



THE CREAM OF

CATALONIA

Catalonia's prosperity is borne out in everything from its magnificent mountains and historic towns to the delicious food and glorious wines. Go trekking in the national parks or gen up on surrealist art – there's so much more to the region than beaches and Barcelona

Words by Andy Allen; pictures by Andy Allen and Arthur P. Sidbach



You don't need to stay for long in Catalonia to become aware of the fierce pride its inhabitants take in their homeland. Visit the region around the national day – St George's Day – and you'll see more Catalan flags hanging than stars and stripes at an American Independence Day parade. The longer you stay, the more you realise that the locals, who very definitely ally themselves more to Catalonia than to Madrid, might actually be onto something. This north-eastern corner of Spain, with its cosmopolitan capital Barcelona, sandy costas and stunning Pyrenees mountains, really does seem to have it all.

According to the Spanish Ministry of Tourism, 13.2 million people visited Catalonia last year, making it Spain's most popular tourist region. But it is safe to say that the aforementioned tourist hotspots probably hogged the bulk of the visitors.

While these may be the brightest jewels in Catalonia's crown, there is more than enough beauty left in the rest of the region – especially

within the northern area inland from the Costa Brava stretching up to the inland cities of Girona, Vic and Figueres – to keep the most jaded tourist or house buyer happy.

Key to understanding this region is the fact that not only does it seem to have more than its fair share of cultural and touristic riches, but that it is also doing well economically. Ever since the early days of the Industrial Revolution, which the enterprising Catalans turned to their advantage more rapidly than the rest of Spain, this has been one of the Iberian Peninsula's richest areas. Even today it retains a solid, prosperous feel that often seems to have more in common with rural France than the rest of Spain. A traveller will soon notice a very distinct Catalan culture as well as a different language – Catalan is the lingua franca in these parts.

For the main activity in this area, however, all you need is energy. Rural tourism is becoming increasingly established in the region, helped by the excellent walking opportunities in the green and rugged



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countryside, and the numerous opportunities there are for outdoor sports.

A good place to start exploring is the mountain of Montserrat, the spiritual heartland of Catalonia, which lies 30 miles north-west of Barcelona and brings a pristine halt to the expanse of industrial wasteland surrounding the exhilarating city.

As the jagged peaks loom out of the haze, it rapidly becomes clear how Montserrat earned its name, 'serrated mountain'. Yet the

peaks are also worth admiring from close quarters – both for the ornate basilica, where the statue of the Black Virgin is displayed, and for views across the plain. The cable-car ride to the top is likely to have a jagged effect on your stomach if you have a delicate head for heights. Besides being an attraction in its own right, Montserrat is the focal point of a remarkably attractive region, El Bruc natural park, stretching out to the Alta Anoya area centred around the town of Igualada. Here



one is generally within 45 minutes' drive of Barcelona airport.

In many ways this region is a microcosm of what living and travelling in the Catalan heartland is all about. Rolling hills studded with Mediterranean vegetation and neat stone villages greet travellers. In places it almost feels like an Iberian home counties.

Striking across the forgettable grey belt formed by the industrial towns of Manresa, Terrassa, Sabadell and Granollers that curves upwards around the north of Barcelona, you arrive in a fresh set of hills: the natural park of San de Munt i la Serra de l'Obac. Inside the curve lie the small, picturesque towns of Caldes de Montbui, one of Spain's most important spa towns, and La Garriga, with its well-preserved Roman baths.

Even more dramatic is the neighbouring mountain range of Montseny (pronounced

Mont-seyn) to the north-east, which forms an imposing (and in winter, snow-capped) western border for much of the motorway linking Barcelona and Girona. With its remote spa towns such as Viladrau and San Hilari Sacalm, where most of Spain's mineral water is produced, this is excellent walking territory. A visit in late autumn finds cars parked alongside every roadway as Catalans decamp en masse to its slopes in search of Montseny's prolific edible wild fungi.

If most foreign visitors to the Costa Brava are unaware of what they are missing as they fly over Montseny on the final approach to Girona airport (the nearest airport for almost all areas mentioned here except Montserrat/Alta Anoià), that is also true of Girona itself. A city with a history as tortuous as the slopes of Montseny are peaceful, it was fought over by everyone from the Romans to the

Home thoughts from...

Philip and Deborah Harker

Philip, 39 and originally from Burnley, and his wife Deborah, 38, born in London but who has lived all over the world, moved to a masia outside the village of Bescanó near Girona in 1999. They have three children: Tomas, 7, Max, 4, and Liliana, 2.

Why did you move to this area?

We were growing tired of London and we'd looked at moving to other parts of the UK. But we used to come here on holiday and Deborah used to live in Barcelona and somehow we just ended up buying here on the spur of the moment.

How would you describe your property?

It's a stone masia with six bedrooms. When we bought it – for £85,000 – it was pretty much an empty shell and we couldn't even get up to the top floor. It took a lot of work to turn it into what it is today but we've had a lot of fun on the way.

How do you make a living?

Philip restores masias in the Girona area; he started off working for a British builder, Mike Collins, and began to learn the ropes from him. Now he is able to take on his own projects. But now we're looking to buy a new



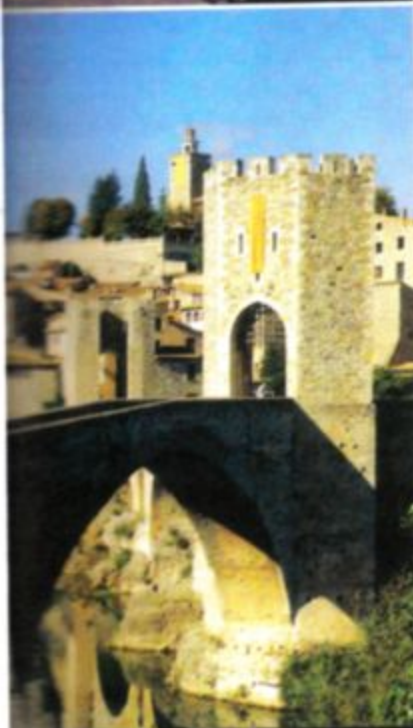
masia in the same area and do the same again, so this one is up for sale.

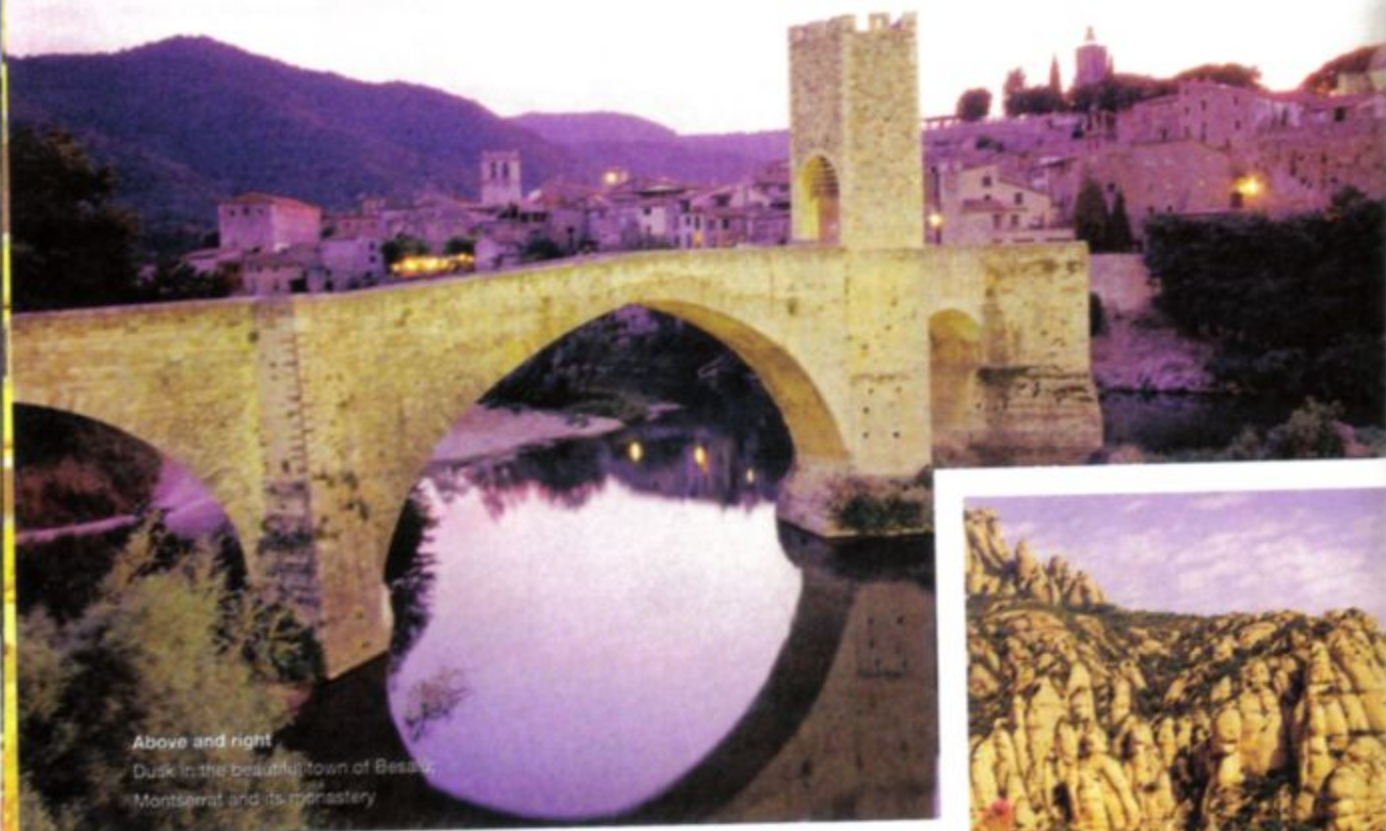
How do you find living in this area?

We love it here. We've met lots of people through our kids who go to a local school and we're very happy with that. It's a completely different kind of lifestyle – no pressure and no pretence. We have no plans to go back to the UK.

Philip and Deborah's home is on the market with Lucas Fox for €900,000 (£621,000)

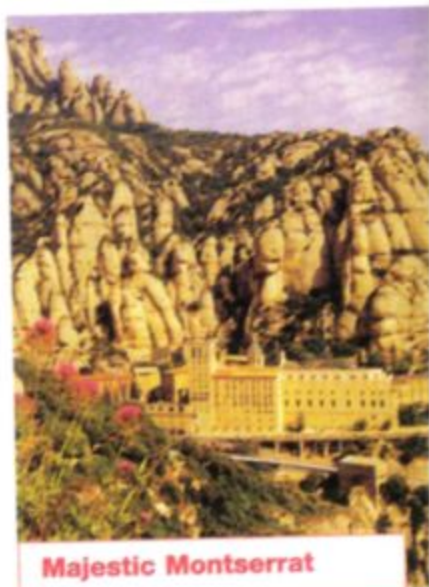
Previous page
Aragon village in the Parc Natural, Lleida
This page, clockwise
River Onyar in Girona; the Medieval bridge
in Besalú; Girona's picturesque El Call





Above and right

Dusk in the beautiful town of Besalú, Montserrat and its monastery



Majestic Montserrat

Around Girona, particularly to the west side and around the lakeside town of Banyoles, is ideal for foreign home buyers

Visigoths and Napoleon. You'll find it is now a remarkably quiet place, skipped by the bulk of holidaymakers as they head straight for the beaches. Yet Girona's historic pedigree (and the time it spent under Moorish domination) is apparent in the maze of streets that make up its medieval centre and its famous Jewish quarter. Around Girona, particularly to the west side and around the lakeside town of Banyoles, the green, rolling countryside is ideal for foreign home buyers.

Attractions of a more modern – and certainly more bizarre – kind are on offer in the last major town before the French border, Figueres. This, as any visitor will quickly realise upon arrival, was the home of

surrealist painter Salvador Dalí – a fact which announces itself in the astonishing exterior of the Dalí Museum, with its tiled murals and façade topped with a series of giant eggs.

If Figueres' Dalí museum represents the Catalans' wild side, the other main city in this area, Vic, represents the solid side – Catalonia at its most bourgeois and prosperous.

Mention Vic to a Spaniard and they will invariably think "embutidos" – the cured meats and sausages that this pork-producing region is famous for. In fact the agricultural wealth of the surrounding plain has made Vic one of Spain's richest towns as well as the fastest growing (along with a bit of help in December, when dozens of locals became

Montserrat is worth a visit for the fantastic views alone, but if you're interested in its history or religion, the best time to visit the basilica and see La Moreneta is at the chanting of Ave Maria. This is usually at 1pm or noon on Sundays, when the world-famous boys' choir sings. While the basilica is free to enter, you might also like to visit the museum next door. There is an entry fee of about €5.50 to see some interesting archaeological finds and an art collection including works by Degas, Monet, Picasso and Caravaggio. The ticket also gives access to the multimedia exhibition near the tourist office. **Tel: 00 34 938 777 766**

Property in inland Costa Brava

If you're after a stylish stone farmhouse with spectacular views over leafy hills, you could do a lot worse than settle here. According to Alex Vaughan of Barcelona-based agent Lucas Fox, Britons have been buying masias around Girona for some time.

The area offers particular advantages, he says, because many properties are a 20-minute drive from Girona and its airport. It is also relatively easy to find properties that have been restored to a high standard. Yet while beautiful, they are not cheap. Restored masias, which are generally large and often boast five or six bedrooms, go for around €900,000 (£260,000), though you can find smaller ones for around €750,000 (£217,000).

For a more economic alternative, Vaughan recommends the Alta Anoia area to the west of El Bruc natural park, where properties can offer twin views of Montserrat and the Pyrenees. Masias on offer here are much more likely to need extensive restoration work than those around Girona.

"To a degree, Anoia is uncharted territory and prices are considerably lower. It's a fantastic area, with excellent scenery and great walking and you can be at Barcelona airport within an hour from most parts of it," he says.

Vaughan has also noticed a growing interest in Montseny – also around 45 minutes from Barcelona, though more sparsely populated. An especially convenient commuting option can be found in the hills around the small, picturesque Catalan spa town of Caldes de Montbui, with its Roman

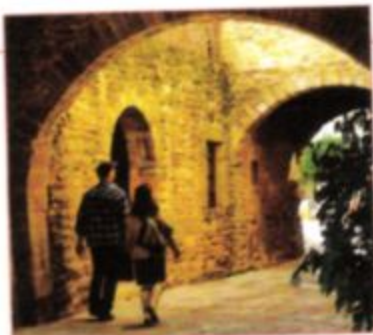
baths, L'Ametlla del Valles and La Garriga. Here, Vaughan says, villas are more widely available than grand stone masias.

Encarna Gonzalez, of estate agent Finques Besakú, which is based in the picturesque medieval town of Besakú, warns that this is not an area for bargain hunters.

"We do tend to get quite a lot of buyers who think they're going to be able to buy a fantastic masia for a few thousand euros. It really isn't like that. There is really no such thing as a cheap masia anymore," she says.

Gonzalez says that price rises in the area she covers – La Garrotxa, Alt Emporda, with Figueras as its capital, and Pla del Estany (pronounced Pla del Estari) – have outstripped those in Barcelona during the last decade. While this has pushed the area out of the price range of many of the traditional buyers in this area, there are some superb masias available. Once restored, she says, they provide remarkably sturdy dwellings whose thick stone walls retain the heat in the winter and cool the property in the summer.

John Barrass, producer of Barcelona's English Language radio programme, Radio Free Barcelona, points out that there are potentially many more townhouses about to come onto the market as elderly village dwellers bequeath their



properties to their children. "The younger Catalans really don't want to live in these villages," he says.

Barrass stresses that a car is vital for anyone living in this area and that schools can be few and far between. He also advises anyone thinking of setting up a telecommuting business to check beforehand on the type and quality of internet access available, as many rural communities do not receive broadband.

Alex Vaughan stresses: "It is beautiful out here, but you're not going to find a large community of foreigners. It will be up to you to make an effort to meet people."

Lucas Fox: tel. 00 34 933 562 989.

www.lucasfox.com

Finques Besakú: tel. 00 34 972 59 08 48.

www.finquesbesaku.com

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Catalonia dreaming...



BARCELONA: €1.8 million (£1.1 million)

Impressively restored 15th-Century masia with five bedrooms, infinity pool and large garden.

www.lucasfox.com, 00 34 933 562 989



GIRONA: €781,000 (£238,000)

Large, restored village house with four bedrooms, four bathrooms and parking for five cars. Lots of character.

www.finquesbesaku.com, 00 34 972 590 848



EL BRUC: €425,000 (£254,000)

Restored masia in El Bruc natural park with spectacular views of Montserrat. Two bedrooms with possible third.

www.lucasfox.com, 00 34 933 562 989



Destination Dali

For a touch of the surreal, head to any one of Salvador Dalí's three homes in Catalonia. The artist was born in the town of Figueras, about 37km from Girona, and he returned to the town at the end of his life. The Teatre-Museu Dalí is a work of art in itself, and is filled with bizarre and interesting works by Dalí and his contemporaries. Alternatively you can head for the coast and the pretty town of Cadaqués. In nearby Port Lligat you'll find a series of fishermen's cottages that Dalí converted into a bespoke home for him and his Russian wife. It is now home to Casa-Museu Salvador Dalí. Lastly, perhaps the least-visited of the three, is the Casa-Museu Castell Gala Dalí. A short distance from Girona, the town of Púbol is home to a medieval castle bought and decorated by Dalí for his wife and muse, Gala, in 1970.

www.dali-estate.org

www.figuerasclutat.com

Have you had
the best experience of
Inland Costa Brava?
Tell us your story by writing to our
address on page 7 or send us an email to
costa@roughguides.com

millionaires overnight after a giant lottery win). Vegetarians can content themselves with admiring Spain's largest main square and the well-preserved old quarter.

In the expansive, fertile plain that encircles Vic, the volcanic rock formations that reveal the area's geological history are already striking, but head further north into the Garrotxa (Garr-ot-cha) region and they become truly remarkable. Garrotxa is a walker's paradise and also boasts two of Catalonia's most remarkable villages.

One, Castellfollit de la Roca, has expanded to the crest of a basalt cliff where houses seem to spill over the edge. The other, Besalú, with its atmospheric centre and crooked 11th-Century stone bridge, is one of Catalonia's best preserved historic villages. ○

Above

The pretty inland town of Pals isn't far from Dalí's Púbol castle and the city of Girona

Guide to inland Costa Brava



GETTING THERE

You can fly to Girona and Barcelona: see *On Your Way* on page 96. Hiring a car is your best bet for getting around, but there are good bus links from Girona to Barcelona, Figueras and the coast.

STAYING THERE

Apartments Historic, Girona

Tel: 00 34 972 223 583

Great value flats in the city with English-speakers.

Hotel Carlemany, Girona

Tel: 00 34 972 211 212

Luxurious rooms, 20 minutes from the old town.

Hotel Fornells Park, 3km outside Girona city

Tel: 00 34 972 476 125

The perfect base for a touring holiday, with pool.

DOING THERE

Girona is a great base from which to explore inland Costa Brava, but don't forget to stroll around the city's lovely old quarter before stepping out of town.

EATING THERE

Boira

Plaça de la Independència, 17, Girona

Popular with both locals and tourists.

La Cisterna

C/Alvarez de Castro 36, Banyoles

Catalan cuisine in the old town of Banyoles.

La Churraskita

Calle Magre, 5, Figueras

Serves good Argentinian and Italian dishes.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Spanish Tourist Office: 020 7486 8077 or visit www.spain.info. Guidebooks include: *Costa Brava*, from Rough Guides' Directions series and Sunflower Books' *Costa Brava and Barcelona*.