

Air Transat visits the beauty of Spain

by Mark Sissons

Picasso, Dali and Gaudi. The iconic names of these prolific titans of twentieth century art and design are synonymous with Spain, the nation of their births. From Madrid's world-class museums and Barcelona's whimsical architecture to the surrealistic spin Salvador Dali put on his hometown of Figueres, art on a grandiose scale is a major draw for visitors to Western Europe's second largest country.

Now, Air Transat and Transat Holidays are counting on Spain's distinctive artistic allure, along with historic sites and the beauty of its sun-kissed Mediterranean coastline, to make the carrier's new weekly non-stop service from Vancouver to Barcelona a success. Departing every Friday until August 28, the eleven-hour flight will transport clients to a land rich in culture, history and cuisine, with a flair for the avant-garde.

"The retail community has been asking Transat Holidays for a new European destination and it was the perfect opportunity to introduce Spain from western Canada," said Carlo Trinidad, Air Transat's Western Sales Manager. "Since eastern Canada has been offering Spain for a number of years, the Transat Holidays product offering in destination is fine tuned to perfection for western Canadians," he added.

With Air Transat, western Canadian clients will first experience Barcelona, Spain's second largest city, which offers a friendly and compact introduction to the country. This cosmopolitan port is consistently rated one of Europe's trendiest destinations. Once a Roman colony, it contains one of Europe's best-preserved Gothic-era town centres.

But what makes Barcelona visually unique is its whimsical Art Nouveau architecture, epitomized by the creations of its most famous son, architect Antoni Gaudi. His Parc Güell resembles the set of a fairytale with its gingerbread stone houses, fantastical sculptures and swirling ceramic rooftops, while his still unfinished masterpiece, the soaring Sagrada Família Temple that dominates Barcelona's skyline, is Spain's most visited site.

Barcelona's rich and varied Catalan cuisine is also a major draw for visitors, who dine in alfresco seafood eateries along the waterfront promenade or at traditional restaurants like 4 Gats, the century-old institution where Picasso held his first exhibition. Also popular, are day trips to one of the famous wineries near the city, such as Torres or the Codorniu Winery, which produces 60 million bottles annually of sparkling wine the Spanish call cava.

If anyone could match Gaudi's world-class eccentricity, it was Salvador Dali, the father of Surrealism. The world famous Dali Museum



Madrid's 2800 room Royal Palace is the official residence of the King of Spain.

in his hometown of Figueres showcases paintings, sculptures, 3-D collages and jewellery spanning Dali's entire career. There is even a life-size living room with furniture made to resemble the face of Mae West. From the giant eggs adorning its pink facade and its huge trompe-l'œil murals to its geodesic dome, the Dali Museum is the ultimate showcase for its creator's hallucinatory world of Surrealism.

There is nothing surreal about the Costa Brava, a strip of ruggedly beautiful Mediterranean coastline stretching from 60 km northeast of Barcelona to the French border. Long popular as a European package tour destination, this stretch of cliffs overlooking beaches and hidden coves is one of Spain's most picturesque regions.

Ultra modern best describes the sleek new high-speed rail service between Barcelona and Madrid. In less than three hours you can cover the 620-kilometre distance to the Spanish capital.

Arriving in Madrid, with its grand imperial boulevards, astonishing architecture and intoxicating mix of high culture and hedonistic pleasures, is like a double shot of espresso for the soul. Among this city's must-see landmarks is the ornately decorated Royal Palace of Madrid, the historic 17th century old town known as "Madrid de los Austrias," and the Plaza Mayor, the famous square where bullfights, trials and executions once took place.

The soul of this immensely artistic nation resides in its capital's great museums. You see it in the neoclassical 18th-century Museo del Prado, with its huge collection of masterpieces by El Greco, Velázquez, Goya and Bosch. And most viscerally in the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, dedicated to great Spanish modern artists like Dali, Garcia Lorca, Joan Miró and the most famous of them all, Pablo Picasso.

The Reina Sofía's star attraction is Picasso's haunting masterpiece, Guernica, a mural-size cubist depiction of the bombing of the eponymous Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. It is perhaps the most eloquent artistic symbol ever created of the horrors war inflicts on innocent civilians.



The whimsical architecture of Antoni Gaudi gives Barcelona its distinctive visual allure.

Air Transat non-stop return flights depart Vancouver for Barcelona each Friday until August 28 aboard an Airbus A330-200. Transat Holidays also offers one-week Barcelona City and Seaside packages.

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