The best places to visit in Catalonia other than Barcelona

By Jo Jukes

NZ Herald · 11 Jun, 2025 09:00 AM 7 mins to read

Most travellers only visit Barcelona, but those who explore the wider region of Catalonia are treated to an authentic slice of Spanish life, writes Jo Jukes

"Barcelona … The moment that you stepped into the room, you took my breath away," sang the late Freddie Mercury.

Plenty would agree with Mercury; Spain's second-largest city has a certain charm. Yet, it's just a dot on the map of a larger, more diverse region, Catalonia, and there's much to discover beyond the crowded capital.

Where pirates once plundered: Tossa de Mar

When in Tossa de Mar, its cobbled streets, castle-like fortress and winding turreted walls give the sense you've accidentally stumbled on to the set of a *Pirates of the Caribbean* film.

Located about 90km north of Barcelona, Tossa de Mar is the only remaining medieval walled town on the Catalan coast. The fortified walls of La Vila Vella (the old town), where visitors can now stroll, were built in the 13th century to protect against pirate attacks in the Mediterranean.

This fortress and Tossa's natural beauty have attracted many artists and film-makers over the years. Notably, it was the filming location for the 1951 movie *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*, starring Hollywood legend Ava Gardner, and a memorial statue of Gardner overlooks the town. But despite its nostalgic vibe, Tossa is progressive in many ways; it was the first Spanish city to declare itself anti-bullfighting and to ban the sport in 1989.

Platja Mar Menuda beach is not just a chance to cool off, it's also a hotspot for divers and snorkellers. Tossa's succession of rocky outcrops and caves mean the waters are home to plenty of Mediterranean marine life, including the strikingly colourful ornate wrasse, lobsters, and sometimes an octopus or two.

Nature lovers shouldn't miss walking a small part of the Camí de Ronda. Originally created as a patrol route to monitor for pirates, this now well-preserved walking trail snakes 43km along the coast of the Costa Brava. The section around Tossa features pine forests, hidden coves and historic watchtowers.

Getting there: Take the Moventis bus from Barcelona's Estació del Nord bus station.

The monastery in the sky: Montserrat

Standing at 1236m, Montserrat's peak is the height of almost four Auckland Sky Towers stacked on top of one another.

Atop Montserrat – meaning "serrated mountain" because of its jagged limestone peaks – is Santa María de Montserrat, a Benedictine monastery founded in 1025 and one of Spain's most important religious sites. Legend says the original chapel was founded in 880AD after shepherds found a holy statue of the Virgin and child, supposedly carved by St Luke, hidden in a cave nearby.

Don't skip a visit inside this working monastery's basilica to hear a performance by Escolania de Montserrat, the boys' choir, which predates the more well-known Vienna Boys Choir by almost 200 years. Tickets often sell out days in advance, even in low season, so book early to avoid disappointment.

If you miss this heavenly performance, don't fear; another choir, just as sweet, can be heard outside in Montserrat Nature Park. The harmonies of Mediterranean bird species like Woodlark and the Western Subalpine Warbler make an idyllic soundtrack for lunch at one of the picnic tables overlooking the Catalan hinterland.

If you need to cool off from the sun, the complex is also home to Montserrat Museum, which houses many artworks by famed artists including Dalí, Monet and Picasso.

Getting there: Many operators run day tours from Barcelona. Alternatively, take the train from España station (about an hour), then ascend via the cable car or the rack-railway.

Statues by the sea: Sitges

Only 40km south of Barcelona, Sitges is the Raglan of Catalonia and is famed for its beautiful beaches, vibrant art scene and laid-back atmosphere. The town has attracted artists for centuries – Pablo Picasso spent time working in Sitges, and in the 19th century, a group of painters called The Luminist School, considered the precursor of Catalan Modernism, settled in the town.

A must-do is to stroll along the palm-tree-lined promenade, Passeig Marítim, where wearing shoes feels overly dressy. Head towards the striking outline of the Church of Sant Bartomeu i Santa Tecla, and keep an eye out for Sitges' public statues along the way. There are more than 40, and each sculpture tells the stories, histories, and traditions of Sitges. My personal favourite is the waterfront mermaid, Sirena. While her figure is green with a patina, her raised hand is worn to bronze. Clearly, she's received many high-fives over the years.

After dark, head to Monard Wines, a bodega that serves an ever-changing menu of wine from around the world. If you're homesick, opt for their Marlborough region sauvignon blanc or instead select a local cava sourced from the nearby Penedès region, where 95% of all Cava originates.

Getting there: Sitges is a 40-minute train journey from Barcelona Sants station.

www.sitgesanytime.com

Walk in the footsteps of Roman gladiators: Tarragona

If a detour to Rome is not in your Euro-trip itinerary, head to Tarragona instead. Located 100km south of Barcelona, Tarragona is home to one of the most impressive collections of Roman ruins in Spain, which date back to the 3rd century BC, many of which are Unesco World Heritage-listed.

The most notable ruins include an impressive Roman amphitheatre on the seafront, built at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. The location offered easy access for delivering wild animals arriving on ships straight into the theatre for gladiator battles, and it could once seat up to 12,000 spectators.

A few minutes' walk from the amphitheatre is Balcó del Mediterrani, a terraced lookout across the Mediterranean Sea and the golden sands of Miracle Beach. According to local legend – the Catalan superstition of "tocar ferro" – touching its iron railing is said to bring good luck.

Tarragona's centuries-old fishing port is considered one of the most important in the Mediterranean, so tasting the local catch is a must-do. The town's traditional dish is a seafood romesco, a sauce traditionally made with red capsicum, garlic, tomatoes, onion, hazelnuts, and served with fish. Its origins are said to date back to the early 18th century, when local fishermen would make the sauce with available ingredients and add the fish they'd caught that day.

Getting there: Take the one-hour fast train from Barcelona Sants to Tarragona.

Time travel to medieval days: Girona

When arriving in Girona, it's fair to wonder whether you stepped into a time machine rather than a train; between the labyrinth of narrow cobblestone streets, ancient stone archways and gothic churches, the old town truly feels like a perfectly preserved medieval scene.

To reach the old town, or Força Vella (Catalan for "old fortress"), from the train station, wander along one of Girona's most famous bridges, Pont de les Peixateries Velles. Also known as the Eiffel Bridge, it was built in 1877 and designed by Gustave Eiffel, who went on to design Paris' iconic tower.

The wonders of Girona are best viewed from the ancient city walls; the founding sections are a Roman construct dating back to the 1st century BC. From here you'll be rewarded with panoramic views over the town, cathedral, Girona's Jewish Quarter (one of the best preserved in Europe), the bell tower of the 14th-century Gothic church Basílica de San Félix, and the nearby Pyrenees mountain range, which straddles Catalonia's border with France. If you head to the cathedral on foot, *Game of Thrones* fans will recognise the exterior as the filming location of the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing.

After climbing 90 steps to the cathedral, you might need a sugar hit to recharge. Reach for Girona's traditional dessert, xuixo, pronounced shoo-sho. This croissant-shaped, fried pastry is traditionally filled with Crema Catalan; think of it as like a cream-filled cronut. While many cafes in Girona offer these, don't miss the ones at El Xuixo de Can Castelló. The history of this family-run patisserie goes back to 1898, and the traditional Xuixo recipe has been passed down through three generations.

Getting there: Girona is around 100km northeast of Barcelona and is 40 minutes via fast train from Barcelona Sants station.

Recommended for you

Refresh for more

New Zealand

'It really is hard': Why older jobseekers are struggling in NZ's current market

New Zealand

'I was going through a lot': Security guard who assaulted Uber driver keeps licence

New Zealand

'Twister': Man's quick action saves elderly camper in Northland storm

Boxing

'It's all on the line': Boxing legends prepare for final bout

New Zealand

'My partner just got shot': Woman describes fatal gang shooting

New Zealand

Three dead in Waiuku crash after vehicle leaves road, ends up in water

Latest from Travel

Travel

My search for whales on Australia's Sunshine Coast

As winter malaise sets in, find warmth, cocktails and turtles on the Sunshine Coast.

15 Jul 08:00 AM

Travel

Nervous to visit Egypt as a solo female traveller? Here's a worry-free way to do it

14 Jul 09:00 PM

Travel

A visit with the grizzly bears of British Columbia

14 Jul 09:00 PM

Sponsored

Your Fiordland experience, levelled up

25 May 02:00 PM

Help & support
Contact us
House rules
Privacy Policy
Terms of use
Competition terms & conditions
Our use of AI

Subscribe to the NZ Herald newspaper
Subscribe to Herald Premium
Gift a subscription
Subscriber FAQs
Subscription terms & conditions
Promotions and subscriber benefits

NZME NETWORK

The New Zealand Herald
The Northland Age
The Northern Advocate
Waikato Herald
Bay of Plenty Times
Rotorua Daily Post
Hawke's Bay Today
Whanganui Chronicle
Viva
NZ Listener
Newstalk ZB
BusinessDesk
OneRoof
Driven Car Guide
iHeart Radio
Restaurant Hub

NZME

About NZME
NZME careers
Advertise with NZME
Digital self-service advertising
Book your classified ad
Photo sales
NZME Events

ME.

© Copyright 2025 NZME Publishing Limited