


**SIX  
NATIONS  
RUGBY**

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ACTRESS  
**Ruth Negga**

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An aerial photograph of Barcelona, Spain, taken from a high vantage point looking down over a lush green park towards the city. The city is densely packed with buildings, and the Sagrada Família is visible on the left. In the background, there are rolling hills under a sky with soft, golden clouds from the setting or rising sun. The overall mood is serene and picturesque.

# OLD CITY

## *New Dreams*

The Catalan capital of Barcelona has all a traveller might seek: an amazing food scene, rich cultural destinations and a populace with undeniable charm.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS EGIN HIGGINS



**S**ixteen years ... not that long in the life of a city, yet Barcelona, an old stomping ground for this writer, has changed a lot since I first stepped foot there in late 2001. And in mostly good ways.

The already brilliant Metro system has been further improved, upgraded and made even more efficient; there are now even more cultural happenings occurring week in/week out than you could shake a delicious slice of *pa amb tomàquet* (bread and tomato) at; but perhaps the most obvious change has been to the city's food scene, which has flourished to turn the city into a hub of world-class culinary creativity.

Prior to my stint, the 1992 Olympics had been the catalyst for the rejuvenation of the metropolis by the Med'. Pre-games, the city had languished – slightly neglected and under-invested in – yet it was a place

that possessed an undeniable cultural spirit lying dormant beneath the miasma of dilapidation: a fascinating, architecturally mish-mashed capital, as uniquely engaging as any heavy-hitting European first city.

The Olympics certainly brought in cash but the billions in moolah didn't just finance PR puff, rebranding and spin. The canny Catalans spent their windfall polishing and further revealing an urban beauty that had lain forsaken for years. It also allowed them to make some new additions, in the shape of sensitive redevelopment and refinement of its Gothic quarter, a man-made beach and investment in a previously lumpen infrastructure.

"*Barrà*", as the locals call it, not "Barça" (that's the football team), is really a city of interconnected neighbourhoods – Barceloneta, El Born, Ciutat Vella, El Raval, El Gòtic and Montjuïc are some of the most

popular and each has its own characteristics, quirks and peccadilloes. And take **Gràcia**, annexed to the city in the 19th century, which remains a culturally independent bastion. Home to quaint squares, bohemian bars and a mixed crowd of Catalan stalwarts and blow-in internationals, all of whom play very well together. It's a village that is very much a microcosm of the larger city. Drop into **Bodega Marin** (+34 932 133 079) for a glass of finest vermouth with olives and revel in an interior that really hasn't changed much since 1916 – a firm favourite for locals. For top-end bites, the more sophisticated **Somodó** (*somodo.es*) fuses Japanese cooking and Mediterranean ingredients. The poached egg on cream of anchovies is just sublime.

At the north end of the barrio, the city's architectural *enfant terrible*, Antoni Gaudí's Parc Güell, is a pleasant way to stretch one's legs and take in the surreal, sculpted architecture of the Modernist maestro.

On the other side of town, in posh Sarrià-Sant Gervasi, a lesser-experienced Gaudí masterpiece, with fewer crowds to endure, **Torre Bellesguard** (*bellesguardgaudi.com*) is also worth exploring.

Originally a family manor house, it is a great example of how Gaudí was not just a master of form but of function too. The guided tour is illuminating and the surrounding neighbourhood calm and interesting.

Not too far away in Montjuïc, the **Fundació Joan Miró** (*fnirobcn.org*) honours the experimental Barcelona artist in a superb building designed by Rationalist architect Josep Lluís Sert. Within, Miró's unmistakable sculpture, tapestry and painting are on display, giving a vivid snapshot of the mind of the creative.

After a tour of the museum, a five-minute walk brings you to the **Telefèric de Montjuïc** (*telefericdemontjuic.cat*). The views from the cable cars are spectacular and the less than ten-minute ride gets you to **Montjuïc Castle**, an ex-military fortress that allows for more stunning views over the city and balmy walks around its historical ramparts and beautifully laid out surrounding gardens.

Hop on the Metro back to **Ciutat Vella**, Barcelona's oldest neighbourhood and essentially the city centre. **Plaça Catalunya** is cool to wander around and a fantastic room with a view is found in the restaurant on the top floor of the **El Corte Inglés** (*elcorteingles.es*) department store. A little pricey by Barcelona standards but worth the outlay for the awesome vista. Ciutat Vella is also home to the famous, or infamous, depending on your take, Las Ramblas, a boulevard that is perhaps worth a quick stroll along, but not much more. Instead, time is better spent heading into the heart of the Gothic area. Take in the Roman, Medieval, Modernist streets, stroll through funky barrio **El Born**, and come out the other side at romantic **Parc de La Ciutadella** with its rowing boats, impromptu salsa dancing, fountains and sculpture. A memorable way to spend a Sunday is right here with a picnic of delicious things picked from one of the city's enviable indoor food markets.

As much as the restaurants in the city are also a big draw for any food nut worth their salt, the municipal indoor grocery markets are larders of edible sights, sounds, aromas and flavours. Discover how food is very much a part of the culture here in the enthusiasm and animated way the city's folk do their shopping. Favourites are the famous **La Boqueria**, just off Las Ramblas; the slick **Mercat del Ninot** in Eixample and the colourful **Mercat de Santa Caterina** in Ciutat Vella – each worth a visit.

So sure, the Airbnb effect has led some of the city's old neighbourhoods – Barceloneta, for instance, is not the once grittily authentic working-class stronghold it once was – to change completely in the past two decades, but for the most part, and for the reoffending visitor at least, progress has brought very good, not to mention exceedingly tasty, things to the bewitching streets of Barcelona. 🍀







Clockwise from opposite, Cava and tapas at Perelló 1898 at the Mercat del Ninot; a stunning steeple at Gaudí's lesser-known Torre Bellesguard; Natalia Albut and Stefania Nunu take in the view from Montjuïc Castle; entry to creative oasis, Fundació Joan Miró.

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## EAT AT ...

**AVANT-GARDE** In **Disfrutar**, the essence of gastronomic Barcelona is alchemised and distilled. A restaurant run by three chefs who previously spent 15 years working together in Ferran Adrià's world **elBulli**, **Disfrutar** (meaning "to enjoy") is an obvious heir to Adrià's molecular gastronomy movement and, while the spirit of **elBulli** is evident, there is also something of a departure. The oeuvre of chefs Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas might best be described as "neo-molecular". You'd be right to expect plenty of surreal surprises from a menu that breaks the frame of modern cooking, yet the cues for this fantasy repertoire are all founded on a solid Mediterranean base. (Carrer de Villarroel, 163, +34 933 48 68 96; [disfrutarbarcelona.com](http://disfrutarbarcelona.com))

**TAPAS** Housed in the bustling (and superb) **Mercat del Ninot**, which gives the traditional **La Boqueria** a run for its onions as the must-visit Barcelona market, **Perelló 1898** is a tapas bar that comes from folks who have been in the business of selling cod (*bacallaners*) since the 19th century. The specialty is ... pretty much everything, but the cod fritters are

a particular treat. Pull a stool up to the slick bar, order a glass of Cava, or several, and pick and choose from a fantastic menu that changes daily. (Passatge del Torrent de l'Estadella, 22; [perello1898.com](http://perello1898.com))

**CHARISMATIC** Traditional yet more modern, lighter, **Tragaluz** is a triumph of setting as much as food. A glass ceiling, open kitchen and nicely distressed (done before they became as ubiquitous as filament bulbs) concrete walls lend an air of chic industry. Food is Med' with a twist; the slightly above-average price point is worth it. Co-founded by the legendary and formidable Barcelona restaurateur Rosa María Esteva – the glass ceiling here is perhaps the only one she has encountered that is still intact. (Passatge de la Concepció, 5, +34 934 87 06 21; [grupotragaluz.com](http://grupotragaluz.com))



Top, a unique dining room, above, cutting-edge plating technique, and left, chefs Eduard Xatruch and Oriol Castro, at **Disfrutar**.

## SMART FLIERS

✓ **AER LINGUS** flies from Dublin to **BARCELONA** twice daily.





Clockwise from far left, land ahoy at Port Vell; fantastic architecture at MNAC; erudite tour guide Jordi Carruesco i Mari from Torre Bellesguard.

## SLEEP AT ...



**GASTRONOMIC** Catalan class suffuses the modern **Hotel Omm**. There are two top-tier dining options – Roca Bar is fun and casual but no retiring type when it comes to culinary chops and there's the Michelin-starred Roca Moo, above, a powerhouse of creative Catalan cuisine. The hotel also has an outdoor rooftop pool and

terrace, with views of Gaudí's Casa Milla, a spa and minimalist, yet cosy rooms in muted tones. Rooms from €230. (Carrer del Rosselló, 265, +34 45 40 00; [hotelomm.com](http://hotelomm.com))

**CLASSY** Refined, distinguished, discreet ... the **Mercer Hotel** is the perfect bolthole for international rock stars and starlets, or those who'd like to live that particular dream in the heart of Barcelona's historical Gothic *barrio*. The Mercer manages to pull off that difficult act of aping cutting-edge interior design while showcasing the historically important architectural features of the building. Furthermore, staff go the clichéd above and beyond when it comes to guest satisfaction. A very classy affair. Rooms from €261. (Carrer dels Lledó, 7, +34 933 10 74 80; [mercercatalonia.com](http://mercercatalonia.com))

**CULTURAL** The aroma of spiced incense wafts through the **Hotel Claris**. Owned by the Derby Hotels Collection, the 'collection' referring to the fascinating objets found throughout this architecturally alluring hotel. Opulent suites, *below*, and a high-toned rooftop restaurant where you'll find as many locals as guests makes this a unique Barcelona experience. Rooms from €187. (Carrer de Pau Claris, 150, +34 934 87 62 62; [hotelclaris.com](http://hotelclaris.com))

