

Barcelona plays it cool

By Chris Leadbeater

Weird architecture, great food... even the football team isn't bad. With new flights from the UK, now's the time to visit. Chris Leadbeater pays homage to a Catalan champion

What's the attraction?

Spain's second-largest city – and arguably its most enticing – becomes a little more accessible this week. On Friday, no-frills airline Monarch (08719 405 040; monarch.co.uk) launches a new daily flight from Gatwick to Barcelona's main El Prat airport – rising to 11 flights a week from 31 October.

This is beginning to look like a fares war between the UK and the Catalan capital, because from December Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) starts twice-daily flights to the city's main airport (just seven miles south-west of the centre) from Stansted that will complement its existing operations from Edinburgh and Leeds/Bradford.

These new services will find themselves in competition against easyJet (0905 821 0905; easyjet.com) from Newcastle, Liverpool, Stansted, Luton, Gatwick; and British Airways (0844 4930787; ba.com) and its partner, Iberia, from London City and Heathrow).

Add in trains via Paris, and Barcelona has never been within such easy reach.

A good thing too: with its almost year-round fine weather and seafront swagger, here is a metropolis ideal for an autumn mini-break. Weekenders who visit before 1 December can also soak up the sounds of the city-wide Barcelona Jazz Festival (barcelonajazzfestival.com).

Insider information

"Barcelona is hugely accessible by train. Connections are faster than ever – it now takes less than 12 hours from London St Pancras via Paris. The new AVE trains in Spain shave hours off journey times. And travelling by rail you get to see the destination, and arrive in the city centre, rather than landing several miles outside it. Fares start at around £230 per person return." Dan May, from rail-holiday specialist Ffestiniog Travel (ffestiniogtravel.com)

Familia favourites

Few individuals have given a city colour and shape quite like Antoni Gaudí. The febrile imagination of Catalonia's finest architect bore fruit in the late 19th century, gifting

Barcelona outlandish yet lovely landmarks such as the multi-spired Sagrada Familia basilica (sagradafamilia.cat; which is on target to be completed by the centenary of his death in 2026), the ornate Palau Güell mansion (palauguell.cat), and the Park Güell. Follow the great man's vision via Runnerbean Tours, which offers a "free" walking tour (guides are paid by donations) departing daily at 11am (00 34 636 108 776; runnerbeantours.com).

The Pablo and Joan Show

Beyond Gaudí's architectural ticks and twitches, Barcelona's rich cultural vein is most visible in the legacy left by two of Spain's most lauded artists. Pablo Picasso is eulogised by the Museu Picasso (Carrer Montcada 15-23; 00 34 93 256 3000; museupicasso.bcn.es; €10), while the Fundació Joan Miró (Parc de Montjuïc; 00 34 93 443 9470; fundaciomiro-bcn.org; €9) pays tribute to the Spanish surrealist in striking white premises on Montjuïc. The Miró exhibition hosted by Tate Modern earlier this year opened at the Fundació this week and runs until March.

Who said that?

"It was the first time I had ever been in a town where the working class was in the saddle... Waiters and shopkeepers looked you in the eye, and treated you as an equal... I recognised it immediately as a state of affairs worth fighting for."

– *George Orwell, "Homage To Catalonia"*

"Barcelona are a great club, the best in the world, and playing there is a guarantee to win."

– *Ex-Arsenal captain Cesc Fabregas, preparing to sign for FC Barcelona, June 2011*

Nou sensations

Some might say that the foremost artists of the 21st-century city come brandishing football boots rather than brushes. Certainly, the success of FC Barcelona over the past half-decade (the team are the current club champions of Europe) has led to breathless praise of their fluid attacking style. Even if you're not a big football fan, there is a cathedral- esque quality to the Camp Nou stadium, a 98,787-capacity arena that is open for tours that ferry you past the glittering trophy cabinet, into the changing rooms and to the lip of the pitch (Avinguda de Joan XIII; 00 34 902 189 900; fcbarcelona.com; €22).

Pillow talk

Accommodation options in Barcelona are many and varied. The Hotel Arts Barcelona (00 34 93 221 1000; hotelartsbarcelona.com) is a chic five-star option louchely arranged on the edge of the Olympic Port. It offers five restaurants, a spa and dramatic views of both the city and the Mediterranean. Doubles from €295 per night, room only.

In contrast to this glitzy shoreline starlet, the Gran Hotel Havana (00 34 93 341 7000; hoteles-silken.com) is a more reserved affair: a four-star housed within an 1872-built

mansion, just north of the Ciutat Vella. Heavily revamped in 2009, it has a rooftop swimming pool and doubles from €120, room only.

Elsewhere, the Hotel Grums (00 34 934 420 666; hotelgrumsbarcelona.com) is a new arrival, a four-star in the shadow of Montjuïc, where doubles – from €98, room only – are themed around city landmarks. And Hostal Gat Xino (00 34 93 324 88 33; gatrooms.es) in the hip Raval area offers doubles from €60, including breakfast.

Track record

Barcelona can claim another important arena and something of a lesson from the past. Set atop Montjuïc, the Anella Olímpica was the site of the 1992 Olympic Games, and still offers the main stadium and the Piscina Municipal de Montjuïc, the diving complex whose high boards, framed by the city behind, became the photogenic image of the event. Enthusiasts can call at the Museu Olímpic (Avinguda de l'Estadi 60; 00 34 93 292 5379; museuo-olimpicbcn.cat; €8). Montjuïc was also the site of the 1929 International Exposition; its grand Palau Nacional now houses the National Museum of Catalan Art (00 34 93 622 03 76; mnac.es; €8.50).

Reach for the beach

Much of Barcelona's reputation as a short-break favourite can be tied to its enviable position on the Mediterranean. That the city boasts beaches to accompany its bravado definitely adds to its appeal, and the temptation to simply stroll on the sand can be strong when you are confronted by the golden curves of the Barceloneta (voted the world's best urban beach by the Disc-overy Channel in 2005) and Sant Sebastià beaches – both of which lie a short hop from the Ciutat Vella ("Old City"). Find a list of the city's wave-lapped stretches at barcelonaturisme.com/beaches.

Catalan cuisine

Barcelona has nurtured numerous star chefs, from Ferran Adrià, to Carles Abellà* and the late Santi Santamaria, as well as flaunting 20 Michelin-starred restaurants. The doors might be closed now at El Bulli, but Adrià and his brother Albert recently opened an affordable, modernist tapas bar, Tickets (ticketsbar.es) and cocktail bar/restaurant 41degrees (41grados.es) in Barcelona's Paral·lel neighbourhood.

More top Catalan fare is served at Restaurant 7 Portes (00 34 93 319 3033; 7portes.com), which keeps in step with its Ciutat Vella location; dating back to 1836 it serves fried salt cod with garlic and spinach for €22. In the Gracia district, Alkimia (00 34 93 207 6115; alkimia.cat) has a more contemporary feel, but acknowledges the city's traditions in a €65 menu that includes a fig tartar with tuna, anchovy and lemon sorbet.