15 fun things to do in Barcelona

The Catalan capital is one of Europe's great all-rounders, a city as pretty as it is cultured, with an appetite for letting its hair down. Here's our pick of original experiences in the 'Rio of the Med'

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1 Take a night tour of a masterpiece

'Welcome to the greatest rooftop in the world,' says curator Silvia Vilarroya, stepping out into the sultry Barcelona evening. Stone structures coated in ceramic mosaics rise from the highest points, linked by undulating pathways around the courtyards, along which knight-like sculptures protrude like periscopes. The effect is part medieval battle scene, part futuristic chessboard. 'All of these are chimneys or ventilation pipes,' says Silvia. 'Antoni Gaudí was provocative – but he was also functional.'

La Pedrera was the final residential building that the Catalan architect took on, a commission from the wealthy Milà family. It polarised opinion when it opened in 1912; people either hated it or really hated it. But since then it has become much-loved – and visited. Night tours strip away the crowds, enabling small groups to linger in the Milàs' recreated apartment and admire design flourishes, such as ceilings in which trees have seemingly taken root. Out on the roof, the embers of the day start to cool. A whisper of a breeze carries the occasional sound from the Passeig de Gràcia below, but otherwise all is quiet.

● Night tour of Casa Milà £23; 7–10.30pm; lapedrera.com →

2 Hit the roof

In the lobby of Hotel Majestic, a woman clutching a Chihuahua hails a bellboy with her eyebrows. Staff buzz about, obsequious.

Up on the 10th floor things are altogether less stuffy. Bathers absorb rays and cocktails around the pool, while smiling waitresses attend to those marooned in the deep sofas. There are reminders of the rarified atmosphere – a £2,400 bottle of Rémy Martin Louis XIII Cognac is barely out of place on the drinks menu – but as long as you're happy to pay a little more for your rosé, a slice of the high life can be yours. It's an appropriate democratisation. The tale of Barcelona is very much one of its rooftops. Meagre rain keeps them flat; the constant battle for space keeps them busy.

A few blocks west of the Majestic is Hotel Pulitzer's rooftop oasis, its wood furniture, trellises and pot plants bringing to mind a Home Counties garden. Here, a bow-tied waiter serves a bottle of white to a group of friends, as cool jazz swirls around the deck.

● hotelmajestic.es/en; hotelpulitzer.es/en

3 Ham it up with jamón

Master slicer Juan Pairo is standing beside racks of ham in an upstairs tasting room just off La Rambla. Through the window, the celebrated street is characteristically frenzied but here, within glass walls, it's all refinement and precision.

Juan glides his knife across the marbled, ruby-red meat and frees a paper-thin slice of Jamón Ibérico de Bellota. It's sweet and intensely nutty. Other cuts follow, Juan distributing morsels to the tasters, all amateurs in the art of ham appreciation. The parallels to a wine tasting are pronounced: the obscure vernacular, the tasting notes, the strangely sombre air for something so pleasurable. If jamón is Spain's wine, then Jamón Ibérico de Bellota is its champagne.

As the Jamón Experience's introduction explains, its sought-after flavour is the result of the Iberian pig's free-range lifestyle roaming oak groves in southern Spain. During this time it will consume around 750kg of acorns (bellotas). The jamóns, the back legs, are cured in salt for three years in a practice that has barely changed in thousands of years. And when the results are this good, why should it?

● Entry plus tasting £15; jamonexperience.com

4 Channel Willy Wonka

Inside the Museu de la Xocolata's classroom a group of visitors in chef's hats are playing with industrial quantities of chocolate. Littering the worktops are strawberries, lollipops and moulds oozing with silky molten goo. These short classes offer a hands-on appreciation of the versatility of chocolate; next door, in a temperature-controlled exhibition space, it's a case of look but don't touch. Everything from La Sagrada Família to the Terracotta Warriors has been immortalised in chocolate; intricate artworks that are a testament to the skill (and self-denial) – of their creator.

● Museum £4, courses from £15; museuxocolata.cat

5 Join a human tower

Late evening in the suburb of Clot finds a group gathering outside a nondescript building. They chat amicably, sharing jokes and greetings. In 15 minutes' time they'll be walking all over one another.

This is the headquarters of the Castellers de Barcelona, one of the city's human tower clubs. This curious mix of gymnastics and human Jenga has been a feature of Catalan fiestas for 200 years, and groups have started to invite visitors to join in and add their arms to the supportive base of the tower.

The castellers range from school children to septuagenarians, and everyone has a crucial role. The ranks of the base – la pinya, or pineapple – come together, arms locked, heads tucked in. Once set, the first bare-footed climbers clamber into position. Further storeys take shape. The last to climb is the anxaneta, the child who must raise a hand from the top to 'crown' the castle.

Eduard Paris's days as an anxaneta are behind him. At 39, he's commonly near the base, enduring the weight of up to six people on his shoulders. 'You cannot see it but when you hear the cheers as the child reaches the top, you are pleased and you are thinking of the group,' he says. 'They're helping you, you are helping them. Together the tower is complete.'

● Guided visits from £20; castellersdebarcelona.cat →

6 Take the high ground

'I was born in this area and have been coming up here for years,' says Ana Ollé, taking a bowl from her bag and filling it with water for her dog, Kora. She and her friend plonk themselves down on an expanse of concrete warm from the afternoon sun, and dangle their legs over the edge.

The slab is part of the crude cluster of semi-circular fortifications that make up the hilltop Bunker del Carmel. It's not much to look at, bringing to mind foundations laid in haste by cowboy builders. But, as a place to look from, it's pretty special – as those who constructed it during the Spanish Civil War to warn of fascist bombing raids would attest. The neat urban sprawl of Barcelona extends beneath, hemmed in by mountain and Med. The city's wide, straight boulevards look like rivers of green flowing to the water's edge.

Half the fun is getting here. The walk from Carmel Metro station takes you up through a marble run of a neighbourhood, with seemingly every street built on an incline. The final stretch is steeper still, a series of steps zig-zagging up through dusty, cacti-specked parkland. The arduousness is a natural filter. It limits numbers and nudges visits towards the evening cool, when picnics will emerge and guitars materialise as sunset tints the buildings far below a subtle pink. 'I don't know much about the bunker's history to be honest,' says Ana. 'I come up for the peace, the vibe and of course the views. It's just so magical.'

● Entry free, Carrer del Turó de la Rovira, 611

7 Eat homemade tapas

Guillermo and Cristina potter around their apartment's kitchen, chopping ingredients and taking the odd sip of wine. It's a classic domestic scene, save for one detail – the 10 strangers sat expectantly at their table.

In need of new adventures, the couple threw in their day jobs to concentrate on providing an authentic dining experience to visitors to their home city. This begins with the location – a residential block in an anonymous corner of the Eixample district – somewhere off the usual tourist trail.

The evening starts with a serving of pa amb tomàquet (tomato-rubbed bread served with Manchego cheese and meats), followed by fiery, salty pimientos de Padrón (sautéed green peppers). A crowd gathers for the preparation of Guillermo's fragrant clam, onion and white wine dish, and any residual ice is broken by two guests' inept attempts at rolling croquettes. All the while, the hosts chat about ingredients, traditional cooking styles and the city they patently adore. As the clock strikes midnight, there's little appetite to call it a night.

● From £25; eatwith.com, barcelonaslowtravel.com

8 Find a secret square

It's mid-afternoon on an infernally hot day in the city's Gothic quarter. Visitors swarm around the cathedral and in the imposing square of Plaça Sant Jaume – Catalonia's administrative hub.

A short walk away, one of Barcelona's most enchanting spots is almost empty. Hidden down a lane, off a lane, off a backstreet, Plaça Sant Felip Neri is one of those places you tend only to find when you're lost, and then never again. For a couple of summer weeks the steep-walled square is carpeted in yellow flowers from the acacias that shield it from the Iberian sun. Today, the weathered flagstones are clear, the dappled shade dancing from the breeze that ruffles the treetops. A lone shaft of sunlight falls on the central fountain, illuminating its white and mint-patterned tiling, and exotic scents from the nearby soap factory mingle in the still air. Saint Philip, carved into the façade of the square's baroque church, turns a blind eye to couples smooching in the shadows.

● Plaça de Sant Felip Neri is in between Jaume I and Liceu metro stops →

9 Go with the flow on the water path

A trio of Lycra-clad joggers are struggling to maintain their usual pace – to the right is the most naggingly distracting of views: the entire city of Barcelona, compact and sparkling in the mid-morning sunshine.

The Carretera de les Aigües, or water path, is a route that demands a more leisurely pace. The track runs for seven miles, a white necklace around the verdant shoulders of Mount Tibidabo. It meanders with the languor of a river in its dotage, and is reassuringly level – a legacy of its former use as a route for channelling water to the city. Each step offers a new perspective, but the Med is a constant, glinting backdrop.

● barcelonaturisme.com/carretera-de-les-aigues

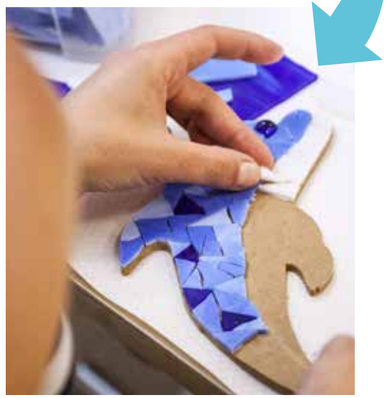
10 Try your hand at Gaudí's decorative style

Not so long ago, Barcelona's Gothic quarter was a no-go zone where criminality thrived amid decades of urban neglect. Today, this historic underbelly has been given a long-overdue scrub. It has drawn a creative crowd – none more so than Angelika Heinbach, who runs a workshop here.

Angelika breaks a plate of frosted glass and begins to carefully arrange the pieces on a pre-cut wooden shape. This is trencadís, the signature style of Gaudí, who would take glass and ceramic from nearby factories and transform them into dazzling mosaics.

Angelika offers introductory courses in this decorative form of recycling, urging pupils to take inspiration from Gaudí's celebrated façades throughout the city.

● Trencadís courses from £16; mosaiccos.com



11 Visit the original vermouth bar

Midday sunlight streams through the claret shutters of Quimet & Quimet to illuminate walls lined with bottles. The clientele is a mix of neighbourhood stalwarts and first timers. Presiding over the bar are Joaquín Pérez and his daughter Neus. This is a family business, as it always has been.

The history is only part of the appeal. The bar's montaditos, or open sandwiches are renowned: salmon and yoghurt drizzled with truffled honey; prawns, baked red pepper and caviar. The artful creations disintegrate with the first bite, but the food is merely the supporting act. The main event is the vermouth, something the bar has been synonymous with since it opened in 1914. The fortified wine is traditionally taken late morning and early evening in Catalonia. 'The drink is a Catalan tradition, but look around you – it's national, international… it's for everyone,' says Joaquín.

● Montaditos £2; Carrer del Poeta Cabanyes, 25

12 Fly in a vintage icon

'When this ride opened, flight was a luxury enjoyed only by the very wealthy,' says Alex Garcia, opening the gate to another line of passengers. 'People would come here so that they could say they had flown.' He slips into his booth and flicks a switch. The propeller splutters into life and the vintage plane begins to inch forward on its axis overhead, Barcelona unfurling 500m below.

Bright red L'Avio is a replica of the plane that flew the inaugural flight from Barcelona to Madrid in 1927. It has been the main attraction at Tibidabo Amusement Park, on the summit of the eponymous mountain, for much of the century that the park has been doing business.

Unlike the rollercoaster below, this is no white-knuckle ride. The three rotations proceed at a stately pace and there's little need for seatbelts in an interior lined with armchairs and vintage dials. But peering down at the city through the small window of the juddering cabin, it's a plausible imitation of flight – even today.

● Park entry £22; tibidabo.cat →

13 Lose yourself in maze-like gardens

When the Neoclassical gardens of Parc del Laberint d'Horta were first planted in the late 18th century, the site was a two-hour coach-and-horse ride from central Barcelona. Today, the spot has been caught and consumed by the city's voracious suburbs, enveloped by apartment buildings and ring roads. Its status as an oasis is all the more prized as a result. On a humid afternoon, Barcelona's oldest garden is host to dozens of visitors. They amble along footpaths flecked with pine needles, rest on sun-warmed stone benches and explore the endearingly whimsical jumble of temples, pavilions and sculptures. The decadent tone is set by the crumbling, Havisham-esque palace of the aristocratic Desvalls family, who once hosted royalty here; this is not one of those gardens in which you worry about creasing the grass. At the centre of the site is the maze for which the park is named. A couple admire the classical frieze at the start – depicting Theseus's arrival in Crete to kill the labyrinth-dwelling Minotaur – then set off into the decidedly less ominous corridors of fastidiously pruned cypress trees.

● Entry £1.70; Passeig dels Castanyers, 1; barcelonaturisme.com/Parc-del-Laberint

14 Go kayaking at dusk

Dusk is greeted on the beach with almost universal indifference. Towels remain on the sand, ball games intensify and conversations grow more exuberant. The odd shout carries 100m offshore to where a fleet of kayakers is paddling through the opaque stillness. The boats are swift and agile; gliding through the gathering darkness with a satisfying speed.

'This is my favourite part of the day,' says Alberto Bolsa. The 45-year-old is the veteran of beachfront watersports company Base Nautica, and his familiarity with the city's coastline is perfectly suited to the dusk tours he leads. The distances are modest, with the speed set by the slowest. He calls a halt, giving everyone the chance to soak up the peace and trail fingers through bath-warm water. Soon, a course is set for home, where kayaks will be pulled on to the sand and a post-paddle spread of octopus, and bottles of beers greedily consumed.

● Two-hour kayak from £25; basenautica.org

15 Hit the beach on two wheels

'Dar la espalda al mar', it used to be said of Barcelona. It had its back to the sea. Not any more. On a sunny afternoon, a stream of runners, skaters and pedestrians flows along the promenade of La Barceloneta. Out on the sand, tanned retirees chat animatedly alongside teens playing volleyball, and sun worshippers yo-yo between the shallows and chiringuitos – the flat-roofed beach bars.

Moving with the promenade current, at the head of a train of green bikes, is Edu Bertrand. Like all the guides with Steel Donkeys, he is local, laid-back and offers customised tours. Today, he's focusing on Barcelona's coastline past and present, moving from the claustrophobic medieval lanes of the land-locked La Ribera district to the reclaimed strip on to which the city's southernmost beaches are grafted. It's an armchair ride, with the generously saddled bikes having a hint of the *Easy Rider* about them. Gently weaving through the crowds, there's a conspicuous absence of the anti-bike animosity that can mar cycling in some European cities. Barcelona is not a city that sweats the small stuff.

'The 1992 Olympics changed everything,' says Edu. 'The city started to be rebuilt for the people, and the beach is an expression of that. It reflects Barcelona's dynamism.'

● Customised cycle tours from £27 (maximum eight people); steeldonkeybiketours.com LP

Duncan Craig, second bike from the left, below, determined after extensive research that the perfect ratio of tapas to cava is 3:1.