



CATALONIA: PAST AND PRESENT

Nancy S. Saylor

The Mediterranean Society's 2009 seminar in Catalonia focused on ancient, medieval, and modern history and art. Catalonia's rich history, its natural beauty, and its great food and wine made the trip pleasurable.

On our arrival in Barcelona, we were met by Eric Hersey, the director of the Spanish Touch, our land agent in Catalonia. Traveling into the city on a bus labeled with the name of the champion Barcelona soccer team, we were greeted with cheers from townspeople on the sidewalks—quite an entrance into Barcelona. After a late afternoon orientation tour and dinner at the hotel, Hotel Les Balmes, located in the Eixample district, the group began its tour of Barcelona on the next day.

In the Barri Gotic, the oldest part of Barcelona, we visited the Roman walls—still visible and with medieval additions—the remaining Corinthian columns of the Temple to Augustus, and the underground excavations of Barcino, where an acre of the Roman city streets, houses, shops, garum-production facilities, and dyeing operations can be found.

Barcelona's Cathedral, in the heart of the Barri Gotic on the Plaça de Sant Jaume, has beautifully carved Renaissance wooden choir stalls and thirteen geese guarding its cloister. The Church of Santa Maria del Mar in the Ribera district is a fine example of the Catalan Gothic style. Its interior was burned during the Spanish Civil War, though much of the stained glass was undamaged.

Both the Picasso Museum and the Foun-



The group posed at the quarry from which the stones for the walls at Tarragona came. Eric Hersey is at the far left.

dation Joan Miró exhibit the entire range of those artists' careers. The Picasso Museum is located in a beautiful Gothic palace in the Ribera district, while the Foundation Joan Miró is in a modern building on Montjuic hill. The National Museum of Catalan Art, also on Montjuic hill, displays Romanesque frescoes and wood sculptures from Catalonia. These works of art were rescued from twenty-nine churches in northern Spain in the 1920s to prevent theft and to protect the art from deterioration. We also visited the Archaeology Museum on Montjuic to see its col-

lection of finds from Empúries and the Balearic Islands.

Barcelona has many fine examples of Catalan modernist architecture, especially the work of Antoni Gaudí—La Sagrada Familia Church, La Pedrera apartment building, and Parc Guell. We also toured Palau de la Musica, Barcelona's concert hall designed by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, with its excellent acoustics and exuberant interior decoration. Visiting La Sagrada Familia, under construction since 1882, was a highlight. Gaudí used natural forms as the basis for his design and construction ideas. Stained glass is now being added to the church. Visitors can watch as church construction continues.

On the last morning in Barcelona, the group stopped at Mercat de la Boquiera on La Rambla, the oldest covered market in Europe, to see the colorful displays of

fruit, vegetables, freshly caught seafood, and hams and sausages for sale, as well as the flower stalls on La Rambla.

Leaving Barcelona, we drove northwest to the sacred mountain of the Catalan people, Montserrat. The monastery complex is perched most of the way up jagged peaks so that both above and below you see dramatic rock formations. We were grateful for the excellent driving of Antonio. As we walked to the Montserrat basilica, one wedding party was about to depart and another was arriving. Not only did our group get to visit the interior of the basilica, we also saw the church half full of wedding guests, heard the wedding march, and saw one bride walk down the aisle. While the

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wedding proceeded, we could see through a window above the altar the line of visitors to the Black Virgin's shrine.

After stopping on the way along the coastal road to Tarragona to see the triumphal Arch of Bera, now completely devoid of sculpture, we proceeded to Tarragona, where the ensemble of Roman archaeological sites is now a World Heritage site. Our hotel, Hotel Plaça de la Font, was well-located on the Plaça de la Font, a plaza atop part of the old Roman circus and now surrounded by restaurants and small shops. Many of us enjoyed sitting outside in the early evening to have a drink before dinner and watch people stroll buy.

We began our tour of Roman Tarragona with a visit to the Archaeological Museum. Our local guide, Xavier, was perhaps the best example of the excellent local guides we had on this trip. All had an in-depth knowledge of their subjects and the ability to communicate what they knew. Xavier gave us an extensive tour of the Roman walls, ramparts, and praetorian tower, also showing us where new archaeological work had begun. On the Sunday that we toured Roman Tarragona, our group was lucky to see the *castellers* compete. *Castellers*, unique to Catalonia, build human pyramids, which can grow to several stories high. To the accompaniment of bands and singing to encourage



At Empúries our guide John (facing camera) introduced the Greek city to the group.

each team's progress, children scramble up the pyramids made by adults and form the top-most positions.

The following day we traveled northwest through the lovely Penedès wine region to the royal monastery of Poblet, where many of the count-kings of Aragon are buried, and then to the medieval town of Montblanc for a tour and lunch.

On our last day in Tarragona, we visited the amphitheatre before traveling south along the shore to the extensive remains of

the Roman villa at Els Munts, located just above the sea and with intact mosaic floors and baths. Our next stop was Centcelles, a Roman villa with a large dome decorated with early Christian mosaics. Both sites had excellent museums. We visited now-abandoned El Médol quarry, the source of the stone for the walls of Roman Tarraco, a lovely site with a sandstone pillar rising in its middle among trees and shrubs. We saw the beginnings of restoration work at Pont de les Ferreres, the aqueduct that carried water to Tarragona in the Roman era.

A highlight of the tour was a *calçotadas*, a feast with large white onions called *calçots* that are grilled and served with Romesco sauce, followed by *boutifarra* sausage and beans, then lamb chops, artichokes, and finally *créma catalana* for dessert, all accompanied by red wine. Xavier and Eric arranged this delicious, gargantuan, and often hilarious lunch for us at a restaurant famous for such feasts.

The following day we traveled to the Costa Brava, stopping at Girona for lunch and a tour of the city. Roman Girona (Gerunda), at the confluence of the Onyar and Ter rivers, has been settled since the 5th century B.C. The Romans came in the 1st century A.D., extending the Via Augusta through the town. Crossing the river

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At the calçotadas (seated) Elaine Themo, Marietta Jones, Vicky Ashby, Anna Mae Shishodo, Mary Agnes Chun, and Doug Gottwald; and standing, our Tarragona guide Xavier.

Eric demonstrates the proper way to drink the wine.



on one of the foot bridges, with its views of pastel-colored houses lining the riverfront, we entered old Girona, which rises steeply to the cathedral. Our “archaeological walk” of the walls began behind the cathedral above a garden, and from the walls we could see the snow-capped Pyrenees and the countryside around Girona. We visited the Cathedral and its treasury, where the splendid Creation tapestry from the 11th century retains much of its brilliant color. We also visited the famous Arab baths and the archaeological museum in Sant Pere de Galligants.

Arriving in late afternoon at Hotel Can Xiquets in a secluded and peaceful spot in the hills above the Bay of Roses, we found that all the rooms have beautiful views of the countryside.

On the day after our arrival, we visited first Empúries, a visually stunning site on the southern coast of the Bay of Roses. Our local guide, John, took us on an extensive tour of the remains of the Greek and Roman cities. From the Greek city we passed through gardens leading to Roman villas overlooking the sea and the mountains.

At the site of the Iberian town of Ul-

lastret on a hill near Empúries, we walked the streets of the town, admiring its strategic position above the plains, and enjoyed visiting the museum.

The next day we entered Bésalu over its curved medieval bridge. Marta, our local guide, led us on a tour of the Romanesque Sant Pere church, notable for its stone lions on either side of the entrance and the sculpture on the capitals in the apse; Santa Maria convent; and the Mikwé, the 13th-century Jewish ritual bath, the only remaining Jewish bathhouse in Spain, newly discovered in the 1960s.

After lunch in Bésalu we passed through a mountainous national park to the monastery at Ripoll to see the great Romanesque portal at the Monastery of Santa Maria. The portal is covered in sculpture, in part depicting saints, stories of the Bible, and months of the year. The beautiful cloister has two levels, which is unusual. The church is plain but has many burial places of interest, including that of Count Wilfred the Hair, who founded the monastery in the 9th century and helped to make it a place of learning.

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

The opening reception is scheduled for 3-5 p.m. on Sunday, September 13. This year the reception will be held in the Faculty Lounge of Jepson Hall, where we have the receptions after the lectures. There is construction at the Deanery.



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Be sure to visit the Society’s Web Site:
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Next came the abbey church of Sant Joan de les Abadesses, founded by Wilfred the Hairy for his daughter in 887, and known for its Calvary or the “Sacred Mystery,” seven 13th-century life-sized figures in wood polychrome depicting the descent from the cross. We also visited the abbey’s museum, which holds treasures from the abbey and nearby churches.

On our final day, we spent the morning at Figueres at the Dalí Theatre-Museum, an experience full of humor and showing the full breadth of Salvador Dalí’s work. Then we went to Cadaqués via a drive with breathtaking coastal scenery: views of the Bay of Roses from the north and beyond Cap de Creus to the north. Lunch was followed by free time to stroll and shop, enjoying the different views of the



After lunch in Girona, the travelers prepare to cross the river into the old city.

bay. Sitting in an outdoor café watching the people walk by provided a fitting end to our tour of Catalonia.

Our farewell dinner that evening was at Hotel Can Xiquets, continuing the series of meals with excellent food and wine. Each evening in Barcelona and Tarragona

we dined at a different local restaurant, often starting with small plates, such as fried codfish balls, olives, or sausages. We sat together at long tables enjoying the food, wine, and each other’s company while discussing the day’s events. We did the same at Hotel Can Xiquets for four nights. The last night Eric served us a delightful *cava* to celebrate our time in Catalonia. We toasted Eric

and Antonio, and they us.

Many of us did not want to leave, not just because the Hotel Can Xiquets was such a luxurious last stop in our travels, but also because Catalonia is a joyful place, filled with so much to see in a beautiful setting.

A longer version of this report may be found on the website: www.mediterranean-society.org.