

UNCHARTED CATALONIA

LAUREN HO SHARES THE DELIGHTS OF THE PROVINCE OF GIRONA, FROM ITS FISHING VILLAGES AND VINEYARDS TO ITS HISTORIC CAPITAL

The light in Girona is different in autumn. The blinding sun of the summer months has mellowed to a ripened glow that bounces off the silvery trunks of the wind-contorted trees that cloak the muscular, intricate coast of north-east Spain. Most of us have a list of places where we would like to live. Mine never featured Girona, but a chance visit proved a defining moment that kindled a decade-long love affair with the Catalan region that I now call my part-time home.

As I set off on my regular morning walk from home, the breeze is cool against my skin. I inhale the scent of pine hanging in the air and follow the nearby path that leads to Aigua Xelida, one of the isolated coves that characterise the Costa Brava

coastline. Today, instead of heading towards the water for a swim, I peer downwards through a tangle of branches at the bronzed locals catching the last of the season's rays. With a carpet of pine needles underfoot, I follow a precipitous trail, past the centuries-old fishing cottage that balances precariously on the water's fringe, to the edge of the rugged cliff where the land falls dramatically away, sculpted by sea and weather into a series of caves, rocky spines and secret bays.

This walk is just one section of the Camí de Ronda, a 136-mile coastal footpath that runs the length of the Costa Brava south from France. Originally furrowed to enforce border control after the Spanish civil war, today the path is one of the area's most popular hiking routes. It is a wonderful way to experience the diversity of

this coast: the sandy bays flecked with colourful wooden boats; the Seventies apartment blocks that line the beaches of tourist hubs like Lloret de Mar; the exquisite towns such as medieval Begur, which presides over eight of the Costa Brava's golden coves, or Cadaqués, where a jumble of whitewashed buildings backed by the scenic Pyrenees has inspired artists over the years, including Salvador Dalí and Pablo Picasso.

Girona is an underrated province. Even its synonymous capital is often bypassed for the allure of nearby Barcelona. But, if you take the time to visit, you will find a trove of museums and churches within a tangle of cobblestone lanes.

On my trip here, led by the perfume of chocolate, I make my way under the gothic arches of the Plaça del Vi to Xocolateria L'Antiga, a century-old café. I perch at a marble-topped table sipping on molten hot chocolate with a hubbub of local chatter around me. Moving on, I cross the red Pont de Ferro, built by Gustave Eiffel before his famous Parisian tower, pausing to gaze at the colourful houses that haphazardly line the Onyar River against a backdrop of the looming Romanesque cathedral. I continue through the medieval warren of streets in the

preserved Jewish quarter to the rear of the cathedral, where the city's fourteenth-century walls end. Here, away from the jostle of tourists, I clamber up the last section of the wall and quietly survey the clutter of rooftops, interlaced with sycamore and cypress trees, spread before me.

In the afternoon, I drive north through a scenic tableau of olive trees and medieval villages into the Empordà wine region. Here, around 45 wineries extend over 5,000 acres of rolling land, their linear vines seeming only to end at the distant surge of the Albera Massif, the natural border between Spain and France from where the region's north tramontana wind blows.

After a tour round Terra Remota, a young, organic vineyard shaking things up among the region's age-old wineries, I head back to Aigua Xelida, stopping on my way for a late lunch in Tamarit, a coastal enclave along the Camí de Ronda path. I take a table at my favourite beachside restaurant, Rodondo, and feast on deliciously sweaty jamón ibérico and the local soupy rice casserole, not unlike paella. The sea sparkles, the air is warm and an end-of-season tranquillity envelops this seaside hamlet – and once more I'm reminded why Girona constantly draws me back.

WHERE TO STAY HOTEL CAMIRAL

With two golf courses and a soon-to-open vineyard, equestrian centre and kitchen garden, the offerings at this 145-room hotel are the icing on the cake to its flawless location right in the centre of the province of Girona. The interior design capitalises on the building's sleek lines with modern furnishings and local knick-knacks, such as vintage wine bottles and delicate ceramics. The best of the sea, mountains and rolling terrain might be right on your doorstep, but do not miss chef Ramón Simarro's Catalan-tinged European menu at the in-house restaurant 1477. Make sure you ask for the creamy rice infused with fresh, sweet prawns from nearby Palamós.

WAYS AND MEANS

Hotel Camiral (00-34-9-72 472 249; hotelcamiral.com) offers rooms from €230 a night, B&B □



The view from the coastal Camí de Ronda footpath