

ROSSANA ORLANDI

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After decades of opening up to the world, the Catalan capital is reconnecting to its Spanish roots.

BY ANDREW FERREN

I moved to Spain in 2002 for what was meant to be a one-year sabbatical from my life in New York, and although I ultimately settled in Madrid, for personal reasons, Barcelona is a huge part of why I'm still here 15 years on. Back then, as a travel writer, there seemed to be endless demand for stories about the city. Whether it was architecture, boutique hotels, local food markets, or early-morning foam parties, if it was happening in Barcelona, it just seemed so much fresher, more modern

and creative, and maybe even a little more fun than virtually any other place.

Eventually tourism skyrocketed, with not always the happiest of results. When Barcelona became a popular port for cruise ships, the tiny streets of the Gothic Quarter started having to absorb thousands of day-trippers racing from site to site. And with the success of Airbnb, both local and foreign speculators started buying up apartments to rent out to tourists, and it seemed some neighborhoods like La Barceloneta were being hollowed out, with few locals left. People spoke of the "next Venice," referring to a city with far more visitors than residents. Finally the ongoing political maneuvering over Catalan independence tempered things, putting a level of tension in the air that was palpable, even to tourists.

Of course no one is ready to give up on Barcelona yet. And why would they? This is a city where you truly can have it all: cultural

riches (ancient and contemporary), a highly refined gastronomy scene, a thriving design community, tasty wines, and Mediterranean weather that awakens the beach in summer. For visitors and locals alike, an upside to the recent existential crisis has been a subtle relaxing of some of the old-time formality and social mores that once separated visitors from residents. Lunch in a fashionable restaurant can now be had at 11 a.m., or 2 p.m., or 4 p.m. Many restaurants have well-edited boutiques and some of the best shops serve pitch-perfect G&Ts. In cafés, late-afternoon caipirinhas get sipped along with *café cortado* without anyone raising an eyebrow. Even the hotel invasion looks to be headed for a slowdown. Barcelona's left-leaning mayor, Ada Colau, put a freeze on new hotel licenses "until further notice." Nonetheless, a new crop of independent properties have appeared recently, instilling the landscape with some much-needed creativity.

PHOTO: COURTESY COTTON HOUSE HOTEL.

HOTELS

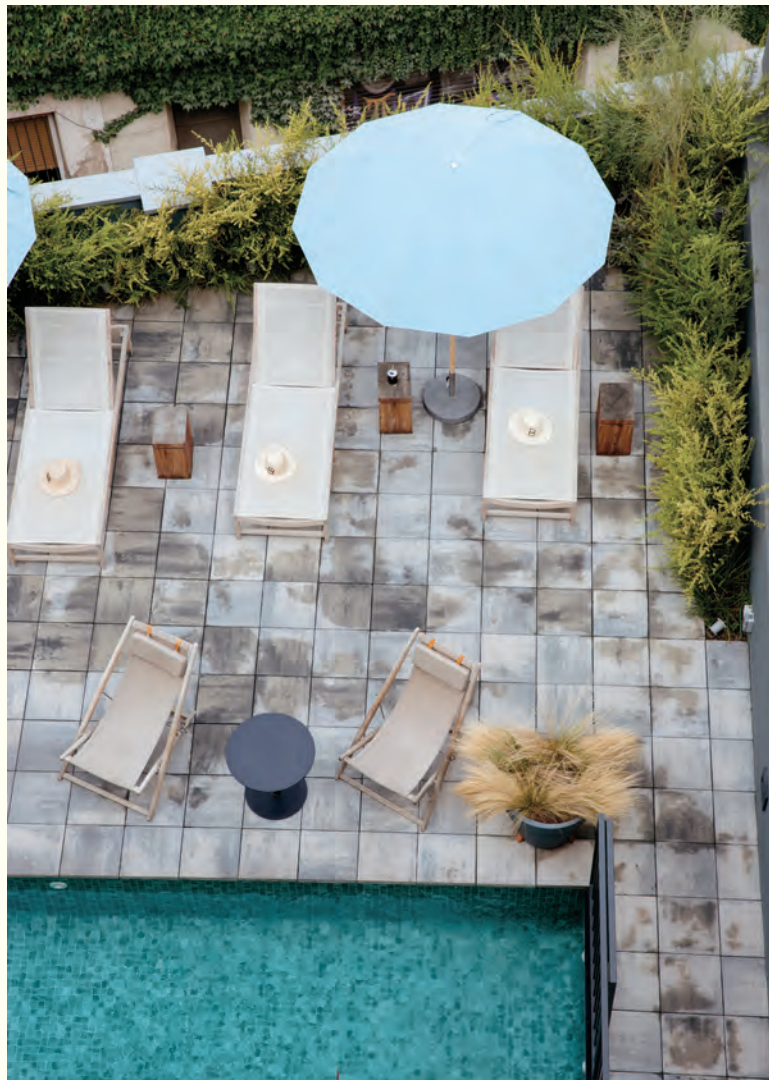
The first years after the financial crisis of 2008 seemed to defy logic, as half a dozen big-name properties opened in the city, from the Patricia Urquiola-designed **Mandarin Oriental** in an art deco building on Passeig de Gracia to the **W Hotel** by Ricardo Bofill, staking out new territory with a sail-shaped tower on the beach. Nonetheless, a new crop of independent projects have appeared in the past two years. In a building that once housed Pablo Picasso's first studio, **The Serras** is the pet project of businessman Jordi Serras, who traveled the world taking notes on hotels for inspiration. Interior designer Eva Martinez conceived the plush but light and functional décor, with blue-and-yellow-hued furniture in the tapas restaurant helmed by acclaimed Catalan chef Marc Gascons, a sleek plunge pool on the rooftop terrace, and loftlike rooms that are larger than most in the city. The location, facing the city's harbor but on a large street, seemed perhaps its only drawback when it first opened, but others have since followed it to the water's edge—most notably the new **Soho House** hotel, complete with a Cecconi's in the lobby and an on-site cinema. The 57 rooms are done up in Spanish textiles and antique fixtures.

Among the more affordable new arrivals is the **Hotel Yurbban**, where the charcoal-colored rooms are compact and crisp, if a little spare, and the groovy Midcentury-inspired lobby and patio garden feels more like Trancoso, Brazil, than downtown Barcelona. >

PHOTOS: (FROM TOP) COURTESY SOHO HOUSE BARCELONA. COURTESY HOTEL YURBBAN. COURTESY THE SERRAS.



(FROM TOP) The bar at Soho House Barcelona. Inside Hotel Yurbban. A junior suite at The Serras. (OPPOSITE) Batuar bar at Cotton House Hotel.



It's been such a hit that a sister property is underway next door. Across town in Poble Sec, near the new dining mecca of Avenida Paralelo, is **Hotel Brummell**. Inspired by travels to Sri Lanka, Australian duo Blankslate imbued the property with a tropical, modernist aesthetic, though the 20 clean-lined rooms hew Scandinavian. Head to the all-day Kitchen for Spanish staples such as *buñuelos de bacalao* (salt-cod pastries) and toasted Andalusian bread with Iberian ham. Insider's tip: Book one of the five beautifully authentic Brummell Apartments scattered across the city.

Venturing into the Eixample, the vast neighborhood of proudly ordered blocks lined with glorious Art Nouveau buildings, the **Cotton House Hotel** is located in the former Cotton Producers Guild. In the lobby, library, bar, restaurant, and stairways, interior designer Lázaro Rosa-Violán has wrought a sophisticated and layered environment with whispers of a gentlemen's club from the era when the fiber was king. Steps away is the year-old **Casa Bonay**, by Brooklyn firm Studio Tack. The unfussy concept feels a bit like a commune in which the lobby is the bar (and vice versa); a team of local craftsmen were assembled to fabricate everything from the Alt Empordà's natural, plant-based products to geometric furniture in the rooms by Marc Morro of local shop AOO. Argentine chef Estanis Carenzo is in charge of the two restaurants, where almost all the ingredients are organic—many from the herb garden on the rooftop terrace—and much of the wine list is biodynamic. There's also an independent coffee bar and specialty boutiques selling local fashion and international magazines.

Further north, near Avenida Diagonal, is another Rosa Violán-designed property, the **Hotel Praktik Bakery**. With a working bake shop led by breadmaker Anna Bellsolà as the centerpiece of the public areas, it's quickly become a favorite bolt-hole for its 74 simple monochrome rooms offset by Mediterranean blue mosaic bathrooms and the perennial scent of fresh confections. On the other side of Diagonal is the 85-room **Hotel Vincci Mae**, with interiors designed by Jaime Beriestain. With 1930s actress Mae West as its muse, the hotel portrays her elegance through geometric lines and works by artist Antonio García-Yanes, while the cocktail in her name is served on the hammock-strung roof terrace.

(THIS PAGE) Hotel Brummell.
(OPPOSITE, FROM TOP). A guest room at Casa Bonay. Hotel Praktik Bakery.

PHOTOS: PHILIPPA LANGLEY (2).



PHOTOS: (FROM TOP) MERTXELL ARIALAGUER, COURTESY HOTEL PRAKTIK BAKERY.

A view of the “El Bosc Blanc” exhibition by Jaume Plans, at Galeria Senda. (OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) The “Las Meninas” room at the Picasso Museum. An outdoor piece at the Miró Foundation. The Barcelona Design Museum.

CULTURE

In a city famous for the visual splendor of its architecture—the sidewalks alone sport a tile design inspired by Antoni Gaudí—the art inside its buildings is equally impressive. But even the most august and storied of Barcelona’s cultural institutions has new stories to tell. In the past four years, the collection of the **Picasso Museum** has been completely reinstalled with a string of brilliant acquisitions as well as hundreds of documentary photographs showing the artist at work. Perhaps best of all, the introduction of online ticket sales means no more hours-long lines snaking around the building. Shortly after painter Antoni Tàpies—whose somber, sometimes monumental and nearly monochrome compositions feature ripped, stitched, and knotted canvases—died in 2012, his eponymous **Galeria Toni Tàpies** ceased to show work by other artists. It is now entirely devoted to highlighting the career of this towering figure of 20th-century painting. The **Tàpies Foundation**, created by the artist in 1984 in a stunning modernista building that was once a publishing house, also showcases a

selection of his works in addition to smaller contemporary art exhibitions.

New to the scene is the **Design Museum of Barcelona**, which opened three years ago and is serendipitously located near the city’s largest flea market as well as Jean Nouvel’s luminous Torre Agbar. The building, designed by MBM Architects and known as *la grapadora* (the stapler), hints at just the type of everyday item one might find inside, where the collections reveal how design has affected humanity from ancient times to the present.

A new nexus of the hip and artistic has spawned on Carrer de Trafalgar, in the shadow of architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner’s stunning **Palau de la Musica Catalana**. It puts on concerts almost every day and is one of the city’s architectural gems (Montaner was Gaudí’s teacher). Until recently the streets behind it, such as Trafalgar, were home to cheap Chinese clothing wholesalers or empty storefronts. That changed when **Galeria Senda**—which shows everyone from Robert Mapplethorpe to up-and-coming Spanish talents such as



PHOTO: ENRIC BERENGUER/COURTESY GALERIA SENDA.



YAGO HORTAL
PAINTER

“Barcelona has so many museums and exhibition spaces worth checking out. **MACBA** and **CCCB** are two of my regular haunts, but one of my favorite cultural outings is to walk from Plaza de España up Montjuic and visit **CaixaForum** and **MNAC** before continuing on to the **Miró Foundation**. I love Miró and the siting of the foundation is spectacular. For clothing, I like to check out the **Avellaneda showroom**—his collections always have lots of surprises.”

PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) CATERINA BARAU/MUSEU PICASSO, BARCELONA. GEORGE M GROUTAS. MACIEK LILKO.





Anna Malagrida—migrated to spacious new digs in the neighborhood a couple of years ago.

Also worth checking out are a number of Barcelona's smaller museums, clustered together between Montjuic, the hilltop home of the well-known National Museum of Catalan Art and the Miró Foundation, and Plaza de España. Located in a stunning former brewery is the vast arts center, **Caixa-Forum Barcelona**. Nearby is Mies van der Rohe's **Barcelona Pavilion**, among the most iconic of modernist structures, designed by the architect for the city's 1929 International Exhibition and re-created on the same site in the 1980s.

Finally, what would Barcelona be without Antoni Gaudí's **Sagrada Família**? Due to be completed in 2026, the massive basilica and top tourist site continues its slow rise over the city. As it nears completion, the objections of critics who lament that the architect himself isn't drawing up the plans are being drowned out by popular enthusiasm. Blocks away is the **Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site**, an equally stunning if lesser-known UNESCO World Heritage masterpiece by Domenech i Montaner, considered the largest Art Nouveau site in Europe. The early-20th-century campus of exuberant buildings and pavilions is adorned with gothic tracery and has been reopened with a new gallery space.

(FROM TOP) The Barcelona Pavilion, by Mies van der Rohe. The ceiling of Sagrada Família. A view of the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site.

PHOTOS: (FROM TOP) NAOTAKE MURAYAMA, JUNTA CONSTRUCTORA DEL TEMPLE DE LA SAGRADA FAMILIA, ROBERT RAMOS/FFHSCSP.

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RESTAURANTS & BARS

A chef recently joked that just by trying to sample all the restaurants in Barcelona run by El Bulli alums, one could dine out in the city for a couple of weeks. Indeed, many who came out of Ferran Adrià's kitchen have stuck around, including his brother Albert, who is responsible for more than a half a dozen openings. His latest is **Enigma**, whose unconventional style is making headlines and drawing comparisons to El Bulli. The interiors by surprise 2017 Pritzker Prize laureates RCR Arquitectes, also known for their work on the award-winning Les Cols, in Olot, conjure a silvery dreamscape with swirling clouds made of metal mesh on the ceiling and opaque resin walls molded to appear like rushing water. The 40-course tasting menu can take up to four hours and the wine list has been pared back to subtle, low-alcohol vintages, in deference to the food. While the fare evokes some of the theatrics of El Bulli at **Disfrutar**—run by three of its former head chefs—the informal interiors provide a fresh new backdrop. Clay, the most Spanish of materials, acts as a unifying element to the lattice-like terracotta

screens that surround the open kitchen. Another former member of the club, Rafa Peña, is celebrating the 10-year anniversary of his first solo restaurant, **Gresca**, by opening a more casual wine bar called **Gresca Bar** next door. Expect small tapas like eel toast with sour cream and onion, and anchovy marinated with lemon.

But Barcelona is about more than the ultimate gastronomic experience at 300 euros per person. Inspired by the well-known New York art dealer, **Mary Boone Bar** offers a fun dose of uptown attitude along with cocktails named for modern artists in an art-filled environment meant to evoke Boone's imagined Barcelona apartment. At photographer Nacho Alegre's **Servicio Continuo**, interior designers Cristina Carulla and Cristina Mas conjured a British member's club that jibes with the Prohibition-era drinks and abbreviated menu of global classics: fish and chips, dim sum, and scallop ceviche.

Located on the edge of the Barceloneta neighborhood near the harbor and beaches, the **Green Spot** has made eating vegetarian cool with an airy room lined

in textured timber and lush atrium by São Paulo-based Isay Weinfeld, and a seductive menu that includes sweet potato tagliatelle with macadamia nuts and black truffles. Its counterpoint, **Solomillo**, a *charcuteria* in the Hotel Alexandra, is an ode to beef: Diners choose the breed, weight, and cooking point of their carefully aged sirloin, which has been heralded as some of the best in the city. The space is studio Borell Jover's tribute to Spanish design, where Marset Funiculí lamps by Lluís Porqueras are complemented by Basque brand Ondarreta's graceful chocolate-hued stools.

Enigma. (OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) The Green Spot. Outside Servicio Continuo. Patio seating at Solomillo.

PHOTO: PEPO SEGURA.



MILENA BUSQUETS
NOVELIST

"There are wonderful local designers in Barcelona. **Beatriz Furest** makes beautiful bags and leather accessories, while **Gema Sach Studio** is another local fashion house for womenswear and purses. For books, everyone in town goes to **La Central** on Carrer de Mallorca, which has a lovely cafeteria on the upper level."



PHOTOS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP) INIGO BUELO. COURTESY SERVICIO CONTINUO. COURTESY SOLOMILLO.



ALBERT ADRIÀ
CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR

SHOPPING

Like many European cities where all the booksellers were historically on one street and the silversmiths on another, much of Barcelona's varied retail scene can still often be categorized by address or neighborhood. The most well-known and grandest boulevard is Passeig de Gràcia, but the recent expiration of decades-old rent control has seen global brands like Armani and Prada pushing out local businesses that have been there for generations. Two hold-outs worth seeking out are **Santa Eulària**, a compact department store with a fantastic edit of coveted niche brands, and **Bel**, an old-school haberdashery famed among the Catalan gentry for their bespoke shirts, pajamas, and boxer shorts, all made on-site. A few blocks away, on Carrer de Pau Claris, is the sprawling concept shop of Chilean interior designer **Jaime Beriestain**, who over the years has left his mark on dozens of hotels and restaurants. Visitors will find Spanish furniture brands and curios, a *floristería*, and his grandma's onion soup recipe at the café.

At the top of Passeig de Gràcia sits Carrer de Seneca, a narrow lane just a couple of blocks long that has somehow become a bellwether of trends in the city. A decade ago it was lined with fashion boutiques;

now it's all about vintage décor pieces. One of the most interesting stores is **Antique Boutique**, offering both Midcentury pieces and custom designs in gleaming brass. (It also houses the photography collective Anonymus.) Even if it weren't filled with cutting-edge contemporary art and displays of standout 20th-century furniture, **Galeria Miquel Alzueta** would be worth a visit for the architecture alone. Visitors arrive through an arched, steel-clad tunnel into an expansive vaulted space where Alzueta champions younger artists and unsung design pioneers, often sparking a critical reevaluation of their work and animating the market.

Closer to the port in the old El Borne neighborhood, Carrer de Rec continues its reign as a can't-miss fashion-and-design destination. Get your bearings at any of the five **La Comercial** boutiques, which carry a tautly selected array of housewares. On buzzing Avinguda Diagonal, David Vivirido and Francesco, founders of the cult men's lifestyle magazine *Hercules Universal*, have applied their sharp editing to **Issue Ten's** eclectic inventory of edgy art, underground fashion pubs, and special-edition tees from local label Shon Mott.

"Even though Barcelona now has such a wide range of innovative and international restaurants, traditional Catalan fare is far from endangered, thanks to the extraordinary quality of local ingredients and diversity of the region's culinary tradition. Visit neighborhood markets like **La Boqueria** or **Santa Caterina**, where you can see the astounding variety of available ingredients and check out some of the premier specialist gourmet shops like **Sans & Sans** and **Casa Gisbert** for the very best coffees and teas, wines, olive oil, sweets, cured meats, and artisanal cheeses."

(FROM LEFT) Antique Boutique. Candy for sale at La Boqueria market.