

## At a glance

- Discover secluded beaches and seductive hotels
- Sample the best of the area's famous cuisine
- See historic sites and get a dose of surrealism

# Hidden Costa Brava

Escape the package-holiday hordes with these secret slices of the Spanish coast, says **Sally Howard**

**N**amed for its wild coastline, the natural beauty of the Costa Brava lures two million visitors a year to this stretch of coast north of Barcelona. What sets the Costa Brava apart from the lower-lying Spanish provinces is the extreme diversity of its natural landscape: from lofty mountains to wildlife-rich wetlands, unpeopled rocky coves to sweeping, golden-sand beaches – all in a tightly knit area.

Despite its name – Costa Brava roughly translates as ‘rugged coast’ – the region supplies a healthy dose of life’s refined pleasures. Its hotels knock spots off the 1960s blocks that blight its southerly rival,

the Costa del Sol. And despite the closure of the famous El Bulli restaurant – named the world’s best five times in the annual industry awards – the region’s cuisine continues to shine. You can enjoy its mix of powerful Spanish flavours and French culinary finesse everywhere, from humble fishing cafés to fine-dining restaurants.

Thrown into this seductive mix are ancient walled villages, glorious cathedral cities and a good serving of surrealism.

### Where to start

You’ll need a car to get about the region. The best way to get to know the Costa Brava is to take a leisurely week to drive north

from Barcelona, criss-crossing from coastal big-hitters, such as Pals, Empuriabrava, and Roses, to historical towns and villages, like gothic-style Vic and the bayside medieval town of Begur. You can conclude your tour in the characterful north of the Costa Brava at bustling Figueres, the town made famous by its flamboyant son, Salvador Dalí.

Dalí is not alone among the Costa Brava’s eccentrics. Indeed, one local saying declares that: ‘In the mountains of the Costa Brava, a mad wind blows clean through the ears’. And it may well be that the almost-British eccentricity will be the aspect of the Costa Brava that stays with you, long after the taste of its delicious cuisine has faded.

## Glimpses of Girona

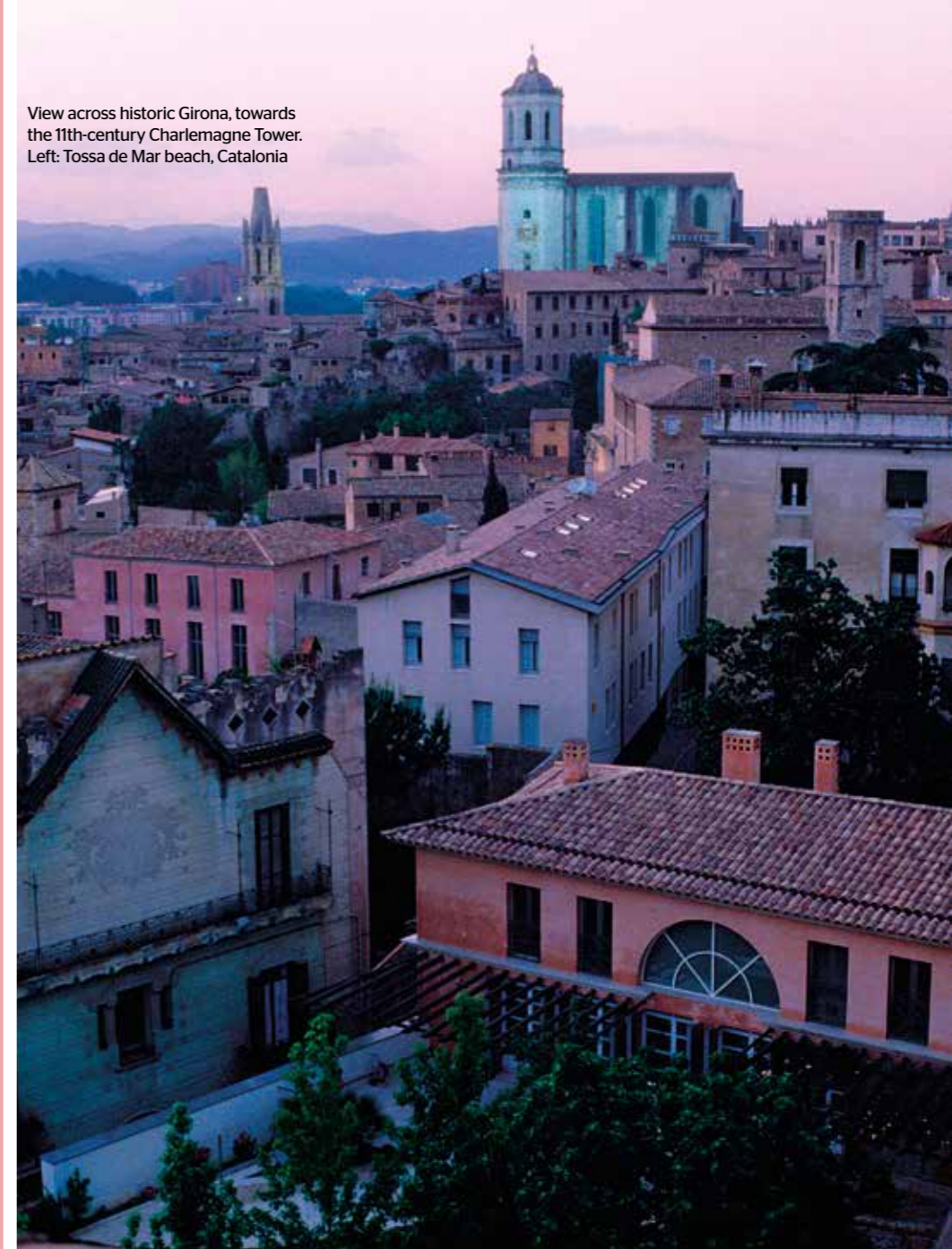
Many people fly into Girona and drive straight out, which is a mistake. Instead, do as the Spaniards do and take a weekend break here. You won’t be disappointed.

Girona’s Roman founders were the first to pace its **city walls**. To retrace their footsteps, walk south along the wall’s ramparts, starting at Pont de Sant Agusti, a medieval stone bridge on the Onyar river, then follow the Passeig de la Muralla through Girona’s nature gardens to the 11th-century **Charlemagne Tower** ([girona.cat/turisme](http://girona.cat/turisme)) for grandstand city views. Sublime religious architecture abounds in the Costa Brava, not least the remarkable **Parish Church of Sant Romà** ([lloretdemar.org](http://lloretdemar.org); free) in the mostly charmless resort of Lloret de Mar. But the baroque **Girona Cathedral** ([catedraldegirona.org](http://catedraldegirona.org); free) outshines them all. Its 23-metre wide Gothic nave is the second widest in the world – outstripped only by St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Visit on weekend mornings when it booms with Gregorian chanting.

Like all great Mediterranean squares, **Plaça de la Independencia** bustles with smooching young couples and ranks of old men waiting for dinner or death (or both). Pull up a seat for people-watching at **Lizarran** (No 14; [lizarran.es](http://lizarran.es)) for its tasty Gironan-style tapa of *bacalla* (salt cod; around £4 a plate) with Romesco sauce.

The atmospheric market on the **Rambla de la Llibertat** dates from the 12th century. Pick up flowers and fruits from outdoor stalls, or clothing and objects d’art from bordering boutiques.

View across historic Girona, towards the 11th-century Charlemagne Tower. Left: Tossa de Mar beach, Catalonia



Snorkelling sights in the Bay of Tamarit

## Secret beaches

As a rule of thumb, southerly beaches that are backed by towns, such as Tossa, Roses, Platja d’Aro and L’Escala, will be rammed from late June to August. But you needn’t look far for a stretch of coast to almost call your own.

For a family-friendly spot to lay your towel that’s within reach of beach cafés, but without the crowds, walk north from Platja d’Aro. Here you will find small sandy beaches, particularly cliff-backed, golden-sanded **Cala Belladona**, far from the main stretch. For snorkelling, head to the smaller rocky beaches east of Girona, such as the **bay of Tamarit**. This has

a sandy side for sunbathers and a diving board off the rocks into the water for swimmers.

Take **Sant Feliu de Guixols**, the road that winds north past Tossa de Mar, and after 15km you’ll find intimate coves reached via stone walkways. Any tiny turnout or parking spot will lead you to a quiet beach.

Best of all are the spectacular beaches and coves along the **Cami de Ronda coastal path** (part of the GR 92; [ow.ly/KfMW0](http://ow.ly/KfMW0)). You’ll need walking shoes to find such off-the-beaten-track beauties as **El Golfet**, with its pink rocks and towering pines. >>



A Dalí-inspired door in Cadaques

## Catalan haute cuisine

It would be criminal to leave the Costa Brava without sampling its renowned haute cuisine. Ferran Adrià's El Bulli restaurant (named the world's best a record five times) closed in 2011, but for a meal in the same spirit, try the three Michelin-starred **El Celler de Can Roca** (cellercanroca.com; mains around £30) outside Girona. Its buttery pig's trotters with sea slugs (trust us) elevate slimy molluscs to the sublime.

Carme Ruscadella also has three Michelin stars and it's well worth the trip to her tiny nine-table **Restaurant Sant Pau** in the coastal town of Sant Pol de Mar (ruscaldeda.com; tasting menu only, around £114). She reworks Costa Bravan produce in dishes like squid with tomato, spleen, pepper and ink; and upside-down coca (Catalan celebratory cake) with crisp mackerel, tomato and almonds.

For contemporary Catalan cuisine without the Michelin prices, try cosy **Sa Rascassa**, set back from the pebbled cove of Aiguafreda (hostalsarascassa.com; mains around £13). Don't miss the white beans with clams. Or, with a tasting menu at a remarkable £41 per head, try **Pa i Raïm** (pairaim.com; mains around £10). This restaurant in an Art Nouveau villa in Palafrugell is hotly tipped for a Michelin star, courtesy of delicate dishes, such as hake with peas and beads of cava jelly.

If you are looking for something more down-to-earth, **Pizzeria Delfin** at Playa d'Aro turns out crisp, generously topped pizza wheels (Catalan toppings, plus seafood a speciality) just a hop-step from the beach at Playa d'Aro (00 34 65131 0009, mains around £5).



The secluded and reasonably priced Sa Rascassa restaurant in Aiguafreda

## Travel essentials



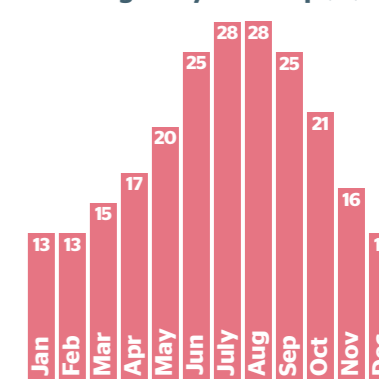
**Average hotel room**  
**€66<sup>a</sup>**



**Average return airfare**  
**£198<sup>b</sup>**



**Average daily max temp (°C)<sup>c</sup>**



### SCAM WATCH

While not as big a problem as in Barcelona, the Costa Brava's resorts, especially Tossa de Mar and Lloret de Mar in high season, are blighted by pickpockets and street muggers. Conceal money and avoid toting a map or wearing shorts, which mark you out as a tourist.

Dial 112 for an emergency police line; or 902 102 112 for the general police force line.

**MORE INFO**  
en.costabrava.org



## A dally with Dalí

The master of surrealism, Salvador Dalí, grew up in the Costa Brava, and you can see some of his most daring and daftest works here. Start at the **Dalí Theatre and Museum** (salvador-dali.org; entry £8) in his birth town of Figueres, with its batty Dalí-designed exterior and rooms of optical illusions. Or try his weird and wonderful coastal house museum, **Salvador Dalí House – Portlligat** (salvador-dali.org; entry £8), near Cadaqués, for its garden of curiosities including a prone Gulliver and a pastiche of the Alhambra palace. And finally, see his final resting place at **Gala Dalí Castle in Púbol** (salvador-dali.org; £6), where Dalí-esque whimsies include a glass coffee table with a stuffed horse visible in the floor below.

**MONEY SAVER** You can buy a combined ticket for all three sights, saving about £3, but only in person from the Theatre and Museum, so go there first.

Sculpture by Salvador Dalí in his home town of Figueres



The medieval town of Begur

## Beyond the high-rise hotels

Be wary of Costa Brava package deals if you want to avoid ersatz resort hotels in need of a spruce-up. Even the popular beachside resorts have some beauties if you go indie. Among the best in the budget bracket is smart boutique **Hotel Diana** (hotelesdante.com) in Tossa de Mar. It's set in a white-washed Art Deco building with breakfast (served in a Moorish tiled courtyard), a plant-trailed terrace and 360-degree sea views.

**MONEY SAVER** Rooms with plaza views at a bargain £41 are just as seductive as those with sea views, which start at £72.

If you want a family-friendly resort, the **Hotel Mediterraneo Park** (en.hotelsmediterraneo.com; doubles from £49) offers plenty of bang for your buck, just a short walk from the beaches at Roses. This four-star has indoor and outdoor pools, mini-golf and a well-run kids club, plus slick, balconied doubles and suites.

For romance, look inland to the bevy of new convent and Catalan farmhouse restorations. The best include 15th-century farmhouse **Can Bassa** in Madremanya (canbassa.com; doubles from £81), and **Castell d'Empordà** (hotelcastellemporda.com; from £115 for a tower double) – a fairytale hilltop castle in the heart of the green Empordà region with olive groves at its feet.

which.co.uk

The fairytale hilltop castle of Castell d'Empordà



Suite Pere Margarit in Castell d'Empordà



PHOTOGRAPHY: 4 CORNERS, ALAMY, ROBERT HARDING

<sup>a</sup> average price from searches on Trivago.co.uk Fe bruary 2014 to January 2015. <sup>b</sup> average price from searches on Momondo.com February 2014 to January 2015. <sup>c</sup> Average Daily Max Temperature Jan to Dec; Girona, based on Weather2Travel.com