

WORDS KIM TRAILL

travel

Barcelona

MERCURY AND CABALLÉ SERENADED IT, BUT **KIM TRAILL** DISCOVERED A MODERNISTA PARADISE BIGGER THAN YOUR AVERAGE POP BALLAD

Sprawling along the Mediterranean coastline, Barcelona might be Spain's second largest city, but culturally it's very much the capital of Catalonia. You'll certainly find Spanish staples here: feisty flamenco – all smouldering gazes and snapping castanets – along with pyrotechnical Spanish classical guitar concerts, but to get a real sense of this pulsating metropolis at the foot of the Collserola mountains, you need to seek out the city's Catalan cultural heritage.

Fortunately that's not too difficult. Studded with monuments from Catalonia's cultural renaissance of the early 1900s, Barcelona is a paradise for aficionados of Modernista (Art Nouveau) architecture, in particular the fantastical creations of Antoni Gaudí – affectionately nicknamed “God's architect”. Gaudí's magnum opus, the still unfinished Sagrada Familia cathedral – a wonderously organic fairy tale in stone – is the most visited site in Spain.

There's a plethora of spectacular *Festa Majors* (street festivals): from *gegants* – parades of giant puppets, *castellers* – teams of people building dizzyingly tall human towers, to *diables* – devils spinning fireworks around their heads, showering onlookers with sparks. And while flamenco is most definitely a Spanish import, the Catalans have their own national folk dance, the rather more sedate *sardana*, often performed in parks on Sundays, accompanied by traditional folk orchestras, called *coblas*.

Tragically for the Catalans, General Franco did his best to stamp out their language and culture during his brutal 36-year dictatorship. Shut off from the world by Franco's fascist politics, the fertile artistic atmosphere of fin de siècle Barcelona was all but destroyed. Since Franco's death in 1975, the Catalans have bounced back, and seize any opportunity to celebrate their language and culture. Now spoken by over six million people, the Catalan language has regained its ‘official tongue’ status, and if President Artur Mas gets his way, this coming November Catalonians will be voting in a referendum on whether to break away from Spain.

The Catalans are justly proud of their city, with its appealing beaches, sparkling port, lively squares both grand and intimate, abundant seafood and fine wines. Federico García Lorca once described La Rambla – Barcelona's famous tree-lined promenade which runs from Plaça de Catalunya in the old centre to the Christopher Columbus monument at Port Vella – as “the only street in the world which I wish would never end.” There's a fantastic ‘Gothic’ district and an hour away by train are the mystical mountains and monastery of Montserrat.

For music lovers, however, the city's most striking attraction would have to be Lluís Domènech i Montaner's fabulous Catalan Palace of Music. Located in a section of old Barcelona called La Ribera, the Palau was constructed between 1905-08, at the height of the Catalan renaissance. Demanding a



TRAVEL INFO

Average Temperatures:

Winter: 13°C – Summer: 29°C

Currency: Euro (AU\$1=EUR0.68)

Best time to visit: Any time of year is pleasant although it gets hot in August. Cultural events take place throughout the year but the Casals Music Festival in July is rather special.

TOURIST INFORMATION

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Barcelona with Gaudí's Sagrada Familia Cathedral



design symbolic of the Catalan character, the building's wealthy sponsors gave the period's finest artists and craftsmen free reign to produce their most sumptuous sculptures, intricate mosaics and decorative concepts. The result is a breathtaking world heritage listed architectural masterpiece. The walls on either side of the 2200-seat hall are made almost entirely of stained glass, framed within vast arches. Much of the ceiling is a huge stained glass skylight, with an inverted dome as the centrepiece.

The Palau presents an eclectic range

“A CONCERT AT THE PALAU IS LIKE HAVING YOUR MUSIC GIFT-WRAPPED”

of performances – from flamenco, Cançó catalana (Catalan song) and jazz, to symphonic and chamber music. Orchestral concerts are sometimes of the 'greatest hits' variety, but often include pieces by Catalan and Spanish composers. Granados and Albéniz, both Catalan, were Spain's most famous composers of the early 20th century and definitely worth looking out for.

The annual Maria Callas International Music Competition – one of the largest in Europe – is held at the Palau each March. Founded by a Catalan pianist, it's a great chance to hear international soloists perform in the gorgeous Palau at bargain prices. Regardless of what you actually hear, a concert at the Palau is like having your music gift-wrapped.

For opera fans, Barcelona's 2300-seat Gran Teatre del Liceu, is one of the most beautiful

in Europe. Originally constructed in 1847, the Liceu is located halfway up La Rambla. Step away from the buskers, souvenir stands and bird cages and you'll see where tenor José Carreras, a Barcelona native, made his debut on the opera stage at 11 as Trujamán in Manuel de Falla's *El retablo de Maese Pedro* (Master Peter's Puppet Show). Fellow Catalan, soprano Victoria de los Angeles, also made her debut here at 18, singing the role of Mimi in *La Bohème*. Soprano Montserrat Caballé, another Catalan, has also been a regular performer at the Liceu. Pablo (Pau) Casals was once the opera orchestra's principal cellist and gave his final performance here in October 1938 before leaving his homeland permanently.

Despite being bombed once and twice destroyed by fire, the landmark theatre has been immaculately restored and now offers a lively and diverse repertoire. From popular and contemporary opera – curiously with a strong focus on German works – to ballets, concerts and musicals, there's also a program for children, which offers child friendly adaptations of *The Magic Flute* and

The Barber of Seville. Contemporary Catalan composers occasionally feature in the program, including Enric Palomar, who was commissioned by the Liceu to compose the rather gruesomely titled opera *La Cabeza del Bautista* (*The Head of John the Baptist*).

Barcelona also boasts a shiny, modern concert hall, L'Auditori, a giant Ikea inspired concrete construction, which opened in March 1999. Home to Barcelona's orchestra, the OBC (Orquestra Simfónica de Barcelona I Nacional de Catalunya), L'Auditori lacks warmth, but makes up for it with impressive acoustics. Several of Gaudí's most famous buildings, including Casa Batlló, Casa Milá – also known as the Pedrera, or Quarry – and the buildings of magical Park Güell, also play host to regular opera and classical concerts.

This August, a new outdoor opera festival will premiere in Barcelona, with performances to be held in the El Grec amphitheatre on Montjuic. An initiative of long time Barcelona resident, Australian mezzo-soprano Michelle Marie Francis Cook and tenor Sergi Gimenez Carreras, nephew of José Carreras, the OPERAIR Barcelona Festival is primarily targeted at summer visitors to the city. The program includes a full production of Bizet's *Carmen* – with Francis Cook in the title role – along with a flamenco ballet incorporating the music of Manuel de Falla's *El Amor Brujo* (*The Bewitched Love*) and works by Albéniz, Granados, Rodrigo and Turina. Francis Cook is confident the event will soon rank among the leading festivals in Europe.

If you're in Barcelona in late July-August, another must see is the Pau Casals International Music Festival. With an eclectic program featuring local and international artists, concerts are held in a small auditorium across the road from Casal's house – now the Casals Museum – in the beachside town of San Salvador.

Catalonia's great cellist...

The legendary Catalan cellist Pau Casals was asked why he continued to practice at age 93. "Because I think I'm making progress," he replied. Widely regarded as the finest cellist of the first half of the 20th century, Casals was fiercely opposed to Franco's dictatorship, leaving Catalonia for good in 1938. Casals (1876-1973) was awarded the UN Peace Medal in 1971 in recognition of his stance on peace, justice and freedom. At age 80, Casals married a 20-year-old student, dismissing concerns that marriage to someone 60 years younger might be hazardous to his health: "I look at it this way: if she dies, she dies."

