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Barcelona
Sexes and the City
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All curves and circles, the mind-bending living room of Barcelona's Casa Batlló reflects the extraordinary sensibility of its Catalan-born architect, Antoni Gaudí, who designed a number of masterpieces for Barcelona's cityscape.

BArCELoNA

[two perspectives]

He plans their trip around acclaimed art and architecture sights; she thrives on serendipity and craves the undiscovered. Will Barcelona make them both happy?

By Hugh Delehanty and Barbara Graham Photographs by Ken Kochey

[HuGH]

"Please, no more Catalan," my wife, Barbara, protested, "you're giving me a migraine."

It was our first morning in Barcelona, and things weren't off to a great start. I had been prepping for the trip for months, even studying Spanish. But as soon as we landed I realized my faux Castilian wasn't going to get me far in this fiercely proud, Catalan-speaking city. So that first morning I had started boning up on the native tongue.

"See oos PLOW," I enunciated. "That's how you say 'please.'"

"Traveling with you is like still being in school," Barbara groaned.

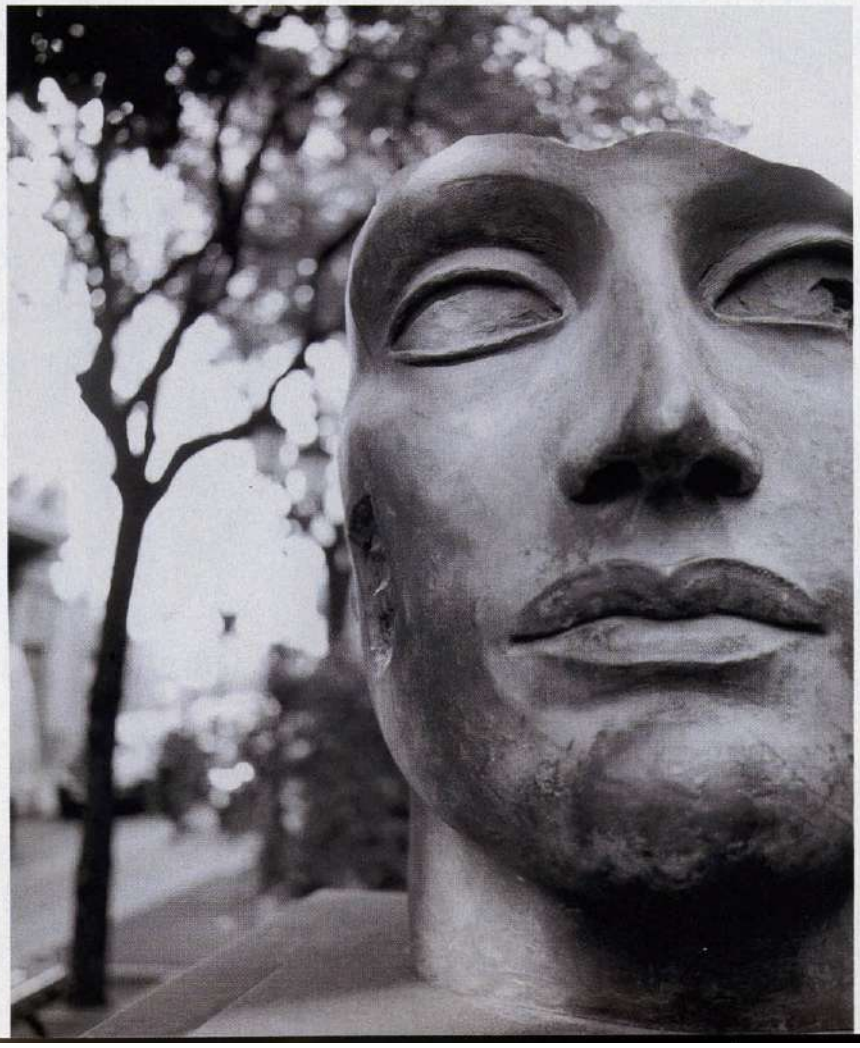
It's a family sickness. When I was a kid, my schoolteacher mom turned vacations into history lessons. While my friends in our suburban Boston town spent summers frolicking on Cape Cod, we traipsed around New England in the footsteps of the Pilgrims. Barbara is not that kind of traveler. She is a creative wanderer who frowns on guidebooks, preferring to stroll along waiting for magic to happen. Sometimes the magic does happen, but just as often we spend a lot of time getting nowhere, seeing nothing.

Barcelona would be different I promised myself. We would not waste our time in out-of-the-way neighborhoods when the marvels of Antoni Gaudí awaited us. If only Barbara could see it the same way.

[BArBARA]

For months before our trip Hugh devoured books on Spain, even waking me one night with the news that King Ferdinand II and Queen Isabella had been on hand to greet Columbus when he sailed into Barcelona in 1493. I was not amused. Besides, going to Spain was his idea. I'd never been to Barcelona, but I had traveled to Madrid with my first husband when Gen. Francisco Franco was in power—and my feelings about both men had left me with a bad attitude toward the entire Iberian Peninsula. Hugh had lobbied to visit Spain for years, and I finally had to admit that it deserved a second chance. I didn't harbor great expectations, though. My pre-trip research was limited to finding the best hotel we could afford: the Neri, a renovated 18th-century palace in the Barri Gòtic (the old city's Gothic quarter), that was as perfect in reality as it seemed online.

Unlike Hugh, I arrived in Barcelona with no list of must-see sights. I hate crowds, and my museum-going threshold is two hours, max. As for churches, though I appreciate the grandeur of European cathedrals, after a while I feel like author Cynthia Ozick, who wrote, "Finally one tires/of so many spires." My modus operandi is to set off on foot, in the direction of a neighborhood where people actually live, or a restaurant (I'm the opposite of casual when it comes to food), or some intriguing spot I've heard about, staying open to serendipity along the way. In Barcelona, I was thrilled to discover, this couldn't be easier: With its many pedestrian rambles—including the famous promenade Las Ramblas—the city is a walker's dream.



[HUGH] Barcelona is not an easy city to decipher. To understand her, says Teresa Vilaros, a native who is professor of Hispanic studies at the University of Aberdeen, "You have to seduce her to find her secrets; she shows herself only to a select few."

Clearly we were going to need help. The man for the job, Barbara decided, would be a young American habitué of Barcelona named Jordan Susselman, who fell so hard for the city when he visited in 2000 that he decided to stay and unlock its secrets. In 2006, he started a tour company called "Hi. This is Barcelona." When he met up with us at our hotel, I pulled out my list: Picasso's Barcelona, Miró's Barcelona, not to mention Gaudí's Barcelona. Jordan read it as if it were a bad credit report. "I think you can do the touristy stuff on your own." I could tell Barbara had already gotten to him.

Jordan led us on a Barbara-style stroll through the old city, focusing on offbeat sights most tourists pass by: The offices of a Catalan hiking club, on Carrer del Paradis, which houses four Corinthian columns from the Roman Temple of Augustus. A parking lot, jammed with motor scooters, that Jordan proclaimed "my favorite vista in all of Barcelona."

"Huh?" I said, thinking he must be joking.

"The whole history of the city is here," he said, pointing out remnants of Roman aqueducts, the crumbling walls of a Gothic palace, an 18th-century church, an ornate *modernista* building, and a jazz club and organic restaurant called Living. "This is why I love Barcelona. No other city I know mixes the old and new like this."

One of many squares punctuating Barcelona, palm-shaded Plaça Reial encourages lingering with its neoclassical facades, fountain, and cafés. Heads up: An enigmatic sculpture *(opposite)* by the Polish artist Igor Mitoraj marks Rambla de Catalunya.

That may be true, but I was still yearning for the not-quite-so-hidden Barcelona.

[BARBARA] Like Jordan, I wanted to discover the soul of this city slung like a hammock between mountains and sea. And what could be more soulful than the Boqueria market, with its riot of vegetables, fruits, and fresh, glistening fish? Yet there is something even more compelling about Barcelona than its markets and traditions: a pervasive sensuality that seems to captivate all who enter its energy field. Barcelona outdoes Venice and Paris as the kissing capital. Even Hugh, who shies away from public displays of ardor, had taken to kissing me on the street—though not always with the same gusto as the natives went at it.

"What is it about this place?" I asked Jordan as we emerged into dazzling sunshine after exploring the aisles of the Boqueria.

"In Barcelona you can be who you want. You can have purple hair and work at a global company, or run naked in the streets."

Perhaps the world's most unusual cathedral, Gaudí's Sagrada Família draws more than two million visitors a year with its singular Gothic-Modernist architecture and elaborate Nativity facade *(opposite)*, where details include over 80 types of plants. A kiss *(below)* adds a grace note to Passeig de Gràcia, Barcelona's genteel avenue.

"But why here? People in most places are not nearly so tolerant," I said, then drank from a spigot on Las Ramblas that is said to guarantee a return to this port city.

"One possible reason is that Catalonians have had to fight so hard to preserve their culture and identity," Jordan said. "Their history has been an alternation of oppression and openness, which seems to have made them unusually accepting of differences in people."

As if to illustrate the point, he led us through the jumble of narrow streets that compose El Raval, once Barcelona's seedy underbelly; the barrio was a source of inspiration for Picasso, as well as the setting for *The Thief's Journal*, by Jean Genet. You can still engage the services of one of the many hookers who line the streets, have your pocket picked if you're not careful, and order absinthe in some of the old bars. But gentrification is under way: You can catch an exhibit at the opened-in-1995 Museum of Contemporary Art, or get a massage at Mailuna, a teahouse and spa. Or do as we did, and have tapas with a nouvelle twist at El Jardi, a café tucked among orange trees in the courtyard of the former Antic Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, a striking work of Gothic architecture where Gaudí, mistaken for a beggar, was brought after being hit by a tram—and died. This historical tidbit helped redeem the day for Hugh who, I could tell, was getting tetchy about not hitting any temples of high culture.

[HUGH] After saying goodbye to Jordan, Barbara and I negotiated a truce. She agreed

A pervasive sensuality seems to captivate all who enter this city's energy field.

The best way to get to know Barcelona is to dance with her, slowly, passionately.

to devote more time to formal sightseeing—and let me plan the next day. Our first stop was Pinotxo, at the Boqueria market, known for its classic *truita amb pataca* (omelette with potatoes), which we finished off. We then headed for the Eixample, the city's open-air museum of modernista architecture, on a walking tour I'd designed with a local architect. Though everyone (including us) visits Sagrada Família, Gaudí's haunting, unfinished "expiatory temple" that he worked on for 43 years, until his death, in 1926, I was more interested in his less ambitious works, especially Casa Batlló, a newly refurbished house on Passeig de Gràcia. The exterior is a magical homage to Sant Jordi—Saint George—the dragon-slaying patron saint of Barcelona, with a shimmering Monet-like facade, an undulating dragon-scale roof, and columns shaped like bones. The interior is even more seductive—a free-flowing world of rounded windows and doorways and aquamarine tiles that makes you feel as if you're floating underwater. From there we headed to Gaudí's Casa Milà, an otherworldly apartment building with cavelike walls and serpentine balconies, capped by a surrealistic roof deck studded with white chimneys and ventilators (which, allegedly, were models for Darth Vader and the Death Star's guards in *Star Wars* films).

After wandering Casa Milà's curvilinear passageways—there are no straight lines in Gaudí's universe—I felt as if I had stepped through the looking glass. I wasn't the only one. By the time we reached the roof, Barbara had declared an end to our truce, and grabbed my hand. The next thing I knew, we were lost in the backstreets of Gràcia, a mazelike neighborhood near Barcelona's university. Her face brightened as we came upon Plaça de Rius i Taulet, a charming square with a 19th-century clock tower and a gaggle of children chasing a dog around its base. "I just love a good plaça," Barbara said, beaming. "I'm a plaça kind of girl."

[BARBARA] *"Bona sera, signore. Un aigua minerale and a cervesa, s'il vous plait."*

Hugh was attempting to order drinks in his personal polyglot.

"Agua con gas?" the waiter asked.

"Oui. I mean, *si.* Oh, crap," sputtered my beloved.

I didn't care what language he spoke; I couldn't have been happier. We'd just scored a table at a busy café in another of Gràcia's delightful squares, Plaça de la Virreina. It was that magical interlude between the workday and dinnertime, when communal life was in full swing, abetted by alcohol and plates piled high with tapas.

"If we ever move to Barcelona, I want a flat overlooking this square," I announced.

"Right," Hugh said, humoring me.

"I'm serious. Remember that astrologer who said I should live in Spain? I thought it was a joke until now," and I motioned to the dreamy plaça ringed by plane trees, dotted with benches, and swarming with friends gossiping, kids playing, lovers smooching.

The reason I loved Plaça de la Virreina is the same reason Hugh would never have found his way here. It is rarely mentioned in guidebooks and has no extraordinary artworks. In fact, the Gràcia area began as a working-class village. With its squares, small shops, and galleries, as well as a melting pot of international cuisines, the neighborhood retains an arty small-town charm. Greenwich Village on the Mediterranean.

We were hungry for dinner, but I could not face another dead crustacean in olive oil, so after the sun set, we found our way to Mesopotamia, an appealing Iraqi restaurant in the heart of the neighborhood. As the Iraq-born owner, Pius Alibek, fed us dishes he had learned from his mother—including the house specialty, bulgur with minced beef, vegetables, and nine secret spices—I discovered another secret about Barcelona: Nobody is exactly who they appear to be. Alibek not only holds a Ph.D. in comparative linguistics; he was awarded a Medal of Honor by the mayor of Barcelona for his promotion of world peace. What's more, he hosts his own program on Radio Catalunya about cuisines of the world. "When people talk politics, they get into trouble," he explained. "You don't need a visa to enjoy the foods of different cultures. I see food as a messenger of peace."

On the way back to our hotel room, Hugh confessed he was glad I had led him astray.

[HUGH] After our perfect unplanned evening in Gràcia, I had to admit Barbara was onto something. The best way to get to know Barcelona—like any elusive mistress—is to dance with her, slowly, passionately.

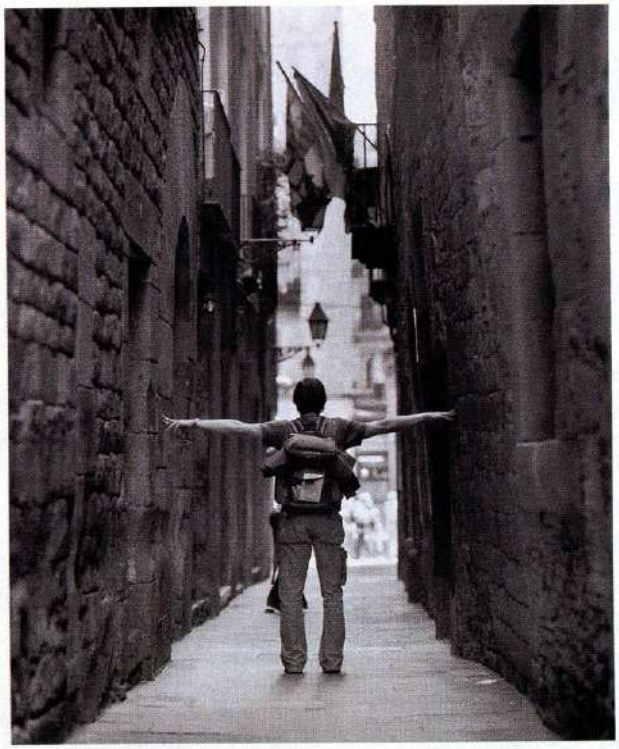
The next day was the Feast of St. John the Baptist (Sant Joan), a summer-solstice holiday celebrated with fireworks and seaside bonfires. The art critic Robert Hughes says that the key to the Catalan character is the interplay between *seny*, which is usually translated as "common sense," and *rauxa*, "uncontrollable emotion." At the Sant Joan feast, Barcelonans experience rauxa in all its irrational Dionysian glory.

The best way to enjoy the festivities is to steer clear of the old city, where, Jordan had warned, "you can get your limbs blown off by firecrackers," and find a choice table at a restaurant by the beach. So I was pleased when I snagged a reservation for a late dinner at Barceloneta, an elegant seafood establishment on the waterfront—until we got there.

Our table was on the terrace, but it overlooked a busy walkway area where teens were setting off ear-splitting fireworks. Barbara, who is keenly sensitive to noise, tried to be a sport, but I could see she was miserable. We left after a few sips of *cava*.

The romantic evening I had planned went from bad to worse as we headed back to the hotel. Firecrackers exploded around us, amplified in the medieval streets. Our nerves were fraying and we were starving. So when we ducked into Senyor Parellada, a restaurant on Carrer de la Argenteria, between the El Born and Barri Gòtic districts, little did I expect that we were about to have one of our best meals in Barcelona. Everything was superb. The *xai de Montseny*—roasted lamb with roasted garlic and creamy potatoes—was so tender that I moved it to the top of my best-dish list, unseating the celebrated leg of lamb at Chez L'Ami Louis, in Paris.

After dinner, things got even better. Barbara, whose sense of direction is famously unreliable, led the way to the hotel. Of course we got lost, but in the process happened upon a block party where a salsa band was playing and a crowd of locals, young and old, sat at long tables, downing pitchers of beer and platters of grilled shrimp. Suddenly, the music slowed, and the street filled with swaying bodies. I took Barbara's hand and we began improvising our own soulful version of the samba. It reminded me of our very first date, 25 years ago, when we almost succumbed to passion in a crowded salsa club in San Francisco. This time, a silky breeze was blowing off the Mediterranean and brilliant fireworks lit up the sky, thankfully off in the distance. All of a sudden, I felt at one with Barbara and the music—and with this unpredictable city that had stolen my heart.



The narrow streets in Barcelona's old Jewish neighborhood, the Call, invite measurement.

[BARBARA] As we neared the end of our week-long trip, Hugh and I finally found our rhythm, alternating between "sights" and adventures into the unknown. Still, I couldn't forget that Barcelona hadn't always been a lovefest. There was the matter of the Inquisition and the expulsion of the Jews in the 1400s. I'm not a very observant Jew, but when I travel I gravitate to the ghettos and eerie pockets of once-flourishing communities where crumbling remains offer stark reminders of all that was lost. So on our last day, Hugh went off to the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya and the Fundació Joan Miró, and I met up with a Jewish architect, Dominique Tomasov Blinder, who started Urban Cultours to offer an inside look at Barcelona's former Jewish quarter, or Call.

As we explored the tangle of streets in the Call, it became clear that Blinder was on a mission. "This was one of the most important centers of Jewish life until the late 15th century. I believe the memory must be kept alive and given a voice after 600 years of oblivion." She pointed to Hebrew inscriptions in the wall of a medieval building. "These tombstones were taken from the Jewish cemetery and used for construction after the Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism or flee the country."

The streets of the Call felt barren—more numbing absence than presence. It wasn't until Blinder led me into the former Sinagoga Mayor—now named Shlomo ben Adret, after a 13th-century rabbi—that I began to sense the past. This tiny underground synagogue, restored in the 1990s, is said to date to Roman times. In a room saturated by the musty smell of centuries, there was finally a hint of the presence I'd been searching for.

Later, as Hugh and I compared notes, it turned out that while I was in the Call, Hugh had his own spiritual experience, in the Barcelona Pavilion (also called the German Pavilion), designed by Mies van der Rohe for the 1929 International Exhibition.

"In college, I loved Gaudí and could not wait to see his work," Hugh said. "I still find his designs amazing, but they can be overwhelming. I realized that today while sitting in Mies's temple of marble, loving its silence and simplicity."

"I'm sorry I missed it," I said. The truth is, despite our differences, Hugh is an exceptional travel mate. He is so knowledgeable about architecture and art, and his eye is so well trained, that looking at a painting or building with him is inevitably a richer experience than when I'm on my own.

"Well, I wish I hadn't missed the tour of the Call," he mused. "Next time."

"You think there will be a next time?"

"Definitely. We drank from the tap on Las Ramblas, remember?"

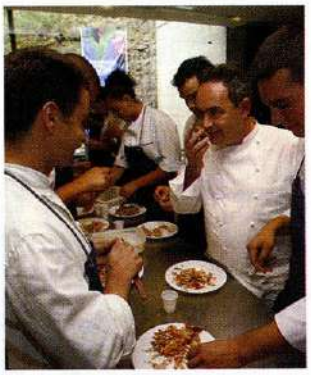
Then he kissed me like a native as evening wrapped around us like a soft curtain.

Barbara Graham *is a contributing writer for* O, The Oprah Magazine. **Hugh Delehanty** *is a writer and editor. Photographer* **Ken Kochey** *also has shot for* Esquire *and* Town & Country.

CULTURE

Free-Spirited Catalonia

This autonomous Spanish region cherishes its independence.



Catalan star: Chef Ferrán Adrià.

The creativity and entrepreneurship that electrify modern-day Barcelona also characterize the region the city is capital of: Catalonia, a self-governing, fiercely independent province of Spain. Proud of its culture yet never a sovereign land, Catalonia has a long history of independence movements, the most recent in 1979, when, after much agitation, it was declared an "autonomous community" of Spain, with its own president, parliament, language, and flag. Today the richest and most industrialized area in the country, thanks to thriving businesses in metalwork, textiles, publishing, and chemicals, Catalonia is a land of contradictions. Timeless yet avant-garde, provincial yet global, it boasts a flourishing food scene—everything from traditional dishes to the pioneering cuisine of superchef Ferrán Adrià, who reinvents Catalan cooking with innovative techniques at his restaurant El Bulli—and a scenic landscape that accommodates both rustic villages and megaresorts.

SOURCEBOOK

Barcelona Essentials

THE BASICS

Entry requirements U.S. citizens need a valid passport to enter Spain. **Time** Barcelona is six hours ahead of U.S. eastern standard time. **Money** The euro; for exchange rates, go to *www.oanda.com*. **Phone calls** From the U.S., dial the international access code 011, the country code 34, the city code 93, and the local number.

PLACES MENTIONED

Antic Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau There are two entrances: Carrer del Carme 47 and Carrer Hospital 56.
Bar Pinotxo 466 Mercat de la Boqueria.
Barcelona Pavilion Av. Marquès de Comilles, Montjuïc; 423-40-16; *www.miesbcn.com/en/pavilion.html*; fee.
Barceloneta L'Escar 22, Molle des Pescadores; 932-212-111.
Boqueria Market Rambla 85-89, Barceloneta.
Casa Batlló Passeig de Gràcia 43; 216-03-06; *www.casabatllo.es*.
Casa Milà (also known as La Pedrera) Calle Provença 261-265; 484-59-00; fee.
Fundació Joan Miró Parc de Montjuïc; 4-439-470; *www.bcn.fjmiro.cat*; fee.
Hotel Neri Calle Sant Sever 5; 304-06-55; *www.hotelneri.com*.
Las Ramblas Promenade that is actually a series of connected streets running from Plaza de Catalunya to the city statue of Christopher Columbus.
Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona) Plaça dels Angels 1; 412-08-10; *www.macba.es/controller.php*.
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya Palau Nacional, Parc de Montjuïc; 622-03-76; *www.mnac.es*; fee.
Restaurante Mailuna Valldonzella 48; 301-20-02; *www.mailuna.net*.
Restaurante Mesopotamia Verdi 65; 237-15-63.
La Sagrada Família Calle Mallorca 401; 207-30-31; *www.sagradafamilia.org*.
Senyor Parellada Calle Argenteria 37; 933-105-094.
Sinagoga Mayor Calle Marlet 5; 317-07-90; *www.calldebarcelona.org*.

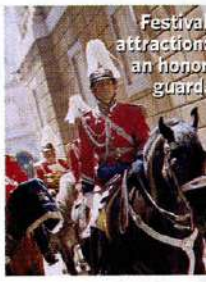
FOR MORE INFORMATION

Barcelona Tourism, *www.barcelonaturisme.com*. Turisme de Barcelona, *www.bcn.es/turisme/english/turisme/welcome.htm*. Urban Cultours, *www.urbancultours.com*. Hi. This is Barcelona, *www.hithisisbarcelona.com*.

NUTS & BOLTS

Things to Know Before You Go

When are the best times to visit Barcelona? Summer is high season in Barcelona, when you can expect crowds of tourists and hot weather. The shoulder seasons of April-June and September-October offer perhaps the best conditions for a leisurely visit—and include three of the city's top festivals: The April 23 Festival of Saint George (Sant Jordi), patron saint of Catalonia, celebrated as a day of romance, roses, and books; the Eve of Saint John (Sant Joan), June 23, which heralds the summer solstice with bonfires, fireworks, and tastings of the traditional pastry "coca de Sant Joan"; and the La Mercè festival, September 24, which pays homage to Barcelona's patron saint with activities for all ages, including theater, concerts, and fireworks.



What is the best way to see the city? A great way to explore Barcelona is to walk its streets at your own pace. For sights that may be a little far apart, use the city's metro and bus systems—including the hop-on, hop-off Bus Turistic, which offers three routes (44 stops) for one ticket (*www.tmb.net/en_US/turistes/busturistic/busturistic.jsp*). For information (in English) on the metro and bus system, including maps, timetables, and sightseeing routes, log on to *www.tmb.net/en_US/home.jsp*.

ONLINE

Best of Barcelona and Catalonia

- Learn about Robert Hughes's portrait of the city, *Barcelona* (1992), in our **Ultimate Travel Library** (*www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/travellibrary/library.html*).
- Find where to buy espadrilles, textiles, and other made-in-Barcelona wares in our **Authentic Shopping Guide** (*www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/shoppingguide/shopping.html*).
- Link to great websites on Spain in **TripMarks** (*www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler/extras/toolbox/tripmarks.html*).
- Sample music by Spanish and Barcelonan artists in our online **World Music Guide** (*http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com*).
- Find useful facts, photos, maps, and more on Spain in **People and Places** (*www3.nationalgeographic.com/places/index.html*).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LUIS GENE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; KEN KOCHEY; NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAPS