



CUT-OUT-AND-GO GUIDE | GOURMET COSTA BRAVA



instant escapes

Gourmet Costa Brava

No longer chips with everything, this corner of Spain is a foodie paradise

If the Costa Brava still conjures up images of eggs, chips and lager louts, then think again. From sizzling sardines on the beach to sophisticated dining amid the lush, wine-growing plains of the Empordà, this region has some of Spain's most exceptional food — at a fraction of the price you'd pay in France or Italy. Hold the ketchup! **By Eddi Fiegel**



SEE & DO

Wander around Girona's medieval Old Town and you'll find its higgledy-piggledy cobbled lanes brimming with foodie treats, from artisan chocolatiers to shops where you can sample superb local wines direct from the barrel. Over the river Onyar, check out the fantastic Mercat del Lleó (Plaça Calveti Rubalcaba) — the market has spectacular displays of sparkling fish, plump olives and rainbow-coloured Mediterranean veg.

Plates of grilled fresh fish, the clear, emerald sea so close you'll almost get your toes wet, fishing boats bobbing on the water — this is Tamariu, an unspoilt, pretty-as-a-picture horseshoe bay with a string of restaurants behind the beach. Head to Es Dofí at the end of the promenade for hake or the crispy, whitebait-like fried somsos (Passeig del Mar 22; 00 34 972 620043; mains about £11).

The lively harbour town of Palamós is famous for its fat, succulent prawns. You'll appreciate them all the more after an excellent Fish Museum trip. You'll head out early on a trawler to watch them being caught, then see them auctioned later at the market (Moll Pesquer s/n; museudelapesca.org; trips from £75pp, including lunch).

Superb wines have been produced in the Empordà region, at the Costa's northerly end, since the Romans were around. Vineyards line lush valleys or descend to the gleaming Med. Find out

The twilight zone: boats on the beach at Calella de Palafrugell; below, mussels are a seafood staple in these parts; walking along the promenade at the harbour town of Palamós

how the balmy sea air gives the red wines their warm, spicy character at Castillo Peralada winery — it has tastings, tours and a museum in a 14th-century castle (perelada.com; from £8.70; book ahead).

Gorgeous beaches are ten a penny around this stretch of the coast, but the crescent bay of Llafranc is one of the loveliest. With tall, arabesque pines lacing the promenade, this is the place to sit back with a cool Voll Damm (the deliciously hoppy, Catalan beer). Order one with a piled-high bowl of steaming mussels at seafront La Sirena (Paseo Cipsela 31; 00 34 972 301138; mains about £17).

In the geranium-filled medieval village of Ventalló, the Serra Sala family have been making amazing aromatic oil from the local olives for centuries, and have become go-to suppliers for some of the region's world-famous restaurants. Get the delicious inside track: join charming Fina Sala and her daughter on their tours of the olive groves and mill — then dig in to tastings with charcuterie, cheese and home-grown cherries (Carrer de la Bassa 20; oliventallo.com; from £18pp).

You won't want to leave Catalan cuisine behind — and you won't have to if you take a lesson with local chef Pere and his wife Mariona. You'll start at Palafrugell's lively market, rubbing shoulders with roly-poly grannies and hipster chefs as you choose the freshest calamari, cuttlefish and prawns. Then, back at their farmhouse, you'll throw it all into fideuà (like a noodly paella), and make custardy crema catalana (atasteofspain.com; from £134pp).

The laid-back seaside town of Calella de Palafrugell was made for end-of-day lazing. Pastel-coloured 19th-century villas, brilliant beaches and excellent bars and cafes give it the feel of Brighton-on-Med. Bag a wicker armchair overlooking the bay at Can Gelpí restaurant (Carrer de les Voltes 11; 00 34 972 614572) and order the local tiple, cremat — a flaming concoction of coffee, rum and cognac theatrically ladled into a terracotta dish at your table (£8pp, minimum two people).

WRITER'S TIP
Not hands-on enough? Try the fabulous fish-cooking classes at Espai del Peix (espaidelpeix.org; from £20), next door to the Fish Museum



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EAT

● **Haute ice cream**
ROCAMBOLESC (Ice cream about £3)
Because: If you can't get in to the restaurant El Celler de Can Roca, the Rocas' Girona ice-cream parlour is the next best thing. The vanilla with caramelised apple and shortbread is worth the trip alone. **Travel's tip:** The beautiful bars of chocolate make super-stylish presents. Carrer de Santa Clara 50, Girona; rocambolesc.com.

● **The bargain blow-out**
RESTAURANT VALL-LLOBREGA (Three-course menus from £9)
Because: You'll have some of the best-value, heartiest food around at this unassuming place hidden in a sleepy village. **Travel's tip:** Order the stews and garlicky alioli mayonnaise with roast chicken. Raval de Mar 8, Vall-llobrega; 00 34 972 602044, restaurantvall-llobrega.com.

● **Great-value seafood**
L'HORT DEL RECTOR (Mains about £13)
Because: Beamed ceilings, lace curtains and shelves crammed with books make this cod-focused restaurant feel like the home of someone's eccentric uncle. **Travel's tip:** Of the 18 main-course cod dishes, our pick is the one with fat, juicy prawns. Carrer de l'Església 2, Monells; 00 34 972 630396, hortdelrector.com.

● **The best of Brava**
RESTAURANT IBERIC (Mains about £15)
Because: It's surely the best restaurant in the area — order Catalan dishes such as *suquet de mar* (a saffron-infused fish stew) and exceptional meat dishes. **Travel's tip:** Book a week ahead. Come hungry as portions are generous. Carrer de Valls 11, Ullastret; 00 34 972 757108, restaurantiberic.com.

● **The Michelin star**
RESTAURANT CASAMAR (Mains about £20)
Because: This is Michelin-starred food at a fraction of the price you'd pay back home and comes with a stunning view of Llafranc bay. **Travel's tip:** Hungry? Don't be tempted by the 'Pica Pica' tasting menu (£42) — you'll be peckish an hour later. Carrer del Nero 3, Llafranc; 00 34 972 300104, hotelcasamar.net.

TOP TABLE
 Heart set on a table at El Celler de Can Roca (cellercanroca.com), one of the world's best restaurants? You'll need to book at least 11 months ahead — though your hotel concierge might get lucky with a last-minute cancellation

PRETTY WALK
 Allow time to explore the medieval walled village of Monells, just over the bridge from L'Hort del Rector

TAKEAWAY TIP
 Just down the street from La Simfonia, the Local Market deli (localmarket.cat) has wonderful charcuterie and artisan beers, and wine-tasting evenings every Thursday at 7pm (£13)

DRINK

● **Star sundowners**
HOTEL LLAFRANCH
Because: A favourite of Sophia Loren, Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson back in the '50s, the terrace bar has great sea views. **Travel's tip:** Enjoy the sunset with a *tinto de verano* (red wine and lemonade). Passeig Cypsela 16, Llafranc; hllafranch.com.

● **Bargain local**
CAFE DELL'ARTE
Because: This neighbourhood bar in coastal L'Escala has excellent Catalan wines and great-value *tapas* amid red-velvet drapes, Dansette record players, vintage radios and '50s bric-a-brac. **Travel's tip:** The house red Synera is beautifully full-bodied — and only costs £2 a glass. Carrer Calvari 1, L'Escala.

● **The deli with prezzies**
MERC FRENCH PATISSERIE & DELI
Because: This smart deli in Old Town Palafrugell does tantalising *gâteaux*, but also sells *jamón serrano*, biscuits and chocolate. **Travel's tip:** Join locals people-watching over *croissants* at breakfast. Plaça Nova 7, Palafrugell.

ASK THE LOCAL
 Costa Brava native Laura Masramon is a sommelier specialising in wines from the Empordà region

“ You won't find tourists at Vinomi (Passeig de Sant Joan Bosco 59-61; four-course menu £30), a restaurant in a wine shop in Girona (you choose your wine from the shop). There are lots of terrace cafes in Girona's Old Town, but La Simfonia (Plaça del Oli 6) has a great wine list, from £4 a glass. The *sweet Garnatxa d'Empordà* is good with blue cheese, *foie gras* or desserts. I love the Motel Restaurant in Hotel Empordà (Ave de Salvador Dalí Domènech 170; hotelemporda.com). You don't have to be a guest to enjoy its breakfast buffet (£11). I love the *fried eggs with artisan breads and the local Catalan goat's cheese*, served with honey.



STAY

● **The city bolthole**
AC HOTEL PALAU DE BELLAVISTA (Doubles from £51, room only)
Because: It's a great base for exploring Girona — stylish, comfortable and good value. **Travel's tip:** It's at the top of a steep hill above the Old Town — work off that lunch or cab it. Pujada Polvorins 1, Girona; 00 34 872 080670, marriott.com.

● **The chic beachside hotel**
HOSTAL SPA EMPURIES (Doubles from £78, room only)
Because: On Empúries's beach, this smart hotel has a sleek spa and a superb fish restaurant. **Travel's tip:** The 'spa' rooms are more spacious — but rooms in the old building have the best sea views and they're cheaper. Platja de Portitxols/n, L'Escala; 00 34 972 770207, hostalempuries.com.

● **The simple seaview hotel**
HOTEL TAMARIU (Doubles from £95, B&B)
Because: You're metres away from the beach on an unspoilt bay. Rooms with

balconies start at £96, but it's only £5 extra for a sea view. **Travel's tip:** Some of the nearby restaurants close early. To eat later, dine in the hotel or in Llafranc. Passeig del Mar 2, Tamariu; 00 34 972 620031, tamariu.com.

● **The restaurant with rooms**
HOSTAL SA RASCASSA (Doubles from £95, B&B)
Because: Its five rooms are stylishly simple and the Sa Rascassa restaurant — one of the best in the region — is just downstairs. You're also in striking distance of the Costa's best beaches and medieval villages. **Travel's tip:** Dining in the restaurant? Leave room for the divine 'chocolate stones' pudding. Cala d'Aiguafreda 3, Begur; 00 34 972 622845, hostalsarascassa.com.

● **The fairy-tale castle**
CASTELL D'EMPORDA (Doubles from £103, B&B)
Because: Rooms are a glamorous mix of Indian silks, Moroccan floor tiles, Far Eastern antiques and comfy beds — and you're in a 14th-century castle



High costa living: clockwise from top left, great views from the AC Hotel Palau de Bellavista; pool at Luxe Calella apartments; beach dining at Hostal Sa Rascassa; stylish simplicity at Hotel Tamariu; *jamón serrano*, a local speciality

FILL THE FRIDGE
 Staying by the sea, you'll be in the mood for seafood. There's an excellent fresh fish counter at the Mercadona supermarket in Palafrugell, about five minutes' drive from Apartment Luxe Calella

overlooking the rolling Empordà plains. **Travel's tip:** For romance, ask for a room in the castle. Otherwise, the Garden Suites in the modern extension are brilliant for families. La Bisbal; 00 34 972 646254, hotelcasteltemporda.com.

● **The glamorous holiday house**
CHARMING VILLAS CATALONIA
Because: Charming Villas Catalonia has a collection of plush villas and apartments throughout the region, including the Apartment Luxe Calella (from £1,738 a week, ie, £248 a night, sleeping 6), less than 10 minutes' walk from Llafranc and Calella de Palafrugell. **Travel's tip:** Ask the owners to arrange anything from personal chefs and sommeliers to cookery classes and wine-tastings. 00 34 972 590389, charmingvillas.net.

GET ME THERE
GO INDEPENDENT
 There are more flights to Barcelona, but Girona gets you nearer the Costa Brava and saves you a couple of hours' drive. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies to Barcelona

from Belfast, Bristol, Liverpool, Gatwick, Luton, Southend and Newcastle from £20 return. Monarch (monarch.co.uk) flies to Barcelona from Birmingham, Gatwick, Leeds Bradford and Manchester from £58 return. Ryanair (ryanair.com) flies from Stansted to Girona from £59 return.

GO PACKAGED
 Kirker (020 7593 2283, kirkerholidays.com) can tailor-make a three-night self-drive, including a four-star hotel, car and flights from £588pp, B&B. Inntravel (01653 6177001, inntravel.co.uk) has a seven-night self-guided walking trip from £1,028pp, half board, with flights.

GET AROUND
 Sixt (0844 499 3399, sixt.co.uk) has car hire from £111 a week from Barcelona airport. Or try Avis (avis.co.uk). Buses run from Barcelona airport to various towns (eg, Barcelona-Palamós £16 one way; compras.moventis.es).

FURTHER INFORMATION
 See costabrava.org or spain.info. ■

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