

Catalonia—Past and Present
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The Mediterranean Society's May 18-31, 2009, tour of Catalonia focused on ancient, medieval, and modern history and art. The tour's eighteen participants stayed four nights each in Barcelona, Tarragona, and on the Costa Brava in the hills above the Bay of Roses. Catalonia's rich history, its natural beauty and its great food and wine made the trip pleasurable.

The group flew into Barcelona midday on May 19. Eric Hersey, the director of The Spanish Touch, our land agent in Catalonia, filled in for our tour escort who could not accompany us due to a bad accident at home. Eric took us into the city on a bus labeled with the name of the Barcelona soccer team, so that as we drove into town people cheered our bus from the sidewalks. It was quite an entrance into Barcelona. Our Barcelona hotel, Hotel Les Balmes, located in the Eixample district, is near many of the city's sights and good restaurants. After a late afternoon orientation tour and dinner at the hotel, the group began its tour of Barcelona the next day.

Barcelona began its existence as a Roman military camp (Barcino) and never became as important as Tarragona, an hour to the south. In the Barri Gotic, the oldest part of Barcelona, we visited the Roman walls, still visible although enlarged during the medieval period, the remaining Corinthian columns of the Temple to Augustus, and the underground excavations of Barcino, where an acre of the Roman city streets, houses, shops, garum production facilities, and dyeing operations can be found.

Barcelona's Cathedral, in the heart of the Barri Gotic on the Plaça de Sant Jaume, has beautifully carved Renaissance wooden choir stalls and thirteen geese guarding its cloister. The Church of Santa Maria del Mar in the Ribera district is a fine example of the Catalan Gothic style. Its interior was burned during the Spanish Civil War, although much of the stained glass was undamaged.

Catalonia is renowned for its art and artists. Our group visited the Picasso Museum, the Foundation Joan Miro, and the National Museum of Catalan Art. Both the Picasso Museum and the Foundation Joan Miro exhibit the entire range of these artists' careers. The Picasso Museum is located in a beautiful Gothic palace in the Ribera district while the Foundation Joan Miro is in a modern building on Montjuic hill. The National Museum of Catalan Art, also on Montjuic hill, displays Romanesque frescoes and wood sculptures from Catalonia. These works of art were rescued from twenty-nine churches in northern Spain in the 1920s to prevent theft and to protect the art from deterioration. The group also visited the Archaeology Museum on Montjuic to see its collection of finds from Emporion and the Balearic Islands.

Barcelona has many fine examples of Catalan modernist architecture, especially the work of Antoni Gaudi. Our group visited Gaudi's La Sagrada Familia Church, La Pedrera apartment building, and Parc Guell. We also toured Palau de la Musica, Barcelona's concert hall designed by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, with its excellent acoustics and exuberant interior decoration. Visiting La Sagrada Familia, under construction since 1882, was a highlight. Gaudi used natural forms as the basis for his design and construction ideas. Stained glass is now being added to the church. Work areas have been set up in the interior of the church, and visitors can watch as church construction continues.

The last morning in Barcelona, the group stopped at Mercat de la Boquiera on La Rambla, the oldest covered market in Europe to see the colorful displays of fruit, vegetables,

freshly caught seafood, and hams and sausages for sale. On La Rambla many stalls had flowers for sale as people rushed by to do their Saturday morning shopping. While many of us were fascinated by the market, others sat and had coffee, a typical activity for the morning in this part of the world.

Leaving Barcelona behind, we drove northwest to the sacred mountain of the Catalan people, Montserrat. As we approached Montserrat, the landscape changed dramatically. The road that goes up to the monastery complex was steep and filled with waiting cars. The monastery complex is perched most of the way up jagged peaks so that both above and below you see dramatic rock formations. As we walked to the Montserrat basilica, one wedding party was about to depart and another was arriving. Not only did our group get to visit the interior of the basilica, we also saw the church half-fill with wedding guests, heard the wedding march, and saw the bride walk down the aisle. While the wedding proceeded, we could see the line of visitors to the Black Virgin's shrine in the floor above the altar.

Following lunch, Antonio, our excellent bus driver, drove us to Tarragona, stopping at the triumphal Arch of Bera, now completely devoid of sculpture, as we approached the city on the coastal road. Roman Tarragona (Tarraco), first a military camp, became the capital of Tarraconensis, the largest of the provinces of Roman Spain. The ensemble of Tarragona's Roman archaeological sites is now a World Heritage site. Our hotel, Hotel Plaça de la Font, was well-located on the Plaça de la Font. This plaza, atop part of the old Roman circus, is surrounded by restaurants and small stores. Many of us enjoyed sitting outside in the early evening to have a drink before dinner and watch people stroll buy.

We began our tour of Roman Tarragona with a visit to the Archaeological Museum. Our local guide, Xavier, was perhaps the best example of the excellent local guides we had on this trip. All had an in-depth knowledge of their subject and the ability to communicate what they knew. Xavier gave us an extensive tour of the Roman walls, ramparts, and Praetorian tower, also showing us where new archaeological work was being done. On the Sunday that we toured Roman Tarragona our group was lucky to see the castellers compete. Castellers, unique to Catalonia, build human pyramids, which can be several stories high. Bands play and people sing to encourage each team's progress. The children scramble up the pyramids made by adults and form the top-most position on the pyramid.

The following morning we traveled northwest through the lovely Penedès wine region to the royal monastery of Poblet, where many of the count-kings of Aragon are buried and then to the medieval town of Montblanc for a tour and lunch.

On our last day in Tarragona, we first visited the amphitheatre and then traveled south along the shore to the extensive remains of the Roman villa at Els Munts. The villa is located just above the sea; the villa's intact mosaic floors and baths were of special interest. We traveled on to Centelles, a Roman villa with a large dome decorated with early Christian mosaics. Both sites had excellent museums. We visited El Médol quarry. The stone quarried from this site was used to build much of Roman Tarraco. The now unused quarry provides a beautiful picture. A sandstone pillar rises from the middle of the quarry floor among trees and shrubs. We saw the beginnings of restoration at our visit to Pont de les Ferreres, the aqueduct that carried water to Tarragona in Roman era.

Our lunch was a calçotadas, a feast with large white onions called calçots that are grilled and served with Romesco sauce, followed by boutifarra sausage and beans, then lamb chops, artichokes, and finally créma catalana for dessert. All this food was accompanied by red wine.

Xavier and Eric arranged this delicious, gargantuan, and often hilarious feast for us at a restaurant famous for such feasts.

The following day we traveled to the Costa Brava, stopping at Girona for lunch and to tour. Roman Girona (Gerunda), at the confluence of the Onyar and Ter rivers, has been settled since the 5th century B.C. The Romans came in the first century A.D., extending the Via Augusta through the town. Pastel-colored houses line the riverfront of old Girona. You cross the river on one of the foot bridges to the old city. Once we were inside, we found that Girona rises steeply to the cathedral. The "archaeological walk" of the walls begins behind the cathedral above a garden. From the walls we could see the snow-capped Pyrenees and the countryside around Girona. We visited the Cathedral and its treasury. In the treasury, the splendid Creation tapestry from the 11th century retains much of its brilliant color. Girona is famous for its Arab baths, which the group explored. We visited Sant Pere de Galligants that houses the archeological museum of Girona before leaving.

The group arrived in the late afternoon at Hotel Can Xiquets. The hotel is in a secluded and peaceful spot in the hills above the Bay of Roses. All the rooms have beautiful views of the countryside.

The following day we visited the archaeological sites of Emporion and Ullastret. Our local guide, John, took us on an extensive tour of the Greek and Roman archaeological site of Emporion. Visitors enter the visually stunning site of Emporion on the southern coast of the Bay of Roses. The site along the shore is full of the remains of public buildings. Above the site museum there are gardens that lead to Roman villas which overlook the sea and the mountains. Archaeological work continues at Emporion; only about 15% of the city has been excavated. Driving into Ullastret, an Iberian town on a hill near Emporion, we saw archaeologists working on the site. We walked the streets of the town, admiring its strategic position above the plains, and enjoyed visiting the museum.

Instead of ancient Costa Brava, we drove west the following day to see its medieval towns and Romanesque monasteries. All tourists enter Bésalu over its curved medieval bridge. Marta, our local guide, met us for a tour of the Romanesque Sant Pere church and Santa Maria convent, as well as the Mikwé, the 13th Jewish ritual bath. Sant Pere is memorable for its stone lions on either side of the entrance and the sculpture on the capitals in the apse. Next to the river is the Mikwé, the only remaining Jewish bathhouse in Spain, which was discovered in the 1960s. We entered down steep staircases to see the bathing tank which was fed by the river. The Jewish community used the bath for ritual cleansing. We had lunch and wandered the streets of this beautiful medieval town before driving on to the monastery at Ripoll. The long drive to Ripoll was through a mountainous national park. We came principally to see the great Romanesque portal at the Monastery of Santa Maria. The portal is covered in sculpture, in part depicting saints, stories of the Bible, and months of the year. The beautiful cloister has two levels, which is unusual. The church is plain but has many burials of interest, including that of Count Wilfred the Hairy, who founded the monastery in the 9th century and helped make it a place of learning. We then drove to the abbey church of Sant Joan de les Abadesses, founded by Wilfred the Hairy for his daughter in 887. The abbey is known for its Calvary, or the "Sacred Mystery," seven life-sized figures in wood polychrome from the 13th century that depict the descent from the cross. After seeing this splendid work of art, we visited the abbey's museum which holds treasures from the abbey and nearby churches.

On our final day, we spent the morning at Figueres at the Dali Theatre-Museum. This museum experience is unexpected, full of humor and showing the full breadth of Salvador Dali's

work. Antonio drove us to Cadaqués for lunch and to stroll and shop. The drive to Cadaqués was in breathtaking coastal scenery. We could see the Bay of Roses from the north side and also look beyond Cap de Creus to the north. Strolling in Cadaqués to see the different views of the bay and sitting in an outdoor café watching the people walk by was a fitting end to our tour of Catalonia.

We had our farewell dinner that evening at Hotel Can Xiquets. The food in Catalonia is famous and deserves to be. Each evening in Barcelona and Tarragona we ate at a different local restaurant, often starting with small plates, such as fried codfish balls, olives, or sausages. We ate together at long tables enjoying the food, wine, and each other's company while discussing the day's events. We did the same at Hotel Can Xiquets for four nights. The last night Eric served us a delightful cava to celebrate our time in Catalonia. We toasted Eric and Antonio and they us. Many of us did not want to leave, not just because the Hotel Can Xiquets was such a luxurious last stop in our travels but because Catalonia is a joyful place, filled with so much to see in a beautiful setting.