

Spanish coast offers history and relaxation

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By Anne Z. Cooke McClatchy-Tribune News Service

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where the Costa Brava is a rite of passage

LLAFRANC, Spain — I happened to be looking up when they flew overhead, a flock of white storks heading south along the Costa Brava, in Catalonia, on Spain's Mediterranean coast.

With the rising sun as their compass, they flew in shifting, untidy groups, black-tipped wings pumping air and red beaks pushing forward. I was 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 right here, in Spain. I'm convinced they like it as much as we do."

I was up early that September morning, shaking off jet lag with a walk on the Camino de Ronda, the pedestrian trail that hugs the shoreline for 136 miles, from the French border south through Girona province. The path, sometimes paved, sometimes dirt, connects each fishing village, emerald cove and sandy beach to the next, spangling the coast like a string of rough-cut diamonds.

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 headache, no unquenchable yawns. Maybe my compass was saying the same thing: The Costa Brava is where smart people come to spend the winter. 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 — didn't want to miss anything: lazy afternoons bobbing in emerald clear coves; searching for Roman ruins; vineyard visits; and tours at the three most important Costa Brava locations associated with the Surrealistic painter Salvador Dali, and known as the "Dali Triangle." So we decided to hire a guide, an idea I scorned when I was 18 and a "know-it-all" backpacker, but which my parents, seasoned travelers, never failed to recommend. "A good guide can take a pencil sketch and turn it into a portrait," they told me.

You'll probably want to grab your bathing suit and head straight to 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 Girona province, on the River Onyar.

Here we met our guide, Carles (Carlos, in Spanish) Pongiluppi, a fact-freak who not only guides locally, but accompanies Spanish groups traveling overseas. Articulate, casual and handsome, he also added a sense of humor to history's whys and wherefores.

And a good thing, too, since he was a look-alike for Dexter, the killer in the eponymous TV drama, for which he endured some friendly ribbing.

With a brief stop at the tourist office, we crossed the Sant Felui Bridge and made for the town's old city center, now restored, awash in gardens and crisscrossed by spacious squares and narrow cobblestone passages. Plunging into the heart of the medieval quarter, we poked through every block, looking at fragments of the Roman road — the Via Augusta — tiny medieval houses, 12th century churches, portions of the old city walls, the half-hidden Jewish quarter, and among these, newer buildings.

Armed with the street map, I nailed the directions. But I lagged behind to look at some flowers, took a wrong turn across another bridge and wound up on Independence Square, where the city's better stores and old and new architecture styles mix and match.

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 part of Spain, Girona and the Costa Brava, enjoy the warmth of the Spanish sun. 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, Catalanian pride is palpable.



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