

May 16, 2014

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Escape to the Costa Brava: A Traveler's Rite of Passage

Posted: 04/21/2014 4:40 pm EDT | Updated: 04/21/2014 4:59 pm EDT

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LLAFRANC, Spain- I happened to be looking up when they flew overhead, a flock of white storks heading south along the Costa Brava, on the northeast coast of Spain. Navigating by the rising sun they flew in shifting groups, black-tipped wings pumping air and red beaks pushing forward. I was still watching them when a passing jogger -- tanned, a bit winded and a Brit, by his accent -- saw me scanning the sky and stopped to look.



"They should be heading west toward Gibraltar," he volunteered, as the birds veered away to the west. "It's their traditional route. But some are wintering over here in Catalonia. I'm convinced they like it as much as we do." I was up early that September morning, shaking off jet lag on the Camino de Ronda, the pedestrian trail that hugs the shoreline from the French border south for 136 miles through Girona province. The path, sometimes paved, sometimes dirt, connects each fishing village, emerald cove and sandy beach, a string of rough-cut diamonds spangling the coast.

Intent on the birds, it crossed my mind that for a traveler just arrived and eight time zones from home, I was feeling pretty good. No muggy headaches, no unquenchable yawns. Maybe my compass was pointing the same way: toward the Costa Brava, which was looking unexpectedly promising. The trouble was that I had only a week to explore. From the look of things, my eight days on



the ground would be stretched paper thin.

We -- my friends and I -- had vowed not to miss anything: splashing in the glassy-clear Mediterranean sea; exploring Roman ruins; walking through vineyards; and touring the so-called "Dali Triangle," the three locations connected to Catalan-born Surrealistic painter Salvador Dali, once the art world's bad boy. To maximize precious hours we decided to hire a guide, an idea I scorned when I was 18 and a "know-it-all" backpacker, but with which my parents, seasoned travelers, began all our family trips.



You may want to grab your bathing suit and head straight to for the beach in a cove like the one at Playa del Canadell, near Llafranc, (guaranteed to put any French beach to shame). Or perhaps to Cadaques, where we blew an afternoon at the "MF" outdoor café, sipping wine and eating tapas under an umbrella. But dig into history first in the city of Girona, capital of the eponymous province, on the River Onyar.

Here we met our guide, Carles (Carlos, in Spanish) Pongiluppi, who not only guides locally, but accompanies Spanish groups traveling overseas. Articulate, informed and as interested as we were in visiting places he must have seen a hundred times, he put a zing in history's whys and wherefores with an easy sense of humor. And a good thing it was, since as a look-alike for Dexter, the killer in the "Dexter" television series, he came in for some friendly ribbing.

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With a brief stop at the tourist office, we crossed the Sant Felui Bridge and made for Girona's restored old-city center, crisscrossed by spacious squares, narrow cobblestone passages and adorned by flower gardens. Plunging into the heart of the medieval quarter, we threaded our way from street to street, pausing to look at fragments of the old Roman road, the Via Augusta, and at medieval houses, 12th century churches, portions of the old city walls and the half-hidden Jewish quarter. Armed with the street map, I nailed the directions. When I lagged behind to admire a late-blooming garden and took a wrong turn across another bridge, I wound up on fashionable Independence Square, where -- happily -- the rest of the group was waiting.



An unexpected revelation was a tour of St. Peter's Cathedral, no longer used as a church. Stripped of its original trappings and completely bare, its 12th century "beautiful bones" showed why art historians use it as a classic example of Romanesque architecture.



As a part of Spain, Girona and the Costa Brava abide by the same laws that apply throughout the country. But Catalonia's special culture and history infuse the region with a unique sensibility. Whether you're tasting wine, riding a bus, talking to a flower seller or joining a museum tour, Catalonian pride is palpable. Catalan food, too, is special, in a class all its own. We ate an unforgettable lunch at the Bonay family restaurant, on the Placa de los Voltes, in the historic village of Peretallada, which Pongiluppi recommends for anyone anxious to try "the kind of dishes that people here prepare at home." At the other end of the culinary spectrum was Chef Joan Roca, whose Michelin-rated three-star restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca, is located on a unobtrusive street in Girona. Greeting us with a smile and inviting us into the kitchen to taste one of the season's specialties, Roca said that though he continually incorporates new flavors and styles, his mother's Catalan recipes remain the inspiration for the dishes that earned the Number One spot on Restaurant Magazine's 2013 World's-Top-Ten list.

As for the glue that unites Catalonians it's their language, unique to the region. Spoken by a few, understood by most and mixed with Spanish by many, Catalan is the the wind on which a fervent nationalist movement, demanding independence, stays aloft. As we traveled with Pongiluppi, with no detail unnoticed and no question unanswered, Catalonia came to life. We learned more about the great and small -- village life, museum exhibits, mushroom-growing habitats and medieval stone quarries -- than we could have ever discovered on our own. The impossibly-steep, terraced hillsides? Ancient abandoned vineyards. The lake? A wetlands popular with birders. When the flower-bedecked staircase in Begur looked familiar it was because it appears in a scene in the film "Suddenly Last Summer." The damaged church, its carvings destroyed and ancient frescoes covered with white paint? Painful evidence of the still-remembered Spanish Civil War and long-dead friends and relatives.



We also learned what Salvador Dali, the master showman, was all about. His childhood home, which the family lost but which he bought back and remodeled, is a testament to an artist's addiction to shapes and color. Now a museum, the house is a repository for souvenirs he collected traveling. See it in Port Lligat, in Cadaques. For Dali's best, most symbolic works, see the collection at the fanciful Dali Theatre Museum, in Figueres, (arrive early to avoid the crowds) where he spent the last years of his life. Don't miss Gala's house at Pubol, in La Pera, the manor he bought for his wife, Gala, who accepted it with the provision that it was hers along, and he would never stay overnight. But during the initial remodeling, he filled it with funny, sentimental and symbolic touches, each a clue to the influences that shaped his life. Don't miss the photo exhibit upstairs, which documents their marriage life.



Our most southerly excursion took us to the port at Palamos where we boarded a creaky, nicked wood sailboat owned by a friend of a friend -- a relationship never made clear -- for a signature Mediterranean jaunt and when we anchored off a cove, a refreshing swim in blue water so clear you could see the bottom, 20 feet below. The next day we drove north through wild, rugged hills to to Cap Creus, the rock-strewn headland Dali called "a reflection of my tortured mind." From high on the cliff, the Mediterranean sea fills the frame, coastal cliffs, narrow and rocky peninsulas laid out from Spain to France. Here, too, were backpackers toiling uphill on the Camino de Ronda, heading for the café and parking lot near the summit. Retracing an ancient coastal path, the Camino de Ronda is now a National Trail, open to the public even if it crosses private property. When we stopped at Playa del Canadell, Pongiluppi pointed out where the trail and the sidewalk are one, running beside the sand directly in front of cafes and souvenir shops, or crossing homeowners' private decks. "It's quite funny," he said. "Sometimes you get there and the family is sitting outside eating dinner and tourists are walking back and forth past the table. But the public always has the right of passage."

Or as first-time visitors might add: the Costa Brava is a rite of passage.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

We stayed at the Hostal Empuries, in L'Escala, a mid-range property and restaurant on an inviting swimming beach. (The property is rated a hostel because it was originally a restaurant with available rooms.) The footprint follows the design of a Roman villa design, with one-story rooms around formal gardens. The adjacent, two-story hotel, now renovated, also belongs to the property. The special attraction here? Empuries, a Greek and Roman archaeological site 100 yards away. Moderately priced. See it at www.hostalempuries.com.

www.hostalenmpuries.com or at info@hostalempuries.com.

Farther south, we stayed at Mas de Torrent, in Torrent, a family-owned, restored stone manor house on a hill, with spacious public rooms, two fine restaurants, a spa and pool and gardens with extensive views. The beach is three miles away. A five-star property, a few of its 39 luxury rooms are in the house. The rest are in adjacent cottages. Most guests are weekenders from Barcelona here for the fine cuisine and proximity to the beach. At www.mastorrent.com; or at commercial@mastorrent.com

My list of top-ten favorite getaways includes Spain.

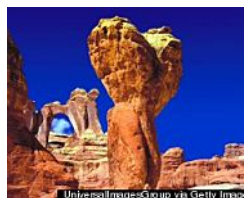
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