

A toast to the coast

As the Costa Brava celebrates its centenary, Sue Style rediscovers its original appeal

Mention the words Costa Brava and for most people they will evoke visions of high-rise hotels, wall-to-wall traffic, pubs, fish and chips and Full English Breakfasts. Yet 100 years ago, the Catalan poet Ferran Agulló was so moved by the rugged pine-clad cliffs plunging to deserted sandy coves and turquoise waters that he dreamed up the name Costa Brava, meaning "the wild coast".

Today it can be a stretch to imagine what it was about this famous area that so bewitched people. But a recent trip to this beautiful stretch of coastline, which runs from Portbou on the French border in the north down to Blanes (short of Barcelona) in the south, showed how much is worth rediscovering.

I'm having a bit of a battle with myself, though. On the one hand, in the interests of those who know and understand the Costa Brava, I should button my lip about its delicious coves, its singular small hotels, quirky restaurants and distinctive wines. On the other hand, it was such a revelation to me to discover that the Costa Brava is not all tat and tattoos that I can't help blurting it out.

If you do decide to give the coast another chance, there are two things to remember. First, go out of season (in autumn the crowds have gone, the light is soft and the ocean still warm; in June the beaches look freshly laundered and the crowds haven't yet descended). Second, concentrate on the northern end. The bravest and best bits are to be found roughly between Cap de Creus down to Palamós. Stray south of Palamós at your peril.

There are a handful of good places to stay near the beach. **Hostal La Rascassa** (www.hostalsarascassa.com) at Aiguafreda, near Begur, has five simple, inexpensive rooms 40 metres from the shore, no phones or telly in the rooms and no

discos for 3.5km; the family-owned **Hotel Llevant** (www.hotel-levant.com) in Llafranc has 26 rooms, and is a member of Gourmet Hotel group; **El Convent** (www.hotelconventbegur.com) near the Sa Riera beach is an upmarket ex-convent with a secluded garden; the **Hostal Empúries** (www.hostalempuries.com) offers shabby chic right on the beach, next door to the superb Greek and Roman archaeological excavations. Or base yourself inland at the **Hostal Blau** (www.hostalblau.es) in the medieval village of Peratalada (six rooms in a 16th-century golden stone house, with a restaurant serving

local and Tuscan cuisine) or the **Hotel-Restaurant El Fort** (www.hotelefort.com) in Ullastret (four suites and a Slow Food-inspired restaurant).

The Costa Brava region bristles with Michelin stars: Ferran Adrià at **El Bulli** near Roses, the brothers Roca at **El Celler de Can Roca**, outside Girona, and Fina Puigdevall's **Les Cols** near Olot.

But this is rather elevated eating. For simpler stuff in a gorgeous dining room with views over a small bay, try **El Hostal** between L'Escala and Sant Martí d'Empúries (see hotels). The Santi Santamaria-trained chef has some fresh ideas

Wild Cap de Creus, the most easterly point of the Iberian peninsula, is a nature reserve

Corbis

but an irritatingly restrictive menu formula and no à la carte options. **Sa Rascassa** at Aiguablava serves great seafood on a shaded terrace and at **Tragamar** under the arcades on the seafront at Calella de Palafrugell you can feast on a moist, shell-fish-laden, saffron-free paella within touching distance of the pastel-coloured fishing boats. Inland, close to the wonderful, watery Aiguamolls National Park, **L'Aigua** in L'Armentera does modern Catalan cooking in a beautiful old water mill.

Local wines are more than keeping pace in this Empordà Denominación de Origen, which boasts several rising stars. Look out for wines from **Oliver Conti** in Cantallops, **Martí Fabra** in Sant Climent Sescebes or **Martin Faixó** whose vines grow on the wild slopes on the road up to Cadaqués.

There are couple of things to beware of. The region's infamous north wind, the *tramuntana*, blows down from the Pyrenees, imprisoning the fishermen in the bars and flattening gnarled old vines and unsuspecting old ladies in its wake. Sitting in a café on the waterfront when the *tramuntana* blows has been likened to being shut inside a very noisy, very cold tumble dryer. If it should blow while you're there, no matter: take stocks of reading matter (George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, *Winter in Madrid* by CJ Sansom), hunker down and listen to it raging outside from the safety and comfort of your hotel.

A second footnote is the fabled frostiness of some of the locals. Put it down to world weariness in the face of 40 years of tasteless hordes; or it could be a cultural thing – Catalans are by nature reserved. This is the Spain of stately *sardanas* danced in the round to the steady metre of reedy musical instruments, not the land of flamenco and passionate guitars. Persevere, in Spanish if you can, or better still in Catalan. You will be rewarded.

THE RISE OF TOURISM

Lament for a paradise lost

After its poetic baptism by Ferran Agulló in 1908, the Costa Brava slumbered peacefully on into the 1930s. Travel posters targeted a wealthy, cultured and largely local clientele – the journey up the Costa Brava even from Barcelona was still quite an undertaking. They depicted the Empúries archaeological site or showed modestly clad people striking elegant poses in the shade, surveying the sweep of deserted beaches.

Later came artists – Dalí in Cadaqués, Chagall in Tossa, calling it his "azure paradise". Film stars followed: Clark Gable and Ava Gardner (right) frolicked on the beaches below the

Hotel Gavina in S'Agaró under the bemused gaze of locals.

With the postwar boom and the advent of paid holidays came mass tourism. By the end of the 1960s the Costa Brava brand had become synonymous with a peculiarly tacky form of tourism, exported with dismal fidelity from points north (Britain, Germany, Scandinavia). Catalan journalist Josep Pla, who wrote evocatively on his beloved coastline, concluded sadly in 1975: "We could, *evidentment*, have had just a bit more sense and good taste."

More recently, the head of tourism in Girona lamented:

"They [the tourists] go to a bullfight or a flamenco show just because it's on the programme; they're not the least bit interested in Spanish food; they buy revolting souvenirs; they have absolutely no interest in getting to know the country, nor its people; when the sun shines they head for the beach, and at night they go out to pick up (or get picked up) and to get drunk – and they do it all with their own compatriots."

The last straw for those who love and appreciate the true beauty of the Costa Brava was the recent debacle involving a tourist office campaign for the region's centenary. It transpired that the shots of the beaches showed Bermuda sands, while the "Pyrenean" pictures were traced to Canada. The ensuing uproar, many think, could force a re-evaluation of the region's genuine charms.

