

BARCELONA

Go beyond La Sagrada Familia to get to know this beguiling city, says Ella Buchan



GOTHIC QUARTER

WHY GO

A mix of busy squares and atmospheric, labyrinthine streets, the Gothic Quarter or Barri Gòtic is at the heart of the old town, bordering tourist thoroughfare La Rambla and stretching to the seafront. It's perfect for visitors who want to explore the city's major cultural attractions and have easy access to the beach.

WHAT TO DO

The medieval streets are home to tiny tapas bars, Catalan restaurants and nightlife spots, from craft cocktail joints to old-school pubs such as Els Quatre Gats, which opened in the 1890s and hosted one of Picasso's first exhibitions. Attraction World has a two-hour Gothic Quarter Walking Tour (£18), covering architectural landmarks and hidden history.

The impressive Barcelona Cathedral, dating back to the 13th century, is one of the area's most famous buildings. Visitors can gaze at the vaulted interior's altarpieces or potter around in its shadow, where artisan vendors sell handcrafted chocolates, leather wallets and honey.

Plaça Reial, dotted with palm trees and lined with restaurants whose tables spill outside, is one of the busiest squares.

Suggest clients escape the crowds by wandering towards the waterfront, home to a dynamic dining and nightlife scene. The Green Spot, a bright, cosy restaurant with Scandi-chic decor, innovative vegetarian cuisine and regular live jazz, is a favourite.

EIXAMPLE

WHY GO

Eixample is rich in designer stores and modernist architecture, including several creations by acclaimed designer Antoni Gaudí.

WHAT TO DO

Browse souvenir stalls and people-watch by the fountain in leafy Plaça de Catalunya. Or wander around Quadrat d'Or (Golden Square), the most central part of the district, to get a sense of its eclectic, and often eccentric, architecture.

Gaudí's intricate – and still unfinished – Roman Catholic church, La Sagrada Familia, is in this area, and is one of the city's most-visited attractions. Eixample is also home to two of Gaudí's fantastical, wavy, apartment buildings – Casa Mila and Casa Batlló (pictured) – both of which have rooftops open to the public.

Passeig de Gràcia, the main thoroughfare, has upscale shops beneath facades embellished with floral motifs and stained glass.

Clients can go deeper into the area's history on a two-hour Modernist Walking Tour (£16) with Do Something Different.



DESTINATIONS

SHORT BREAKS | BARCELONA

WHERE TO
stay

PRIME POSITION

Mandarin Oriental Barcelona

This luxurious hotel, which has a beautiful, tucked-away spa and a two-Michelin-starred restaurant, poses elegantly on Passeig de Gràcia, known for upscale shopping and modernist architecture. Rooms have enormous bathtubs and sleek design details, while several have terraces filled with greenery. Doubles from £470, including breakfast. mandarinoriental.com

STRIKING DESIGN

The Barcelona Edition

This chic hotel, next to Santa Caterina Market in the hip El Born district, has a laid-back, understated style punctuated with striking design elements. The plant-filled rooftop has a pool and loungers with views over the rooftops. Cosy doubles, with window seats and marble bathrooms, start at £280. editionhotels.com

CITY AND BEACH

Hotel Arts Barcelona

The pool at this sleek waterfront hotel, close to Port Olímpic marina and the Gothic Quarter, faces Frank Gehry's Peix sculpture, a giant steel goldfish created for the 1992 Olympics. Doubles, with marble bathrooms and views to La Sagrada Família, start at £270. hotelartsbarcelona.com



EL BORN

WHY GO

El Born is a walkable area whose narrow streets and squares are home to tucked-away tapas restaurants, tiny bars, museums and architecture.

WHAT TO DO

This arty area is heaven for those who enjoy pottering

among galleries and boutiques.

Ceramics and glasswork studios sit next to stores selling wine, jewellery and logo-style T-shirts.

The Picasso Museum's impressive collection of works is spread across five adjoining medieval palaces.

Fans can visit places associated with

the artist on a two-hour walking tour, ending with entrance to the museum, with Attraction World (£25).

Other notable attractions include the Basilica de Santa Maria del Mar, an inspiring Gothic church with stained glass windows, and Santa Caterina Market, whose multicoloured wavy roof mirrors the vibrant produce sold underneath.

EL POBLENOU

WHY GO

With quiet streets meandering towards sandy Bogatell Beach, El Poblenou has become a hip enclave thanks to tech companies moving into its old factories and warehouses. It's ideal for second-time visitors looking for a walkable, vibrant area away from the crowds.

WHAT TO DO

The area is dotted with craft coffee shops and restaurants serving pizza, seafood, inventive vegetarian food and creative spins on Catalan classics. Suggest Timesburg Poblenou for gourmet burgers, or Can Dende (pictured), a popular brunch spot. Unassuming side streets are home to gourmet food stores, bakeries and local-label fashion stores.



POBLE SEC

WHY GO

Overlooked by Montjuïc hill – home to the Joan Miró Foundation (pictured) – this area is known for its nightlife and restaurants.

WHAT TO DO

Small parks and tree-shaded squares with cafes offer respite from the busy, broad avenues that slice through the neighbourhood. Theatres, concert venues, cabaret shows and nightclubs make this a popular area after-hours too, but one of the main draws is the food. Poble Sec has some of the city's most-renowned restaurants, including Xemeni, with its Venetian menu, and Albert Adrià's Tickets, where the tapas and decor come with theatrical flair. Book well in advance.



VILA DE GRACIA

WHY GO

Life is centred around tree-dotted squares in this charming neighbourhood. The laid-back vibe is dramatically disrupted each August by the Feste Major de Gracia, a raucous festival of parades and street music.

WHAT TO DO

This area has one of the city's most diverse dining scenes, with Ethiopian, Japanese and Indian restaurants alongside favourite tapas bars and bodegas. Otherwise, it's all about Gaudí. Among his creations here is Casa Vicens, an art nouveau townhouse that's now a museum. Park Güell, reached via an endless flight of steps or (thankfully) escalators, is a must: undulating paths wind around Gaudí's bold, sculptural buildings and mosaic benches. Architecture enthusiasts can take a four-and-a-half-hour Gaudí tour that includes Park Güell and other important sites, through Do Something Different (£93).

EL RAVAL

WHY GO

El Raval's most-visited attraction is Mercat de la Boqueria, where people perch at tapas bars close to sellers hawking meat, vegetables and olive oil. But the true spirit of this vibrant enclave is found on its narrow streets, with walls emblazoned with street art and bars tucked away in leafy courtyards.

WHAT TO DO

The Museum of Contemporary Art, or MACBA, displays 20th-century pieces by Catalan artists, while smaller Arts Santa Monica has rotating exhibits and workshops. For food, recommend Restaurant Marmalade, serving fusion cuisine and craft cocktails in an old furniture store, or Llop, a relaxed farm-to-table spot with topped toasts and substantial salads. The shopping scene is a hip mix of vintage and record stores. More surprising is Sant Pau del Camp, a 12th-century monastery with cloisters, mosaics and courtyards dotted with palm trees and sculptures. **TW**

ABOVE: Park Güell

BELOW: Mercat de la Boqueria

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Belen Codina



BOOK IT

Super Break offers a three-night stay at the centrally located three-star Autohogar Hotel, with breakfast, from £328 including flights from Gatwick for a stay in mid-September. superbreak.com/agents

Jet2CityBreaks offers three nights' room-only at the four-star Senator Barcelona Spa Hotel, with flights from Manchester on September 10, from £299 including 22kg bag allowance. jet2holidays.com