

SE Travel
HD **Stylish city brings out best in travellers**
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Smarten up your wardrobe - and your looks - if you don't want to feel totally out of place when you visit the Catalan capital, writes Tony Park

BARCELONA is beautiful, as are all its inhabitants, and I'm feeling distinctly daggy as we step off the shuttle bus from our cruise ship, MSC Sinfonia.

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The bus drops us in the shadow of explorer Christopher Columbus, whose statue stands 60m above the port where he returned from his discovery of America. Chris clutches a map, looking dapper in tights and crushed velvet.

Our small group hails a cab, a pristine Mercedes.

The driver is friendly, speaks better English than a Sydney cabbie and cuts a fine figure in brown leather jacket and tailored chinos.

We get him to take us to the furthest of the sights we want to see, Barcelona's magnificent Sagrada Familia cathedral.

The 5km drive takes us along graceful tree-lined boulevards, past parks boasting funky public art, some seemingly inspired by former resident Pablo Picasso. Early morning joggers and roller bladers look more like Nike models than Biggest Loser contestants.

Unlike other port cities we're visiting on the Sinfonia's "Grand Voyage" from Italy to Cape Town, there's a marked lack of graffiti in Barcelona and I wonder if it's because the city's young inhabitants have enough artistic outlets or whether they're just too sensible to mar this perfectly formed metropolis in any way.

I'm not, as a rule, a city person, but this place is flooring me, quickly. And no matter how many European cathedrals you've seen, it's impossible not to be impressed by the Sagrada Familia. Designed by architect Antoni Gaudi, this unfinished masterpiece has been under construction for 130 years. It's a mind-boggling confection of Gothic, modernist and Art Nouveau, featuring everything from gargoyles and the nativity to spires topped by bowls of fruit.

We grab another taxi back towards the port district, but stop short at the Placa de Catalunya. This is the jumping off point for another of Barcelona's must-do experiences, a walk down the 1.2km shopping and gawking avenue La Rambla.

Our guidebook has warned us to beware of pickpockets, but I'm almost disappointed not to have to fend any off. There's also cautionary advice about "well dressed" (of course) con men, but no one tries to sell us a statue of Christopher Columbus.

A pretty woman with a pretty dog sashays past us as we study our map. Even the man talking to himself and rummaging through the garbage bin is sporting a trendy denim jacket and rust-coloured slacks. The only badly dressed people here are the tourists.

Perhaps of more interest than La Rambla itself are the myriad side alleys and hidden gems we stumble into off the main drag. Walking through an ancient stone arcade we emerge, like gastronomic Indiana Joneses, into a hidden food market so bright with colour we almost have to invest in designer sunglasses.

There are live lobsters and whole fish on one side and shiny fresh fruit and spices on the other. Immaculately groomed Barcelonans perched on barstools snack on giant prawns at a counter and our stomachs groan audibly.

Tapas is the answer and we have the heads-up on a neat little place on Carrer Del Cardenal Casanas, a laneway off to the left by a building decorated with an ornately carved dragon and stone umbrellas - it once turned out parasols for the city's perambulating fashionistas.

Taverna Basca Irati is exactly the tapas joint we've been hoping for. The friendly young guy behind the bar talks us through the line of small but perfectly formed pieces arrayed in front of us. Each is held together with a toothpick and we're told that at the end of the meal he'll count the toothpicks and charge us accordingly.

We stand at the long counter and scoff mini croissants filled with crab salad; **bread** with sensational Spanish cured ham; fried prawn, bacon and **cheese** poppers; and mouth-wateringly spicy chorizo.

We're not on top of the local **wine** selection so the bartender lets us taste a couple before we **buy**. Before we know it we've racked up an empty bottle, a few large beer glasses and a small mountain of bare toothpicks.

Back on the boulevard, we wander through an open-air flower market and past street performers posing as statues.

These people annoy me in my own city, but here, in a place where blocks of flats and old umbrella factories look like design icons, these metallic painted people seem to fit.

There's even a bronzed Christopher Columbus who animatedly urges his patrons to look towards the New World as they pose with him for pictures.

I'm thinking, however, I quite like the Old World right now.

The name La Rambla comes from the Arabic for stream, and one once followed the course of the boulevard. Water still flows here underground and it surfaces at the fountain of Canaletes, a popular rendezvous point for locals.

Drink from this black and gold bubbler, so the legend goes, and you will return to Barcelona.

I gulp down as much as I can, because I've decided a cruising visit of a few hours is not nearly enough and I definitely want to come back. Next time, though, I'll be better dressed, and maybe get a facelift.

Tony Park is the author of 10 novels set in Africa. He travelled to Barcelona on the MSC Sinfonia courtesy of msccruises.com.au and swagmantours.com.au

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