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Homage to Catalonia, where the Costa Brava is a rite of passage

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

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I happened to be looking up when they flew overhead, a flock of white storks heading south along the Costa Brava, in Catalonia, on Spain's Mediterranean coast.

With the rising sun as their compass, they flew in shifting, untidy groups, black-tipped wings pumping air and red beaks pushing forward. I was watching them when a passing jogger - tanned, a bit winded and a Brit, by his accent - saw me scanning the sky and stopped to look.

"They should be heading west toward Gibraltar," he volunteered, as the birds veered away to the west. "It's their traditional route. But some are wintering over right here, in Spain. I'm convinced they like it as much as we do."

I was up early that September morning, shaking off jet lag with a walk on the Camino de Ronda, the pedestrian trail that hugs the shoreline for 136 miles, from the French border south through Girona province. The path, sometimes paved, sometimes dirt, connects each fishing village, emerald cove and sandy beach to the next, spangling the coast like a string of rough-cut diamonds.

Intent on the birds, it crossed my mind that for a traveler just arrived and eight time zones from home, I was feeling pretty good. No muggy headache, no unquenchable yawns. Maybe my compass was saying the same thing: The Costa Brava is where smart people come to spend the winter. The trouble was that I had only a week to explore; from the look of things, my eight days on the ground would be stretched paper thin.

We - my friends and I - didn't want to miss anything: lazy afternoons bobbing in emerald clear coves; searching for Roman ruins; vineyard visits; and tours at the three most important Costa Brava locations associated with the Surrealistic painter Salvador Dali, and known as the "Dali Triangle." So we decided to hire a guide, an idea I scorned when I was 18 and a "know-it-all" backpacker, but which my parents, seasoned travelers, never failed to recommend. "A good guide can take a pencil sketch and turn it into a portrait," they told me.

You'll probably want to grab your bathing suit and head straight to a cove like the one at Playa del Canadell, near Llafranc (guaranteed to put any French beach to shame). Or perhaps to Cadaques, where we blew an afternoon at the "MF" outdoor cafe, sipping wine and eating tapas under an umbrella. But dig into history first, in the city of Girona, capital of Girona province, on the River Onyar.

Here we met our guide, Carles (Carlos, in Spanish) Pongiluppi, a fact-freak who not only guides locally, but accompanies Spanish groups traveling overseas. Articulate, casual and handsome, he also added a sense of humor to history's whys and wherefores.

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And a good thing, too, since he was a look-alike for Dexter, the killer in the eponymous TV drama, for which he endured some friendly ribbing.

With a brief stop at the tourist office, we crossed the Sant Felui Bridge and made for the town's old city center, now restored, awash in gardens and crisscrossed by spacious squares and narrow cobblestone passages. Plunging into the heart of the medieval quarter, we poked through every block, looking at fragments of the Roman road - the Via Augusta - tiny medieval houses, 12th century churches, portions of the old city walls, the half-hidden Jewish quarter, and among these, newer buildings.

Armed with the street map, I nailed the directions. But I lagged behind to look at some flowers, took a wrong turn across another bridge and wound up on Independence Square, where the city's better stores and old and new architecture styles mix and match.

An unexpected revelation was a tour of St. Peter's Cathedral, no longer used as a church. Stripped of its original trappings and completely bare, its 12th century "beautiful bones" showed why art historians use it as a classic example of Romanesque architecture.

As part of Spain, Girona and the Costa Brava, enjoy the warmth of the Spanish sun. But Catalonia's special culture and history infuse the region with a unique sensibility. Whether you're tasting wine, riding a bus, talking to a flower seller or joining a museum tour, Catalanian pride is palpable.

Chef Joan Roca, whose three-starred Michelin restaurant, El Cellar de Can Roca, was ranked last year as the World's No. 1 Restaurant (by Restaurant magazine), and who brought me into his kitchen for a quick look, said that the foundation of his cooking styles are based on his mother's cooking at home.

At the other end of the culinary spectrum was the Bonay family restaurant, on the Placa de los Voltes in the historic village of Peretallada. Tell Enrique you want to try his local food and he'll serve what Pongiluppi says is "genuine local food, the kind of dishes that people here prepare at home."

And there's the Catalan language, unique only to Catalonia. Spoken by many and mixed with Spanish for place names (platja for playa) and on signs, it's the wind on which a fervent nationalist movement stays aloft, always agitating for independence.

Traveling with Pongiluppi meant no detail went unnoticed, no question unanswered. We learned more about village life, museum exhibits, mushroom-growing habitats and medieval stone quarries than a Wikipedia researcher. The impossibly-steep, narrowly terraced hillsides? Ancient vineyards. The lake? A wetlands popular with birders. The familiar flower-bedecked staircase in Begur? Used in the filming of "Suddenly Last Summer." The dreary-looking church? A refugee of the Spanish Civil War: During the conflict, once-remarkable frescoes and carvings were destroyed or painted white by anti-Franco Republicans.

And we discovered what Dali, the master showman, was all about. His childhood home, which he later rebuilt, is a hoarder's heaven. See it in Port Lligat, near Cadaques. For a study in symbolism, head for the eye-popping Dali Theatre Museum, in Figueres, which displays his collection and where he lived at the end of his life.

Gala's house at Pubol, in La Pera, is the manor he bought for his wife, Gala, who accepted it with the provision that he never visit her or stay overnight. But he contributed personal touches, leaving a host of touching, funny, sentimental and quixotic works. Don't miss the photo exhibit upstairs, documenting their lives. My recommendation? Visit this one first.

Our most southerly excursion took us to the port at Palamos where we boarded a creaky, slightly dinged sailboat owned by a friend of a friend - a relationship never made clear - for a coastal jaunt and quick swim in glassy-clear cool water.

The next day we drove north through rugged dry hills to Cap Creus, the rock-strewn headland that Dali called "a reflection of my tortured mind." From high on the cliff, the Mediterranean's blue sweep fills the frame, cliffs, coves and sea laid out from Spain to France. Here, too, were backpackers toiling uphill on the Camino de Ronda, heading for the cafe and parking lot.

As an ancient coastal trail, the Camino de Ronda is now a now a National Trail, free and open to the public even where it crosses private property. Back at Playa del Canadell, Pongiluppi showed us where the trail and the sidewalk are one and the same, crossing from cafes and souvenir shops to homeowners' front decks.

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"It's quite funny," said Pongiluppi, who spent many a youthful summer's day on this particular beach. "Sometimes you get there and the family is sitting outside eating dinner and tourists are walking back and forth past the table. But the public always has the right of passage"

"How do the homeowners respond to that?" I asked.

"They don't," he said. "Most just say hello and go on with what they're doing."

For those who know it, the Costa Brava, too, is a rite of passage.

IF YOU GO:

LODGING: In L'Escala, toward the north, we stayed at the Hostal Empuries, a mid-range property and restaurant on an inviting swimming beach. The one-story property is not a hostel but is rated as such because it was originally a restaurant with available rooms. Though the footprint resembles a motel, it is a Roman villa design, with wings enclosing garden courtyards. The older two-story hotel adjacent, now restored and renovated, is also part of the property. The special attraction here? Empuries, a Greek and Roman archaeological site 100 yards away. Moderately priced. See the Hotel & Spa HostalEmpuries, in L'Escala, Girona, at www.hostalempuries.com or at info@hostalempuries.com.

In the south, we stayed at Mas de Torrent, in Torrent, a family-owned and restored limestone manor house on a gentle hill, with spacious public rooms, two fine restaurants, a spa and pool and gardens with extensive views. The beach is three miles away. A five-star-rated property, its 39 luxury rooms are in adjacent casitas with a few in the house itself. Most guests are weekenders from Barcelona or the U.K., or visiting Americans. See the Mas De Torrent Hotel & Spa, at www.mastorrent.com; or at commercial@mastorrent.com



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