Spanish city also oozes style and character. Writer and resident Sarah Andrews reveals why Barcelona can't be beat ➤

Photography by Ester Gebuis

Clean, morning sunlight filters through the century-old plane trees lining Las Ramblas, dappling the heads of the mothers pushing strollers, locals laden with shopping bags, students whizzing by on bikes, and the camera-toting tourists making their way along this iconic boulevard. This is the core of the city, the looking-glass in which every layer of society can find its reflection.

Meanwhile, a pleasant organic scent wafts up from the tidy stalls of the flower vendors – and a more pungent one comes from the ones selling birds, ferrets, mice and turtles. Above it all, a ceaseless hum hangs in the air, the soundtrack made by chatter, chirping, the whine of motorcycles and the heavy sighing of city bus engines. Full of energy and movement, commerce and

culture, Las Ramblas is a perfect allegory for Barcelona itself.

It's just after nine o'clock, and the city has stretched its arms and woken up to another sun-splashed day. But Barcelona, the feisty capital of independent-minded Catalunya, is much more than just another Spanish fun-in-the-sun destination. A proud, poised city almost self-conscious with stylishness, Barcelona is actually not very Spanish at all, keeping a distance from traditional icons like flamenco and bullfighting – instead surprising with splashy architecture, vanguard art and innovative design in everything from fashion to food.

The formula must work – more than six million visitors were drawn to the city last year, yet again confirming Barcelona's spot as one of Europe's

**The stately
Parc Ciutadelle**



*“Full of energy,
commerce and culture,
Las Ramblas is a
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hippest destinations. Most of these visitors left a footprint on Las Ramblas and nearly all of them saw some of Modernist architect Antoni Gaudí’s wondrous work, sunbathed on the beach, or shopped along the stately Passeig de Gràcia.

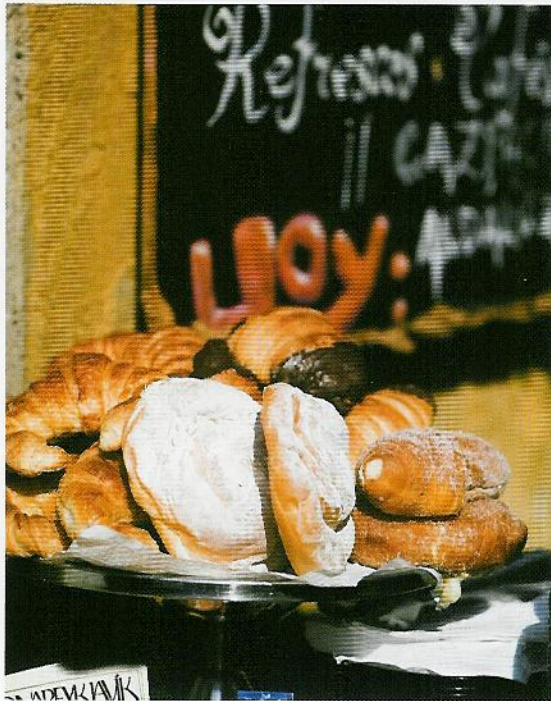
Fewer however, peeled back the city’s tourist-brochure image to discover its less-visited attractions. But like the back side of a coin, the other Barcelona – with her romantic plazas hidden amongst mazes of medieval streets, her exhilaratingly modern boutiques, and her tempting cafés liberally sprinkled throughout – has been here all along, though it may take a bit of help to find.

Truffles and pig’s ears

Exploring lesser-known Barcelona has as much to do with timing as it does with visiting out-of-the-way attractions, which is why the itinerary starts early, before breakfast and before the crowds arrive. Right on Las Ramblas is the raucous Boqueria market, built in 1840 and still the city’s favourite fresh market. No secret to either locals or tourists, it’s practically bursting with colourful, fragrant fruit and vegetables, and stands where you can find everything from candied bugs to exquisite local cheeses.

Wander inside to peek at the novelties: a goat’s head; pig’s ears and hooves; angler fish, hake and bright pink shrimp on ice shavings. US-born Genevieve McCarthy, who runs the gourmet travel company Cellar Tours, suggests a stop to chat with Llorenç, “a fantastic, cranky truffle god,” whose truffle and mushroom stand always has the best selection of in-season mushrooms.

Even better than looking at all the delicious food on show is trying some of it. The lunchtime >



**Above: early
thongs parade La
Ramblas
Left: breakfast!**



“Workmen wash down massive plates of eggs and sausage with beer or wine”

crowd can be smothering, but coming in for breakfast at one of the half-dozen bars interspersed among the food stalls allows you to see the Boquería as it used to be, with fishmongers laying out the day’s offerings and fruit vendors shining up their apples and pears. Pull up a stool beside workmen from the *barri* (neighbourhood), who show up daily to wash down massive plates of fried eggs and *chistorra* (a kind of sausage) with beer or wine. Of course, if your stomach isn’t up to such a challenge, there’s always the fall-back of fresh-squeezed orange juice or a strong *cortado* (espresso with a splash of milk).

The Old Town

When you emerge from the market, squinting in the sunlight, cross Las Ramblas and plunge into the Barri Gòtic (the Gothic Quarter), a neighbourhood of contrasts where ancient history and modern life stand shoulder-to-shoulder. Follow Carrer de la Boquería to reach Carrer Banys Vells (Old Baths), and notice the street’s gentle curve, which follows the boundaries of the 4th-century Roman-built wall, still visible in rough, stony blocks.

Centuries after the Roman city blended into a Catalan one, this area became the medieval Jewish quarter; the street’s name comes from the ritual baths that were located here during the 14th century. Make a mini-trip back in time and spot some of the baths’ ruins in the basements and back rooms of shops along this street. To get a glimpse, duck into the S’Oliver furniture store at number 10 or the café-cum-pastry shop Caelum at the corner of Carrer Palla. A tranquil spot out of the Barcelona sun, Caelum is an ideal café for a pick-me-up of tea and cookies made in local monasteries and convents.

Above: fresh vegetables at the Boquería market
Right: geese keep a watchful eye over La Seu cathedral





Best beaches

More than four kilometres of (mostly) clean, sandy beaches stretch out along Barcelona's waterfront. You'll find sunbathing spots and gentle waves in each, but a few beaches stand out from the rest...

At night, head beyond the Port Olímpic to the **Platja de Bogatell**, where a beach side bar sets out tables and tiki candles, drawing a chilled crowd.

If you have kids in tow, it's worth making the trek out to the **Parc del Forum**, a seaside park and swimming area at Barcelona's northernmost point, where you can sign up for a host of watery activities, including water-skiing, sailing, sea kayaking and snorkelling.

For easy-access and great people-watching opportunities, there's no beating the **Platja del Passeig Marítim**, Barcelona's best city beach. A two-minute walk from the metro station, it's a party day and night on this crowded stretch of sand.

Strolling the narrow streets of the *barri*, it's impossible not to get lured into the timeless atmosphere of a place where quirky fashion boutiques and beautifully designed gourmet food shops are lined up alongside ancient bookshops, generations-old antique stores and neighbourhood icons like L'Arca de l'Àvia (Grandma's Treasure Chest), where traditional shawls and linens hang in a delightfully old-fashioned setting.

The soaring La Seu cathedral, the star of the Barri Gòtic, is nearby, but perhaps even more satisfying is the delicately beautiful 14th-century Església de Santa Maria del Pi, a bare-boned temple of Catalan Gothic that dwarfs the small square, Plaça del Pi, spreading beyond the church's doors. Though not large, the sun-filled plaza is a favourite of many Barcelonese. Filled days with art markets, and ringed with cafés and shops, its addictive mix of beauty, activity and ➤

**Sun worshippers
just north of Platja
de Bogatell**

“It’s impossible not to get lured into the timeless atmosphere”

history is yet another reason why it’s impossible to tire of exploring the Barri Gòtic.

Nutty neighbourhood

Just off the Plaça del Pi is another neighbourhood favourite: the Carrer Petrixol (“chocolate street”).

A magnet for residents from across the city, this narrow alleyway is home to a handful of old-fashioned cafés that serve what just might be the thickest hot chocolate ever made; it’s like a mugful of melted candy bar and is practically a guaranteed stomach-ache, though well worth it.

Below: Passeig de Gràcia, the city’s most expensive shopping street
Below right: handsome hats in the Jewish quarter

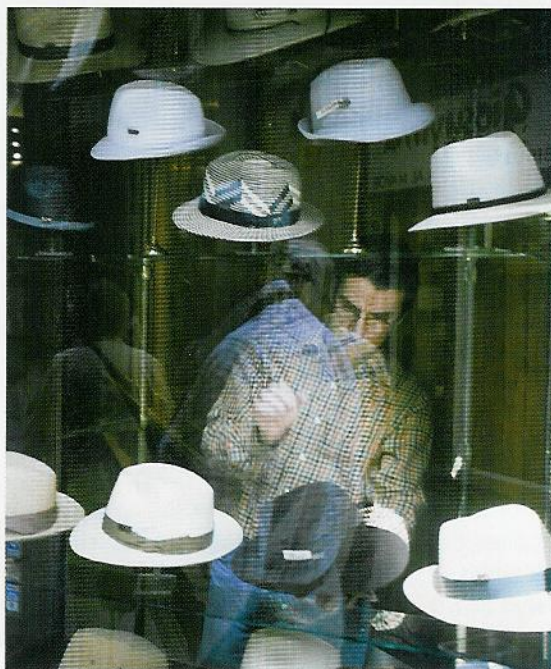
Alongside these granddaddies, stylish newcomers like Xocóa show off with too-pretty-to-eat bon-bons and flavour combinations like chocolate with curry, keeping up the streets long-standing link with chocolate. In classic Barcelona style, new and old keep company quite well.

Katrien Claus, owner of the quirky walking tour company My Favourite Things, admits to sneaking in a mug or two of the dark stuff, but then she points the way to the old, aroma-filled shop Gispert on Carrer Sombrerers, a family store that has specialized in dried fruits and nuts since it opened in 1851. It’s only a few blocks from the long lines of tourists that stream outside the popular Picasso Museum, but feels a world away.

“I love Gispert because there’s so much history in this shop,” Claus says. “It’s got the only wood-burning oven in Barcelona that’s still used to toast nuts.” In the back, past baskets overflowing with unshelled walnuts, hazelnuts and almonds, the shop’s official toaster, Arnold, supervises roasting in the original 1851 wood-burning oven. If you’re there during one of his “quality checks” (usually in the morning), you might get to sample some warm, freshly roasted nuts.

Creativity is key

At the other extreme of the shopping continuum is La Gauche Divine, an offbeat boutique hidden down a side street of the Barri Gòtic. The shop ➤





The scenic Port Vell bathed in sunlight

On your bike

Biking around Barcelona is a great way to see the sights, especially in the mostly pedestrian old quarter and along the waterfront, where bike lanes abound. Recommended rental agencies include My Beautiful Parking (Carrer Cervantes 5, +34 93 3041580, www.mybeautifulparking.com); One Car Less Bicycles (Carrer Esparteria 3, +34 93 2682105, www.bicicletabarcelona.com) and Fat Tire (Carrer Escudellers 48, +34 93 3013612, www.fattirebiketours.com). More information about Barcelona biking, including a full list of local rental agencies, information about the new public bike programme and a downloadable map showing the city's bike lanes, is online at www.bcn.es/bicicleta/en.

isn't easy to find, but fashionistas from all over the city have hunted it out in search of the latest creations from hip, young Catalan designers. They're rewarded with more than just cool clothes; ever-changing art exhibits adorn the walls and DJ-worthy house music blasts from the speakers.

"There's a great creative environment in Barcelona," sums up Australian Tommy Tang, who runs the fanciful artisan candy shop Papabubble on nearby Carrer Ample. "It's full of really unique people doing groundbreaking stuff."

Lazing around

A bag of Papabubble sweets just might give you the energy boost you need to finish up the afternoon with a stroll through the Born, the city's most fashionable district (for the moment at least), thanks to a stream of chic stores, restaurants and bars, with new ones opening all the time. The crowds tend to huddle around the palace-lined Carrer Montcada, a stately street whose beauty is often masked by throngs of tourists waiting to enter the string of museums here. But there's no need to join them. Head instead to the neighbourhood's quieter spots, like the tranquil Plaça de les Olles, where a handful of cafés serve food al fresco to hip young things, or the back streets Carrer de L'Esparteria and Carrer Vidriera, which are lined with designer boutiques well off the tourist radar.

As the sun sinks lower in the sky, seek out one last spot of solace in the city. Just off Las Ramblas hides the oasis of El Jardí (The Garden), a hotel and open-air bar within the enclosed patio of the 15th-century Hospital de la Santa Creu, where Gaudí died after being run over by a tram in 1926. The clamour and clatter of the endearingly gritty Raval district continues just on the other side of this hospital-turned-library's stone walls, but the clientele seem blissfully un-aware of it as they listen to the chirping of birds and the whisper of the wind as it rifles through the leafy trees in the patio. There's no better way to while away the lingering afternoon.

"This is the Barcelona most people never see," says Cristina Roig, a regular at El Jardí. "It's just students and people from the neighbourhood, reading and chatting. Simple. Peaceful."

Tomorrow will be another long sunny day, with plenty of time for delving further into the "other" Barcelona. But for now, sit back, drink in hand, and watch the last of the sun's rays fade into black. ☀

Hot tips

WHERE TO EAT

Arrive early (1pm for lunch, 8pm for dinner) to nab a bar stool at the popular tapas bar **Paco Meralgo** (171 Carrer Muntaner, +34 93 4309027), where filling, upscale tapas like lentil stew with chorizo and pot roast with mushrooms are served to a crowd of regulars.

For home-style, Castilian fare, taxi out to Nou Barris to be treated to an unforgettable meal at **Hermanos Tomás** (1 Carrer Padre Pérez del Pulgar, +34 93 3457148, www.htomas.com), a family-run joint whose grubby exterior and old-fashioned style masks an fabulous dining experience. Reservations are a must.

Don't forget the city's markets for truly authentic tastes: at Mercat de la Boqueria, the always-packed **Quim de la Boqueria** (Las Ramblas 91) serves an ever-changing variety of tapas; while at the Mercat de Santa Caterina, **Cuines Santa Caterina** (Avinguda Francesc Cambó, +34 93 2689918) serves up market-fresh fish.

Courtesy of Le Meridien Barcelona Hotel



WHERE TO STAY

Located in the heart of town, on Las Ramblas, Le Meridien Barcelona (Ramblas 111, +34 93 318 6200, www.meridienbarcelona.com) makes the ideal base from which to explore the city. With its top-class luxury and stylish decor, it's also the hotel of choice for the rich and famous: Pavarotti, Bruce Springsteen, the Rolling Stones and Madonna are just a few of the mega-stars that have stayed here.

GETTING THERE

KLM Royal Dutch Airlines operates seven daily flights from Amsterdam Airport Schiphol to Barcelona International Airport.



Map: def.

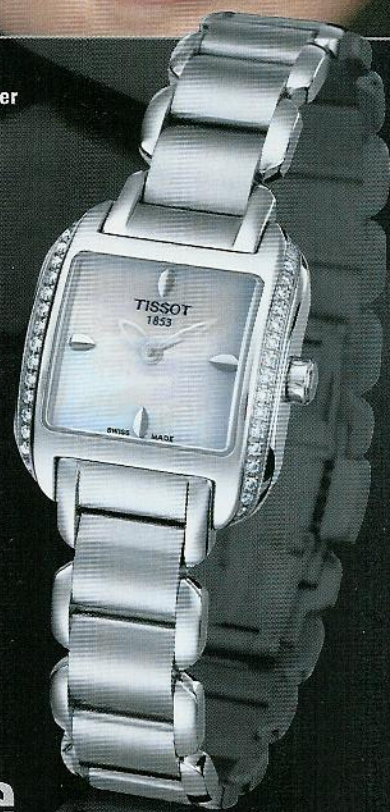


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