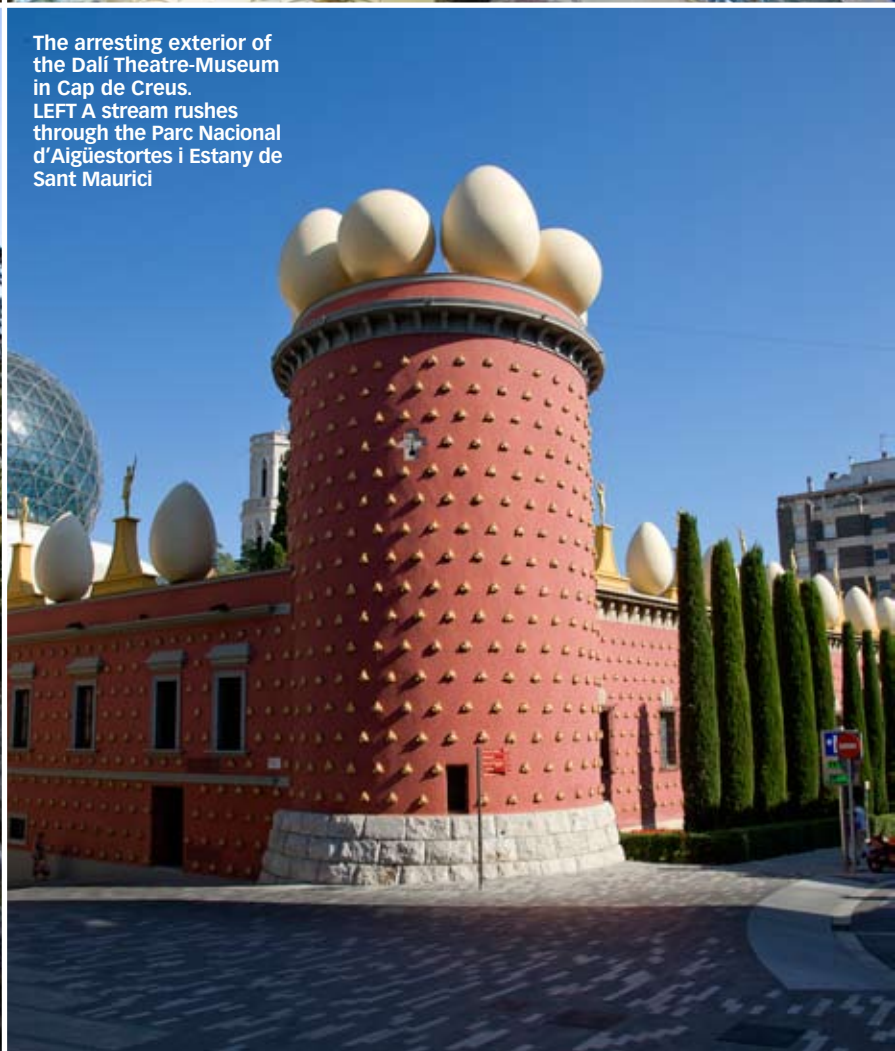




Stone archways characterise the city architecture of Girona. RIGHT Find quality food and good chat at tapas bars such as Xarcuteria La Pineda



The arresting exterior of the Dalí Theatre-Museum in Cap de Creus. LEFT A stream rushes through the Parc Nacional d'Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici



The Perfect Trip Catalonia

Whet your appetite for a Spanish adventure with tapas in Barcelona, explore hidden beaches and the coastline that inspired Salvador Dalí on the Costa Brava, wander the streets of medieval Girona and end your journey in an alpine National Park

WORDS ANTHONY HAM | PHOTOGRAPHS MICHAEL HEFFERNAN



Tossa de Mar, in the middle of the Costa Brava, has its own castle and cobbled streets. The historic town dates back to the 12th century

Your trip mapped out

In this independently spirited Spanish region, wander between traditional tapas bars in Barcelona, explore the walled city of Girona and awaken your senses in Dalí's heartland

5 PARC NACIONAL D'AIGÜESTORTES I ESTANY DE SANT MAURICI
Best for scenery

You can find the greatest concentration of lakes in Southern Europe in this park. Private cars are banned, so you can enjoy the scenery in peace.

4 GIRONA
Best for medieval

It's easy to imagine you are on a movie set as you take a stroll along Girona's twisting stone pathways and past its historic churches.

3 CAP DE CREUS & FIGUERES
Best for Dalí

The surrealist Salvador Dalí was inspired by this stark rocky landscape, mainland Spain's most easterly point.

2 COSTA BRAVA
Best for beaches

Here, jagged, pine-clad headlands leading to pretty villages with concealed sandy coves offer quiet beaches in the height of summer.

1 BARCELONA
Best for tapas

Spain's original social network, tapas bars in Barcelona are a combination of fine food, flowing drinks and a convivial atmosphere.

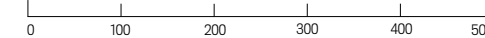
MAP ILLUSTRATION: STUART KOLANOVIC



The Perfect Trip
CATALONIA

1 BARCELONA Best for tapas

MILE MARKER: 0



In the tangled lanes of the Barri Gòtic (Catalan for the 'Gothic Quarter'), tapas is all about tradition. The stone buildings of Barcelona's oldest neighbourhood shelter tapas bars that show enduring allegiance to two simple truths: firstly, take the finest ingredients, interfering with them as little as possible; and secondly, the best things come in small packages.

The celebrated El Xampanyet is the first stop on a tapas crawl guided by food critic Bego Sanchis, owner of the Cook & Taste

cooking school, and there is an atmosphere of unrestrained Catalan conviviality. Shouting to make herself heard – and because that is what one does in a Spanish bar – Bego orders cava and tangy boqueróns en vinagre (white anchovies in vinegar), which are intense and zesty.

After emptying our glasses, we cut across the throng of La Rambla towards Quimet i Quimet, a miniature bar where the walls are crammed with bottles of wine and cans of seafood. 'With tapas, most think of Basque tapas – those little pieces of bread with food on top, lined up along the bar,' Bego says as we contemplate our order – portions of anchovies, prawns and mussels, all put in the shade by a splendid salmon, honey and cream cheese concoction, montadito de salmón. 'In Barcelona, tapas is more about preserved foods, the best seafood from a can, and ▶

ABOVE Tapas bar El Xampanyet has a lively and inclusive atmosphere. BELOW A plate of seafood tapas at Quimet i Quimet





ABOVE AND OPPOSITE Quimet i Quimet focuses on tapas made with preserved seafood. BELOW Xarcuteria La Pineda, which opened in 1930; Carlos Alcayna with his guitar. LEFT Legs of ham hang from Xarcuteria's ceiling



main dishes in smaller servings.' Because there is something irresistible about a journey defined by food – and certainly not because we're still hungry – Bego leads us back to the Barri Gòtic and the Xarcuteria La Pineda, here since 1930. Great legs of ham hang above cava-sipping regulars.

The barmen join friends and customers, one and the same, for quiet conversations in Catalan. From time to time, someone breaks into song to accompany Carlos Alcayna, a regular who sits in a corner strumming his guitar between sips of draught vermouth. 'I used to work across the road and come here for lunch,' says Carlos. 'Now, La Pineda is my office.'

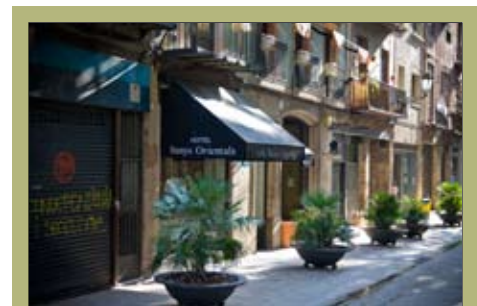
We try slices of jamón ibérico (cured ham) and canned razor clams served with blood-red vermouth. Though delicious, the food is almost incidental. 'Tapas is a social event,' says Bego, 'a reason to catch up with friends. The role of the food is to bring people together.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- The Oficina d'Informació de Turisme de Barcelona has offices around the city (barcelonaturisme.com).
- Cook & Taste runs twice-daily, three-and-a-half-hour cooking classes (£50 per person; cookandtaste.net).
- El Xampanyet (Carrer de Montcada 22; 00 34 33 19 70 03)
- Quimet i Quimet (Carrer del Poeta Cabanyes 25; 00 34 934 42 31 42)
- Xarcuteria La Pineda (Carrer del Pi 16; 00 34 933 024 393)

WHERE TO EAT (MORE)

● Pla. For a market-style take on tapas, seek out this bar on a quiet lane of Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. Pla's chef, Sergio Sánchez-Montijano, doesn't let the medieval décor restrain his modern Mediterranean flourishes with dishes such as braised lamb in its own juice, light white-bean purée, glazed potatoes and leeks with a touch of thyme (mains from £17; elpla.cat).



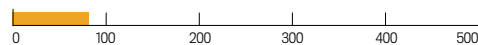
**WHERE TO STAY
HOTEL BANYS ORIENTALS**

On a pedestrianised street on the cusp of Barcelona's Gothic Quarter and cool El Born area, this boutique hotel inhabits the shell of a handsome 18th-century townhouse. Rooms are classy and contemporary with dark-hued parquet floors – ask for one overlooking the back lane for a quieter night's sleep. They also offer spacious suites in two nearby buildings (hotelbanysorientals.com; from £90). ▶



2 COSTA BRAVA Best for beaches

MILE MARKER: 80



A two-hour drive northwest from Barcelona along the C32, C253 and C31

North of Barcelona, beyond the concrete sprawl that bespoils the city's outskirts, nature suddenly takes over. The Costa Brava's rocky headlands force the main highway inland and a quiet road, narrow and sinuous, traverses the coast's steep contours. Soon it reaches the village of Tossa de Mar, where a crescent of sand arcs towards a pine-clad headland fenced by 14th-century walls and turreted towers. Offshore, fishing boats and pleasure craft bob gently in the sheltered bay. It's easy to see why, in the 1930s, painter Marc Chagall described Tossa as 'blue paradise'.

Tossa's main beach, Platja Gran, is made up of a golden, almost luminous Mediterranean mix of sand and fine pebbles that sparkle in the sun. In high summer, the beach can be overwhelmed by a sea of bodies, but north along the same bay, Platja del Reig and Platja Mar Menuda remain quieter and more intimate. Further along the coast is another candidate for the title of the Costa Brava's prettiest village beach, Calella de Palafrugell. In this secluded hamlet, fish restaurants in gleaming white cottages overlook the sand.

The signature Costa Brava beach, however, is a concealed cove – a U-shaped inlet occupied in equal measure by sea and sand, and surrounded by pine forests climbing steep hillsides. All of these elements are present at the bay of Aiguablava. Even in the height of summer, its rocky outcrops keep overcrowding at bay, and climbing down through the trees to its quiet sands feels like stumbling upon a well-kept local secret. 'Look around you and listen,' says Noemí García, a young

lifeguard. 'What languages do you hear most? Spanish and Catalan. That's because whether we're here for work or just to go for a swim, we're all from around here. We're all from the Costa Brava.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

● costabrava.org

WHERE TO EAT

● **Toc al Mar.** On a slight rise above the beach at Aiguablava, this open-air restaurant feels like an extension of the beach. Order grilled fish, caught by Ramón Deulofeu and cooked over an oakwood fire (00 34 972 113 232; from £10).

ABOVE FROM LEFT Beach lifeguard Noemí García; fortifications at Tossa de Mar; diners outside Toca al Mar. **BELOW LEFT** Calella de Palafrugell. **OPPOSITE** The hidden cove of Aiguablava



WHERE TO STAY HOSTAL SA RASCASSA

Where a quiet road through pine forests meets the sea at Aiguafreda, this early 20th-century home combines stone architecture and exceptional food. It is the location and attention to detail by owner Oscar – and husband-and-wife team Leo and Angela, who run the kitchen – that make this the perfect escape (hostalsarascassa.com; twins from £75 for two nights minimum; open 9 March to 27 October 2012). ►



3 CAP DE CREUS & FIGUERES Best for Dalí

MILE MARKER: 107



An hour's drive along the C31, GIV6216 and well-signposted minor roads

An austere landscape of rock, Cap de Creus is mainland Spain's easternmost point and the place where master painter Salvador Dalí found much of his inspiration. 'It's impossible to understand Dalí's surrealism,' says Antoni Pitxot, a painter and Dalí's one-time confidant and collaborator, 'without understanding his relationship with Cap de Creus.'

'From when he was a child, Dalí used to spend hours at a time here, walking barefoot across the cape then contemplating for hours the rocks, the sun on them, how the light fell. Ah, the conversations we used to have about those rocks! He would say to me, "Did you see that...?"'

Dalí's passion for the landscape is contagious. Cap de Creus is an otherworldly terrain of strangely striated rocks glistening with the patina of ages, veins running through them like rivers. Outcrops come suddenly into focus – bizarre rocky forms that evoke Dalí's sense of the absurd. Here, a craggy, wind-worn face in profile; there, the rock that served as muse for Dalí's masterwork, *The Great Masturbator*. 'For Dalí, Cap de Creus was a fantastical place,' says Pitxot. 'Or as he put it, "a grandiose geological delirium".'

Dalí's eccentricity is much in evidence in the village of Port Lligat. His former home, which is now the Casa Museo Dalí, is an old fisherman's hut that was transformed into a labyrinthine building now filled with his weird paraphernalia: a stuffed polar bear, a phallus-shaped swimming pool, a wooden bust of Christ, an unfinished painting on the easel.

Although he spent most of his adult life on the coast, Dalí was born and died in the town of Figueres, an hour inland. Here, the Dalí Theatre-Museum – co-designed with Pitxot before Salvador Dalí's death – houses the world's finest collection of his art works. Lurking in the background of so many of his masterpieces (*Leda Atomica*, *The Spectre of Sex Appeal*, *Othello Dreaming of Venice*, *Rhinocerotus Figure of "Illisus" of Phidias*) is the artist's beloved Cap de Creus, a land that is both real and imagined.



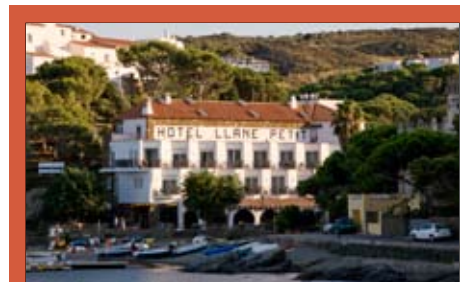
FURTHER INFORMATION

● The Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí oversees the painter's legacy and runs Dalí museums at Figueres and Port Lligat (salvador-dali.org).

WHERE TO EAT

● Restaurante Cuatro. Cadaqués, a pretty seaside town on the Cap de Creus peninsula, has many waterfront restaurants, but Cuatro is a cut above. Try the excellent grilled seafood platter (cuatro-restaurant-cadaques.com; mains from £14).

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The Mae West Room in the Dalí Theatre-Museum; the Casa Museo Dalí, once a simple fisherman's hut; painter Antoni Pitxot, a friend of and collaborator with the master artist



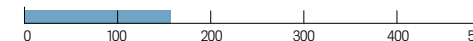
WHERE TO STAY HOTEL LLANE PETIT

In Cadaqués' quiet, southern reaches and surrounded by rocks that echo Cap de Creus, this attractive hotel has cheerful white rooms and unusual, angular balconies – ask for one with a view over the small cobbled beach (llanepetit.com; from £60).



4 GIRONA Best for medieval Spain

MILE MARKER: 160



One to two hours' drive west and then south from Cadaqués via Figueres

Crowned by a looming cathedral and encircled by formidable walls, Girona looks like the film set for a medieval epic. This is one city that really knows how to put on a show. The star historical attraction is its architecture – Girona's high stone walls contain churches and former cathedrals, one-time synagogues and minor palaces, all dating from different eras of its medieval past.

Across the steep-sided hill that Girona's old town inhabits, an intricate network of stone-clad laneways turn and twist. Buildings guarded by high archways and antique doors, adorned with balconies of wrought iron, tumble down to one of the prettiest urban river frontages in all of Catalonia. Wandering these alleyways, it somehow isn't all that surprising to see a robed monk emerging from the shadows.

The mysterious figure is one of many who take part in Girona's numerous historical re-enactments – their way of breathing life into the city's medieval past. Today is a restaging of its heroic defence against Napoleon's armies – in 1808, Girona held firm against the invaders for seven months while around them cities and entire regions capitulated.

Looking rather Napoleonic himself, a local man who introduces himself simply as José is playing the leader of Girona's defenders – a mix of grizzled chaps dressed as soldiers with fixed bayonets and town noblemen who swagger and strut. 'Why do we do this?' José says to me. 'Partly, it's a bit of fun. But it's also because



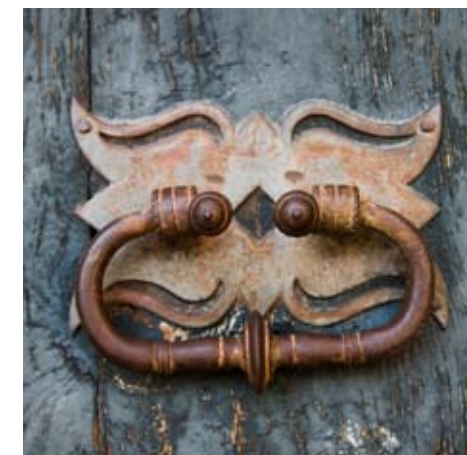
we take our history seriously here in Girona. How could we not? The city's story is written on every stone.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

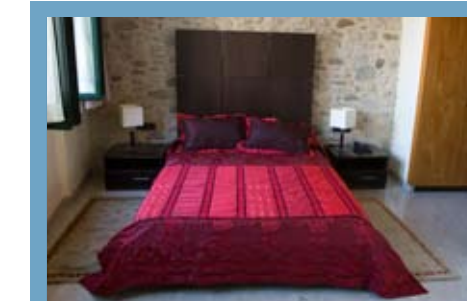
● The local government tourist office (girona.cat) is supplemented by a privately run information office, Turisme Imaginari (gironabooking.com).

WHERE TO EAT

● Café Le Bistrot. A throwback to the literary cafés of early 20th-century Catalonia, this bistro serves Catalan and French food (cafelebistrot.com; mains £8).



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Girona-dweller José in Napoleonic-era costume; stone pathways flanked by high walls reflect Girona's proud heritage of Catalan defiance. **BELOW LEFT** An iron door knocker



WHERE TO STAY HOTEL HISTORIC

A few steps from the cathedral and occupying a wonderful stone townhouse high on the old city hill, Hotel Històric has spacious rooms with beamed ceilings. The top-floor suite is gorgeous and flooded with natural light, while the on-site apartments have more space and a retro aesthetic (hotelhistoric.com; suites £180). ▶

5 PARC NACIONAL D'AIGÜESTORTES I ESTANY DE SANT MAURICI

Best for scenery

MILE MARKER: 449



A four- to five-hour drive via the AP7, AP2 and C-13

Deep in the Pyrenees, where Spain rises to meet the rest of Europe, the Parc Nacional d'Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici is northeastern Spain's most beautiful corner. 'This park is like Yellowstone, Canada and the Alps, rolled into one and in miniature,' says Josep Maria Rispa, who's been a park ranger here for 20 years. 'You have the best in alpine scenery but within a small area.'

Entering the park from the southwest, the valley of the Riu de Sant Nicolau, carved by ancient glaciers, climbs into the park's inner reaches. At 1,600 metres above sea level, the trail – accessible at this point only on foot, or by taxi from nearby Boi – passes the pristine freshwater of Estany de Llebreta. 'Of around a thousand lakes in the Pyrenees,' says Josep, 'almost two hundred are within the park's borders. Nowhere in the Pyrenees – nowhere else in southern Europe, in fact – is there such a concentration of lakes. This is the park of the waters, a paradise of lakes.' Estany (the Catalan word for 'lakes') and aigüestortes ('winding streams') are what give the park its name.

Beyond Estany de Llebreta, the valley climbs to a rugged plateau watered by clear mountain streams and home to semi-wild horses. Valleys narrow and rise ever deeper into the park before finally reaching remote Estany Llong, 2,000 metres above sea level and a 90-minute hike beyond the last taxi drop-off point. Here, in the park's heart, there is a sense of standing between two different worlds. Past the mountains to the west, Atlantic weather prevails, but to the east the climate is Mediterranean. 'You must respect these mountains,' says Josep. 'They're beautiful, but it could snow here, even in summer.'

He points out a pine tree that somehow survives up here – at 600 years old, it predates Columbus. In the distance beyond are the jagged granite shards of the Agujas Perdut (Lost Peaks) – mythic natural fortresses around which white clouds swirl and said to shelter an invisible lake. Even after two decades of seeing it, Josep is silenced by the view – all of Catalonia, stretched out at the mountains' feet.



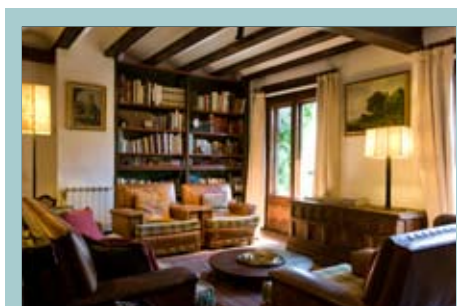
ABOVE Herds of semi-wild horses roam the park's rugged plateau at nearly 2,000 metres above sea level. **OPPOSITE** The park contains pristine alpine landscapes and almost 200 lakes

FURTHER INFORMATION

● Park information can be found at reddeparquesnacionales.mma.es. Private vehicles cannot enter the park, and the hike from the park's entrance to Estany Llong takes three-and-a-half hours. Returns by Jeep taxi into the park from Boi cost £8; Estany Llong is a 90-minute hike beyond the last taxi drop-off.

WHERE TO EAT

● El Caliu. At the top of the village of Taull, this well-regarded local restaurant does creative salads and mountain dishes such as stuffed lamb (elcaliutaull.com; mains from £8).



WHERE TO STAY PENSION SANTA MARIA

Taull is home to a stone-built Romanesque church that ranks among the most beautiful in all Christendom. Within sight of the church, this charming house of rustic stone, wood and slate, overseen by owner Alex, is a rambling country retreat of impeccable taste. Like the open fire, rooms are warm and welcoming (taull.com; from £70).



Madrid-based **Anthony Ham** is a regular contributor to *Lonely Planet Magazine*. He is also the coordinating author of *Lonely Planet's Spain* and *Pocket Barcelona* guides.

In next month's *Lonely Planet Magazine*, join us on The Perfect Trip to **COSTA RICA**.

