

Welcoming Barcelona

Students enjoy exploring the many treasures of Barcelona, from modern architecture to a thriving nightlife. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

Barcelona is a city with a unique combination of elements," says David Merkle, Academic Director at SolBarcelona. "It is a modern city located in an area of the world with strongly rooted traditions." As the capital of the old kingdom of Catalonia, Barcelona is not short of history and tradition, evidence of which can be seen in the medieval churches and old streets throughout the city. At the same time, the 1992 Olympic Games were instrumental in bringing modern development and fresh life to the city in recent years. This successful blend of the old and the new provides a unique appeal that many visitors find hard to resist.

"Many students come to this city with a view to just studying Spanish," says Merkle. "Inevitably many of them fall in love with [Barcelona] and start looking for work here with a view to settling for a period of time." The lure of Barcelona also frequently proves irresistible to students attending Esade Escola de Idiomas, according to Gracia Rodríguez, Assistant Director of Spanish Programmes. "[There is an] almost alarming number of students in our school who are planning to stay for good in Barcelona," says Rodríguez. "When I ask them why, they say that the quality of life here is outstanding."

Students visiting the city for only a short period

of time may be overwhelmed with the many museums, art galleries, parks and markets that the city has to offer. "Barcelona offers a great cultural and racial mix and also thousands of things to do and places to go," says Carolina Bernal, Marketing Manager at the European University. "The most famous

sites in Barcelona are the city centre, the Picasso Museum, the Park Güell, the Sagrada Família, the Olympic stadium, the Olympic village, Las Ramblas and Plaza Catalunya," she says.

Las Ramblas is a particularly famous part of Barcelona and no trip would be complete without strolling down this

mile-long walkway, which cuts through the middle of the old city and leads down to the port. The walkway, named after the Arabic word, *ramla*, meaning riverbed, follows an old seasonal river and is a focal point for many tourists and locals, who enjoy watching the buskers and street acts from one of the many cafés that line the paved street.

The city is also synonymous with the distinctive architecture of Gaudí, including the Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Família – Gaudí's unfinished cathedral – the Casa Vicens and Parc Güell. Students visiting Barcelona during 2002 can also take part in a number of special events devoted to this famous architect. Richard Young, Director of the Universitat Autònoma



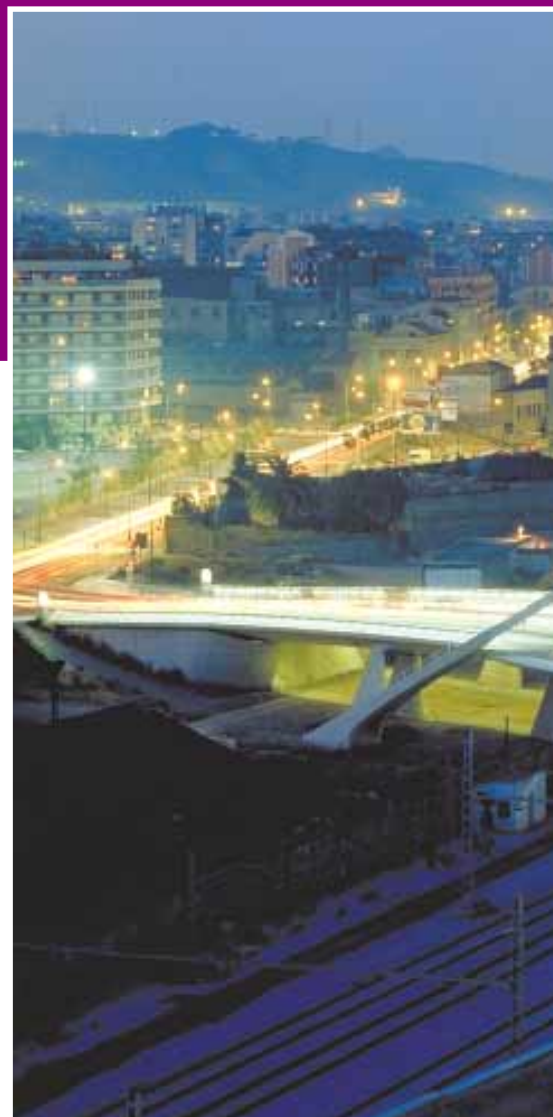
Casa Batlló

Otherwise known as the "House of Bones" or the "House of Masks", Casa Batlló is one of Gaudí's most distinctive works. Inside, stained glass windows and ornate fireplaces complete the look



Sardana Monument

It is possible to watch local people dancing the Sardana – the Catalan national dance – in front of the cathedral in Barcelona. This statue to commemorate the dance is situated on Montjuïc



de Barcelona, explains, "2002 is the 150th anniversary of Antoni Gaudí's birth and there are many events [including the Gaudí festival on the 1 June] taking place this year in honour of the city's most famous citizen."

Young also points out that Barcelona and Catalunya enjoy many exciting local festivals throughout the year – including the Festa of Sant Joan in June, celebrating the beginning of summer, and the Festa de la Mercè, marking the end of summer – which offer a particularly authentic Spanish experience for students. "In August there is the Festa Major de Gracia with street parties and decorations in the streets with long tables and open air meals," says Young. "Everyone is welcomed."

Barcelona's temperate climate means that outdoor activities feature heavily in the social life of the city. The Barri Gòtic and the Born are popular areas for students wanting to sample some of the city's vibrant nightlife according to Johan Stoppler, Director of C2 Barcelona. "Here you can find



Agent viewpoint

"The size of the city [as well as] the international and young atmosphere attracts students. The large numbers of activities and cultural life is also tempting. This together with a nice climate makes students choose Barcelona to study in. [Students] mainly meet with people downtown at the cafés – Las Ramblas is very popular – or promenades or parks. The famous museums are also very popular. As with all bigger international cities, life and people [can be] more stressed and students can find it more difficult to get to know locals than in a smaller city. [I would recommend Barcelona for students aged between] 18 and 30 years old. It can be too big and hectic for younger students."

Henrik Boivie, Sprakpunkten, Sweden

"Barcelona is one of the best known Spanish cities in the USA. Until recently, Americans had been skipping Spain when travelling around Europe but the Olympic Games and the Universal Expo put Spain on the map. Barcelona is a Spanish city, yet more cosmopolitan and European than any other in Spain. It is large but really easy to get around, especially if you compare it to the maze of Madrid, and also more pleasing to the eye. Barcelona is also ahead on design and everyone knows Dalí."

Marta Ramos, Director of Language Programs, Academic Study Associates, USA

The Felipe II Bridge was built by Santiago Calatrava in 1985-87

PHOTOGRAPHS: CATALAN TOURIST BOARD

cheap drinks, lots of people who want to have fun and plenty of bars open until late at night, where you can drink inside or outside," says Stoppler.

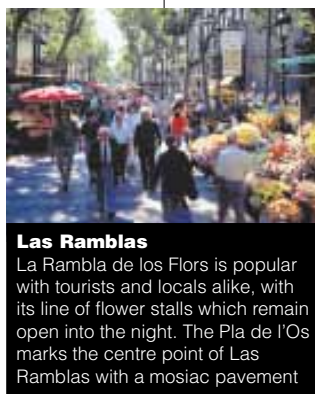
The Exiample – meaning "the extension" due to its position outside the original city walls – is also a popular area for students to go out at night, and at a tapas bar called La Gran Bodega the brave can experience the *pórrro*, a drinking jug with a spout that pours wine down the back of the throat.

Andrea Suárez, Head of Studies at Kingsbrook school, says that students often enjoy sampling some of the local food specialities in cafés or restaurants around the city. "The typical food in Barcelona is *pan amb tomaquet* – bread with tomato," she says. "You can find it anywhere, at any restaurant. Students also like [to

sample] tapas, typical in all of Spain, and *sangría* [wine with fruit and sometimes whisky]."

Barcelona's distinctive appeal lies not only in the multitude of places to visit and the social activities to take part in, but also in the atmosphere and character of its people. Bernal says that students at the school go home with memories of "the

openness and the friendship that Barcelona and its people offer them". And Rodríguez agrees that the attitude of the local population adds an extra dimension to the city. "People from Barcelona love their city," she says. "It shows everywhere and makes the place very agreeable and appealing."



Las Ramblas

La Rambla de los Flors is popular with tourists and locals alike, with its line of flower stalls which remain open into the night. The Pla de l'Os marks the centre point of Las Ramblas with a mosaic pavement



Young believes that the accepting and warm nature of the local people is to do, in part, with their multilingual background. "The languages of Barcelona influence and promote a welcoming international atmosphere," he says. "Catalan is now promoted in equal status to Spanish by the local government. Catalans are therefore already more linguistically aware than many of their fellow countrymen as most are bilingual, and many signs and information around the city are in Spanish, Catalan and English." □