

Barcelona by bar

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Casa Batlló is Barcelona's most photographed building and is at its most photogenic at dusk.

MANILA, Philippines - There are lots of other sources which will tell you what to see and do in Barcelona.

Because I am such a nice guy, and want to save you a lot of bother, I have thoughtfully listed the top ones here:

Sagrada Familia. The still-unfinished cathedral that looks like a Star Wars set. Crowds and lines. Order your tickets ahead online. Accessible by Metro but taxis are cheap in Barcelona.

Casa Batlló (but-LYOH). An office building on Paseo de Gracia with a fanciful, fairyland-looking façade by Modernista architect Antoni Gaudí (gow-DIH), who also did the cathedral. Useless taking pictures in daylight; trust me. Come at the magical time around dusk when the building façade is lit up and the sky is a rich blue.

Las Ramblas. The most-visited tourist attraction in Spain. Really one long avenue that runs from Plaza Catalunya all the way to the seafront. Restaurants and shops, street performers. Pickpockets. Leave your wallets and handbags at home and just carry a little money in a secret pocket.

Futbol Club de Barcelona. Tickets online. Not cheap.



The main entry to Los Caracoles is through the kitchen (above). Lunch at Tapas 24 (below) is a contact sport.

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The above four are Core Barcelona (speaking as an outsider). Everything else is optional: Picasso Museum (repetitive without being comprehensive), Olympic area (just an area, though the dancing fountains are worthwhile), marina (a lot of boats), Barrio Gotic (medieval streets), La Pedrera (another building in the Modernista style).

Catalans and food

Now that we've gotten the touristy stuff out of the way, we can settle down to business. Barcelona is a world culinary capital, and good restaurants are thick on the ground. What many considered The Best Restaurant in the World (El Bulli) used to be nearby, before it went bankrupt (official story: we are turning it into a culinary school). Even the current world's best restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca, is in a town which is practically a suburb of Barcelona.

This region (Catalunya, the half-sister of Provence, as you will understand from a map), while it didn't invent the tapas bar (though many Catalan natives think it did), has about the best restaurant scene in the country. For one thing, dinner can start as early as 7:30, unlike the rest of Spain, where at that time most cooks are still on siesta. And I am sure my two Spanish friends will back me up on this (except for the one who is Basque.)

My first advice for food in Barcelona is never eat at any place marked "Tapas Bar" (like that, in English). If you do you will be sorry.

My second advice is never eat on Las Ramblas. But since you will do so anyway, good luck na lang.



The interior of the Sagrada Familia looks like a set from Star Wars.

I do have some helpful ideas for you once you have learned the error of your ways.

Los Caracoles (The Snails) in the Old Town. Starting as a single hole in the wall a long time ago, over the years it expanded left, right, back and up. As a result, you enter by the kitchen and immediately wind up in a veritable rabbit warren of interconnected rooms which go on forever. It took me half a day to find the washroom, with tragic results. Dark, atmospheric, lively. To be honest the food is not the high point, but this is such an institution, you should try it.

Ciudad Condal (thyu-DUD kon-DAL) on Rambla de Catalunya. Rambla de Catalunya is not the same as Las Ramblas, and is actually one of the premier residential streets in town, sporting a wide central island which in warm weather is filled with sidewalk restaurants. Condal has a good range of bocadillos (little sandwiches), tapas and beer. From spring through early autumn, very pleasant outdoor seating under leafy trees.

Cinco Jotas (thing-ko HO-tuss), also on Rambla de Catalunya. The truth is that good jamon bellota can be found all over town. But this store/restaurant represents one of the big brands, and you can buy by weight to take away, including whole legs. In case you don't know what jamon bellota is, you should find out, as I did a few years ago, though in Lyon, France. Bellota ham is made from Iberian pigs that were allowed to roam free, eating acorns; this gives the meat a deep, rich flavor, and polyunsaturated fats that keep it juicy at room temperature. Cinco Jotas, surprisingly, also serves a rather good tenderloin steak.

Miscellaneous culinary advice

Manchego cheese is just "any sheep's cheese from the La Mancha region." Most of it is pretty ordinary. Don't get all misty-eyed over it, and buy French or Italian.

Don't drink the water (chalky, heavy with calcium). In all restaurants or in your hotel room, stop grumbling and pay for the agua mineral (con o sin gas, with or without bubbles).

No matter what your mother told you, there is no such thing as "Chorizo de Bilbao-El Rey." This was invented solely for the Filipino market.

The potato chips are the BEST in the world. Many bars in Barcelona sell their own chips, as does Corte Ingles (the monolithic department store). The French used to be in contention for Best Potato Chip, until mysteriously the artisanal line disappeared from Monoprix department store. The Philippines also used to be in contention, until Carol-Ann's was bought by an Evil Empire, solely in order to be sacrificed at the altar of Jack and Jill.

The best bargain at the supermarket is canned Fabada. A little over €1 worth is enough for a meal, though it's best if you reinforce it with a little jamon. If you're not familiar with Fabada, it's pork and beans; if you can get around this scientific, factual reality, it's very good. And great for digestion.

Casa Alfonso on Lluria street (don't be fazed by this street name; the lazy-tongued locals say "low-ria," rhymes with Chinese lauriat) is two blocks east of Corte Ingles. A quite good general-purpose restaurant with a loyal neighborhood following. Try the La Mancha-style vegetables for a quite-different take on the subject (but not weird).

Right next door is a very small bar, called Lluria 2 after its address, which sells the most delicious Marcona almonds I've ever tried. If you don't yet know what Marcona almonds are, once you find out you will never settle for regular California almonds again.

Can Cullerets, easily walkable south of Plaza Catalunya. I include this because most guidebooks refer to it as the oldest restaurant in the Catalan region. Try it if you must, but the house wine is watered down.

La Venta, up on a hill, is hard to get to. Best to find a local friend with a car to take you there. It's one of the old traditional restaurants favored by affluent Catalans (but not too expensive, about €50). Has a country-club atmosphere; many patrons seem to know each other and the staff.

Tapas 24 near Paseo de Gracia, and around the corner from the Mandarin Oriental, is relatively moderately priced (€15-20 for a main course). It serves the most sublime jamon, eggs and fries you will ever taste, everyday components alchemized into an unforgettable delight. On many people's Top 10 Barcelona list, very popular, and not for the claustrophobic or the antisocial. For lunch, best to come by 11.

Cinco Sentits, just north of the downtown Universidad de Barcelona campus. Barcelona has comparatively few Michelin-starred restaurants (Michelin's French reviewers being stingy with their culinary arch-rivals the Spanish and the Italians, while downright profligate with stars in Japan and Hong Kong), but this is one of them. Plan on €150 per head, a rather sober ambience and some very good, imaginative food (but not weird).

And finally, Bar Mut, near Avenida Diagonal. Locals claim that Robert de Niro and Woody Allen eat here. Maybe that's why lunch requires reservations and costs €50 a head. It seems to me the food was fine, but I honestly can't remember what my friends and I ate, because in the middle of our meal, Woody walked in and started asking for volunteers for extras in his next movie.

He didn't, really, but I'm sure he was going to, at any minute.

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