



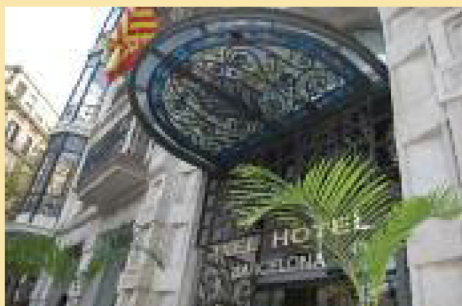
BARCELONA

Roger Wheeler falls for the charms of the Catalan capital

I can't hear the word **Barcelona** without hearing Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé's 1987 hit single which became the unofficial anthem for the 1992 Olympic Games. This fantastic Catalan city is perfectly described in the lyrics of that song; *Come alive, Viva! And shake the foundations from the skies shaking all our lives.*

Monarch Airlines operate a new twice daily service to Barcelona from Gatwick. The bus from the airport to the city centre is cheap and fast and there is a shuttle train which takes you to **Sants Station** which is also your connection for Sitges. The city also has an excellent and very cheap metro system with 2-5 day travel anywhere passes available for tourists.

Barcelona has a very active gay scene and so we checked into the gayest of all possible hotels, **The Axel**, right bang in the middle of



the 'village'. Opened in 2003 and refurbished in 2010, The Axel is housed in a beautiful 19th Century building in the **L'Eixample** area and styles itself as 'Heterofriendly'. The rooms are spacious and very comfortable; there is a spa with a very subtly lit pool, steam and sauna. The 'art' in the public rooms leaves you in no doubt that this is a very gay hotel.

A couple of days in the gay environment of The Axel was great, but we thought that we should check out something more mainstream and moved to an excellent **Ibis Hotel** on the other side of town at 79€ per room per night.

Barcelona is the capital of **Catalonia**, a region with its own language, character and history – indeed many Catalans think of their home as a separate country. We were in fact asked by an attendant at one of the tourist spots, if we were going to visit Spain! The architect **Antoni Gaudi** who built and designed many of the famous buildings in the city, seven of which have been declared World Heritage Sites lived in Barcelona. The unfinished **Sagrada Família** is his most famous; the extraordinary basilica that became his life's work from 1883 until his death in 1926 and is expected to be completed by the centenary of his death. It is well worth paying the 12 Euros to see inside the completed basilica which is truly spectacular.

As Spain's second city, Barcelona could keep you occupied for weeks and is the most cosmopolitan with one of the Mediterranean's busiest ports. The modern waterfront area, **Port Vell**, has many bars, restaurants, museums, a huge aquarium and several cinemas including an Imax. Centrepiece is the new 26 floor **W Hotel**, designed along the lines of a huge spinnaker sail. The **Eclipse Bar** on the 26th floor is not for those with vertigo but the views are breathtaking as are the prices of the drinks. They specialise in cocktails costing an average of 16€ a pop. This is where young, rich and trendy Barcelonians hang out; after 10pm they turn the music up, you could probably hear it in

Madrid. We were told that the dress code was 'sexy', so not being particularly young or that rich we admired the view, had a drink and left. But it's certainly not to be missed.

The wide streets and squares of the old city are quite simply lovely. The main artery is **Las Ramblas**, a wide boulevard with a central strip housing all manner of kiosks and performing artists. At dusk you can just wander in and out of tapas bars, enjoying the atmosphere and the local wine, which is surprisingly affordable. As lunch is the main meal for most Spaniards (sorry, Catalans) we went to **Le Meridien**, a beautiful traditional four star hotel on the Ramblas, which is surprisingly reasonable, in the region of 16€ for three courses.



LAS RAMBLAS

As usual when visiting a city of this size the easiest way to see the sights is by the open top tourist buses. There are three lines which cover the entire city and go from the central **Plaça de Catalunya**, where you will find most of the shops. Don't miss the **Plaça Reial**, just off the Ramblas, a beautiful square with bars and restaurants which is in the **Barri Gotic**, the real old city. Also well worth a visit is the Monumental Bullring opposite the **Placa d' Espanya**. This former bullring has been converted into a futuristic shopping centre and provides stunning views over the city from the top, especially towards Montjuïc. Finally, we shouldn't forget that Barcelona has a football team and the entire population is **Barça** crazy - when the team plays at home there's no hiding place.

We're not the first to fall for Barcelona's charms and style, it's a city you have to visit.

www.barcelonaturisme.com
<http://anythingcanhappenaxel.com>
www.w-barcelona.com
www.lemeridienbarcelona.com
www.monarch.co.uk
www.gaybarcelona.com/home.html

MONARCH AIRLINES NEW BARCELONA ROUTES

Monarch Airlines operate year round flights to **Barcelona** from **Manchester** and **Gatwick** airports with fares, including taxes, starting from **£42.50** one way (**£66.50** return).

All customers are allocated a seat at check-in but for those wishing to select where in the cabin they sit to ensure that families and groups are seated together, seats can be pre-booked from **£4.99** per one-way flight. For customers looking for added comfort, extra legroom seats are also available offering up to six inches of extra space from only **£9.99**.

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Online check-in, is available between 18 days and four and a half hours prior to departure. Hot and cold meals can be pre-booked or purchased onboard. www.monarch.co.uk