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CITY BY THE SEA HAS GOT IT ALL

Jenna Thompson visits Barcelona

When it comes to choosing a holiday, I suffer from crippling indecisiveness. City break or relaxing beach holiday? Should we spend our time visiting museums and art galleries, or lounging by a pool with a book and a cocktail? Luckily, in Barcelona, you don't have to choose, as this stunning city by the beach really does have it all. In the historic Gothic Quarter, rambling alleyways lead to charming, secluded squares, while on the streets of the Eixample district the incredible architecture of Antoni Gaudi feels as though it is around almost every corner. And where the Mediterranean laps the shore there are miles of golden sands –

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Jenna Thompson

shipped in for the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 – that are lined with cocktail and tapas bars. On our five-day trip, we wanted to sample it all. Our base was the four-star Hotel Balmes in Eixample, which is part of the Derby Hotels Collection. Just a few minutes' walk away from Gaudi's legendary La Pedrera and Casa Batllo, Balmes is brilliantly located for visiting all of Barcelona's main attractions. And when you're tired of exploring, the hotel has a gorgeous pool and garden that feels miles away from the busy streets outside. After a day of walking around, our room was the perfect place to retire to, with a luxurious bathroom and an incredibly comfortable bed.



TAPAS WITH A TWIST: Le Bouchon restaurant in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter.

The hotel is also filled with an unusual collection of African art, which certainly makes it feel unique. On our first evening in the city, we headed for the beating heart of Barcelona – La Rambla, a wide, tree-lined street full of life. But the best of the city is located off there, as we found when we meandered into the stunning alleyways of the Gothic Quarter. There, we dined at Le Bouchon, a charming restaurant located in the stunning Mercer Hotel. After the recent arrival of

chef Harry Wieding, traditional tapas has been given a modern twist. In the most romantic of settings, we enjoyed a fantastic journey through the best of Catalan cuisine. In a city where meat and fish take centre stage on most plates, the staff could not have been more helpful in feeding two vegetarians. It seems as though there is a surprise around every corner in the Gothic Quarter. Although filled with traditional architecture, the lively Placa Reial is lined with modern bars and restaurants, including Ocana, where we drank Spanish beer in the square while people-watching. The highlight of our trip, however, had to be a trip to the Camp Nou. The home of FC Barcelona, the stadium museum and tour is the most visited attraction in the city. But we went one step further and managed to secure tickets to watch the team take on Celtic in the Champions League. We watched in awe as Lionel Messi scored a hat-trick to the deafening roar of the crowd around us. It was an unforgettable experience. After watching a game from the stands, we were keen to explore inside the stadium. As well as the team's incredible trophy cabinet, the tour takes in the changing rooms, tunnel, press room and pitch-side. On a day spent exploring on foot, we saw the most famous of Gaudi's buildings, the Sagrada Familia, and walked around the Parc de la Ciutadella, with its stunning Gaudi fountain. Taking a break from the baking Spanish sunshine, we rowed boats and took in the gorgeous scenery. After that, we were more than ready for a



HIGHLIGHT: Jenna at the Camp Nou.

BREAK AWAY



UPMARKET: Andaz London Liverpool Street.

Victorian grandeur meets modern chic

Angus Young visits London

What to do when planning short break stay in London? Do you stick with a familiar budget chain or twist by opting for a more upmarket hotel? If it's the latter, then take a tip from me and head for the Andaz London Liverpool Street. Originally one of the capital's great railway station hotels, it's now a mix of Victorian architectural grandeur and chic contemporary cool. The latter is on display as soon as you walk through the hotel's large revolving main doors. Reception desks and uniforms are a thing of the past here. Instead, sharply-dressed staff float next to a couple of computer screens tucked discreetly into a low-slung table next to a couple of ice buckets housing complimentary bottles of wine. The ambient mood music pulsing in the background matches the dimmed lighting and the glass lifts to the floors above. Illuminated signs point the way to a champagne bar, a brasserie, a lounge bar and a Japanese restaurant as well as the George pub, a surviving wood-panelled feature of the original hotel and, no doubt, hugely popular with tourists despite the modern-day distraction of a giant TV showing Sky Sports. Our room was a return to the hotel's modernist minimalism, complete with an eye-catching wall mural commissioned to reflect the arty, urban nature

TRAVEL GUIDE

Where: London
Accommodation: Andaz London Liverpool Street, 40 Liverpool Street, London EC2M 7QN
Call: 0207 961 1234
Web: www.londonliverpoolstreet.andaz.hyatt.com

of this particular corner of East London with trendy Shoreditch and Brick Lane just a short walk away. On the night of our stay we explored nearby Spitalfields Market, once the place to buy fresh meat and now occupied by enough restaurants to provide a different dining experience every night for a month. Back at the hotel, our evening ended with a wholly unexpected drama in the plumbing department when a bathroom sink broke away from its fixings. It necessitated a change to an upgraded room and some exceptional customer service from some very apologetic staff. The next morning it was all but forgotten as we enjoyed a beautifully presented buffet breakfast in the grade two listed splendour of the 1901 dining room and its fabulous domed ceiling. All too soon we were on our way, skipping the chance to work out in the hotel gym.

THREE THINGS TO DO



1 Visit Spitalfields
www.spitalfields.co.uk



2 Broadgate Ice Rink
www.broadgate.co.uk



3 Leadenhall Market
www.visitlondon.com

DAYS OUT



IN THE GROTTO: Joanna Lovell with Oliver and Jasmine and Father Christmas.

Santa Claus has come to Cottingham

Joanna Lovell visits Southwood Garden Centre

Santa and his reindeer have arrived in Cottingham! My two children, Oliver, five, and Jasmine, three, were so excited to see and feed them. They arrived all the way from the North Pole last weekend and will be there until Christmas Eve. Santa is already greeting children from his grotto inside the centre, where every child gets a present. My daughter was over the moon to receive a Barbie and my son was happy with his car set. Santa was good with them and, despite there being a queue, we weren't rushed. This year, the centre is hosting a range of events, including Breakfast with Santa and Supper with Santa. The garden centre is now full of Christmas displays, which my children

VENUE GUIDE

Location: Ganton Avenue, Cottingham.
Open: Santa and his reindeer are there until Christmas Eve.
Prices: Entry to see Santa is £6.99 per child.
Call: 01482 845825.
Visit: www.southwoodgardencentre.co.uk

also loved looking at. There's everything from trees and decorations to animated displays. There's also two small rides, which cost £1 a go. Director Jane Jones said: "We are really excited to welcome Santa's live reindeer all the way from the North Pole to Southwood Garden centre. "Our very friendly reindeer will be on show for everyone to see from now until Christmas Eve, when they have to go and help Santa on his very special mission. Children will have the opportunity to feed our reindeer with special reindeer moss, which can be purchased at the centre and is sold on a first come, first served basis. "We also have four animated areas, where children can watch our magical Christmas display come to life." Santa will be in his grotto every weekend and, from Thursday, December 1, every day until Christmas Eve. Entrance to the garden centre, including seeing the reindeer, is free. Entrance to Santa's grotto costs £6.99 per child. Breakfast with Santa costs £9.99 and supper is £10.99.



TAKING THE REINS: Oliver and Jasmine Lovell on the reindeer ride



RELAX: The pool at Hotel Balmes.

TRAVEL GUIDE

Holiday snapshot: A city break by the sea.
Must see: Camp Nou – for a match, if possible.
Climate check: We visited in autumn, but it was still sunny and warm.
Return visit? Definitely.
Contact: www.hotelbalmes.com

day on the beach. We headed for one of the quieter beaches, Mar Bella, where we lounged on the sands and took a dip in the sparkling blue sea. There, I concluded that Barcelona really does have it all. Somehow, I don't think I will be quite so indecisive when it comes to booking a return trip.