

A Ramble on Ramblas

Forget the tour bus—the best way to enjoy old Barcelona is on foot

By ROD USHER

SANDWICHED BETWEEN PINE-CLAD HILLS and the Mediterranean, central Barcelona has one of the highest population densities of any European city. This means cheek-by-jowl living and car-clogged streets, but also that visitors can see a lot on foot.

From the city's hub, the Plaça de Catalunya, you can stroll down to the sea along the Ramblas—derived not from rambling but from the Arabic word for dried river course—passing mime artists, bird sellers, cafés, kiosks and con men. Of the latter, don't be sucked in by those who shuffle a ball under one of three cups atop a cardboard carton; it's a classic hustle.

On the right of the Ramblas in the Sant Josep food market you can observe Catalan cooks' love affair with fungi. On the same side is the Liceu, the opera house ravaged by fire in 1861 and again in 1994. Re-restored, its splendor can be seen in performances at night, or in tours from 9.30 a.m. to 11 a.m. by prior request (visits @liceubarcelona.com). Farther down is the Pipa jazz club, in the Oriente Hotel.

The most lively places are in the narrow streets leading off the left of the Ramblas, although there have been some changes since I first visited 10 years ago. In one, Carrer Boqueria, my eye caught a huge screen at the back of a beauty shop called L'Embruix. Showing on it was what looked to be a thinning scalp being prepared for a baldness treatment. Donning my glasses, I saw it was in fact a vagina in vast close-up, and a demonstration of even more private parts being pierced by a silver ring. I hobbled off.

On reaching the 60-m cast-iron Christopher Columbus column at the foot of the Ramblas, cross the road to the waterfront, where for less than \$5 you can cruise the port for an hour on one of the ferries. The reflections from the Montjuïc hill in the afternoon sun come from the above-ground graves, or *nichos*, of the cemetery above the Olympic stadium, where so much sweat was spilled in '92. There must be a message here.

To the left of where the ferries tie up is a boardwalk, the Mare Magnum shopping center and multicinema, and the Barcelona aquarium. Take the glass tunnel through the main tank for up-close views of huge sunfish and sharks.

For a quieter time, go up, not down, from the Plaça de Catalunya, taking the broad avenue off to the right, the Passeig de Gràcia. A short walk up on the left is the weird and wonderful façade of a Gaudí building, Casa Batllò. Farther up, on the opposite side, is his eight-story residential edifice known locally as La Pedrera, or the stone quarry. See if you can find a straight line in the whole building. There are guided tours.

Back down the Passeig de Gràcia toward the



SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE The Ramblas, which comes from the Arabic word for dried river course, is lined with cafés, bird sellers, musicians and mimes. Just don't get involved with the con men

Plaça, take the first right, Carrer Mallorca. The first intersection is the top, narrower part of the Ramblas. Cross it and on the right, just before the next intersection, is La Central, a bookshop with a big English section, from Austen to Unsworth.

A couple of doors past La Central is a shop where the canny Catalans have cashed in on a habit introduced ages ago by the Arabs, the siesta. You buy tickets (about \$5 for five minutes) to have your neck and back massaged through your shirt by an attendant while you sit face down in a special chair that supports your head. After which you are draped with a blanket and left to "siesta" for the time you choose. Even if you can't sleep in strange surroundings, the shut-eye rejuvenates you to go out and explore more of what may be Europe's most elegant and vibrant city. ■



STREETWISE



The View: From the Plaça de Catalunya,

take the U7 line of the underground to its end. Cross Plaça Kennedy and board the old 32-seat Blue Tram (or substitute bus) to reach the funicular. This cable train sets you down atop Tibidabo, 550 m above sea level.



The Meal: Espai Sucre, or Sugar Space,

calls itself Spain's first desserts restaurant. It's at 53 Carrer Princesa, 15 minutes walk from the Ramblas. The menu, entirely of desserts, is superb. Nights only. Book on 93-268 1630.



The Bar: Irati, in Cardenal

Casanyes off the Ramblas, is a Basque tavern with excellent cider and tapas from noon to 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Help yourself from the bar, picking a tapa with a toothpick in it. When you are replete, the bar staff count the toothpicks and charge 75¢ for each one. A cider is the same price.



The Gym:

The municipal Banys de Sant Sebastià, on the beach in Barceloneta, has good gear and a 33-m indoor pool. About \$5 for a day.



The Net: EasyEverything near the

bottom of the Ramblas, or Cybermundo, off the Plaça de Catalunya in Carrer de Bergara.