

Story by Nancy L. Claus

barcelona hopping

CLASSIC, CONTEMPORARY, AND UTTERLY COOL



Arguably Spain's coolest, most style-conscious city, Barcelona is an artful blend of old and new, classic and funky—living proof that eclectic design is here to stay. Contemporary structures happily coexist with buildings dating back to medieval and Roman times. Even the sidewalks, with all their pretty patterns, ooze style. In 1999, the city received the Royal Institute of British Architects' Royal Gold Medal for its architecture, the first and only time that the winner has been a city rather than an individual architect.

No architect is more inextricably linked to Barcelona's blend of distinctive, dazzling, and dizzying architecture than Antoni Gaudí. Gaudí was born into a family of coppersmiths in 1852 in the province of Tarragona. As a child, he watched his father and grandfather craft beautiful works of art with just a hammer, a few copper sheets, and skilled hands, an influence obvious in his later projects.

When he was 17, Gaudí's family sent him to study architecture in Barcelona, where he caught the attention of Count Eusebi Güell. The young architect worked for the Count, transforming his palace and creating the magnificent Park Güell (among other notable works) before focusing exclusively on the Temple of the Sagrada Família, his towering, still unfinished magnum opus. Gaudí died in 1926, run over by a trolley while out soliciting funds for the temple's completion.

Sure, his wild, surrealist style (think Frank Gehry on acid) was ridiculed at first. After he completed his architectural studies in 1878, his principal, Elies Rogent, said, "I don't know whether we have given the qualifications to a madman or a genius." History proves genius: his sensuous, organic designs look utterly contemporary today. >>



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It's Gaudi, Gaudi everywhere in his urban Park Güell: a glimpse of the caretaker's lodge, seen through a mosaic wall that supports the Hall of the Hundred Columns.

(Clockwise from top left)

The Temple of the Sagrada Família, Gaudi's still unfinished masterpiece; palm trees accent the Gaudi-designed stone columns in the grotto area of Park Güell; the sophisticated entry to the eclectic Casanova Hotel.

Curved walls and roofs, parabolic arches, twisted columns, and spiral shapes are geometrical, yet reminiscent of nature: a snail shell, the trunk of a tree, a honeycomb, even the inside of a whale. While he clearly mastered the technical aspects of his craft, Gaudi once said that his greatest talent consisted of "knowing exactly whether something had to be higher or lower, flatter or more curved. This is nothing more than a quality for clairvoyance and I, luckily, can see it."

And luckily, we can too. Fourteen Gaudi works are scattered about Barcelona, offering a visual tour of the evolution of his work, from the street-lamps of the Placa Reial (1878) to Casa Vicens (1883-87), his first important work, to the Temple of the Sagrada Família, the massive Roman Catholic church that is perhaps the most iconic architectural image of Barcelona—and its number one tourist attraction.

Even the sidewalks ooze style.

GO GAGA FOR GAUDI

You climb up the stairs from the subway and there it is, the Temple of the Sagrada Família, looming overhead: massive, ornate, unlike anything you've ever seen before. It's equal parts gothic castle and fairytale fantasy. It's worth the wait and the two euro surcharge to ride the tiny elevator to the top of the spires: it gives you time to reflect on the amazing arches and stained glass visible through the omnipresent scaffolding.

Once at the top, wind your way—carefully—down the interior stairway, stepping off onto parapets for views

of the intricate mosaics, towers, and all of Barcelona. (Not recommended for those suffering from vertigo!) The church is expected to be completed in 2026, 100 years after Gaudi's death, although work on a nearby subway threatens to delay that target date.

Then it's on to Park Güell, an urban park with windy paths that cut through woods and past stone sculptures, fascinating buildings, and a cute little gingerbread-style church. (Gaudi intentionally avoided leveling the grounds so the paths follow the contours of the land.) And, of course, the breathtaking mosaics. Full of interesting colors and designs, serpentine mosaic benches (surprisingly comfortable) surround the perimeter of a huge open promenade overlooking the harbor and panoramic views of the city. Also in Park Güell is Gaudi's onetime home, now a museum, filled with a collection of his works and furniture.

Insider's tip: there's an escalator that will take you up the mountain to the park. After the steep hike to get to that point, you may be happy to hitch a ride.

Strolling through the city, you happen upon buildings that are instantly recognizable as Gaudi works—even to the uninitiated. Who else would have created a façade to depict a symbolic battle between Saint George and the dragon (Casa Batlló) or the wild sculptural balconies made of recycled iron (Casa Mila)? His style still surprises, amuses, delights.

WHERE TO STAY

Within easy walking distance of Las Ramblas (Barcelona's main thoroughfare), museums, and the easily navigated metro system, the **Casanova Hotel** epitomizes the eclectic ambience of Barcelona. The 18th-century limestone façade of this manse-turned-urban-chic-hotel, with its original 12-foot wrought-iron gates, gives no hint to the totally 21st-century interior. In the sunlit lobby, with its original Miró lithographs and gorgeous stone floors, a back-lit lime green bar balances the soft green glow of the registration desk. Upstairs is the Mexiterranean restaurant featuring a Mexican, Catalan, and Mediterranean fusion menu: think steamed lamb with chiles and garlic, olive oil-poached cod in habanera sauce, and veal sirloin with eggplant and zucchini. Delightfully different. Ask at the front desk for a GPS to navigate the often confusing Barri Gotic or Gothic Quarter.

Details: Casanova Hotel (Gran Via de les Corts 559, casanovabcnhotel.com) has 124 rooms and suites starting at \$136 euros (or, at press time, about \$212), a spa, and a rooftop terrace with a pool, a bar, and a pergola. Guestrooms feature retro-inspired furnishings, plasma televisions, and stunning baths with rain or Vichy showers.

WHERE TO EAT

It's hard to find and even harder to get a reservation, but **Passadis del Pep** (Plaza del Palau 2, passadis.com) rates a 28 in the European Zagat and is a foodie's favorite. For



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paella, you can't beat **La Gavina Restaurant** (Edificio Palau de Mar 1, lagavina-rte.com), overlooking the harbor in the Plaza Pau Vila. Under the radar (but not for long) is the tiny **L'Antic Bocoï del Gotic** (Baixada de Viladecols 3, bocoi.net), tucked away in the labyrinth of the Gothic Quarter. The menu's modest statement that while its offerings aren't extensive, what it makes will be very good is an understatement. The specialty is the coques de recapte, a typical Catalan dish similar to our thin-crust pizza, but topped with such delicacies as Gorgonzola, asparagus, cod, sausages, smoked bacon, dates, and cheese.

WHAT TO DO

> RAMBLE DOWN LAS RAMBLAS

Who would have thought there would be such a huge market for small birds, rabbits, turtles, chickens, and lizards? You'll pass kiosk after kiosk filled with these creatures while street performers compete for coins: a lady in an enormous fat suit eating McDonald's French fries, another completely covered in gold, scary-looking guys randomly jumping out of tricked-out trash cans. The street is divided into three sections: the aforementioned critters, flowers, and art down by the harbor with lots of little alleys on either side to explore. Be sure to stop for a Sangria (or two!) at one of the sidewalk cafés and watch the crowds meander by.

> EXPLORE THE CULTURE

Get a crash course in art history spanning from the Renaissance and Classicism periods up to—ironically—the Hudson River School paintings of 19th-century America at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection (museothyssen.org), which also has a museum in Madrid. Expect to see lots of crucifixion and Madonna and child images and, seemingly, one each of the masters: Picasso, Cezanne, Gougin, Degas, Rembrandt, Monet, Matisse, Munch, Toulouse-Lautrec, and our very own Crosby and Church. Follow Picasso's artistic evolution from his formative

years in Barcelona as he moves from realism to cubism to truly bizarre at the Picasso Museum (museupicasso.bcn.cat). It's a great juxtaposition of modern art in the old Gothic Aguilar Palace.

The Contemporary Culture Center of Barcelona (cccb.org) and the adjoining Museum of Contemporary Art (macba.es) form a hip cultural hub with exhibitions, festivals, concerts, and more. And the Catedral de Barcelona (catedralbcn.org), a stunning structure started in 1298 and completed at the end of the 19th century, is filled with religious art and relics. Don't miss the Cloister gardens; views from the rooftop are heavenly.


> GO GOTH

The Barri Gotic is a fascinating warren of cobbled streets and alleyways built in the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. Many of the medieval buildings have been preserved. Picasso lived and worked in Gothic Quarter from 1895 to 1904 and Joan Miró was born and lived here during his youth. On the pedestrian Av Portal de L'Angel you'll find many chic shops, including the El Corte Ingles, a well-known department-store chain in the city.

> BUY AT LA BOQUERIA

Shop like a native at this picturesque market, a potpourri of every type of food imaginable. Hanging strands of garlic, peppers, fruits, vegetables, and even candies are artfully arranged near chunks of cheeses and (vegan alert: skip this part) fish heads, dismembered cows, sheep, pigs, goats, sweetbreads, entrails, and more.

> VISIT A VINEYARD

Just 45 minutes outside Barcelona is the Albet I Noya Winery (albetinoya.com), 500 acres of vineyards, ancient stone walls, and buildings dating back to the 14th century. Josep Albet I Noya, fourth generation in this family business and technical manager of the vineyard, was the first wine grower in Spain to go organic and gives an informative tour of his vineyards, the 1,000-barrel cellar, and the Cava bottling line. 

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