

# Three Romantic Days in Barcelona

By Diana Lambdin Meyer

The elevator car was hot and cramped. Six people were crammed into a space that would have been cozy with just two, but somehow, my husband's hand found mine and we began to smile.

In a few seconds the elevator door opened and we were atop the Christopher Columbus Monument looking out at the skyline of Barcelona Spain from 262 feet. The harbor and Mediterranean Sea spread out in one direction with the Olympic Village visible in another. The churning activity of La Rambla cut a swath to the north and there in the distance were the magnificent towers of La Sagrada Familia.

At my side was my husband of 25 years, and for the first time in my adult life, I felt the urge to carve our names surrounded by a heart in the graffiti-distressed wall of the monument, but instead we held hands and marveled that life had brought us this far.

We only had three days in Barcelona, which is never enough for a city of such magnitude, of such tiny pockets of romance and such overwhelming inspiration of all senses. But it was a celebration of a romantic milestone and we enjoyed every second, strolling hand in hand along the harbor area called Barceloneta, sipping wine in the tiny cafes of the Gothic quarter and finding inspiration in the works of Antoni Gaudi.

## The Gothic Quarter

Nearly two million people arrive in Barcelona each year, as my husband and I did, by cruise ship or in order to embark upon a cruise through the Mediterranean. The adventurous and romantic among them make plans to spend an extra couple of days in Barcelona as we did.

One of your first decisions for a romantic getaway to Barcelona will be when to go. If you schedule permits, a wonderful time to visit Barcelona is on April 23, St. George's Day. This spring version of Valentine's Day is celebrated by giving a single rose and a book to the one you love. There are many stories, myths and legends that accompany the life of St. George, but one involves his slaying of a dragon to save a beautiful princess

and freeing her village from fear of the dragon. You will find many authentic gifts in Barcelona include an image of a dragon.

Some of the best gift shops, those carrying hand-made products by local artists, are found in the Gothic Quarter. On the maps and signage around the city, you'll see this listed as Barri Gòtic. This is the oldest section of the city with most buildings dating to the 14th Century. This is the area where you'll find King's Square and the steps climbed by Christopher Columbus as he prepared to report to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel from his first voyage to the New World.

Among other reasons to spend a significant amount of time in the Gothic Quarter are the Picasso Museum, the Barcelona Cathedral and the Royal Palace. If you're exploring before 10 a.m., step inside the Santa Maria Del Mar, a 14th century Gothic church, and simply listen to the organ rehearsal. For an appropriate and romantic souvenir from the Gothic Quarter, seek out the Cereria Subira on Calle Libreterio. Open since 1761, this family owned candle shop is the oldest store in Barcelona.

## Icons and Tours

Almost any skyline view of Barcelona is going to include the multiple spires of La Sagrada Familia. The temple to the Holy Family designed by architect Antoni Gaudi is worthy of the long lines, the crowds of tourists and admission price. 2010 will mark 125 years since Gaudi began his work, which lasted for 40 years, and just the continuation of the construction is remarkable in itself.

Take the guided tour with an English translator, to truly appreciate the detail, inspiration and cultural significance of La Sagrada Familia. The three facades of the church represent the nativity, the passion and glory, and the death of Christ. Gaudi, who was greatly influenced by nature, incorporated numerous skylights, flowers and trees within the design, which today is continued by nearly 100 workers each day. Still, it is not expected for La Sagrada Familia to be complete until about 2030.

Gaudi's buildings bring thousands to Barcelona each year and are among the many walking tours you may book through the tourism office at Plasa de Catalunya, a major facility in the city center. (Looking for a lower case "i" circled in red). Other

tours may also be taken, by motor scooter, by bicycle, by bus or boat and include everything from history, architecture, photography, shopping, and gastronomy.

Whatever you do, stop at the tourism office to pick up a brochure called "Where to Eat." The brochure lists more than 150 significant restaurants in nine districts, the type of food served, price range and more. Note that most restaurants charge about 15 percent more to eat outside. Look for the term "iva" on your bill to recognize this charge.

You may also notice that many Catalonians eat with their fingers, believing that doing so enhances the flavor and the overall sensual experience of dining. So if you are indeed having a romantic dinner, eating with your fingers is considered a significant part of the evening.

## Viva la Xocolata

Of course, all romantic endeavors require chocolate. If you learn no other word in Spanish, remember this one: xocolata. The best shop and best museum all in one is the Museum of Chocolate. It's actually quite interesting, telling the history of chocolate, how cacao is harvested, processed and marketed. There are exhibits of the most unusual things made from chocolate and how chocolate impacts the human senses as an aphrodisiac. And oh, the gift shop.

Finally, before you depart Barcelona, you will surely have participated in an act that locals simply call "la rambliar." It's not a word you'll find in your Spanish dictionary, but one that means to walk or stroll along La Rambla. It's very touristy, but very romantic nonetheless, admiring the flowers and pets for sale, the unusual gifts and coffee shops, and of course, the street performers that at first appear to be bronzed statues, until you toss them a Euro or two.

A spot on La Rambla frequented by locals is a small drinking fountain simply called Font de Canaletes. Located on the north end of La Rambla near Catalunya Plaza, it's a meeting place for locals and a spot associated with good times and celebrations. It is also a must for the romantic traveler in Barcelona because it is believed that all who drink from la Font de Canaletes will have a good life and return to Barcelona many, many times. GP



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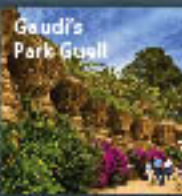
DAY ONE



Barcelona's Beach in Sitges.



DAY TWO



Interior of Gaudi's La Pedrera.



DAY THREE

