

# Catalonia



From metropolitan Barcelona spreads a land of such diversity that, although its furthest-flung corner is no more than 200km away, you could spend weeks dissecting it and still feel you'd barely begun. The Costa Brava, blighted by dreary pockets of mass tourism, still boasts much of the wild beauty that first drew visitors here. Just inland are the medieval city of Girona and Figueres, home of the 'theatre-museum' of that city's zany son, Salvador Dalí.

Running across the north, the Pyrenees rise to mighty 3000m peaks from a series of green and often remote valleys, dotted with villages that retain a palpable rural and even medieval air. These mountains provide some excellent walking and skiing. Enchanting Romanesque churches are scattered across the valleys of the north.

Excitement runs thinner in the far west and south, but there's enough to keep you exploring for days, from the wetlands of the Ebro delta to the historic cities of Tarragona and Lleida. Strike out and you'll discover grand medieval monasteries, lush vineyards and hilltop villages.

Throughout Catalonia (Catalunya in Catalan, Cataluña in Castilian Spanish) the sense of difference from the rest of Spain is intense, not only in the use of Catalan (although everyone speaks Castilian too) but in the festivals, cuisine and reminders of the region's unique history.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Chill out on the Costa Brava coves and beaches near **Palafrugell** (p346) or **Begur** (p347)
- Discover the magical village of **Cadaqués** (p356) and nearby **Port Lligat**, haunted by the memory of Salvador Dalí
- Contemplate the absurd with a visit to the **Teatre-Museu Dalí** (p359) in Figueres
- Conquer the trails of the **Parc Nacional d'Aiguestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici** (p375)
- Take the *cremallera* (rack-and-pinion railway) up to **Vall de Núria** (p366)
- Ski the region's premier slopes at **Baqueira-Beret** (p380)
- Explore the compact medieval city centre of **Girona** (p349)
- Contemplate Spain and France from atop the region's highest mountain, **Pica d'Estats** (p365)
- Seek out the Romanesque churches around **Boi** and **Tauill** (p376)
- Wander the monastery complex of the **Reial Monestir de Santa Maria de Poblet** (p383)



■ AREA: 32,113 SQ KM    ■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 30°C, LOW 22°C    ■ POP: 6.99 MILLION



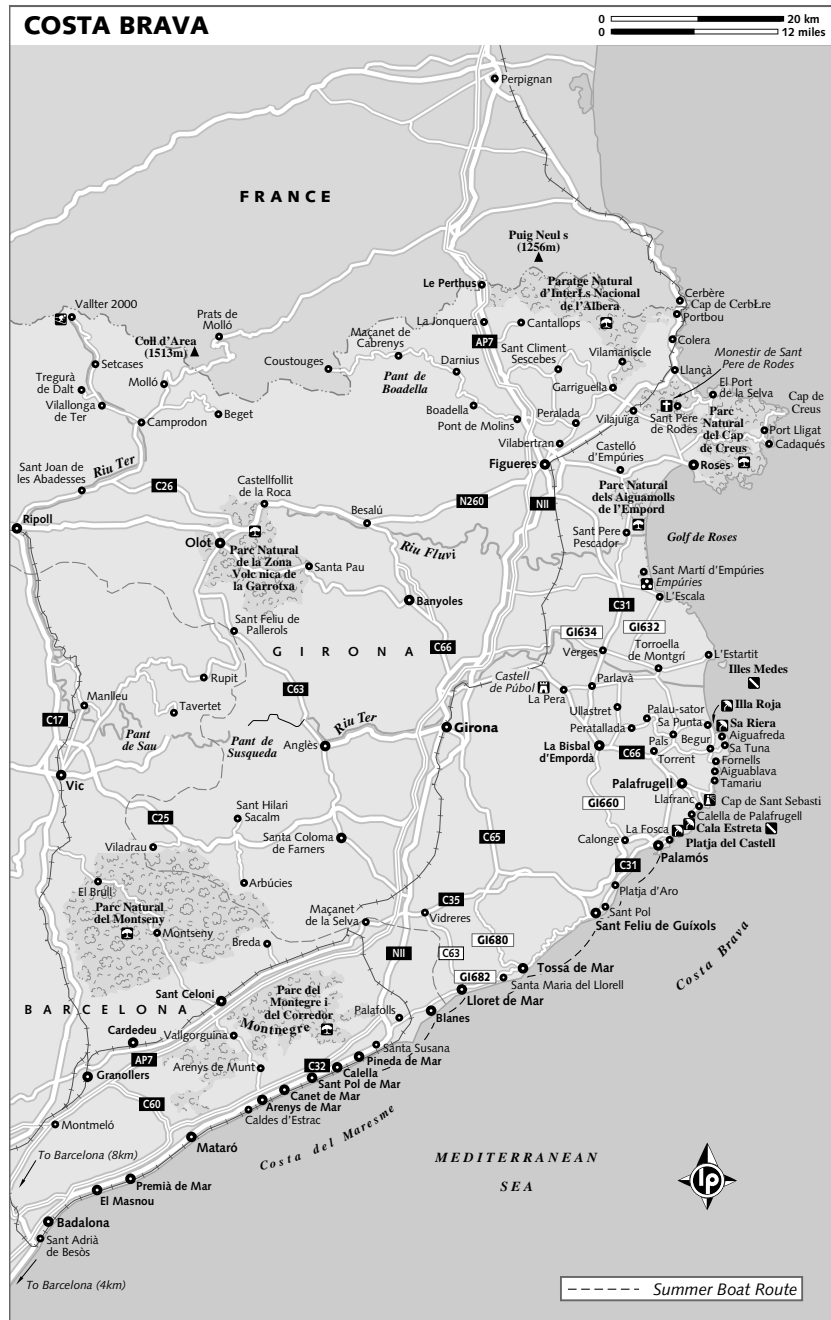
## COSTA BRAVA

The Costa Brava (stretching from Blanes to the French border) ranks with the Costa Blanca and Costa del Sol as one of Spain's three great holiday coasts. But alongside some occasionally awful concrete development, English breakfasts and *Konditoreien* (pastry shops), the 'Rugged Coast' has some spectacular stretches.

Nestling in the hilly back country – green and covered in umbrella pine in the south, barer and browner in the north – are scattered charming stone villages, the towering monastery of St Pere de Rodes and Salvador Dalí's fantasy castle home at Púbol. A little further inland are the bigger towns of Girona (Castilian: Gerona),

with a sizable and strikingly well preserved medieval centre, and Figueres (Castilian: Figueras), famous for its bizarre Teatre-Museu Dalí, the foremost of a series of sites associated with the eccentric surrealist artist Salvador Dalí.

The ruggedness of the Costa Brava continues under the sea and has some of the best diving in Spain. Diving centres with certified instructors operate at a dozen or more places. The Illes Medes, off L'Estartit, are protected islets with probably the most diverse sealife along the Spanish coast. Other top diving spots include the Illes Formigues (rocky islets off the coast between Palamós and Calella de Palafrugell with waters down to 45m) and Els Ullastres, which has three underwater hills off Llafranc, with some sheer walls and depths to 54m.



## Getting There & Away

Direct buses from Barcelona go to most towns on or near the Costa Brava. The railway between Barcelona and the coastal border town of Portbou runs inland, through Girona and Figueres, most of the way. From Girona and Figueres there are fairly good bus services to the coast.

In summer, you could take an alternative approach to the southern Costa Brava from Barcelona by a combination of *rodalies* (local trains) and boat.

The AP7 *autopista* (tollway) and the toll-free NII Hwy both run from Barcelona via Girona and Figueres to the French border, a few kilometres north of La Jonquera. The C32 *autopista* follows the NII up the coast as far as Blanes.

## TOSSA DE MAR

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Curving around a boat-speckled bay and guarded by a headland crowned with defensive medieval walls and towers, Tossa de Mar is a village of crooked, narrow streets onto which tourism has tacked a larger, modern extension. In July and August it's hard to reach the water's edge without tripping over oily limbs, but it is heaven compared with Lloret de Mar 12km southeast – a real concrete and neon jungle of Piccadilly pubs, *Bierkeller* and soccer chants.

Tossa was one of the first places on the Costa Brava to attract foreign visitors – a small colony of artists and writers gravitated towards what painter Marc Chagall dubbed 'Blue Paradise' in the 1930s.

## Orientation & Information

The bus station is beside the GI682, where it leaves for Lloret de Mar. The main beach, Platja Gran, and the older part of town are a 10-minute walk southeast.

The tourist information office (☎ 972 34 01 08; www.infotossa.com; Avinguda del Pelegrí 25; 11 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat Apr-May & Oct, 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar) is next to the bus station.

## Old Tossa

The walls and towers on the pine-dotted headland, Mont Guardi, at the end of the main beach, were built between the 12th and 14th centuries. The area they girdle is known as the Vila Vella (Old Town). When wandering around Mont Guardi you will come across vestiges of a castle, and the Far de Tossa (lighthouse;

☎ 972 34 12 97; adult/child €3/1.50; 11 10am-10pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr). Inside there is an imaginative 20-minute walk-through display on the history of lighthouses and life inside them. Next door is a great bar (see p345).

In the lower part of Vila Vella, the **Museu Municipal** (☎ 972 34 07 09; Plaça de Roig i Soler 1; adult/student & senior €3/1.80; 11 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun-Mon Jun-mid-Oct, to 2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, to 3pm Sun mid-Sep-mid-Jun), set in the 14th- and 15th-century Palau del Batlle, has mosaics and other finds from a Tossan villa, off Avinguda del Pelegrí, and Tossa-related art including Chagall's *El Violinista*.

A tangle of 18th-century lanes, Vila Nova (New Town) stretches away from the old nucleus. Further north, northwest and northeast spreads the sprawl of the really new town.

## Beaches & Coves

The main town beach, Platja Gran, tends to be busy. Further north along the same bay are the quieter and smaller Platja del Reig and Platja Mar Menuda at the end of Avinguda de Sant Ramon Penyaforat. The coast to the northeast and southwest of Tossa is dotted by rocky coves, some with small beaches. You can walk cross-country from Tossa to Cala Levado and Cala d'En Carles beaches, 3km southwest, or the longer Platja de Llorell (3.5km away), or drive down to Platja de Llorell from the GI682. To the northeast, you can walk down from the GI682 to sandy coves such as Cala Pola (4km), Cala Giverola (5km), Cala Salions (8km) and Platja Vallpregona (11km).

In summer (Easter to September), glass-bottomed boats (☎ 972 34 22 29; return adult/3-12yr/under 3yr €10/6/free) run about hourly to some of these northeastern beaches from Platja Gran, calling in at a few sea caves along the way. You have the option of spending the day at Cala Giverola (a pleasant sandy cove with a couple of restaurants and bars) and returning on a later boat.

## Sleeping

Tossa has around 70 hotels, *hostales* (budget hostels) and *pensiones* (small private hotels). You'll find all of them open from Semana Santa (Easter) to October, but only a handful outside those months.

## CAMPING

Five camping grounds are spread out around the town. The nearest is **Camping Can Marti** (☎ 972 34 08 51; www.canmarti.org; Rambla Pau Casals; sites per 2-person tent & car €28; 11 late May-mid-Sep; 11 1km back from the beach and well equipped.