

Travel

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'Lemon and olive trees are the backdrop to 12 villas set over terraces above a remote cove'

Louise Roddon stays at Cephalonia's new retreat

The Hoxton, Poblenou



The cool guide to Barcelona

The smartest hotels, hottest restaurants, most fun neighbourhoods and latest things to do. **Isabella Noble** has the lowdown

Catalonia's capital is home to one of Europe's most thrilling hotel scenes. A wave of wildly creative design-led properties has landed in recent years, many of them taking inspiration from Barcelona's Mediterranean landscapes, renowned architecture and rich heritage. Intimate boutique hotels, designer havens and personality-packed B&Bs mingle with landmark grande dames and reimagined Modernista mansions.

So where to base yourself? Staying within the Ciutat Vella (Old City) puts you in the medieval heart, where narrow lanes are crammed with monuments and museums. Busy but handy for everything, the Barri Gòtic has some gorgeous hotel conversions of historic buildings. Neighbouring La Ribera has a more creative vibe, great restaurants, nightlife and shop-

ping, and major sights including the Museu Picasso and the Parc de la Ciutadella. West of the Barri Gòtic, El Raval is a lively and buzzy multicultural district.

North from the Ciutat Vella, Barcelona opens up into the broad, leafy, grid-like Eixample area. This is where you'll find most of the city's celebrated Modernista architecture, including Antoni Gaudí's masterpieces, along with high-end shops and excellent restaurants. Accommodation-wise, it's a wonderland of luxury hotels and boutique properties. Down by the beach, there are a few glamorous five stars, and you'll have maritime Barceloneta on the doorstep.

Going for a hotel outside the centre means better value, fewer crowds and a slower pace. Village-like Gràcia, just north of Eixample, is perfect if you fancy getting



Serras, Port Vell

to know the local vibe and visiting some buzzing vermouth bars. Post-industrial Poblenou, to the northeast, has a flourishing art-and-design scene, less touristy beaches and tapas bars along Rambla del Poblenou.

Sant Antoni, bordering El Raval, has grown into one of Barcelona's trendiest neighbourhoods, and Poble Sec is the easygoing district at the foot of Montjuïc hill, which has famously great pintxo bars.

So options galore, then, and that's before we start talking about the wealth of new places to eat and drink, as well as interesting new tours and cultural happenings all listed here too. You may need more than one trip to take it all in.

Great hotels next page

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Ciutat Vella (Old City) Yurban Passage

A 19th-century textiles factory on the northern edge of La Ribera has been ingeniously reborn as an art-loving boutique joy where there's even a stylish flower bar. Irma's Dream, a sculpture by the Catalan artist Jaume Plensa, greets guests at the door, while an intimate, adults-only vegan spa awaits beneath whitewashed arches. There's an easy-breezy feel to the 60 pared-back rooms, which have yoga mats, works by local artists and (for some) balconies or terraces. Soak up the wraparound views from the heavenly rooftop bar and take a dip in the cool granite pool.

Details: Room-only doubles from £174 (yurbanpassage.com)

Hotel Neri

It doesn't get more perfectly Barcelona than a chiefly restored medieval mansion in the thick of the history-heavy Barri Gòtic, with the cathedral a short stroll away. Spread across two buildings dating from the 12th and 18th centuries, this coveted bolt hole has 22 calming rooms, some with outdoor bathtubs on intimate sun-drenched terraces. Lively print rugs, local fabrics and monochrome photographs mingle with historical touches (open-stone arches, sweeping ceilings). Dining on citrus-infused crayfish carpaccio and octopus and garlic rice on the Plaça de Sant Felip Neri is bliss (mains from £14), or retreat to the rooftop terrace with its sunbeds, gardens, lounge bar and dip pool.

Details: Room-only doubles from £330 (hotelneri.com)

Kimpton Vividora

When the cult Barcelona design team El Equipo Creativo is involved in a hotel it's almost guaranteed to be a knockout. In a restored Barri Gòtic building just north of the cathedral, Spain's first Kimpton is a haven for travellers seeking a super-central base with style. Sunny tones, sea-blue tiles and swirly-white marble sweep through the 156 rooms; thoughtful touches include yoga mats, Carner Barcelona toiletries and bikes and skateboards for zipping around town. Its restaurant, Fausa, does creative Catalan-inspired cooking (mains from

£21), if you can lure yourself from the sun-soaked roof terrace with a metallic pool, artisan cocktails and super views. **Details:** Room-only doubles from £195 (kimptonvivorahotel.com)

Eixample

El Palace Barcelona

Step off Gran Vía into El Palace's mirrored lobby and you're instantly swept into a five-star wonderland of carpeted corridors. 114 classically elegant rooms and six Art Suites honouring past celebrity guests, from Josephine Baker to Ronnie Wood. Founded in 1919, this landmark address was originally Barcelona's Ritz. Over the past few years, a switched-on team has injected fresh energy, bringing in DJ-set brunches, cocktail-accompanied art classes, alfresco yoga and foodie pop-ups such as this summer's L'Arros, serving Costa Brava-style rice dishes on the fabulous jasmine-scented roof terrace. Then there's Amar, the moody-blue-and-gold restaurant that opened in 2022 and is led by Kafa Zafra, who has fine-dining fun with sea-fired flavours — crayfish carpaccio, caviar and butter broche, and ponzu-dressed oysters (mains from £25).

Details: Room-only doubles from £292 (hotelpalacebarcelona.com)

Casa Bonay

The hotel that kick-started Barcelona's lobby-hangout scene is still one of the city's dreamiest places to stay thanks to its fun creative vibe. Catalan-crafts design touches, popular restaurants and thoughtful extras (you can borrow a bike to explore). People tap away on laptops at Libertine before it morphs into a sultry cocktail bar, and the restaurant Bodega Bonay serves Italian-Catalan dishes such as pork belly on tomato bread (dishes from £8). This summer also brings the return of Casa Bonay's rooftop restaurant Chiriquito, for barbecued sardines and local tomato salads (dishes from £10), along with a new coffee spot, Toi Tao. The converted 19th-century building, with 67 rooms, lies just off Tetuan and is a stylish treat where local brands take centre stage in the decor, from handcrafted Teixidors blankets to Estudio Sauvage flowers. **Details:** Room-only doubles from £145 (casabonay.com)

Casa Bonay, Eixample



Casa Mathilda, Eixample



La Sagrada Família

Sir Victor

Popular with a style-driven creative crowd, Barcelona's outpost of the Sir Hotels brand is a landmark building with a bold white-limestone facade, just off Passeig de Gràcia in the north Eixample. It's named after the revolutionary Catalan writer Victor Català (the pen name of Caterina Albert) and the library spotlights works by female authors. The city's Mediterranean colours infuse the entire place — earthy reds, cool blues — and many of the 91 rooms have garden-view balconies. Mr Porter, the very cool lobby restaurant, dazzles with superb steaks, buttery chargrilled cauliflower and expertly mixed cocktails (mains from £23). Over a Morro Fi vermouth by the

rooftop dip pool, you'll glimpse Gaudi's La Pedrera and the Sagrada Família. **Details:** Room-only doubles from £228 (sirhotels.com)

Casa Mathilda

The first floor of a light-filled 1920s Modernista building in the northern Eixample area has been reborn as a gorgeous, independent B&B with boutique flair. Pick from just 14 rooms, which have Catalan-style tilework, soft-toned palettes and refillable water bottles (no single-use plastics here); some open directly onto the back terrace. The whole property has a personal home-from-home feel. Linger over breakfast under the bougainvillea for a feast of local flavours, including

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Cool Barcelona

Where to go, eat and drink

Restaurants and bars

Besta

An irresistible world of Catalan-Galician seafood fusion awaits at understated Besta, in a foodie pocket of the stylish Esquerra de l'Eixample neighbourhood. Imaginative weekly menus might mean smoked-beef tartare, octopus potato and orange salad and razor clams topped with lemon and jalapeño (dishes from €10, bestabarcelona.com). The chefs Carles Ramon and Manuel Núñez also run the popular Batea (sharing plates from £8, bateabarcelona.com), 15 minutes' walk away.

Fismuler

The menu changes every day at the market-based favourite Fismuler in the La Ribera area, where three former El Bulli chefs wow diners with creamy burrata drizzled with zingy olive oil, sea bass in green-pepper sauce and omelettes stuffed with Mallorcan sobrasada (sharing plates from £9, fismuler.com).

Brugarol X

Divine market-fired, firm-to-table dining in an intimate restaurant in Esquerra de l'Eixample, Brugarol X blends Catalan and Japanese flavours. There's also a tiny branch in the Barri Gòtic (six-course tasting menus from €52, brugarolbarcelona.com).

Mont Bar

Now led by the chef Fran Agudo (previously at the Adria brothers' legendary restaurant Tíckets), the Eixample's laid-back Mont Bar recently bagged a Michelin star. It's loved by in-the-know gastronomes for its elevated product-first cooking, such as bite-sized corn-and-jalapeño cruixent and tuna belly with pine nut emulsion (dishes from £5, 16-course tasting menus £18, montbar.com).

Benzina & Doppietta

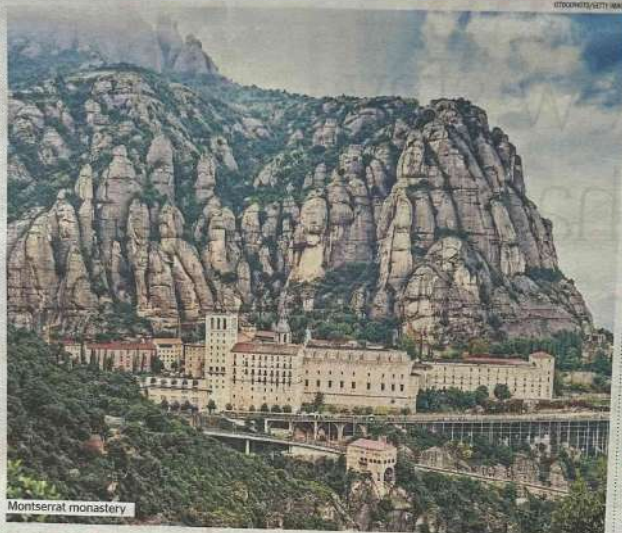
With cool, warehouse style and expertly curated background beats, this side-by-side duo on one of Barcelona's trendiest streets in Sant Antoni does rave-worthy modern Italian cooking and ambitious cocktails, led by the chef Nicola Valle Doppietta has more classic flavours (dishes from £10, doppietta.es), while Benzina specialises in creative plates — try the delicious guanciale carbonara (dishes from £10, benzina.es).

Bar del Pla

It's always a guaranteed good time at El Born's lively go-to tapas spot, all vaulted ceilings and chatty atmosphere. Bar del Pla brings a creative touch to Catalan classics: l'Escala anchovies, patates bravas, mushrooms drenched in wasabi. Fine natural wines are another speciality (tapas from £8, bardeipla.cat).

Vermouth bars in Gracia

Joining the Gracia neighbourhoods vermouth scene often means just grabbing any free table on its villagey squares. Bodega Neus, Vermuteria del Tano, Bodega Marin and La Verma are all popular vermouth bars (vermouths from £2).



Montserrat monastery

Cocina Hermanos Torres

Thanks to the hotshot brothers Javier and Sergio Torres, Barcelona now has its third three-Michelin-star restaurant. A reborn tyre workshop with an open-plan kitchen in untouristed Les Corts is the backdrop for some of the country's most thrilling, season-rooted, sustainability-driven tasting menus (16-course tasting menus £240, cocinalhermanostorres.com).

Compartir Barcelona

Headed up by the respected team behind the city's two-Michelin-star Disfrutar, this Cadaqués-born sensation landed in Barcelona last year. Everything is designed to share and surprise, with Catalan flavours and buckets of creativity in plates such as tarraçon-bearnaise Ebro Delta mussels and rice with jamon (dishes from £12, compartirbarcelona.com).

Paradiso

Named the planet's best cocktail bar in 2022 by World's 50 Best, this sultry haven in El Born mixes its prize-winning creations under a wavy Gaudi-inspired ceiling. Join the online waiting list and prepare to be wowed by signature cocktail the Cloud, which features mescal, hibiscus and a foamy coffee "cloud" (cocktails from £12, paradiso.cat).

Extra Bar

It's absolutely worth the wait for a perch at Gracia's wonderful Little Extra Bar, which specialises in small plates bursting with market-fresh flavours



Benzina restaurant

— tomato and anchovy salad, and potato omelette with botifarra sausage (from £4).

Denassus

Natural Catalan wines, superb tapas and a lively informal vibe go hand in hand at this all-day charmer with a buzzy terrace in the fun Poble Sec area under the Montjuïc hill. There are roast chicken croquettes, pulled pork brioche, truffled tortilla and, of course, a house spin on patatas bravas (tapas from £5, denassus.com).

Can Fisher

For beautiful rice dishes beside the Mediterranean, head to Bogatell beach, bordering Poblenou. The hugely popular Can Fisher restaurant uses local Ebro Delta-grown rice in delectable numbers such as arros del senyoret (everything-peeled seafood rice), and "zero km" local produce features in all its Catalan plates (mains from £17, canfisher.com).

Albe

Just off Passeig Gracia, the stylish gastrobar Albe is making a name for itself on Barcelona's gastronomic scene by bringing Lebanese flavours to Catalan-style dishes. So you might try Palamos-prawn baklava, smoked-butter cauliflower or locally grown Aubergine with tahini and pomegranate (sharing plates from £10, albebarcelona.com).

La Textil

An ever-evolving line-up of house-brewed craft beers and natural wines is just the beginning at this industrial-style bar and restaurant. Dishes feature

fermented ingredients and change with the seasons — from almond-miso oysters to mushrooms in Japanese katsuobushi cream, made from tuna (dishes from £8, latexil.beer).

Betlem

This locally loved haunt in the Dreta de l'Eixample area has classic tapas and platillos (sharing plates) that have been given a light creative touch, served in a converted late 19th-century colmado (a deli-like shop) where menus are chalked up on the board (tapas from £5, betlem.es).

What to do

Picasso Year

Two of Barcelona's headline galleries, the Museu Picasso and the Fundació Joan Miró, have teamed up for the 2023 Picasso Year, which marks 50 years since the death of Pablo Picasso. From October 19 to February 25, 2024, Miró-Picasso explores the friendship between the two artists and their connection with Barcelona (entry TBC, museupicassobcn.cat).

Mirador Torre Glories

The shimmering, cucumber-shaped Poblenou tower, designed by Jean Nouvel in 2005, has finally flung open its doors to visitors, who can survey the city and nearby Sagrada Família from a 125m-high observation deck. There's an interactive sculpture, Cloud Cities Barcelona, that you're welcome to clamber through too (from £13, miradortorreglories.com).

Cava & Montserrat

Join a new, expert-guided small-group day trip to get in early to the millennium-old Montserrat monastery just outside Barcelona, before heading on to a family-owned cava bodega in the Penedès wine region, where you can help with harvesting grapes and taste wines produced here for more than a century (€147, devourtours.com).

Gaudi & music

Each summer Gaudi's otherworldly La Pedrera building hosts jazz concerts on its undulating rooftop, among the distinctive medieval knight-shaped chimneys (€33, lapedrera.com). Neighbouring Casa Batlló, another colourful Gaudi masterpiece, is joining the fun with open-air flamenco, rumba, jazz and more (€50, casabatllo.es).

Barcelona Design Tours

For a deep dive into the city's cutting-edge design world, join a Shops & Showrooms tour, which visits local studios, boutiques and more, or an in-depth itinerary around trendy Poblenou's forward-thinking architecture (€147 for two, barcelonadesigntours.com).

Yoga with a view

Frizzant runs rooftop yoga classes at inspiring addresses such as El Palace hotel, the five-star Mandarin Oriental Barcelona and the Casa de les Punxes (a Modernista gem), and has its own studio and café in Eixample (from £15, frizzant.com).