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FEATURES

BEAUTIFUL BEACHES, FABULOUS FOOD AND IMPRESSIVE ART — BARCELONA HAS IT ALL

VISITOR numbers to Barcelona are averaging nearly six million per year. On a hot day last week most of them seemed to be inside the Boqueria, the huge food market on La Rambla.

Locals and tourists vied for space as the latter stood and gawped at the fabulous displays of fruit, vegetables, fish and hams for sale. It is an intoxicating and exhausting place in which to spend an afternoon.

Footsore, I found myself sitting at a coffee bar beside Christina, a Barcelona native who got around to describing the interesting foods she used to eat as a child. "My mother, she used to feed us the bulls' b***ocks," she explained before adding, "I think that is why I am so hairy."

Catalans are like that. Friendly and curious, they also possess a willingness to share information that makes this region such a delight to visit. When the crowds get too much it's time to get out and about. Costa Barcelona includes the regions of Maresme, el Baix Llobregat and Penedes and has more than 100km of coastline.

We took ourselves down the coast to Sitges (45 minutes from Barcelona by train), a lovely, vibrant town which hosts a festival almost every weekend. The old town with its ancient ramparts and 19th-century colonial homes is perfect for an evening stroll.

In the centre is Casa Bacardi where visitors can learn about the links between Sitges and the Bacardi brand. A short tour ends with a bartender displaying his skills in making you a mojito which contains an alarming amount of Bacardi.

GLOW

Emerging into the evening sunlight, I felt a definite glow which was further enhanced when I spotted six barefoot, flaxen-haired girls in long, flowing, white dresses skipping across a beach lined with tall candles.

The bride-to-be followed carrying a trailing bouquet. This was a traditional Iberian-style wedding made all the more beautiful by its simplicity.

However, we weren't invited so it was time to head inland to the rolling hills of Penedes, one of the oldest wine-producing regions in Europe.

You can visit a number of well-known commercial wine producers but for a more authentic tour, call into Cellar Pardas (www.cancomas.com/pardas) owned and run by Ramon and Montsi Parera.

The Pareras' vineyard is bio-dynamically farmed and their passion for their wines is evident. An hour spent sitting in their garden, tasting their wines and eating their olives, is as near to heaven as you might get on this earth.



MARIE CARBERRY

VIBRANT: Marie Carberry in the Baix Llobregat region; inset below, Sitges beach, 45 minutes from Barcelona



A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Public transport is fantastic value so a trip to Canet de Mar (40km from Barcelona at a train fare of €3.60) is a must. The town is home to magnificent beaches and some of the most remarkable buildings of the Modernista period which were created by leading figures of Catalan Art Nouveau. A visit to the Casa Museu provides a fascinating insight into this artistic movement. Housed in one of the most beautiful of the Modernista buildings is the Casa Roura restaurant where the food and architecture is a feast for the eyes. A three-course meal here will set you back about €25.

Our final stop was Badalona, part of the metropolitan area of Barcelona and one of the most ancient towns in Catalonia.

BULL

Badalona was founded by the Romans and they have 3,400m2 of remains to prove it. In the Baetulo museum you can visit the Baths and the Decumanus, an urban setting near the Forum.

A short hop brought us back to where we started in La Rambla, where I stocked up on olive oil and manchego cheese. I decided against the undercarriage of bull.

FACT FILE

Marie Carberry travelled to Costa Barcelona courtesy of the Spanish Tourist Board and Aer Lingus.

Aer Lingus fly from Dublin to Barcelona twice daily. One-way fares start from €49.99.

For more information on fares and schedules log on to www.aerlingus.com

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