

How to really see Barcelona



I'm standing on the rooftop terrace of my hotel, glass of cava in hand, and the city is laid out before me. I'm facing the bright mosaics of Gaudis Palau Guell, and beyond that is the sail shape of the W Hotel and the sea. There is the cable car carrying people up to Montjuïc, and the Columbus monument which later tonight will be lit up with the lights of Las Ramblas. I want to see everything. I want to soak up the sun in the prettiest plazas, I want to eat in authentic tapas bars, I want to see inside the picturesque churches, to sample the goods at the food markets, to stroll along tree lined avenues, have lunch by the sea at the Marina, lie in the sand of a blue flag beach and feel the thrill of standing inside a very famous unfinished Cathedral. I have 3 days to do all of this. Here's how it's done.

Fly from Southend

If you live locally, this is the best way to fly. Flying from Southend takes the stress, time and expense out of travelling to Gatwick so take advantage of it. The flight out is just 1 hour 40 minutes and you only need to check in 1 ½ hours before take off. Just take hand luggage, it's enough for 3 days and you won't need to go to Bag Drop or worry about whether or not your suitcase will turn up. But be careful, cabin baggage must be 56cm x 45cm x 25cm. If it doesn't fit into slot by the gate you could face charges of up to £45 per person each way. Make sure you take a Top 10 Eye Witness book for the tube and street maps and restaurant recommendations, and allow enough room for a small pool towel. There is a beach and a park that you really need to see.

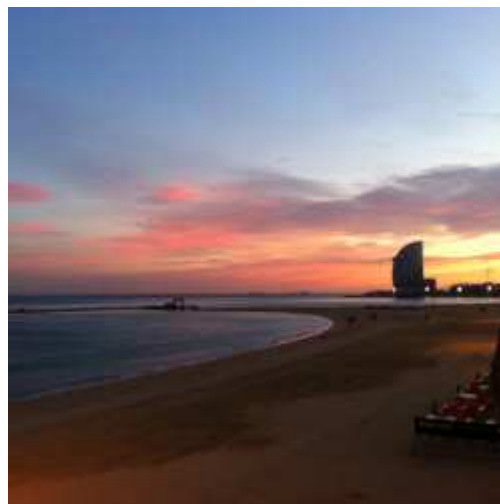
Getting around

Don't pre-book an expensive private transfer. There's a taxi rank at the airport and a cab ride into the city doesn't take long. At just 10km away the journey took around 20 minutes in traffic and cost a flat rate of 29 euros.

Barcelona is fairly compact, you can walk the length of La Rambla in around 25 minutes. The Marina and the Columbus monument are at one end, and the Placa de Catalunya is at the other. The Gothic Quarter and the Old town of El Raval are side streets just off La Rambla. Citadell Park and the beach are a little further out, and Sagrada Familia is a good 1 hour walk away. But the metro is very easy to use, and you should make use of it for these further out attractions. There are just 6 lines in total and a two day travel card costs 14 euros. The ticket machines are very user friendly. Simply select English, then 2 days ticket, then pay. There are clear signs at all stations.

Where to Stay

I stayed at the Hotel Gaudi <http://www.hotelgaudibarcelona.com/> which is fine if you are looking for a quirky 3* hotel just off Las Ramblas. The rooms are large and some have balconies. There is a bar, a cafeteria and a breakfast room. It is a loud hotel, but I forgave that for the Rooftop bar alone, the view was amazing.



First Evening

If you are flying in from Southend it's likely you won't arrive at your hotel until the evening, so for a gentle start to your city break wander down Las Ramblas towards the sea to see the Columbus monument lit up at night. There is a lift to the top if you're brave enough. Then head to Txikiteo for some Tapas and cava. This mellow, friendly, brick walled restaurant is down a side street just off La Rambla. Dinner for 2 will cost around 40 euros. Relax and enjoy.

Second Day

Now's the time to start getting grips with the layout of the city. Think of Las Ramblas as the main road that runs down the centre of the city, with Place de Catalunya at the top and the Columbus monument by the Marina and beach at the bottom. To the left of Las Ramblas is El Raval (old

Barcelona) and to the right are the winding streets of La Ribera and Ciutadella Park beyond that. Sagrada Familia is north of the city in the district of Eixample.



El Raval is an easy 20 minute walk or a short tube ride from my hotel. Walk along La Rambla Raval, which is almost identical to Las Ramblas layout, but it's much quieter and prettier. Pass by the Església des Sant Pau del Camp, a pretty former Monastery, then head round to St Agusti, a beautiful vaulted church that has free entry. Enjoy refreshments in the cafe in the pretty tree lined square outside.

Just around the corner is the garden of the Artistic Hospital de la Santa Creu, with its jacaranda tree filled courtyard. Soak up the atmosphere at the outdoor restaurant, best enjoyed with a chilled glass of sauvignon and a big plate of fat green olives.

Meander back to Las Ramblas and walk in the direction of the Placa de Catalunya, walking past the flower stalls, the former umbrella factory, and the famous drinking fountain. You could stop for a coffee at the cafe l'Opera, a 19th century cafe with vested waiters opposite opera house. Or if you venture down the side street and stop for something a little stronger at the London Bar, which once attracted the likes of Hemmingway and Picasso. Then head up to the food market for a lunch of samples: dim sum for 1 euro, a cone stuffed with parma ham, cheese & bread sticks for 3 euros, something a little different at the exotic fruit stall for 1 euro, tapas for 5 euros. Then prop up a barrel, enjoy a glass of cava for 3 euros and watch the world go by.

If you have room, go for dinner at Avinyo 10, which is a restaurant come art gallery. This quirky eatery is tucked down a side street and is filled with brightly coloured abstract art, huge paintings of flamenco dancers and guitar music. Enjoy a tapas starter, a paella main course and a dessert with a generous jug of cava sangria coming in at 60 euros.

Third Day

The most famous attraction in Barcelona is Gaudi's most famous building, the Sagrada Familia. You will need to pre-book this as you can't simply queue up to get in. They operate a timed allocated entrance only which can only be booked online. The website you need is <http://www.sagradafamilia.org/en/tickets/> The audio tour is a must and costs 22 euros each. It lasts 45 minutes and you can pay extra to go up to the top towers. Spend a while longer walking around, as even though it is still unfinished it's a fascinating and beautiful building. It is possible to walk there from La Rambla in an hour, but it's not a pretty walk. Make better use of your time and ride the metro which takes just 35 minutes. Arrive in plenty of time to find correct entrance- it's a very large Cathedral.

Once you have finished take the metro back in the direction of the beach and stop at Coconut Club for a refreshing sangria at Port Olympic. Take a lazy stroll along the 4km of beautiful blue flag beach of Barceloneta. Spend a lazy couple of hours lying in the sand. You could have lunch at one of the restaurants there, but I recommend walking down to the marina via La Rambla De Mar instead. Stroll along the wooden pier and enjoy lunch at Tapa Tapa at Marengnum near the mall overlooking the sea (40 euros).

Head to the narrow streets of the beautiful gothic quarter for dinner, and watch how the street performers use the buildings acoustics to sing opera. One of the best meals of my trip was at Londres de tapas, 60 euros for two.



Last full day

This morning take the metro to Arc de Triomphe. Take a picturesque walk through tree lined Citadelle park and listen to the paraquets. Enjoy the incredible Gaudi fountain and Catalan government building, then spend the morning sun bathing in the grass. When you're feeling a little

more energetic, hire a rowing boat and go boating around the lake. It's only 6 euros for 2 people for 30 minutes, and if you're travelling with children you may want to stop at the Zoo. Walk to La Ribera and visit the pretty Englesia de Santa Maria. It is free so light a candle for someone special. Sit at the bar outside enjoy a coffee and watch the street performers. Venture back to the Gothic Quarter tonight for dinner.

Going Home

On your last day before you fly home, walk back round to the gothic quarter and spend a lazy morning in Placa Reial, the royal square. It will be much quieter now than it is in the evenings when it becomes a particularly vibrant spot, giving you a chance to enjoy the fountain, the Gaudi street lamps and the palm trees.

It pays to plan your city break. It maximises your time there and ensures that you get to see the best of the city. It doesn't have to be overly structured, but i hope this gives you a useful guide. Aim to have one activity and one meal planned each day to avoid too much aimless wandering.

Barcelona is also a beautiful place in the winter and has an array of Christmas Markets, but I suggest that the beach, the Marina, the park and the tapas bars are best enjoyed in the sun. With Sangria.