

## Barcelona Break

My three day escape to Barcelona did not get off to a good start. Despite being assured by the official Travel For London website that not only could I use my Oyster card, but also that it would be the cheapest fare to Gatwick, I was slapped with a fine at the other end. They know the problem exists, but the only way to rectify it is to write in and complain. I will also have to get the second fine, for signing in on my card and not signing out, reversed. Fabulous.

I made a rookie mistake when the airline made an announcement asking for passengers who were willing to put their wheel on hand luggage in the hold, and volunteered. In exchange I received priority boarding and was allowed on the plane at least two minutes before I would have been otherwise. Given that I always have an aisle seat, I usually wait as late as possible for other people to board before I join the fracas. Ceding my luggage also meant that on arrival I had to wait for it at the luggage carousel instead of walking straight out. Lesson learnt.

Barcelona is one of those airports that is surprisingly badly signposted. I followed the signs to the trains and ended up at the taxi rank. There is also only one currency exchange and it's not in arrivals. It is at the opposite end of the airport, and there are no signs at all to it, which did induce a few panic filled moments as I realised I didn't have any of the correct currency.

Once I found the train station, the process was quite simple and a bargain at 3 Euros. At Passeig de Gracia I exited through the barrier and lifted my roll on to navigate the stairs. As I climbed I felt something at my right. The well-presented, middle-aged man behind me was trying to pickpocket me and had worked the zip on my handbag open. I asked him why he was opening my bag as I checked that everything was still there. He immediately denied it in Spanish and started pointing at other people. Nothing missing so I kept walking and he turned around and went back into the subway. Not the best introduction to the city but at least I caught and confronted him.

I found my hostel quite easily and spend some time marking a map with all of the places I want to go and drawing a line between them to plan my attack. Despite it being only 9pm when I arrived my roommates were all asleep. Not a good sign. They either partied last night and will get up to go out, or they are getting up really early. I am wrong on both counts. Instead, they chat loudly on and off throughout the night whenever they wake up. Great.

Bleary-eyed I stumble out of bed for my first 8am start in a long time. I chow on the free breakfast and am raring to go, hitting the street by 9am. It's cold. I am not sure what made me think Spain was going to be warm. Perhaps my memories of my previous visit a few years prior...in summer. I have packed accordingly and set a brisk pace to compensate for the lack of warmth provided by the two long-sleeved t-shirts I am wearing. I am thankful that I threw a scarf around my neck as I left my house in London.

My first stops are three Modernista buildings. I find two of the three and they are stunning. One is Casa Batllo, a Gaudi masterpiece. Tickets to enter are over the 15 Euro mark so I just admire the facade. The peaked curves and molten organic shapes turn his buildings into something from a fairy tale, twisted and fascinating. He also designed the Pulau de Musica, which at first glance looks modern, all glass and brick. Behind the glass, however, are the original walls. The ground floor is a coffee shop, free to enter so that is my boundary. On my exit I find the street facade, as opposed to the plaza facade. It is much more interesting in shape and feel, as if it is sculpted from molten lava that has continued to form long after the architect finished.

I am now in Barri Gotic, the gothic district and old part of the city. The number one site here is the Cathedral, which is nothing to do with Gaudi. It is suitably gothic and has scaffolding on part of the exterior. Despite my lack of religious conviction, I have an affinity with religious buildings. I am awed at how many resources, both physical and

financial, are offered up in the name of devotion. The Cathedral is beautiful inside with high vaulted ceilings and a multitude of gaudy chapels. The stained glass windows diffuse the light cast across the confessional. I sit for a moment and realise that I can see the priest through the hatched confessional door. He is reading. I choose to believe it is a religious text, rather than the daily tabloid.

St Eulalia is interred in the crypt. She was a young martyr who was tortured by the Romans around the time of the Spanish inquisition. I am not sure whether to be offended by the mercenary nature of the crypt - there is a 50 cent 'donation' required to turn on the lighting. Luckily I benefit from the tail end of someone else's donation. Later, down some alleys I find a small courtyard attached to the Cathedral, replete with 13 Geese. These represent the 13 ways Eulalia was tortured. For the finale she was nailed in a barrel with an assortment of knives and rolled down a hill. That was the end of Eulalia

I have made good time, so I head off to find the starting point for the free walking tour. Free is my favorite word, although it is a little inaccurate in this case. You are expected to tip the guide, so it's not so much free, as costing whatever you are willing to pay. At the end of the tour I open the wrong zip on my money pouch and throw my tip into the hat, later realise that I have tipped in pounds. I am sure my guide is delighted at having to exchange my measly coins.

Quite a crowd gathers for the tour - around twenty in all - which is naturally led by a New Zealander. He is a very good guide, peppering his discourse with interesting historical stories and not overloading us with too many facts and figures. My favourite is an explanation of the stick figure drawing on the front of the unattractive architecture centre building. Picasso drew it on a tablecloth after a few shots of absinthe at the Four Cats bar to prove that anyone could draw like Miro. Little did he know that a drinking buddy kept the table cloth and the drawing now ironically adorns this building.

We walk through plazas and down narrow alleys lined with interesting details if you know where to look for them. After two hours we are back where we started. I have now entered caffeine deprivation levels, where decision making becomes impossible. I try to order a coffee in the bustling Travelers Bar but they take too long to serve me so I stumble back into the alleyway and on to Ramblas, the central pedestrian thoroughfare, lined with tourist tack stalls and pavement restaurants. None appeal but the Columbus Monument beckons me and I dazedly approach. Christopher Columbus stands on a tall plinth at the edge of the harbour, supposedly pointing to America, but actually pointing to Libya.

I follow the harbour towards a recommended lunch place which supposedly had huge sandwiches. In my mind these could only be washed down by coffee. I find the street, but there is no sandwich shop. I walk the entire block before finding an overpriced grungy looking bar cafe. I plonk myself at an outdoor table and order a latte and an expensive ham and cheese panini. The panini is wafer thin but made with Iberian cured ham and the coffee is strong, so the world looks rosy again.

Since I am over this way I decide to walk to Parc de Ciutadella. My extraordinarily poor sense of direction does not agree, sending me instead to the beach. It is equally as pleasant, although doesn't compare to the white sand beaches of Australia. I am surprised by the number of people sitting on the sand given the low temperatures. Tourists from colder climes perhaps? I am disappointed to see no nudity, as it is legal here, with the only requirement being that off the beach shoes must be worn. On the sand grown men build complex sand castle systems busking for coins, and dogs chase sticks into the surf.

I find my way across a complicated figure of eight highway system, scrambling up banks and over bollards to get to the park. It is lovely, with people relaxing in the last rays of afternoon sunlight. There is a stunning water feature, Cascada, featuring a mossy triumphal arch with a waterfall and fountain. While I am on arches, a quick detour

takes me to the Spanish Arc de Triomf, somewhat less impressive than the Parisian original.

A few alleys later I am back at Ramblas. I cross, hoping to make my way to the Magic Fountain at Montjuic park. This walk takes me through a dodgy area. Boutiques give way to strip clubs and casinos and as the sun sinks I start feeling decidedly uncomfortable. I reach the closest edge of the park and admire the views, but decide to head back to the friendly centre before it gets dark.

Back on Ramblas I find the Boquedeira Market, full of mouth-watering local gourmet produce. Colourful fruit and vegetables sit next to delis with dangling legs of Jamon Iberico, while handmade chocolate delicacies compete with multicoloured candies and sharp smelling cheeses. I sample a fresh banana and blackberry juice and buy a punnet of deliciously ripe red raspberries for dessert.

I wander slowly up Ramblas, jostled by the crowds of chattering tourists. Buskers line the path and young men make cartoon character sounds with mouth whistles trying to make a sale. Past the Plaza de Catalunya the crowds thin and the pavement restaurants are deserted. This is about the time my stomach starts rumbling, but I walk at least six more blocks before I find a reasonably priced paella in a warm, indoor casual restaurant. I deserve a glass of wine to wash down the tasty saffron-tinged rice.

Back at the hostel I realise that I have been on my feet for 9 hours. I'm exhausted, with barely enough energy to gobble down my raspberries before my head hits the pillow.

My alarm rouses me and I hit the shower, but when I go to pick up my towel my back seizes and I can't stand up straight again. I also can't call for help given that I am naked. I wait and slowly stretch until I can stand upright again. Not my favourite way to start the day.

After a very slow painful breakfast I hit the streets, heading towards one of Gaudi's main credits, La Sagrada Familia. Barcelona is built on a grid so at this time of the morning, the east west streets are

all lit by the morning sun. Unfortunately I have to walk the north south axis which is in cold shadow.

I stop at a pharmacy for some painkillers and try not to be insulted when the pharmacist asks if I am pregnant. On the way out I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the window. My money belt, packed with my cash, phone and iPod is hanging right at belly level and I have my hands tucked into the opposing sleeves to keep them warm, leaving my hands hovering around my money belt. The baggy jumper just adds to the effect. I do look pregnant. I wonder if it will help me get a priority seat on the subway and start stroking it fondly.

There are a large number of tour buses and people milling around La Sagrada Familia. I follow the queue around the corner...and the next corner...and the next...until I am nearly back to where I started. It is a 50 minute queue, during which time I tuck my hands into my armpits to defrost and eavesdrop on the Japanese conversation in front of me for entertainment. Every now and then I remember to look at the Cathedral, focusing on the folly of Gaudi's architecture. Gastropods, from geckos to snails, play the role of gargoyles. The jagged spires are dwarfed by the construction crane as work continues on the facade, as it has for the last 150 years or so. The nativity scene is punctuated with sharp points and a fir tree while each of the spires are tipped with molecular representations. The front is all block reliefs, angular and futuristic. It is a fascinating construction, but also somehow disturbing, as if the architect threw a collection of possible elements into a bowl and selected them at random like a lucky draw. "...and over here we shall have, ah, a snail crawling down the outer spire. Next..."

The entry fee of 13 Euros is even more painful than my back, but I have to make the wait worthwhile so I reluctantly fork over the cash, trying not to wince. Inside the architecture is more coherent, although still unusual. The columns of the interior are a unique Gaudi design, with the nature-imitating, ever-changing surfaces made of complex geometric forms. They stretch up to meet

colourful sunbursts on the ceiling. A suspended Jesus heads up proceedings while a more sinister chunky black figure watches from the rear. My research fails to discover the identity of this onlooker. The crowds of tourists show no reverence, chattering loudly despite signs requesting silence. Many gaze at the ceiling in awe or perhaps bewilderment.

After exploring every nook, including the museum full of plaster models and the crypt of the great man himself, I am ready to move on to Parc Guell, another significant Gaudi contribution to the city. I successfully navigate the metro and end up at one of the minor park entrances - again, no signage, yet this is one of Barcelona's major attractions.

The park rambles across a hill and renovation work means a lot of the trails are closed. I find my way to all of the exits before I discover any of the attractions.

At least here there are no buildings to block the weak sunlight. Skilled buskers perform in every cranny and illegal vendors hawk cheap jewellery and scarves.

Most of the buildings are towards the lower level main entrance. Two gingerbread house-looking structures flank the gates. Up a short set of stairs adorned with mosaic sculptures, large columns bear a spectator platform, lined with curved benches that look like something from the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. In contrast, on either side are cracked mud archways. An incongruous blend of features to say the least.

After several hours of rambling, I visit all alternative exits before finding the one I am after and travel back to Ramblas for a wander. I can not resist picking up another juice from the market - blackberry and coconut this time. Highly recommended.

I opt for early paella tonight, exhausted, and go for a tourist deal of three tapas plus paella for a super cheap price. You get what you pay for. The tapas are some cold macaroni and tuna, two potato wedges with mayonnaise, and a more appealing bruschetta topped with Boquerones (white anchovies). The black rice paella

is rich in flavour, but the prawns and squid are rubbery. It fills the gap though, and gives me the energy to hike the length of Ramblas back to the hostel to rest my back and pack for my departure tomorrow.

This trip was a brief introduction to Barcelona on a budget. Would I recommend the city? Yes. Would I recommend it in winter? Not so much. Bring a coat.