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Life / Travel

Travel Europe: Spain's Costa Brava boasts history, food and killer scenery

Tapas, olive oil, sea food among many spectacular foods to sample in ancient region of Spain

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DREAMSTIME

The Spanish Costa Brava is a stunning stretch of land north of Barcelona.

By: **Josephine Matyas** Freelance Travel writer, Published on Tue Feb 19 2013

SANTA PAU, SPAIN—I am having a food epiphany. The platter in front of me is a kaleidoscope of grilled mushrooms, aubergine, strips of red peppers and buttery-smooth baby potatoes. The large, meaty mushrooms are laced with olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt.

The cook comes out, wipes his hands on his apron and gestures expansively to show me how he tromped through the countryside, plucking the mushrooms from hiding places in the surrounding forests. His does not speak English. I do not speak Spanish. He's a bit sheepish, and does not want to divulge any territorial secrets. I just want to know the name of this delicious, rustic find.

With the help of a crinkled roadmap, a Spanish-speaking GPS and the occasional local guide, I am exploring the food and culture of Catalonia, the northeast region of Spain.

One of the country's longest inhabited regions, Catalonia includes the fishing villages and beaches of the Costa Brava Mediterranean coast and the peaks and valleys of the rugged Girona Pyrenees.

Eons ago, the Romans planted themselves in this region, recognizing the wide

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valley to be an important passageway connecting Spain to the rest of Europe. And, by controlling this passageway, they controlled the entire Iberian Peninsula.

The stamp of the Romans is everywhere across northern Spain, from ancient walls to churches and monasteries. Evidence of one of their most enduring achievements is found in every kitchen, every day, for every meal: Olive oil. The Greeks may have introduced olive trees to the region, but it was the Romans who perfected the techniques of pressing the oil.

“Olive oil is the mother of all Spanish cooking,” explains Carles Pongiluppi, my guide and culinary attaché. “We have it at breakfast, lunch and dinner every day. In Catalonia, we are half between the mountains and the sea, so we mix those products. But at the base of any stew or sauce is olive oil, garlic and tomatoes.”

On my gourmandizing expedition, I am on the hunt for those elusive mushrooms, but am willing to eat my weight in olive-oil-infused dishes on the way.

Peratallada

They talk “food” in this tiny, medieval village crammed with stone houses and curved archways. There are 150 inhabitants and 17 restaurants. Peratallada is close to the tourist magnets along the Costa Brava coast. Many visitors make a trip to the village, to stroll the narrow alleyways and stop for lunch.

The oldest restaurant in the village, Restaurant Bonay, family-owned since 1936, lays out a tasting spread of regional specialties.

“When we eat, we have three strong meals a day,” says Pongiluppi, eyeing the growing mound of dishes on our table. There is an appetizer platter of olives and salami, snails baked in their shells and served with a sharp garlic sauce, a stew of wild boar with mushrooms and miniscule rabbit ribs served with red pepper, garlic and parsley.

Begur

The medieval village of Begur, with its hilltop castle overlooking the town, could not be more beautiful. Hollywood made its mark here; Begur was one of the main filming sites for Elizabeth Taylor’s 1959 flick, *Suddenly Last Summer*, based on a play by Tennessee Williams. Half a century later, they’re still talking about it.

A stone’s throw from the sea, Begur is known for its tapas selections which include fried prawns, cuttlefish with peas and pig’s feet with snails.

Santa Pau

Medieval towns are common in this part of Spain, but the walled town of Santa Pau is worth an afternoon of exploration of its ramparts, twisty streets and nooks and crannies. The 13th century homes cluster around the massive, stone baronial castle.

Santa Pau is in the heart of the volcanic region of Catalonia, known for its creamy fesols, small white beans grown in the dark volcanic soil. At the Restaurant Santa Pau, in the town’s archway-lined main square, the beans are served with a salty sausage fleck. They’re a teaser to the main dish of paper-thin sheets of homemade pasta, rolled into cannelloni tubes and stuffed with sausage and mushrooms, then sprinkled with a decadently rich truffle cream sauce.

Owner Jesús Pont’s family has been farming and cooking in Santa Pau for several generations.

“This is the region of mushrooms and of truffles. All of these ingredients come from the area. My father collects the wild mushrooms in these forests.”

Mushrooms are everywhere. But no one’s father is about to give up his secret.

Just the Facts

DINING TIPS The ambrosial mushrooms are on the menu at Hotel la Sala de Camós. Ask for the Rovello de Llicorella (Lactarius deliciosus in Latin).

Spanish restaurants operate on a later timetable than North American. Lunch from 2

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p.m. to 3 p.m. and dinner after 9 p.m. If you show up earlier, the kitchen will still be locked up tight.

SLEEPING The newly renovated Hotel Clàssic Begur is in the heart of the pedestrian zone of beautiful Begur. Doubles from \$100 including breakfast. www.classicbegur.com

Hotel la Sala de Camós is a small country inn surrounded by olive trees and rolling hillsides. The building dates back to the 12th century; there are eight renovated and updated rooms. Doubles from \$145 with breakfast. www.lasaladecamos.com

WEB SURFING www.costabrava.org

Josephine Matyas is a Kingston Ont. based freelance writer whose trip was subsidized by Spain Tourism. She can be found online at www.writerwithoutborders.com or follow her on Twitter @writertravels.



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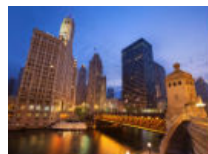
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