

CUTTING-EDGE CATALUNYA

WORDS BY SHANEY HUDSON

So, you think you know Barcelona – the beach, Gaudí and *cerveza* – right? Look beyond the city's inimitable facade and you may be surprised to find a place on the cutting edge.

Top row, from left: Estudio Nómada artists' hub; The streets come alive with art during the Tallers Oberts BCN festival; Do a shopping tour with Antiques & Boutiques. Below: Choose from more than 3,000 wines at Monvínic. Bottom row, from left: Revamp your look at Changing Room; The Barcelona streetscape is a mix of architectural styles.



Barcelona is a city you can feel. You can distinctly taste it in your mouth and hear it in the sounds of the streets. It brushes past you, leaving a trace of its energy on your skin. It's a tactile city that has evolved over centuries into an alluring mix of the old and the new.

Located between the mountains and the sea and hanging on a dynamic architectural frame, Barcelona has always been popular with tourists. Recently, it has been on the radar again as Europe's next 'It' destination, fuelled by affordable European flights, a high-speed train connection to Madrid and investment from international hotels.

So, if Barcelona is on your 'to do' list this year, why not experience the cutting-edge scenes of the city – from food and wine to fashion, design, architecture and art – to discover just why it's so hip. Whatever your passion, this city won't disappoint.

THE ART SCENE

Forget Miró, Picasso and Dalí. Barcelona's new scene is driven by a hunger for art that has its roots firmly in the streets. The trick is to find it. Walk along Carrer del Call, Carrer de Ferran and Carrer d'Avinyó by day and you'll pass boulevards of shops. Come back at night and you'll find shuttered shopfronts transformed into a gallery of creative urban street art.

"The city has a positive artistic vibe," says Dutch writer and teacher Arnout Krediet, one of a community of expats drawn to the city's creative energy. "Many artists live and work, visibly, in Barcelona's city centre."

Krediet is one of the founders of Estudio Nómada, an artists' collective and art school that began when a friend suggested he rent a large building and share it with other artists rather than pay for an expensive smaller studio. "Within three months it was full of artists from all over the world," he says.

In December 2010 the collective rented its second building across the road from the studios. The success of the endeavour is a testament to the strong sense of community in the Barcelona art world.

"Art is a choice, no complaints needed," says Krediet. "The many artists struggling together give me more determination to achieve my artistic goals."

One of the best ways to get a feel for Barcelona's art scene is to visit during Tallers Oberts BCN, an arts festival that runs for two weeks at the end of May and the beginning of June. More than 150 artists' studios are opened to the public, and people can view artworks and artists in action and take part in workshops.

Krediet's advice to art lovers wanting to explore the scene is simple: "Just come over and be submerged."

FOR VINO LOVERS

Barcelona's wine culture barely used to rate a mention, but times have changed and wine bars are opening all over town.

There's one faux pas you can make when you pick up a glass of wine in Barcelona – drinking without food. "One cannot truly separate wine from food in Spain," says Gabriella Opaz, a food and wine blogger who, in 2005, founded Catavino

(www.catavino.net), a comprehensive guide to Spanish wine, with her partner.

The wine on offer in Barcelona has always been high quality, but the scene lacked sophistication and the focus was on regional Spanish wines served by the glass. Luckily for visitors, things have started to change.

"We've encountered... more bars offering a variety of regional and international wines by the bottle, as well as specialised wine bars focused on small, quality-driven producers," says Opaz. She recommends the established La Vinateria del Call, the knowledgeable La Vinya del Señor, wine boutique Vila Viniteca and the popular Monvínic when seeking out the best wines.

"Barcelona is an ideal city to develop the culture of wine," says Isabelle Brunet, a sommelier at Monvínic. "When I arrived 10 years ago, there was only La Vinya del Señor in the Gothic Quarter."

from high-street mass-produced goods to well-made, contemporary design. Many young people are opening studios and following old traditions, making leather goods, accessories and jewellery and manufacturing everything in Catalunya."

Find pieces by emerging Barcelona designers at innovative events such as Changing Room, held at Chic&Basic Born hotel in the newly gentrified El Born. Every six months the hotel surrenders 25 rooms to local designers for a day, allowing them to showcase and sell their wares to the public.

One of the biggest trends is the vintage revival. "The past couple of years have seen not only an increase in the number of vintage shops but also in the quality of the clothing," Richardson says. She recommends Paris Vintage for designer vintage, Heritage for retro bric-a-brac and clothes and the gorgeous L'Arca de l'Àvia for antique textiles and lace.

Forget carbon-copy fashionistas and the latest trends. If you want the Barcelona look, turn to the streets.

Generating international buzz, Monvínic opened in 2008. The bar offers 3,000 wines, tablet computers to assist patrons in selecting wines and an on-site wine library for true wine lovers who want to brush up on their knowledge of the latest drops.

FASHIONISTA HEAVEN

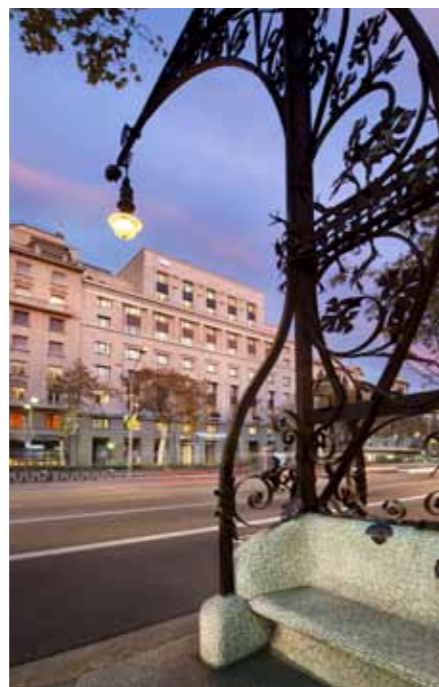
Forget carbon-copy fashionistas and the latest trends. If you want the Barcelona look, turn your gaze to the streets.

"Barcelona is a city with a heritage of craft, not fashion like Milan or Paris," says Lisa Richardson from Antiques & Boutiques, which specialises in customised shopping tours of Barcelona. "There is a sense in the city that both designers and customers are moving away

While the Barcelona look is definitely 'street', the city hasn't entirely turned its back on haute couture. Offering a €300,000 prize – the world's largest fashion grant for up-and-coming designers – is the El Botón Mango Fashion Awards held every 18 months (last held in October 2010) and judged by a jury of fashion heavyweights, including Jean Paul Gaultier. It has established Barcelona as a cradle for young design talent.

MODERN CITYSCAPE

Beyond the iconic structures created by world-renowned architect Antoni Gaudí, Barcelona is shifting into a new architectural era. The city's last major facelift was for the 1992 Olympics, when the seafront was redeveloped. ▷



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Above, from left: The spirit of Antoni Gaudí lives on in the magnificent La Sagrada Família; W Barcelona dominates the waterfront.

Today, development is more dispersed, arcing across the barrios and injecting new life into old areas. ME hotel, completed in 2008 by French architect Dominique Perrault, is a classic

example. Located in Poblenou, a former industrial area, its modern, sleek glass and aluminium tower sits slightly askew over the entrance. At night, all eyes are drawn to the shimmering reds, blues and purples of the nearby bullet-shaped Torre Agbar building, a unique shape on the skyline.

During the day, one of the most salient features rising above the city is W Barcelona, which looks like a giant wind-filled spinnaker. Nicknamed *la vela* (the sail) by the locals, the hotel, which opened in 2009, was constructed on land reclaimed from the sea and provided a new commercial marina, port and beach.

“Barcelona is a mix of all types of architecture,” says architect Ricardo Bofill, who designed W Barcelona. “We have everything – the most excellent urbanism and the most incredible variation of architectural examples, from Roman walls to the latest icons. It’s the result of thousands of architects working over two thousand years.”

While the GFC has slowed down some projects, such as the much-hyped reinvention of FC Barcelona’s Camp Nou stadium, others inch closer to realisation, such as the re-creation of the Las Arenas bullring, originally built in 1898, into a five-storey retail and office space.

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The most famous building in Barcelona is the World Heritage-listed La Sagrada Família, which was started in 1882 and remains under construction. In November 2010, La Sagrada Família was consecrated by Pope Benedict XVI. Sited an equal distance from the mountains and the sea, Gaudí’s basilica is the geographical and spiritual heart of the city.

SPANISH BY DESIGN

The rush of new luxury hotel offerings in Barcelona has provided a fresh canvas for designers to showcase their talent. Along Passeig de Gràcia, opposite Gaudí’s Casa Batlló, Spanish designer Patricia Urquiola converted the shell of a 1950s bank into a slick space for the Mandarin Oriental, which opened in 2009. “The building is dated to 1955. We fully respected the facade, but inside we tell a different story to do with modern Barcelona,” she says.

Urquiola’s elegant and understated redesign included converting the former bank vault into an ethereal green swimming pool, and using old salvaged safety deposit boxes to line the walls and ceiling of the hotel’s bar. The hero feature is the nine-storey whitewashed atrium and carpeted catwalk at the entrance. ▷

YOUR WAY, JOSÉ

Navigate your way to Barcelona’s cultural cutting edge.

Art
Estudio Nómada
 Carrer la Palma de Sant Just, 7
Tallers Oberts BCN
www.tallersoberts.net

Wine
La Vinateria del Call
 Sant Domènec del Call, 9
La Vinya del Señor
 Plaça de Santa Maria, 5
Vila Viniteca
 Agullers, 7
Monvínic
 Carrer de la Diputació, 249

Fashion
Antiques & Boutiques
www.antiquesandboutiques.com
Changing Room
 Chic&Basic Born hotel,
 Calle Princesa, 50,
www.luisvidalweb.com/changingroom
Paris Vintage
 Rosselló, 237 ▷

Heritage

Carrer dels Banys Nous, 14
L'Arca de l'Àvia
 Carrer dels Banys Nous, 20

Architecture

ME hotel
 Carrer Pere IV, 272
Torre Agbar
 Plaça de les Glòries
W Barcelona
 Plaça de la Rosa del Vents, 1
Camp Nou stadium
 Carrer d'Aristides Maillol
Las Arenas bullring
 Plaça d'Espanya
La Sagrada Família
 Carrer de Mallorca, 401

Design

Mandarin Oriental
 Passeig de Gràcia, 38
**Museu del Modernisme
 Català**
 Carrer de Balmes, 48
Disseny Hub
 Carrer de Montcada, 12;
 Palau de Pedralbes,
 Avinguda Diagonal, 686

Food

Dos Cielos
 ME hotel, Carrer Pere IV, 272

Below, from left: The carpeted catwalk in the atrium of the Mandarin Oriental; Dos Cielos restaurant at ME hotel.

Moving beyond hotels, two new major design institutions highlight the city's innovative scene. Opened in 2010, the first is Museu del Modernisme Català, a museum devoted to the Catalan

art and cultural movement known as Modernisme. Centred in Barcelona, Modernisme is exemplified by the work of Gaudí, but the artworks and furniture on display by other artists of the period prove there is more to the movement.

The second – and most ambitious – new development is Disseny Hub, a groundbreaking hybrid institution that exists in temporary digs but opens in a permanent space in 2011. A collaborative effort, Disseny Hub is an interactive space for curators, creators and consumers to meet. It's a place for research and philosophical discussion, as well as cutting-edge art and design exhibitions, such as the permanent Full Print3d. Printing Objects, which explores digital fabrication as a type of production for design.

STAR-RATED CUISINE

Food is an intrinsic part of the Catalan identity and Barcelona's world-class dining culture is no fluke. A gastronome's dream, the city has recently accumulated an impressive number of Michelin stars.

One of the most talked about restaurants is Dos Cielos, which is run by brothers Javier and Sergio Torres, on the 24th floor of ME hotel. The brothers have worked in some of the most influential restaurants in the world but had always planned to return home. "It has been a dream since childhood to have our own restaurant in our city. This is a great moment [for Barcelona]; there are great restaurants, and that creates a very positive competitiveness," says Sergio.

Dos Cielos has a skyscraper rooftop veggie garden and a modern menu with a basis in Catalan cuisine. Dishes include Iberian suckling pig with apples and flowers. The restaurant received its first Michelin star in 2010, however, it is a lesser-known award granted by peers – the Catalan Academy of Gastronomy Best Restaurant award – of which the brothers are most proud. "What makes [Catalan cuisine] so special is the ancient culture mixed with quality produce," says Sergio. "[The award] is recognition of our effort and perseverance." 

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Getting there • To book your flight to Barcelona with Virgin Blue Group partner Etihad Airways, visit www.etihadairways.com or call 1800 998 995 (in Australia).



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