

No visit to Barcelona is complete without a visit to at least one Gaudí building, but be prepared to wait in line anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. A book in hand on Gaudí, or *Barcelona*, the definitive volume on the city by art critic Robert Hughes, would be an excellent companion. *Casa Batlló in Passeig de Gràcia* was built in 1904-1906 for businessman José Batlló, www.casabatllo.es.



There's more to Barcelona than just world-class architecture—
but that doesn't make the stunning designs of Antoni Gaudí any less breathtaking.

BARCELONA, BAR NONE

BETROTHAL BROUGHT ME TO BARCELONA. I traveled to Spain's second largest city to attend my goddaughter Olivia's wedding—and to search for my own wedding gown. Although Barcelona is renowned for its museums and architecture, not so well known is its excellent bridal shopping. I was given the lowdown by Olivia's sister—and fellow Barcelona resident—Nina, who is scheduled to marry her Catalan fiancé next fall. It must be contagious.

Without prompting, the airport cab driver, Jose Luis, en route to the Hotel Arts Barcelona (a Ritz-Carlton-managed property that is the most un-Ritz Carlton-like hotel I've ever experienced) also informed me that Spain is known for its wedding dresses.

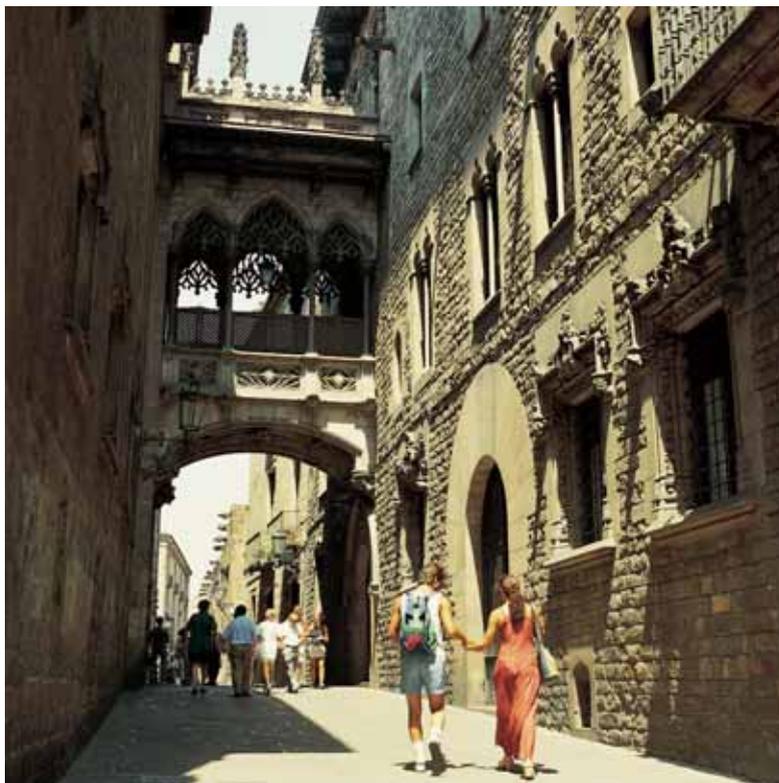
"Go to Rosa Clara and Madrina," said Jose Luis, a most unlikely source for *cosas* made of lace and *peau de soir*. "But Rosa Clara is the best."

Hmm, I thought—why not ask his opinion on hotels?

"Hotel Arts," he replied with conviction, "is the best, the best, the best," as we pulled into the *porte cochere* of the sleek, modern high-rise seaside hotel where I slumbered the first two nights of my nine-day visit to Barcelona. His other recommendations included Rey Juan Carlos I (a five-star hotel) and Hotel Oriente (a three-star hotel), both of which boasted "history," he said.

The same could be said of just about every square inch of Barcelona, which predates the Roman Empire. But for countless visitors, the allure of the city resides in the stunning legacy of architect Antoni Gaudí. One may take respite on the broken-tiled, curving benches (designed perfectly for the back, the kidneys, the entire body, I was later told) in Gaudí's famous El Park Güell, named for his patron, and gaze across the gingerbread gatehouses at the park entrance, beyond Sagrada Família (Gaudí's famous Holy Family church), apartment blocks, cranes, rooftops and balconies, past the sprawling metropolis that leads to the sea.

I went walking, thinking I might find some solitude, but each time



The history of medieval Barcelona comes to life in its urban layout, formed essentially by important Romanesque and, above all, Gothic buildings in the Gothic Quarter.

I neared any Gaudí creation, I ended up sharing his whimsical genius with a multitude of fans. In the park I discovered, in a most Alice in Wonderland fashion, my very own Cheshire Cat. Andres, a 73-year-old chemist, was folded into the zig-zag pattern of Gaudí's brick wall.



(Top) Despite their appearance, the curving concrete and broken tile benches at Park Güell are most comfortable. **(bottom)** At the current rate, with another 20 years of restoration to go, architect Antoni Gaudí, who died in 1926, would never have lived long enough to see Barcelona's most famous architectural landmark, Sagrada Família, finished.

"The park is now surrounded by walls," he complained indignantly, adding, "in the future, you must pay!" And then, after discussing the four stages of life—birth, marriage, procreation and death—he opined that Gaudí's best work was the crypt of the church of Colonia Güell, the crypt in the church of the Güell family, 20 kilometers by train from Catalunya Square.

I continued on my walk and came across a real *gato*, black and white and sprawled contentedly, licking its paws. I climbed to the crest of a stone edifice topped with a cross, which offered more miraculous views of Barcelona. This is a grand place for a person to begin their visit in order to view the four million Spaniards, Catalans and other residents of the port city. Park Güell, with its collage of seniors, children, many languages being spoken and cameras clicking, seemed a most democratic and international spot to comprehend this lively city. Also on my visit, schoolchildren kicked a soccer ball in front of one of the houses in the park with a stunning pink, Spanish-style facade and romped in playgrounds tucked amidst nature, a sign that not only tourists, but natives make use of this famous recreational area.

I went to pray, with 4,000 other daily visitors, at an even more famous Gaudí creation—Sagrada Família. The exterior of the architect's final structure, a cluster of soaring towers, is breathtaking. Inside, despite scaffolding, columns rise toward the heavens.

The church (which is not a cathedral, as one might expect) is a work in progress—a giant broth, or *caldo*, as the Spanish say. In Catalan, one might call the famously unfinished structure an *escudella*, the name for a cooking pot and the soup made in it. The interior bones, filled with scaffolding, beams, stone, plaster and tile, allow our generation the experience of witnessing a masterpiece in progress. Gaudí worked on Sagrada Família for over 40 years, and it was the sole focus of the last 15 years of his life.

Poor Gaudí, the patron saint, the hero, the man whose life put Barcelona on the international architectural destinations map, died after being run over by a tram. The projected completion date of Sagrada Família is 2026, which would coincide with the centenary of Gaudí's death. By contrast, Santa Maria del Mar, the lovely church in Barcelona's scenic Gothic Quarter where my goddaughter Olivia was married, took 50 years to build.

Beyond its world-class architecture, I gathered many other impressions of Barcelona: it seemed as though 80 percent of the population smokes, everyone drinks *cava* (the sparkling white wine that is the Spanish equivalent of champagne) and because of a no-tipping policy (which I suspect will change) there is little incentive for the service industry to raise its level of performance.

Barcelona offers much more than I could possibly experience in nine days. In fact, a week is barely enough time to skim the city's surface. It's therefore a good idea to arrive with an itinerary (like the Yahoo! employee I met on the Iberia flight from Madrid to Barcelona) or just wander the delightful streets, like my architect friend Humberto, who sketched buildings throughout his walks, and make your own discoveries along the way.

I was not able to see and do everything I wished, but now I have a reason to return—before the fourth, and final, stage of life catches up with me. There is something exciting around most every corner, including the cathedrals of dining, such as Commerç 24; fabulous *tapas* at Quimet & Quimet; the sublime Mies van der Roë pavilion and stunning national art museum, MNAC, both at Montjuïc Park; strolls through the colorful food markets that display every animal part in glass cases (including snouts, hooves and heads); and shopping the elegant Paseo Gracida.

But I could be perfectly content, just like the Cheshire Cat, sitting at an outdoor cafe, slurping a sinfully decadent hot chocolate that tastes like

Enoteca, the upscale dining room at Hotel Arts features seasonal Mediterranean cuisine and an extensive wine cellar of Spanish and international wines, but Bites, the hotel's casual cafe, has stellar cuisine that is more affordable. A duplex (bottom) apartment at Hotel Arts includes butler service and breathtaking views of the Mediterranean from the uppermost floors of the five-star, high rise hotel.



warm pudding, watching the world pass by—and dreaming about wedding dresses.

GETTING THERE

There are no non-stop or direct flights to Barcelona from Los Angeles. Iberia flies via New York, Chicago or Miami, with a change of planes in Madrid. Even if you are suffering from jet lag, the new Barajas Airport Terminal Four in Madrid, which opened in March 2006, is worth the change of planes for anyone interested in architecture. The bathrooms, some of the most amazing in any airport (when they are clean), put the United States design world to shame.

WHERE TO SLUMBER

In recent years, Barcelona has become a *mu*y chic and trendy travel destination. Unfortunately, the hospitality industry has not kept pace with the cool factor, so don't expect London or New York standards of service in many hotels and restaurants. If you keep that in mind from the outset, all should be fine. Just slow down and relax—it will all happen eventually.

First, you must decide which section of the city

you want to stay in. Here are recommendations for several areas.

SEASIDE

HOTEL ARTS BARCELONA

This hip hotel is best known for Frank Gehry's giant fish sculpture, which sits just in front of the high-rise structure within view of the pool. I could have stayed forever in my luxurious room on the 21st floor with both Mediterranean and city views. There's a club floor on the 33rd floor, as well as stylish duplexes on the top 10 floors designed by renowned interior designer Jaume Tresserra, with amazing views and a team of butlers at your service. A guest could spend an entire day figuring out how all the neat gadgets in the rooms work, including high-tech light panels, auto window shades in the spacious rooms, cool modern knobs on the tub, multi-head shower and countertop sinks.

Located in the area created for the 1992 Olympics, near Barceoneta—the seaside neighborhood of apartment blocks where fisherman and their families live, and beachfront cafes, like the popular Escriba, line the promenade—Hotel Arts is a 20-minute walk or short cab ride to La Rambla and downtown Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. Operated by the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company, this is a top choice for both business and leisure travelers, as well as celebs, including former guests Woody Allen, Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones.

Hotel Arts Barcelona, Carrer de la Marina, 19-21, 08005, Barcelona
www.hotelartsbarcelona.com, Ritz-Carlton reservations (800) 241-3333.

LA RAMBLA AREA

HOTEL 1898

Conveniently located on Barcelona's fabled main artery for walking, La Rambla, which is pregnant with gawking tourists, human painted sculptures, and outdoor pet stalls selling fish, birds, rabbits and mice. If you like Kimpton Hotel Group's Hotel Monaco in San Francisco, this hotel is similar in feeling, with lots of stripes, dark woods and a tobacco plantation design theme.

Hotel 1898, La Rambla, 109, Barcelona, www.nnhotels.com, Telephone 011-34-93-552-9552

HUSA ORIENTE

Three-star hotel on La Rambla, Husa hotel group has many properties ranging from three to five stars.

www.husa.es

CASA CAMPER

A trendy hotel near the modern-art museum with a





View looking up from La Rambla, architectural detail

noteworthy feature: in the lobby area is a gathering place with food and drink 24/7 included in the rates for guests.

Casa Camper Barcelona, Carrer Elisabets, 11, Barcelona, www.casacamper.com, Telephone 011-34-93-342-6289

PASEO DE GRACIA SHOPPING DISTRICT

PRESTIGE PASEO DE GRACIA

This three-year-old hotel is an excellent choice for a stay in the shopping district of Paseo de Gracia. Not so much for the minimalist—albeit not terribly large—modern rooms set in a historic building, but for the guest library with cava, drinks, newspapers, books and excellent concierge service, Askme.com. One of the concierges recently found an old girlfriend for a guest—20 years later!

Prestige Paseo de Gracia, Paseo de Gracia, 62, Barcelona, www.prestigehotels.com, Telephone 011-34-93-272-4180

HOTEL OMM

Chic, with an extremely nice staff. Home to the restaurant Moo, where I was chased away when scoping it out because I was not a patron. Sometimes too cool is not so cool.

Hotel Omm, Rossello 265, Barcelona, www.hoteloom.es, Telephone 011-34-93-445-4000

HOTEL PASEO DE GRACIA

If you want a budget hotel in the chic shopping district, look no further. Although accommodations are nothing to get excited about, the location and price make this an affordable choice, especially if you don't plan on spending much time in your room.

Hotel Paseo de Gracia, Passeig de Gracia, 102, Barcelona, Telephone 011-34-93-215-5824

DESTINATION BCN AND BARCELONASELECTED.COM

If you prefer the space and feel of an apartment rental, contact Miklos Beyer and Anne Nystad, a couple whose company represents some stunning apartments and penthouses in several interesting sections of the city. The pair are informed and thoughtful—it's like having friends in the city. The decor is cool, and the rates, which start at 135 euros a night, are a bargain when

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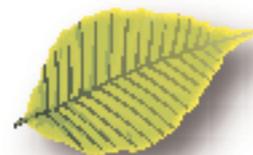
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FRONT&CENTER TRAVEL

compared with hotel rooms. For my money, this would be the way to go for a week or two in Barcelona. There is a 10 percent discount on stays longer than seven nights.

www.destinationbcn.com, Telephone 011-34-68-791-4566

MUST DO'S

- Buy a ticket for the Barcelona Bus Turistic, a double-decker open-top bus that offers three driving tours and four walking tours (the Gothic District, Picasso's bohemian, Modernisme architecture and a gourmet food tour). This will give you a good feel for the city and help you figure out what areas you might like to explore at your leisure. Cost: 18 euros (approx. \$22) for one-day pass, 22 euros for a two-consecutive-day pass.

- Wander the streets off of La Rambla and find a small restaurant or café and make your own discovery. There are many reasonably priced three-course meals here, as well as in other neighborhoods, at family-run restaurants where the menu and price are listed on a chalkboard outside.

- Everyone visits La Sagrada Familia (www.sagradafamilia.org) There is an eight-euro entrance fee, and then another two euros and an hour wait for the elevator to the top of the church (most days). All of the Gaudí buildings are of interest, but be prepared to wait in lines. I had the cathedral practically to myself on a second visit by going for the last 15 minutes. The Gaudí cathedral attracts 4,000 visitors daily but take a stroll about four blocks up to Placia Gaudí, a pedestrian street, to the Hospital de Sant Pau (www.santpau.es) and go through the pavilions and gardens. You will never experience a hospital like this in any other city in your life.

Hospital de Sant Pau, Sant Antonia Maria Claret, 167, Barcelona, tel. 34-93-207-6621

- Pack comfortable walking shoes, as Barcelona is a city best experienced on foot, especially La Rambla (with the rest of the world), Paseo de Gracia,



SHOPPING

Check out fashion designs from Aldolfo Dominguez, elegant men's shirts from Xanco (since 1820) and made-to-order espadrilles from La Manual Alpagatera, founded in 1910, a signature Catalan product (Salvador Dalí and Catherine Zeta-Jones have shopped here). Whether you prefer expensive leathers of world-famous Loewe or T-shirts and flamenco dresses sold from kiosks for children, you will find plenty of shopping opportunities throughout the city. I liked the sporty Spanish designs at a small shop called Laetang (Rambla 88).
La Manual Alpagatera, C/Avinyó, 7, Barcelona, Telephone 93-301-0172
Loewe, Passeig de Gràcia, 35, Barcelona, Telephone 34-93-216-0400

of the 2-4 p.m. lunch hours, as opposed to evening hours. Remember, like many restaurants, they close from 4 until opening, usually around 7 p.m.

• MUSEU NACIONAL D'ART DE CATALUNYA

Barcelona's equivalent of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art is recognized for the world's finest collection of Romanesque frescoes, altarpieces and wood carvings (most of them rescued from chapels in the Pyrenees during the 1920s to save them from deterioration, theft, and art dealers). But the 19th- and 20th-century Catalan impressionist and Moderniste painters are the real turn-on. An



upscale restaurant offers magnificent views in an elegant atmosphere.
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC), www.mnac.es, Telephone 96-622-0360, Mirador Del Palau Nacional, Mirador Del Palau, 6, tel. 93-622-0360, Parc de Montjuic, www.mnac.es tel. 34-93-622-0630.

FOOD

COMERÇ 24 – Plan on spending several hours, and plenty of Euros. at this trendy, upscale restaurant where diners need an explanation of what they are eating. Go for the tasting menu and let chef Carles Abellan "wow" or, in some cases, mystify, you.

Comerç St. 24, www.carlesabellan.com (34) 933-192-102

QUIMET & QUIMET - Amazing tapas and wines by the glass in this tiny bodega. See what amazing combos can be done with foods that come out of a can.
Poeta Cabanves, 25, (34) 934-423-142

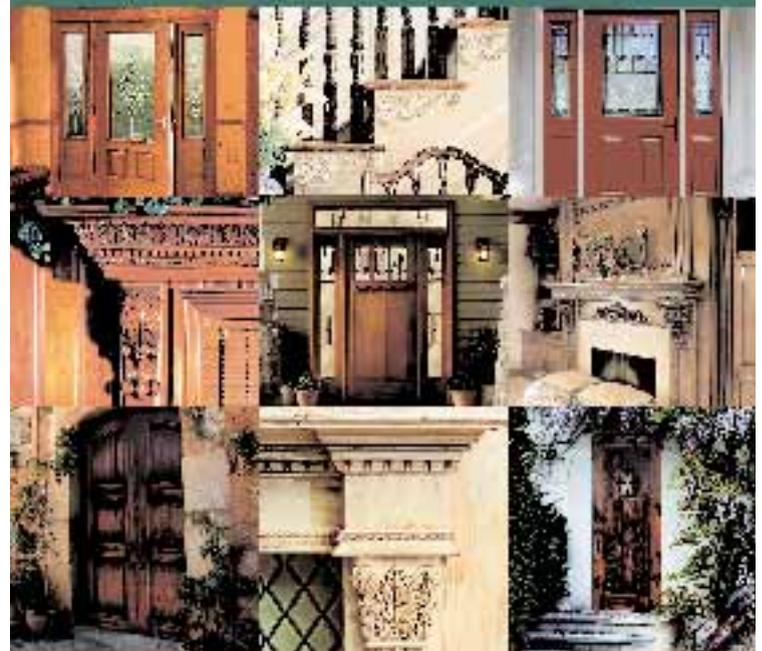
For more information on Barcelona go to www.barcelonaturisme.com and www.spain.info

the chic shopping boulevard, through the Gothic Quarter with its amazing architecture and the wide walkway along the Mediterranean in the beach district, Barconeleta and the Olympic Village.

• Don't always eat breakfast in your hotel. Instead, buy your morning croissant from one of the zillions of bakeries and *panaderias* (there seem to be three in every block) and have *tapas* (even though this is a cuisine from other parts of Spain) in a *bodega* (bar). Seek out Quimet & Quimet, a gem of a wine store-bodega located about a 20-minute walk from Mount Jouic Park. To miss the crowds, go during the latter part



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