



barcelona

From new post-industrial chic arts centres to hip eco-stores and contemporary design hotels, the Catalan capital is fizzing with energy, says Paul Richardson

It was little more than 20 years ago, in 1992, that the Olympic Games transformed a scruffy, seldom-visited harbour city into the western Mediterranean's most dynamic and attractive metropolis. Now Barcelona is in the news again, thanks to an initiative by Catalan leader Artur Mas to set the region on the road to full independence from Spain. Mas has staked his place in history on statehood and claims that an independent Catalunya would have "a capacity for wealth creation per capita similar to that of Germany".

It happens that most business folk in Barcelona disagree with him, while the majority of Catalans take the view that tackling the high level of unemployment is of greater importance than the pursuit of a political chimera. Either way, the city certainly feels more European than many others in Spain, and more open to the world than ever before. It is also tougher on the credit card; restaurant prices at the top end are almost on a par with London and Paris. The sheer fabulosity of a high-fashion emporium such as Santa Eulàlia (founded in 1843 but recently given a gorgeous overhaul by New York-based interior designer

William Sofield), for example, is nearly inconceivable in the more traditional Madrid. The wisened-up cred of the city's eco-stores (Home on Earth and Olokuti are two of the best-known) feels closer to San Francisco than Seville. For contemporary design shops Barcelona has always knocked spots off any other Spanish city; Vinçon comes top, but newer gems such as Room Service, an exquisite show-space for the very hippest modern furniture, are more than worth the detour.

The *New York Times* published a piece of reportage in September last year purporting to show the grim reality of a Spain where people are forced to forage for food in rubbish bins. It's hard to believe that Barcelona is part of the same country.

While it's patently untrue to say that the Catalan capital has been unaffected by the country's economic crisis, the city's tourist sector, especially at the upper end, is proving powerfully resilient. New five-star hotels continue to appear at a furious rate – even after a



Above: the Ohla Hotel's Chill-Out Terrace. Left: the Vinçon design store

recent flurry of openings introduced such luminaries as the Meliá Barcelona Sky and the Mandarin Oriental, the latter being especially successful thanks, in part, to its superb interior by Spanish design doyenne Patricia Urquiola (and to its dark and moody Banker's Bar). Even so, as many as 13 locations are promised by the end of this year.

The newest of these tend to be small and located in the city centre, with an emphasis – typical for Barcelona – on upscale, contemporary design. At the upper end of the Via Laietana, set back a

little from this noisiest of streets, the Ohla Hotel has an irresistible panache that has taken it straight into the premier league. Dominating its ground floor is a gastro-bar (a genre that has triumphed in Barcelona, as in Madrid) with the street visible at waist-level through a wall of plate glass, while right at the top of the

hotel, under a cupola in the building's former ballroom, is the sensational Dome Suite, whose soaring inner space would comfortably incorporate a decent-sized London town house.

Over in the cross-hatched streets of the Eixample, the Alma scores high marks for sheer architectural drama, its hushed, dimly lit interiors and expensively minimalist decor being discreet to the point of austerity. Meanwhile, down in the Gothic quarter (Barri Gòtic), hitherto bereft of properly smart accommodation, the five-star Mercer,

which opened in September, raises the bar for the Barcelona boutique hotel to a level others will struggle to match.

Designed by Rafael Moneo, a leading light in contemporary Spanish architecture, the Mercer is an exercise in grown-up chic – combining wood, stone, glass and fabric with immaculate furnishings.

With all this fresh talent, older “design” properties are having to look to their laurels, and the Hotel Arts, 20 years old next year, is doing exactly that. Not for nothing did it become a symbol of the brave, new post-Olympian Barcelona, in its high-tech tower behind the beach. The early-1990s opulence of the hotel’s interiors not only still feels relevant, but has developed a classic integrity that’s a whisper away from retro. Its highly geared, multilingual service remains arguably the best in town – as does its breakfast, a feast on an epic scale taking in dim sum, crêpes, Catalan charcuterie and a great deal more.

But the novelty here is the revamped Arts Suite – 150sq m of peerless Italian-designed elegance whose 30th-floor position provides mesmerising views of both city and ocean.

The Arts’ Enoteca restaurant, run by Paco Pérez of the Miramar in Llançà, exemplifies a new Barcelona trend: the five-star hotel with a two-Michelin-starred eatery. (Other examples include Dos Cielos in the Meliá Barcelona Sky, Saüc in the Ohla and Moments in the Mandarin Oriental.) In general terms, the restaurant scene has moved away from seriousness and experimentation into fascinating byways such as the Catalan eating-house (Petit Comité, Suculent, El Passatge del Murmuri) and the supercharged tapas bar (Tickets, Ten’s). Mixing and matching is par for the course: cocktails are now commonly taken with tapas, a top-notch priorat with a world-beating burger at La Royale, and a well-poured beer with Catalan bistro



Clockwise from above: the lobby at Hotel Alma. Paco Pérez’s Enoteca restaurant at Hotel Arts. Plaça Reial in the Barri Gòtic



A new wave of bars is reviving the custom of the midday vermouth with seafood snacks



fare at Fàbrica Moritz, the Jean Nouvel-designed refit at the old Moritz brewery.

The Barcelona drink of the moment (apart from the fancy G&T) is vermouth, and a new wave of bars is reviving the Catalan custom of the midday *vermut* served with salty seafood snacks to jump-start the appetite. Best of them are Morro Fi, La Bodegueta and Casa Mariol, a postmodern tavern close to the Sagrada Família, where Miquel Angel Vaquer serves wine (reds, whites and Moscatels) made by his parents at the family bodega in Tarragona.

If a single Barcelona establishment merits the attention of wine lovers,

however, it’s Monvínic. This unique and widely praised fusion of wine bar, tasting room, vinous cultural centre and modern Catalan restaurant, housed in a calm contemporary space with an atmosphere poised between studiousness and pleasure, is a venue that sybarites won’t want to miss.

It’s a fact sometimes overlooked that Barcelona is the powerhouse of the Spanish tourist industry, with more than 7m visitors last year. The downside, for the discerning, is the unmistakable beginnings of a theme-park feeling in the city’s historic centre, now abandoned by locals in the face of the

hordes of tourists. More than ever, it pays to get off the heaving treadmill of the Ramblas, the Gaudi buildings and the Barri Gòtic and into living, breathing neighbourhoods thus far uncolonised by mass tourism.

Of the up-and-coming barrios, none is ascending faster than Sant Antoni, where a legion of new locales (the pioneer being the haute-bohemian, Australian-run

Federal Café) is bringing some gloss to a once-dull neighbourhood. Then there is Poble Nou, a former light-industrial district transformed into a plugged-in creative zone and rebranded “22@”. The area’s Can Framis, a converted wool factory housing a superb collection of contemporary Catalan art, is one of Barcelona’s newest museums, yet remains, gratifyingly, some way off the beaten tourist track. Another arts centre, just completed in the sprawling old Fabra i Coats factory in unglamorous Sant Andreu, represents “post-industrial chic” taken to a whole new level.

Culture as a force for change is a Barcelona speciality. The MEAM (Museu Europeu d’Art Modern), a new museum bravely championing the “outsider” cause of contemporary figurative art, sets out its stall in an 18th-century palace, the Palau Gomis, rescued from near-derection and sensitively restored.

Strollers around the grungy-chic Raval district have been amazed to discover a challenging new building in textured concrete and rusted-iron panels – the film archive Filmoteca de Catalunya – at the heart of what was not long ago the area’s sleaziest square, a dreary haunt of prostitutes and absinthe drinkers.

Onwards and upwards in spite of the gloom; that might be the message that Barcelona is sending out. Whether or not the city is destined to preside over the birth of a nation, there are good reasons for believing in the power of its creativity, hospitality and Mediterranean *joie de vivre* to see it through the challenging times. ♦

THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are for a double room per night with breakfast, excluding tax. **Hotel Alma**, 271 Carrer de Mallorca (+34932-164 490; www.alma-barcelona.com), from €250. **Hotel Arts**, 19-21 Carrer Marina (+34932-211 000; www.hotelartsbarcelona.com), from €215. **Mandarin Oriental**, 38 Passeig de Gràcia (+34931-518 888; www.mandarin-oriental.es), from €265. **Meliá Barcelona Sky**, 272 Carrer Pere IV (+34933-672 050; www.melia.com), from €190. **Mercer Hotel**, 7 Calle dels Lledó (+34933-107 480; www.mercerbarcelona.com), from €370. **Ohla Hotel**, 49 Via Laietana (+34933-415 050; www.ohlahotel.com), from €251.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Prices are for a three-course meal with half a bottle of wine. **La Bodegueta**, 100 Rambla de Catalunya (+34932-154 894; www.labodegueta.cat). **Casa Mariol**, 442 Rosselló (+34934-367 628; www.casamariol.com). **Dos Cielos**, see Meliá Barcelona Sky, from about €85. **Enoteca**, see Hotel Arts, about €180. **Fàbrica Moritz**, 41 Ronda de Sant Antoni (+34934-260 050; www.moritz.com), €30. **Federal Café**, 39

Carrer del Parlament (+34931-873 607; www.federalcafe.es). **Moments**, see Mandarin Oriental, €160. **Monvínic**, Carrer de la Diputació (+34932-726 187; www.monvinic.com). **Morro Fi**, 171 Consell de Cent (morrofi.wordpress.com). **El Passatge del Murmuri**, 104 Rambla de Catalunya (+34935-500 600; www.murmuri.com), €30. **Petit Comité**, 13 Passatge de la Concepció (+34935-500 620; www.petitcomite.cat), €45. **La Royale**, 5 Plaça del Camp (+34932-547 393; www.laroyale.es), €35. **Saüc**, see Ohla Hotel, €64. **Suculent**, 43 Rambla del Raval (+34934-436 579; www.suculent.com), €35. **Ten’s**, 79 Carrer Rec (+34933-192 222; www.tensbarcelona.com), €40. **Tickets**, 164 Avinguda del Paral·lel (+34932-924 253; www.ticketsbar.es), €70.

SHOPS

Home on Earth, 76 Carrer de l’Hospital (+34930-002 515; www.homeonearth.com). **Olokuti**, 38 Carrer Astúries (+34932-170 070; www.olokuti.com). **Room Service**, 16 Carrer dels Angels (+34933-021 016; www.roomservicebcn.com). **Santa Eulàlia**, 93 Passeig de Gràcia (+34932-150 674; www.santa-eulalia.com). **Vinçon**, 96 Passeig de Gràcia (+34932-156 050; www.vincon.com).

GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS

Can Framis, 116 Carrer Roc Boronat (+34933-208 736; www.fundaciocivila-casas.com). **Fabra i Coats**, 20 Carrer St Adrià (+34932-566 155; www.fabraicoats.bcn.cat). **Filmoteca de Catalunya**, 1 Plaça Salvador Seguí (+34935-671 070; www.filmoteca.cat). **MEAM**, 5

Carrer Barra de Ferro (+3493-319 5693; www.meam.es).

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

The Benedictine monastery of **Montserrat** is the region’s spiritual nexus and home to an ancient image of the Virgin Mary in wood. The **Montserrat Museum** (+3493-877 7777) contains works by Picasso, Dalí, Tàpies, Monet, Renoir and Degas.

WHEN TO GO

May-June and September-October are the best times to enjoy this mild Mediterranean climate.

HOW TO GET THERE

Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) and British Airways (www.ba.com) fly daily from Gatwick, from £56 and £79 respectively.

