


Sitting pretty

This idyllic, stately seaside resort is the stuff dreams are made of. But when the sun goes down the nightlife is queen

CITY BREAK: SITGES

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photographs JOSEP CANO



QUICK: what's the first thing that comes to mind when you envision an idyllic seaside holiday? Golden beaches? Swaying palm trees? The soft murmur of Mediterranean waves lapping against the shore? Beach shacks selling crispy fried fish and cool glasses of white wine?

If you said yes to any of the above, Sitges is probably what your dreams are

made of. This stately seaside resort boasts one of the prettiest seafronts anywhere on the Mediterranean, something residents here won't hesitate to boast about. With a manicured promenade stretching more than 2km along the coast and a tight knot of a town centre filled with old Modernist-style mansions, an elegant 17th-century church and plenty of unique boutiques and restaurants, Sitges goes above and beyond ►

Visit in spring and visitors can have the beach to themselves. In the height of summer, escape to the chic shops and art districts

► the standard beach resort. But the town's allure goes deeper than aesthetics. Sitges has a well-earned reputation for being enticingly bohemian, with a welcoming attitude and lively gay and artistic communities. The fact that the town is known for both its gay scene and as an ideal family destination is telling.

Just 20km south of Barcelona, this has long been a favourite getaway for city-wary Barcelona residents. In the late 19th century, the *vila* ("village", still its official status) was already attracting a wealthy, artsy crowd, paving the way for the reputation it would earn later. The first summer homes were built by Los Americanos, Catalans who had made it big trading in Cuba and the rest of the new world. Before long the who's who of Barcelona society followed suit, each builder trying to outdo the ones before him with homes that became increasingly elaborate and imposing. Many of these homes have since been converted into hotels or public buildings.

Sitges took a big step toward becoming the artsy town it is today when Santiago Rusiñol, a Modernist painter and something of a local hero, moved here in the 1890s. He and the entourage that trailed behind him brought a wave of artistic flair to the town, and his loudly professed love of the unique light in Sitges still influences modern-day artists. Rusiñol's seaside studio, Cau Ferrat, became a meeting point for artists of his day, and now it is a museum.

So if Sitges has become a hotspot for artists (and it has, if the dozens of studios and galleries scattered about are proof), then Santiago Rusiñol can take much of the credit.

Sitges has plenty to interest art lovers, but there is more on offer here. The town's crowning glory is the church of Sant Bartomeu i



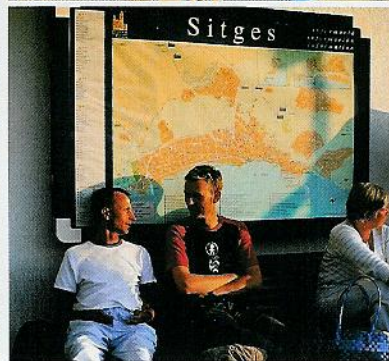
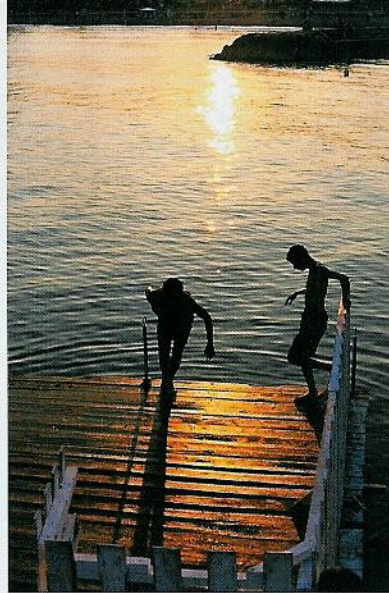
Santa Tecla, which sits on a bluff overlooking the sea. Locals refer to the church simply as La Punta ("The Point"), and both the church and its setting are among the prettiest things in town. On fine days the steps and plaza in front of the church are filled with couples gazing out at the waves crashing on the rocks below. If the weather is right, the waves rise high enough to splash the

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onlookers. Legend has it that fishermen's wives used to keep watch from here, praying that their husbands' boats would return to shore.

The streets around the church are the oldest in Sitges and are pleasant areas for strolling. Make a point of heading to the aptly named Racó de la Calma ("Corner of Calm"), a small plaza behind the church, to sit for a spell and take in the old, white-washed buildings and the Modernist-styled Palau Maricel. Musicians often play in this quiet square.

To really get a taste of town life, head toward Carrer Major or Carrer Parellades, the two busiest streets. Whether you're looking for unique artisan jewellery, edgy fashion or aroma-filled shops selling wines, chocolates or teas, you'll find them here. The spot where these two pedestrian streets meet is called the Cap de la Vila ("Head of the Village") and



though it is really just a wide spot in the road, it is used as a central plaza where neighbours gather and catch up on town gossip.

Sitges' personality changes dramatically depending on the time of year you visit. If seaside peace and quiet is your thing, the relatively slow spring or early autumn might suit best. Mild weather and few crowds mean visitors can find themselves alone on the beach or with the seaside promenade all to themselves. In the height of summer, however, Sitges is brimming with sunburnt tourists and daytrippers from Barcelona.

The busiest time is during August, when the town celebrates Festa Major with street parties, fireworks and papier-mâché giants.

Of course, this is also when Sitges' famed nightlife reaches its peak, with bars and discos pumping out everything from techno music to Caribbean

tunes until dawn every night of the week.

Sitges is deservedly famous for its after-hours action, which comes in gay, straight and happily mixed versions. On weekends and in summer after midnight the town literally vibrates with the music being pumped out of the downtown clubs.

The epicentre of the action is on Carrer 1er de Maig, a short strip lined with intimate clubs and fondly referred to as "Calle del Pecado" ("Sin Street"). Although during the day a five-minute stroll takes you from one end to the other, at night it's packed with bodies, and moving beyond the crowds' bump and grind pace is nearly impossible, forcing you to slow down and get wrapped up in the atmosphere.

After all, slowing down and getting wrapped up in the atmosphere is what Sitges is all about. ■

WHILE IN SITGES



PLACES TO STAY

TOP

Dolçe Sitges' only five-star hotel. Set outside the centre on a hill overlooking the golf course and the sea, the décor is modern, service excellent and style luxurious.

Avinguda Camí de Miralpeix, 12, tel: 0034 938 109 000,

http://sitges.dolce.com

MIDDLE

Hotel Subur Marítim Right on the beach and just 10 minutes from the town centre, this is a relaxing hotel with a great pool area and a classy garden bar.

Passeig Marítim, tel: 0034 938 941 550, www.hotelsuburmaritim.com

ECONOMY

Hotel Arcadia

A quiet, homely place to stay. Ask for one of the renovated rooms, and a balcony if possible.

Carrer Socas 22-24, tel: 0034 938 945 865

PLACES TO EAT

BREAKFAST

Café Roy A Sitges classic for coffee, pastries, a paper, or a gossip with locals. *Carrer Parellades 9, tel: 0034 938 110 052*

LUNCH

Costa Dorada A classic seafood place overlooking San Sebastián beach, here you can grab an outside table and feast on fresh fish, shellfish and paella. *Carrer Port Alegre 27, tel: 0034 938 943 543*

DINNER

Al Fresco An elegant, artsy atmosphere sets the tone at this romantic restaurant tucked into a side street. The excellent cuisine is Mediterranean with an international twist. *Carrer Barrabeig 4, tel: 0034 938 940 600*

GETTING THERE

NEAREST AIRPORTS

Barcelona Airport (El Prat)

Airport Code: BCN

Location: 15km from Sitges

El Prat de Llobregat, tel: 0034 932 983 838, www.aena.es

TOURIST OFFICE

Oficina Oasis; Centro Oasis, off Passeig de Vilafranca, tel: 0034

938 945 004, www.sitgestur.com

Oficina Maricel Carrer Fonollar,

tel: 0034 938 110 611,

www.sitgestur.com

MUST DO

BEACHES

Families with small children head to the **Platja de San Sebastián**, while teenagers looking for beach volleyball and new friends do their sunbathing on the **Platja de la Fragata**. **Platja de la Ribera** is known as the gay beach.

NATURE WALKS

Sitges is surrounded by the beautiful Natural Park of **El Garraf**, filled with trails ideal for walking or mountain biking. There are a couple of bike rental offices in town, and the tourist office has hiking maps. You could also try a seaside walk; behind the **Atlàntida discoteca** is a trail that runs right along the sea as it meanders its way to **Vilanova**.

Port d'Aiguadolç Sitges' recreational port is outside the town centre, but is great for strolling, eating seafood or for drooling over the luxurious yachts docked here. You can also rent jet skis.

FIESTAS

Sitges' **Carnaval** (Feb/Mar) is legendary, with numerous late-night parades and elaborate costumes for all.

Vintage Car Rally (Mar) Antique autos and motorbikes drive from Barcelona and finish with a slow parade through Sitges. Lots of people wear period dress, making it even more fun.

The town gets decked out for **Corpus Cristi** (May-June), laying beautiful and fragrant floral "carpets" all over town.

Festa Major (Aug 22-27) is a week-long summer festival of street parties, fireworks and sometimes free food. Don't miss the parades of giants.

Santa Tecla (Sept) Only Sitges has two summer festivals. This one is a bit tamer but still lots of fun.

With a focus on fantasy and horror films, **Sitges Film Festival** (Oct 13-22) draws attendees and celebrities from all over the world.