

Barcelona for the S

Check out five of the Catalan capital's most stimulating features

By Rose Davidson

BARCELONA IS A VIBRANT MIXTURE of art, food and fun that makes it difficult to leave but easy to love.

The airy ocean city, which also serves as the capital of Spain's Catalonia region, has a distinct culture – one that values relaxation, flavorful meals, innovative artists and, above all else, a care-free good time.

Even though it's been four years since I've laid eyes on my beloved Barcelona, I can still vividly remember the colors, sounds and scents of the city streets. Here are the aspects I miss most, and the ones I recommend to anyone looking for a sampling of the full Barcelona experience.



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1 Gaudí Architecture

When it comes to intriguing architecture, Barcelona has integrated some captivating structures into its cityscape.

To many, the most spectacular of these buildings are those by celebrated architect Antoni Gaudí. His works of art, many of which possess a quality of surrealism, are scattered all throughout the city. Perhaps the most iconic is La Sagrada Família, a basilica that towers over the Catalan skyline.

Park Güell is another one of Gaudí's famed creations. The outdoor area is filled with curvy shapes and colorful mosaics, giving off a carnival-esque vibe that's festive and fun. He designed some residential buildings as well; Casa Milà (also known as La Pedrera) and Casa Batlló both mix up the scenery on the oft-traveled sidewalks of Passeig de Gràcia. All of these masterpieces have been named UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Clockwise from top left: Casa Batlló, La Sagrada Família, Casa Milà and Park Güell



3 Catalan Cuisine

While fresh groceries have their time and place, sometimes it's more fun to eat out.

Barcelona is filled with cafés and restaurants serving authentic Spanish cuisine, many of which include the traditional tapas. The small plates of food are great for a light snack or simply prolonging an evening meal, something the Spanish are known to do. If you order enough, they can even function as a meal unto themselves.

There are hot and cold options out there, which may include breads, cheeses, meats and vegetables. Pintxo tapas, for example, are typically bread-based with flavorful toppings or fillings. The most distinguishing features, though, are the toothpicks that pierce the tapas. The establishments that cook them up are often self-serve, so the toothpicks function as a way to keep track of how much is owed when it comes time to pay the bill.



Photos by Rose Davidson

2 La Rambla

Lined with towering trees as far as the eye can see, La Rambla is heaven on earth for the culturally curious who find themselves in the Catalan city.

La Rambla is a well-known attraction for tourists and locals alike, which means it's almost always filled with people enjoying some free time outdoors. The long stretch of pedestrian walkway is brimming with shops, kiosks and booths selling everything from artwork to small animals, and there's often a variety of costumed street performers posing as statues.

The area is also a great place to pick up some groceries. One of Europe's most famous marketplaces, La Boqueira, is located just off the main drag of La Rambla. In the market, patrons can find more than a hundred stalls selling items such as fruit, poultry and seafood. The colorful produce displays and the aroma of freshly caught fish make for an organic sensory experience.



4 Museu Picasso

Pablo Picasso was shaped by his early life in Barcelona, so it's only fitting for a museum in his name to exist in the city.

Museu Picasso, which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, was the first museum in the world dedicated to his work. Though there are now numerous museums that focus on the artist's masterpieces, this one came at the request of Picasso himself and was the only one he saw in operation while he was alive.

Spanning five gothic palaces, Museu Picasso houses the most complete collection of the Spanish artist's work in room after room of exhibit space. This includes some of his earlier works and many pieces from his Blue Period, which was rumored to have been partially fueled by the despair he felt over a friend's suicide. The museum also features a romantic stone courtyard with a sweeping staircase and pointed arches, serving as a peaceful resting place for visitors between viewings.

5 Neverending Nightlife

Barcelona is one of the most desirable nightlife destinations in the world; bars, pubs, lounges and dance clubs are all choices for a little late-night entertainment.

Many of the more high-energy venues are located along the beach near Port Olímpic, a marina most famously known for hosting sailing events during the 1992 Summer Olympics.

One such venue is the Carpe Diem Lounge Club, a beachfront establishment that, at first, can be difficult to spot. The small cube on the sidewalk is deceiving, but inside, stairs lead down to an exotic, dimly lit oasis.

In the earlier hours of the evening, the Asian-inspired lounge is a relaxing place for a leisurely dinner. The meal can easily last for hours, and sometimes, masseuses walk the aisles, offering their services to seated guests. After dinner, customers can stretch out on the oversized couches inside or show some moves on the dance floor. **CS**

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