



Ida Milne travelled to **Barcelona** province courtesy of the **Spanish Tourism Office**.

Tourism in **Barcelona** is thriving. Vast queues snake along the sides of Antoni Gaudí's still unfinished Basilica de la Sagrada familia masterpiece, waiting for the surprises inside.

Over in the Barri Gotic, it's shoulder to shoulder at peak times as a medley of languages hit your ears, tourists rambling in and out of the boutique shops, exploring the narrow streets with their Roman and medieval building in the old heart of the city.

Las Ramblas, a long series of shopping streets, is also packed with tourists and atmosphere. Nip in to the Mercat de Sant Josep; the enclosed market is a feast for senses of smell, sight and taste, a hall full of jamon, the superlative Spanish dried ham, cheeses of improbable shapes and sizes, fish far fresher and more interesting than typically seen on an Irish fish stall, and a delectable array of fruit in peak condition, again something seldom seen on Irish shop shelves.

Barcelona province tourism interests are anxious to steer some of the business the city finds so easy to attract out to the rest of the province, which they

think has at least as much again to offer.

Irish tourists know about the sun and sand product, so local tourism interests are keen to open their eyes to the province's architectural riches. The public transport network aides their cause. It's cheap and efficient.

The **Barcelona** metro L2 (purple line) will bring you to Badalona in 30 minutes for two euro, or the Rodalia commuter train will get you there in 20 minutes, to the beach and the historical and commercial centre.

There you'll find a recently redeveloped Roman museum located on the site of the city of Baetulo. It's one of those rare museums designed by people who know how to entertain even the whingiest pre-teen.

The experience brings you through pathways raised over the dug-out Roman ruins, with soundtracks leading your imagination into the ancient streets. Barking dogs, bleating sheep, the chime of goat bells, the sounds of the communal baths, the sounds of workers, brings the exhibition to life.

For €3.60 return, you can get from **Barcelona** city to the seaside resorts of Sitges and Canet del

Mar.

Both have a formidable range of attractions, apart from the Mediterranean coast and sunshine.

With an array of pretty half moon beaches, old whitewashed fishermen's houses, meandering narrow streets and a slightly Bohemian atmosphere, Sitges is a lively town which remains a popular destination for rich Catalunyans on holidays.

Picasso and his set frequented it in the late 19th century. It's now popular with gay tourists - the rainbow flag can often be seen outside nightclubs and bars.

In the town's Mercat Vell (old market) there's a new permanent exhibition explaining the history of Bacardí rum, Casa Bacardí.

It takes visitors through the story of the local residents who moved to **Santiago** de Cuba in search of their fortunes, in the process creating one of the world's most famous brands. At the end of the tour, visitors get to try

their hand at making mojitos under the guidance of expert bartenders. The secret? Slap the mint between your palms to release the flavour.

Canet del Mar, less of a party town than Sitges, is worth viewing for its

unique modernist architecture - local architect Lluís Doménech i Montaner used the town as a laboratory for his development of the Catalan modernist style, a search for a particular national style for **Catalonia** drawing on Medieval and Arab styles, characterized by the predominance of the curve over the straight line, by rich decoration and detail, by the frequent use of vegetal and other organic motifs, the taste for asymmetry. The former home of modernist architect Lluís Doménech i Montaner and his family has been turned into a museum explaining the finer points of his designs.

Today, the best-known **Catalan modernist architect** is Antoni Gaudí. A visit to Colonia Guell, another 17 minute train ride from **Barcelona**, offers the rare treat to see a Gaudí building that, for me, is even more magical than the better-known Sagrada Familia.

Reacting to social conflicts in factories in **Barcelona** city, in 1890 Eusebi Guell set up a new ideal textile factory complex.

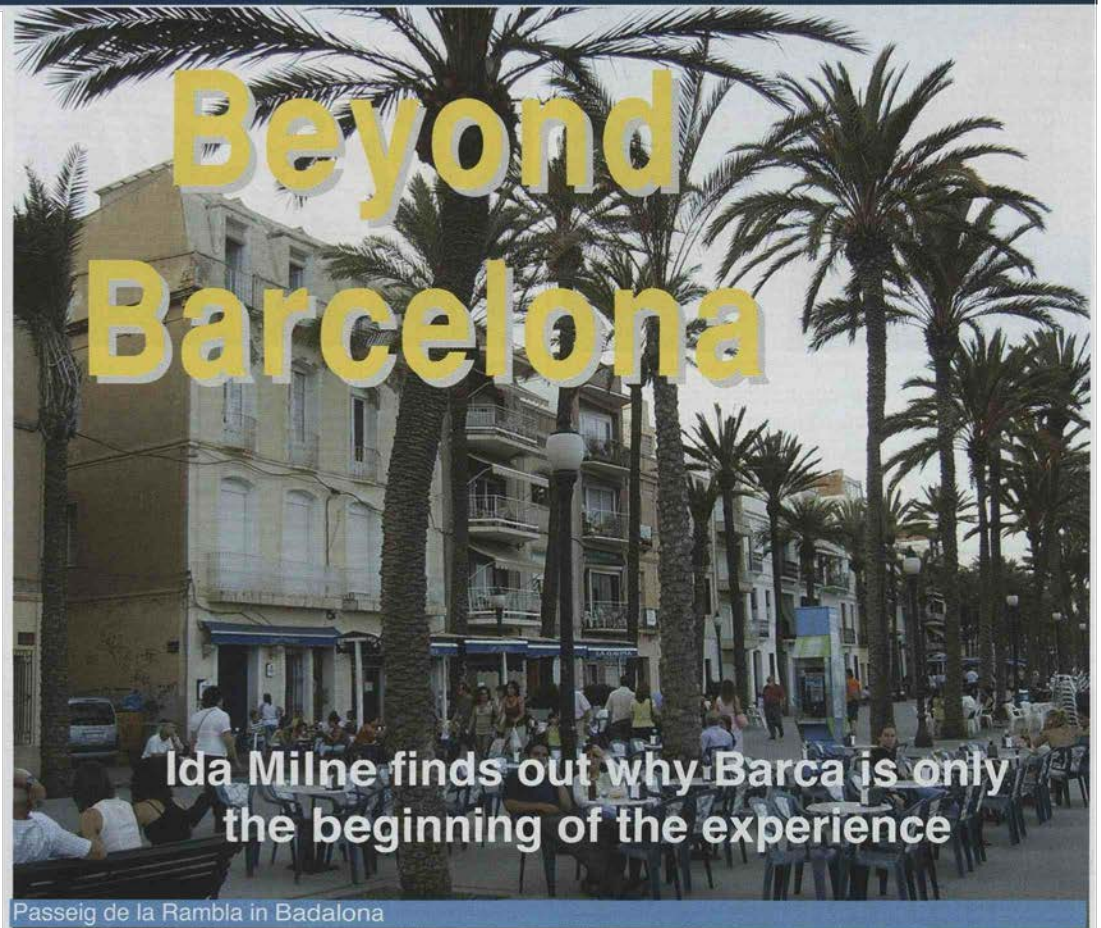
It was in a rural area, in a colony with good housing conditions for the workers, hospital, shops, schools and day-care facilities. The colony was

designed by various modernist architects, and Gaudí was commissioned to build the church.

Like Sagrada familia, the church has never been completed, only the crypt was finished. It's incredibly beautiful, and is regarded as a culminating point in the architect's work as most of his advanced architectural ideas were introduced for the first time, the hyperbolic paraboloid shape of the outside walls, the fluid treatment of the interior and the blending of the building into the environment.

He used controversial materials - burnt ceramic bricks of irregular shape and size mingle with basalt and limestone, smelting slag, glass and different types of mortar. In the hands of a lesser talent, the work would have been a shambolic mess, but in these gifted hands it's a building of rare beauty, mingling energy, colour and serenity. Some of the ideas and decorations echo those used in his later design for the rather larger Sagrada Familia project. Beautiful conch shells encased in wrought iron stands form the holy water fountains and baptismal fountains, an idea also used in the **Barcelona** basilica.

DESTINATION **SPAIN**



PLACES TO STAY

■ The Hotel Estela in Sitges (www.hotelestela.com): located almost on the beach, nine bedrooms are covered in fantastic creations by artists - mine had walls dripping in paint blood.

■ The Cal Ruget Biohotel in Penedès (calrugetbiohtel.com) has magnificent views of the mountains of Montserrat. A typical masia or farmhouse, the property has its own vineyard, organic garden and a pleasure garden with a pool and bar.

The property offers lots of corners de-

signed to relax and enjoy unparalleled peace of mind. Run by Veronica Grimal and Florian Porsche, who worked in the hotel industry before setting up their dream enterprise, using fair trade local produce. Their friend Paddy Mannion, with Clare connections, helped entertain us.

■ The Hotel Colón Thalasso Termal, Plaza de les Barques, Caldes d'Estrac www.hotel-colon.net/web/ct/index.php offers a wonderful spa and a swimming pool with heated sea water.