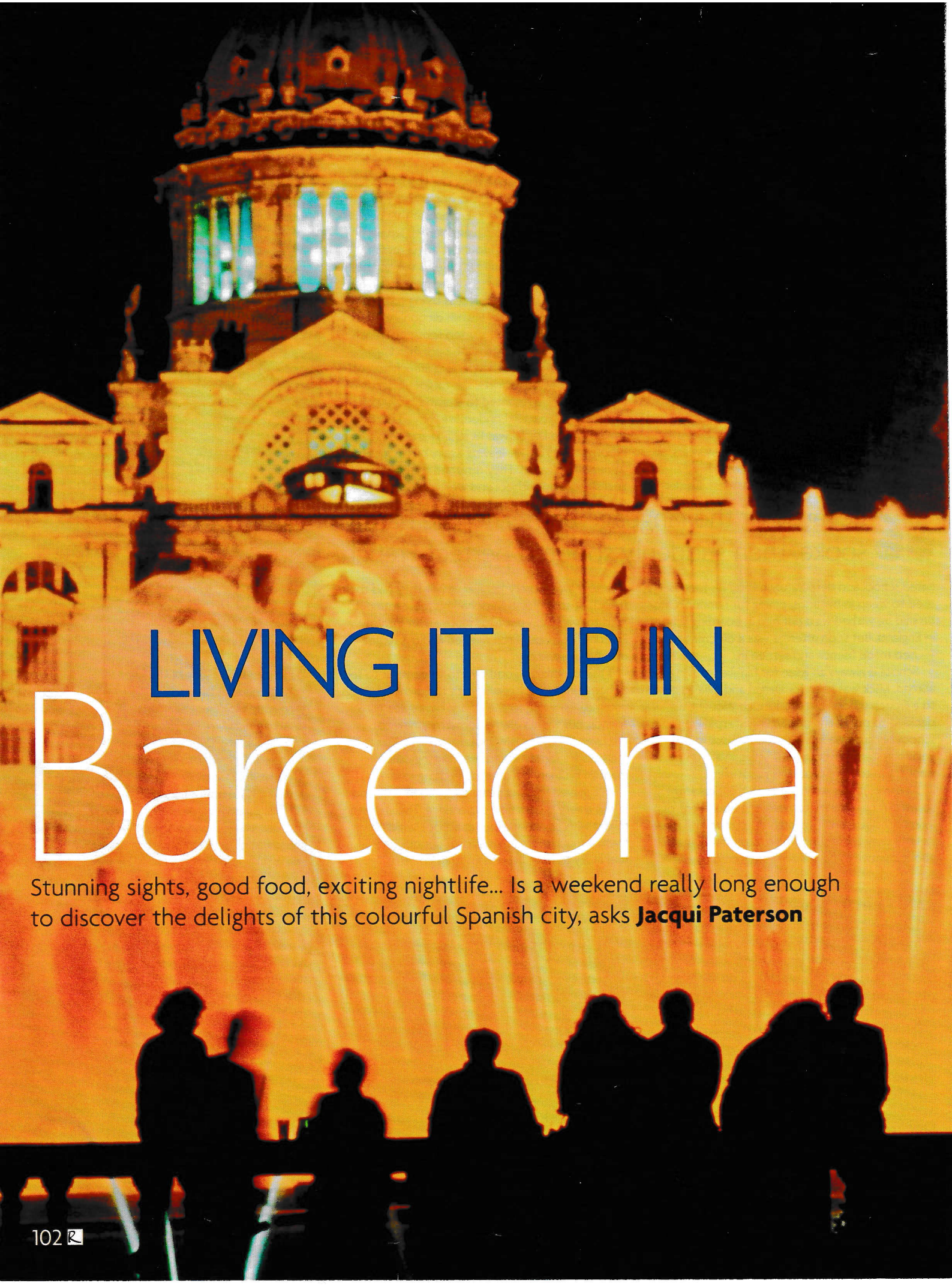


LIVING IT UP IN Barcelona

Stunning sights, good food, exciting nightlife... Is a weekend really long enough to discover the delights of this colourful Spanish city, asks **Jacqui Paterson**



By the time we've checked into our Spanish hotel, it's nearly 11pm on Friday. In London, this would signal the tail end of the evening. Last orders would be called, restaurants would be closing and revellers would be looking for cabs home. Luckily, my partner Danny and I are in Barcelona, where the nightlife is only just warming up.

Excitedly, we leave our hotel and tag on to a group of friendly locals, who lead us through the streets of Paral-lel to one of Barcelona's characteristic trendy lounge bars. The music is funky house and the people are all young and attractive. Later, armed with a couple of free entrance flyers, we make our way to a labyrinthine club stretching over three floors. Where the bars finish, the nightclubs begin...

After a very late night, we wake to the Catalan chatter of our neighbours, who are draping their brightly coloured washing over the bars of their balconies. We're in need of sustenance and breakfast time has long gone, so we search out a typical Spanish café. Food is good away from the tourist traps, but if you don't speak the language, be prepared to mime your order. Our simple lunch of chicken, tomatoes and bread is delicious.

Next, we take the bus up the boulevard of Paral-lel, past ➤

> "Friendly locals lead us to a trendy lounge bar — it's full of young and attractive people

the stately Palau Nacional de Montjuïc — which houses The National Museum of Catalonia Art — and on to Camp Nou football stadium — home of FC Barcelona and our destination.

Buses are a quick and easy way to get around, and you'll find that Catalan bus drivers are much more helpful than their British counterparts. When we accidentally sail past our stop, the driver pulls over and flags down another bus to take us back in the right direction. No way is Danny going to miss out on visiting one of the most impressive stadiums in Europe. I'm not much of a footy fan but, once inside, I too find it an amazing experience to be among 115,000 vociferous Spanish fans cheering on their favourite team.

Game over, we head back to our hotel for dinner and an early night. That's enough excitement for one day!

The next morning is dedicated to sightseeing. We head for Sagrada Família — the stunning cathedral designed by Spain's famous architect Antonio Gaudí. This masterpiece of modern architecture was his final and most ambitious project, which makes it even more fascinating. After taking a leisurely tour through its unfinished interior, we catch the lift up one of the bell-towers to enjoy awesome views across the city.

Later, we stroll to Barcelona's most famous street, La Rambla — a beautiful, tree-lined boulevard teeming with artists, street performers, craft stalls and tourists. It's easy to while away an afternoon just walking up and down, admiring the jewellery and leathercraft stalls — all laden with well-priced handmade goods. But we're keen to explore the nearby Gothic Quarter.

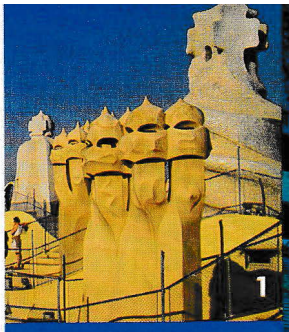
Here, a myriad of narrow, shop-lined cobblestone streets snake and intertwine. We manage to walk around for an hour

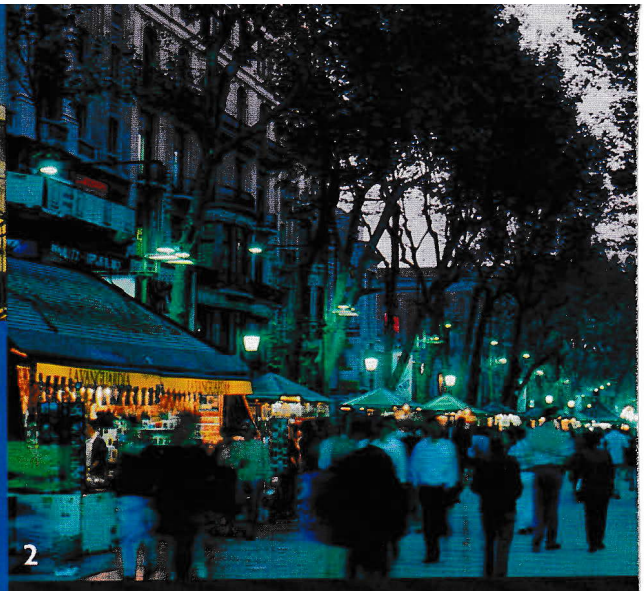
> "La Rambla is a tree-lined boulevard teeming with artists and craft stalls

without knowingly doubling up on ourselves. Through an archway, we spy the secluded cloisters of Barcelona's cathedral on Plaça de la Seu. Then we come across a cluster of shabby-looking but authentic tapas bars and decide to venture inside one for a beer. Like the grey-haired, solemn-faced Catalan men at the counter, we're soon tucking into irresistible little dishes such as octopus and paprika, meatballs in almond sauce, tortilla wedges and fried cheese.

Refreshed, we head back to La Rambla and continue on to the waterfront. A promenade leads us to a marina packed with yachts and flanked by smart fish restaurants. This area is distinctly modern, having been redeveloped for the 1992 Olympics, and very touristy. So we walk further on and discover Barceloneta, the old fishing district where a clutch of bars and restaurants serving traditional seafood dishes have sprung up. We reserve an outside table overlooking the marina — and return later to enjoy an excellent plate of paella washed down by a perfectly chilled bottle of Cava, as we watch the sun setting over the Mediterranean.

All too soon, our city break is over. Is a weekend long enough to soak up the cultural, gastronomic, leisure and shopping delights of Barcelona? Definitely not, we conclude — but we had fun trying to pack it all in. ■


1


2

1 Stroll around the roof terrace of La Pedrera — a fine example of Gaudí's unique work 2 Barcelona's buzzing streets lend themselves to people-watching and souvenir-shopping 3 Find a quiet square and soak up the sun 4 Casa Batlló is another masterpiece of Spain's famous architect

HOW TO GET THERE

Easyjet (0870 600 0000/ www.easyjet.com) offers return flights to Barcelona from around £100. Book on line and save £5 on a return flight. Alternatively, British Airways (0845 779 9977/www.ba.com) offers return flights to the Spanish city from around £100.

WHAT TO BUY

Remember that most shops and businesses close for siesta from 1-2pm until 4-5pm. But they remain open until around 9-10pm, so there's plenty of time for shopping in the evenings.

- Visit the impressive La Bouqueria market, off La Rambla, for the finest fresh food — its stalls are heaving with fruit, vegetables, fish and cheeses.
- Don't miss the arts and crafts market on the central pedestrian strip of La Rambla — you can find leatherwork or a lovely painting at reasonable prices.
- Mango and Zara, the popular Spanish fashion stores, have their headquarters in Barcelona. So take advantage of the cheaper prices to kit yourself out with a few trendy bargains.
- Pick up a pair of cute summer espadrilles with ribbon ankle ties.
- Brighten up your coffee table back home with a glossy photographic book on Gaudí's amazing art and architecture.

WHEN TO GO

Situated on the shores of the Mediterranean, Barcelona enjoys a mild climate all year round. The best months to visit are May, June and September. Try to avoid the sweltering heat of July and August. January is the coldest month, with top temperatures averaging 10°C. Despite the odd heavy rainstorm — particularly around September and October — it's usually dry and sunny in the city.


3


4

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH Jon Arnold/Axiom/Catalonia National Archive/Corbis/Getty Images/The Travel Library/Zefa ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS Corbis