



CITYBREAK

Travel an hour or two from **Barcelona** or spend a couple of days on the beaches or discovering the vineyards and towns full of architectural treasures, writes **Simon Tierney**

Slip the CITY

OUR WAITRESS INSISTS that I try the Malvasia, a local sweet wine. No encouragement is needed. She demonstrates how to drink from the traditional porron bottle, with its long, spouted neck. She warns me that it cannot touch my lips. Instead, I must hold it above my head and pour it like a fountain into my mouth. I am feeling unduly confident.

Most of it goes in my eye but the bit that manages to find my lips is delicious. I am sitting outside a restaurant. The sun is setting but it is still warm. The town is exhaling after its day in the heat. I am eating whitebait and calamari and enjoying some chilled Cava. Sitges, half an hour by train to the south of **Barcelona**, is one of the many gems on the **Costa Barcelona**.

The **Costa Barcelona**, in the region of **Catalonia**, is located in northeast **Spain**. I travelled along the northern and southern coasts of the area. I also travelled inland to **Penedès**, the wine region of the province of **Barcelona**. The Irish thirst for culture often brings visitors to **Barcelona**, while ignoring the stunning environs. The city has become rather saturated with tourists but the province in which it is ensconced, is unspoilt and offers beauty, culture and space to breathe. Leaving **Barcelona** behind and heading for its neighbouring treasures is liberating. The real **Catalonia** awaits.

Sitges is an old fishing town with a spectacular coastline, offering 17 beaches and a continuous promenade which makes for a charming walk in the evening. As I ambled along, a bride dressed in flowing white garments smiled at me on her way to the beach below to be married, as the sun set in the distance. I thought I had stumbled on to a film set. It is an idyllic location with bustling bars and restaurants, spilling on to the narrow pedestrianised streets and sandy beaches. Casa Bacardi, nestled among the many boutique

shops, is well worth a visit. I had the best mojito I have ever tasted here (the trick is to clap the fresh mint, not crush it. Go easy on the sugar).

The traditional fisherman's homes with their signature blue shutters and brilliant white walls collide abruptly with the mansions of the "Americans". This term describes the "done good" Sitgetans of the 18th and 19th centuries who emigrated to Cuba and Puerto Rico, earned a fortune and then returned to the town. They built beautiful houses with garden courtyards to show off their newfound wealth.

From here we moved north towards **Colònia Güell**, a small, late 19th century village developed by the wealthy industrialist, Eusebi Güell, as a sort of Catholic-socialist experiment. Here, he planted his textile factory and its workers, managing to house them while also creating a microcosm of civilised society with a theatre, a social club and many of the luxuries which would have been inaccessible to the labouring classes at this time.

The church, designed by Gaudí, is a preliminary study for the **Sagrada Família** in **Barcelona**. A veritable laboratory of the great Catalan architect, here you can see his signature use of animated stone work and his intricate marriage of nature and design.

Penedès sits in the southwestern part of the province. Being one of the main wine localities in the region, it is a sea of green vineyards. Totally unspoilt, you feel like you are stepping into uncharted territory. With a stunning backdrop of the Leonardesque **Montserrat** mountains, the maturing grape vines whisper in the breeze.

We visited the **Pardas Winery** (pardas.net) near **Sant Sadurní d'Anoia**, which is a 40-minute drive from **Barcelona**. A tour of the premises is €15 and is a fascinating lesson in oenology. Winemaker and owner of the estate,

FAR FROM GAUDI Park Guell in **Barcelona**; (below) a mojito cocktail and (right) the Church of **Sant Bartomeu** and **Santa Tecla** in **Sitges**.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES

Ramón Parera, articulates the very soul of the region.

It is difficult not to be affected by the passion that he and his team fill their bottles with. His Xarel-lo grape variety is subtle and delicious. I asked him which of his wines was his favourite. He replied: "They are all my sons". I half expected him to start singing to his grapes to help them grow.

It would be worth renting a car and doing a tour of some of the 160 wineries in **Penedès**. In Ireland we are particularly familiar with its most prominent export: Cava. With many small, often family-run places to stay, you could happily spend a number of days exploring the area. A bicycle tour would be idyllic. Irishman Paddy Mannion has been immersing himself in all things **Penedès** for years and his company offers a variety of biking tour options. Visit elmoitours.com for details.

Having a meal in the evening sun in the middle of **Penedès** is surely one of the great delights of the Iberian experience. As far as the eye can see, armies of grapevines march towards the horizon, interrupted only by streaks of lavender.

What unites the provinces of the **Costa Barcelona** is the wine, the Modernista architecture and the gastronomy. **Canet de Mar**, on the northern coast of the region is an important stopover for at least two of these ingredients. Buildings designed by its most famous resident, **Lluís Domènech i Montaner**, are abundant. It is a pleasure to walk around this small, quaint town, regularly stumbling upon another example of the Art Nouveau. The best illustration of this is **Casa Roura**, built in 1892. The blue ceramic tile tower points to **Domènech i Montaner's** influence on Gaudí. It has now been transformed into an excellent restaurant (casaroura.com)





where a €22 tasting menu allows you to try lots of specialities.

You would be hard pressed to find more beautiful Art Nouveau interiors in which to enjoy some food. What makes a Catalan meal enjoyable is that so much of it is shared.

This will usually involve a number of tapas courses, as it does in Casa Roura; pain con tomate smeared with garlic and olive oil, zucchini carpaccio and calamari among others. The Tarta Massini, a delicate chocolate speciality, is particularly good.

The long and indulgent meals personify the Costa **Barcelona** lifestyle. Several courses of tapas, including the regional xato salad of tuna in a delicious sauce and perhaps some pink barbecued beef as a main, all washed down with a local Cava is a fitting reward for the architectural treasures consumed earlier in the day. And the orange sun just keeps on beating down.

Situated just 10km north of **Barcelona**, the town of Badalona has a uniquely preserved Roman city lying beneath it. The Museo Badalona has done a fantastic job of preserving the archaeology – you can even follow a Roman street and see where the posh shops were, where the gym and dressing rooms of the baths lay and where the nasty tenements sat. Constructed over a section of the ruins, the museum has a gallery walkway which allows you to get an intimate view of the ancient city.

The beautiful and intact mosaic floor of the Caldarium and the marble Venus of Badalona sculpture are a must-see. If you suffer a bout of museum fatigue, head down to the beach which lines the town. May is possibly the best month to visit because of the many festivals taking place, including the Cremada del Dimoni (“burning of the devil”) when the town is ignited with fireworks and colour.



As I ambled along, a bride dressed in flowing white garments smiled at me on her way to the beach below to be married

How to . . .

Getting there Aer Lingus operates daily flights from Dublin to **Barcelona** and three weekly flights from Cork to **Barcelona**, aerlingus.com. Trains run from **Barcelona** to Sitges every 20 minutes. A single journey costs €3.60. Trains run regularly from **Barcelona** to Vilafranca del Penedés. The journey takes one hour and costs €6.80 return.

Where to stay Hotel Estela **Barcelona**-Hotel del Arte, Avinguda del Port d’Aiguadolc, No 8 08870, Sitges, **Barcelona** (tel: 0034 938114545, hotelestela.com). A four-star hotel with a selection of bedrooms designed individually by artists, this is an ideal location within a stone’s throw of the beach. It also has a small outdoor pool. The restaurants in the nearby harbour are recommended. Rooms from €91.

Cal Ruget BioHotel, E-08735 Vilobí del Penedés, **Barcelona** (tel: 0034 938979342, calrugetbiohotel.com). Situated among the vineyards of Penedés, it is nine kilometres from Vilafranca. The owners, Veronica Grimal and Florian Porsche, grow much of the delicious food they serve on site. With a swimming pool and innumerable opportunities for interesting walks, this is a great location from which to explore the area. A double room is €135.

Where to eat Restaurante la Taberna del Puerto, Passeig de la Ribera, 24 08870, Sitges (tel: 0034 938942058, latabernadelpuerto.net).

Situated on a buzzing strip of restaurants and bars near the sea, this is a great spot for tapas and seafood in the evening.

Ca L’Arque Restaurant, Arnús, 89 08911, Badalona (tel: 0034 934641222). With a warm, provincial atmosphere, this restaurant serves excellent food with some local specialities. It also has a funky roof garden for some al fresco fun.

● Simon Tierney travelled to **Barcelona** courtesy of Aer Lingus and stayed as a guest of Turespana and the **Barcelona** Province Tourism Board.



THE TALE OF THE LAND OF MILK AND HONEY

Some people take this description of Israel literally. With the world’s biggest natural spa, the Dead Sea, those seeking well-being nirvana have lots to talk about. How they felt like Cleopatra having a milk bath, or how that soothing honey aroma moisture rub was the bee’s knees. The day they got down and dirty with a Dead Sea mud body wrap, and felt totally relaxed after some Asian style holistic therapy. And after Israel has relaxed your body, let it attend to your soul. From its *hidden gems* to its *visible jewels*, Israel is indisputably the land of a million stories. To read more interesting tales and receive the complete set of books in our special trilogy, order your free copies online now at thinkisrael.com

