

GOING PLACES #2

JOHN COONEY

FLAMENCO FUN IN BARCELONA



Sagrada Família

Her hair was pulled back in a tight bun. Her face looked for all the world like she was being tortured. Accompanied by much hand-clapping, shouting, strumming of guitars, she stomped her heels and snapped her fingers and swirled her truffled dress around her legs in a colourful blur. Her song was a Spanish classic about a beautiful gypsy girl who brings tragedy to her family and her village. It was flamenco – it was passionate – and I was spellbound!

Somebody said to me afterwards, you don't watch flamenco – you feel it. And I realised later: that's not just true of the dance – it's true of Spain. Or, at least, it's true of the sizzling exuberant city I'd woken up in that morning.

We were on Spain's south-eastern coast, between the mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. We were in Barcelona, which (according to one guidebook I'd read) *"is inconceivable until you get there, unbelievable while you walk its streets, and unforgettable after you've gone – if you ever manage to tear yourself away!"*

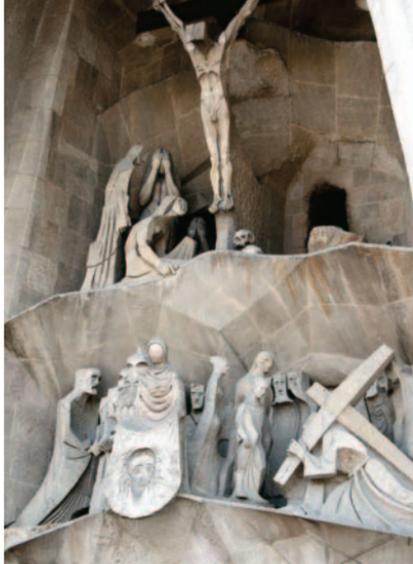
We'd already proved the bit about its streets: Barcelona is one of the most walk-around-able cities I've ever walked around. And if you don't believe me, take a stroll down La Rambla. It's actually five separate streets strung end-to-end: a lovely tree-lined pedestrian boulevard packed with flower stalls, cafés, buskers and (best of all) human statues. You'll find angels and artists, ballerinas and boys on bikes – and it's only when you toss a coin in the hat that you know for sure they're alive!



La Rambla bisects the Old Town, from the Placa de Catalunya to the harbour. And it's obviously a focal point for locals – not just tourists. You can shop-till-you-drop if you want: it's littered with retail outlets, souvenir stalls, restaurants and newspaper kiosks. And off to the right at one point, as you wander down, is a glorious market: Mercat Sant Josep – a riot of noise and colour, fruits and herbs, and stacks of sausage and cheese.

But people-watching beats shopping every time, I reckon. So we sat ourselves down at an outdoor table ... traded some Euros for a glass of red and a full plate of tapas (popular Spanish snacks) ... and watched!

Right in the middle of old Barcelona is the Barri Gòtic (Gothic Quarter) – a jumble of streets and alleys crammed with some spectacular medieval architecture. And our rushed visit included a true masterpiece: the city's famous Gothic Cathedral. People were worshipping on this hillside as far back as Roman times, but most of this awesome old church with its soaring nave and exquisite decorations dates from the 14th and 15th centuries – a mere 600–700 years ago.



But more awesome still (for my money) is the even famouser unfinished cathedral of Antoni Gaudi: La Sagrada Familia (Holy Family). Architect Gaudi is a clear favourite with Barcelonians – his push-the-limits, fairytale creations are on-show all over the place, and his must-see Sagrada Familia has become the city's symbol.

Look, no exaggeration: I've seen plenty of cathedrals in my time, and after a while they all start to look the same; but this towering, inspiring, weirdly-wonderful construction took my breath away. And when I got up close, it also gave me a stiff neck!

The eight completed bell-towers already jut more than 100 metres against the sky. And there are four more towers still to come, the highest of which (in honour of Christ) will reach an incredible 170 metres. But wait – there's more: the whole thing, from the base of the huge columns to the tips of each spire, is encrusted with a tangle of stunning sculptures – which tell the gospel story and breathe light and life into this mountain of stone and steel.

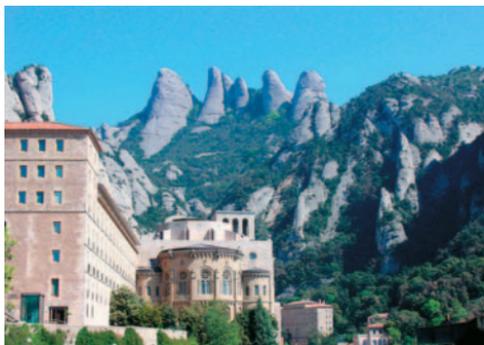
Gaudi's vast project was begun in 1882, but sadly he died in 1926 before it could be completed. Thankfully, the work has continued, with each new generation of designers and sculptors adding their own contemporary touch.

(Shh: don't tell anyone, but I'm coming back in 2020 to see the finished thing!)

If you're pressed for time (as we were) there's one more sight you've got to see before you cry "*Adiós Barcelona!*" You've got to bribe someone to take you 50km out of town to the Monestir de Montserrat – a Benedictine monastery (founded 1025) that's perched impossibly high (4000 feet) up the sheer sides of a teetering rocky massif.

One of the greatest religious shrines of Spain, it contains the legendary 'Black Madonna' – a black wooden carving of the Virgin Mary and Child which (according to doubtful tradition) was carved by St Luke, brought to Spain by St Peter, and hidden in a cave near Montserrat during the Moorish invasion (where it was later found by young shepherds).

The remote monastery suffered a setback in 1811, when Napoleon's troops came a-looting and a-wrecking. But today its more modern buildings house





a community of about 80 monks. Pilgrims arrive daily to venerate the Black Madonna, and tourists arrive just as daily to photograph the pilgrims.

In earlier times, the monks used to haul each other up to Montserrat in a basket on a rope – we (oh, the disappointment!) got hauled up in a modern *cremallera* (cable-train). But the awesome setting gave me goosebumps ... the views over the precipice-edge gave me clammy palms ... and the other-world-ly stillness of the place (check out the gorgeous little chapel, up endless stairs above the main altar) somehow sneaked into my bones.

A tip: if you head for the basilica at 1pm (we missed it) you'll be treated to a performance by the *escolia* (boys' choir) – really something, by all reports.

Ah, yes, Barcelona: you don't just watch it – you feel it! ❁

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