

THE MEDITERRANEAN » CATALONIA

Where Spain still feels like Spain

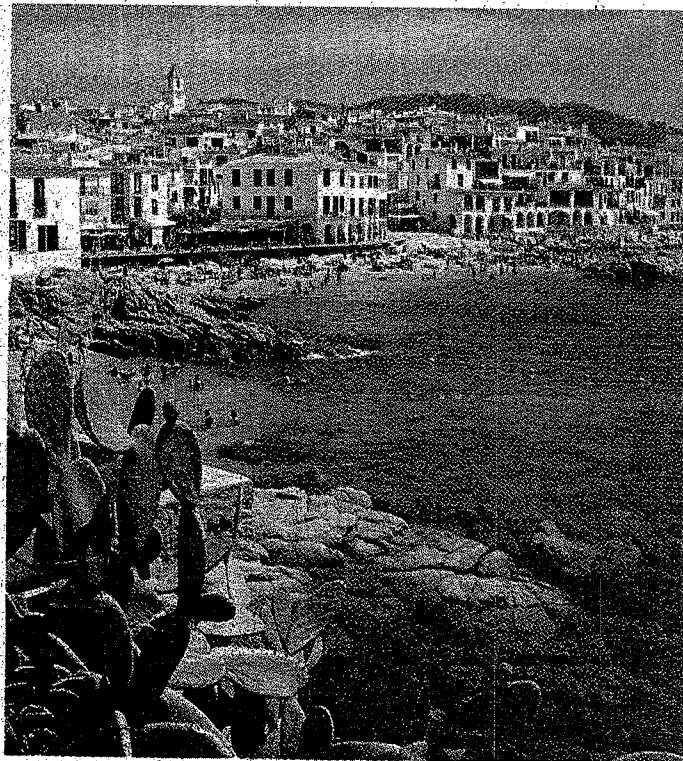
Forget the concrete (read: southern) coast. In the northeast, there are pristine beaches – and, yes, actual fishing in the fishing village

BY SARAH WILDMAN
CADAQUES, SPAIN

On the small roads between Cantalops and Llanca – two names that were barely dots on our map of Catalonia in northeastern Spain – the lush mountain greenery turned quickly to farmland rolling out for kilometres around us and filled with sunflowers and hay.

We were travelling from the interior mountains of this Spanish autonomous region to the Mediterranean. Again and again, rising up in the near distance, came fantastic, if dusty, terra-cotta-coloured medieval hamlets and equally ancient churches and farmhouses. On the streets everywhere, the lingua franca was Catalan, not Spanish, and amid all the tourists that descend from France and elsewhere, a local pride seemed to pervade the scene, against a backdrop that falls away suddenly, breathtakingly, into the sea.

By some small miracle – and preservation efforts that have helped to control development in Catalonia – the Costa Brava has maintained an authenticity and a refreshing resistance to change that keeps this stretch of the Mediterranean radically different from the southern coasts of Spain. Fishing villages still feel like fishing villages, medieval mountain towns are



Calella de Palafrugell's beach is one favourite along Spain's northeastern coast. MATIAS COSTA/THE NEW YORK TIMES

still hushed at siesta and artists still paint on the little streets of towns like Calella de Palafrugell.

We began in Begur, about an hour and 40 minutes from the Barcelona airport. Built on a hill, it is a small maze of lanes dotted with excellent fish restaurants, ancient towers and

cozy bars, all scattered beneath a dominating fortress where women and children once ran for safety from 17th-century pirates. Within a 10-minute drive, there are eight official beaches (and many more unmarked coves), almost all of which are linked by a mix of paved and unpaved walking routes.

Pack your bags

GETTING THERE

Air Canada flies to Barcelona from Toronto and Montreal.

WHERE TO STAY

BLISS BEGUR HOTEL San Josep 3, Begur; 34 (972) 624-540; www.blissbegurhotel.com. Rooms start at \$226, including breakfast.

HOTEL ROCAMAR Calle Dr. Bartomeus, Cadaques; 34 (972) 258-150; www.rocamar.com. On a quiet side of the Cadaques bay overlooking what might as well be a private beach. Rates start at \$214 in the high season. \$160

WHERE TO EAT

SA RASCASSA Cala D'Aiguafreda 3, Begur; 34 (972) 622-845. The restaurant serves fresh fish and fresh pasta on a lovely cool terrace steps from the sea.

LA SIRENA Carrer d'Es Call, Cadaques; 34 (972) 258-974. Serves excellent grilled fish à la Basque.

MORE INFORMATION

TOURIST OFFICE OF SPAIN 416-961-3131; tourspain.toronto.on.ca.

On each of our three days in Begur, we explored nearby villages.

In tiny, touristy Pals, we met Dalwa Donofre, a Mozambique-born, Lisbon-raised artist selling massive collages with themes that connected back to the sea. In Peratallada, a well-preserved central square filled with cafés made the village feel more alive than some sleepier neighbouring towns. But as lovely as the light was in the villages, the siren call of the shoreline always made us anxious to get back to the sea.

"I like September best," said Oscar Gorriz, the proprietor of Sa Rascassa, a five-room pension and restaurant on a minuscule cove called Aiguafreda. "The hotel is booked solid all summer, and, come fall, the pace is slower, the tourists are more relaxed; we're more relaxed."

Gorriz told us how happy he was that Catalonia had largely managed to prevent the gargantuan building schemes that have blighted the southern coasts of Spain. "Concrete from Valencia to Malaga," he said, shaking his head at the sprawling hotels and housing blocks that have gone up on the Costa Blanca and Costa del Sol.

From Begur, we drove up the coast, past Greek ruins at St. Martí d'Empuries and Roses, where El Bulli, the restaurant of Spain's star chef Ferran

Adria, was sold out well into next year. The highway twisted and turned, clinging to the hillside until, finally, gleaming Cadaques came into view.

The list of artists' ghosts haunting this small town is a who's who of 20th-century painters: Salvador Dali, most famously, spent part of his childhood in the village. Pablo Picasso spent time here, as did Max Ernst, Henri Matisse and Man Ray. In 2004, the town put up small markers at locations that have appeared in a work Dali's. But as interesting as it is to walk in their footsteps, it is all the more engaging to see the living artists still working, creating and exhibiting there.

We spent days winding around the old city's narrow corners, down the uneven cobblestone alleyways into one artist atelier after another. We reluctantly left Cadaques and drove north on the narrow N-260, keeping bathing suits, the ready and jumping out of the car every chance we could to swim in ever-less-populated coves as we headed to France. There was no border control as all as we crossed into France. It weren't for the little EU sign and a forlorn, abandoned customs house, the only way to know we were no longer in Catalonia was the warning from my Spanish cellphone. We were roaming now.

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