

barcelona dreaming

Novelist SUSAN MINOT and art critic JED PERL preview Spain's Olympic city. One finds fantasy, the other fantastic architecture, as both succumb to the Catalan capital

IN BARCELONA, NEW AND BEAUTIFUL THINGS CAME AT ME IN A RUSH. I TRIED to slow them down, till I realized one should not try to stop beautiful rushing things. Only one thing intruded. It came in the form of dug-up streets, of skyscraper dorms, and of T-shirts picturing a little creature called Cobi—it was the Olympics, scheduled for this summer. Barcelona did not, I thought, need the Olympics.

There is some Paris in Barcelona, in the streets opening onto small squares, in the wide avenues; then one notices the rounded mosaic benches, then the palm trees. At the end of Ciutadella Park with its palm house and beige paths there is an Arc del Triomf, but this one is terra-cotta red and festooned with angels with white pointed wings.

There are lavender bulbs in unlit lamps.

A yellow dome sits like a painted egg atop an austere Beaux Arts building. Balconies bulge, chimneys swell and curve. Lampposts strain, tonguing the air with refined curls. Cupolas studded with smashed crockery twist in shapes part Moorish, part Dr. Seuss. Everything seems extended, pulled in a different way. Even the sidewalks are patterned—a dusty turquoise with a flowery wallpaper design or four-petaled flower stencils.

I am staying at the Ritz. One is assisted through the revolving door by young doormen into a cool high lobby with black-and-white floors. The lounge is high, too, and white with round settees and low tables and chandeliers. In the evening one sees groups of businessmen or wedding parties taking cocktails. At night the dining room glitters with candles throwing shadows across enormous blue scalloped curtains.

The guest rooms are carpeted and have fireplaces; the windows with French latches have an extra pane of glass to muffle the sound of the buzzing avenues. Bathrooms are of unpolished pink marble with open showers. There's fresh orange juice on a tray in the morning and wrapped chocolates on the turned-back covers at night.

In Barcelona I have visions. At night I come upon the Block of Discord, the famous Modernist row of buildings, awash in spotlights, Domènech i Montaner's sand-dripped spires echoing the finely wrought window trim. The studded encrustations of Puig i Cadafach stand out like copper stamps above Venetian windows. Next door, Gaudí's Casa Batlló swims in a blue light, its scaly roof ▶ 186

Barcelona quartet, LEFT TO RIGHT: Stained-glass ceiling of the Palau de la Música Catalana; Gaudí's still-unfinished Sagrada Família cathedral; Gaudí's Casa Batlló; architectural model for La Sagrada Família.

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a wave, its balconies like the jawbones of whales. Two anchors dangle from the upper facade. To the visitor, Gaudí is everywhere—his undulating apartment building, Casa Milà; his huge uncompleted church, La Sagrada Família. Still under construction, it looks as if it is being built from the top down—the sporelike clusters bristle atop the rocket spires. *Sanctus sanctus sanctus* is scattered across them in delirious abandon, Gaudí's spirit.

I go early to museums and stand very still in front of Picasso's early paintings at the Picasso Museum, soaking them into me. I drift mooning through the Antoni Tàpies Foundation in the renovated Domènech i Montaner building, with its brick facade and huge scribbling wire sculpture by Tàpies on the roof. The main room displays a changing exhibit of the artist's work; the floor is a canvas with great black brushstrokes; the skylight above is hung with an awning of pen-and-ink faces. The permanent collection downstairs, hung at waist level, has his famous sand paintings, torn canvases, impression pieces, and beautiful lithographs.

At the Antique Shoe Museum, tucked away in the fountained Plaça de Sant Felip Neri, there are slave sandals and high-perched satin boots. At the new Museum of Modern Art, Catalan artists' work is displayed—from a dazzling palm gate by Gaudí to romantic paintings by Ramon Casas. Outside, around the lily pond in Plaça de las Armas, couples kiss on the benches, ignoring the marble figure of *Disconsolation* flung onto one arm, hair hiding her face.

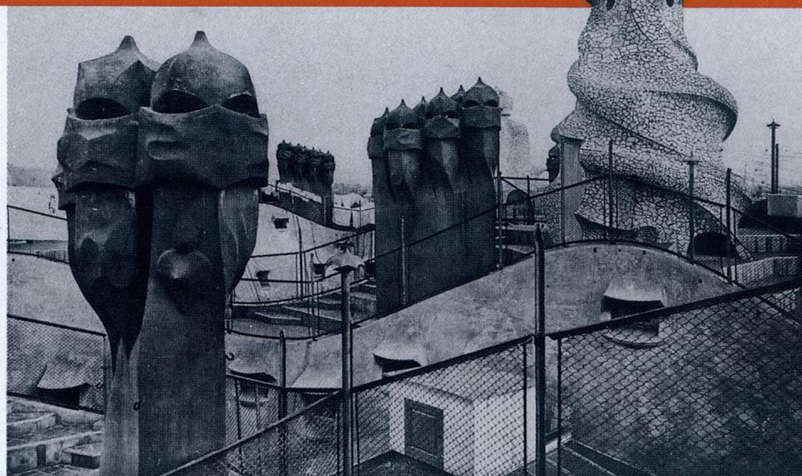
The cloister off the great Cathedral is dark at the edges with a bright garden and white geese among the trickling water. Inside, the columns are fluted, looking like flowers.

On my way to the Joan Miró Foundation I get lost in the winding roads and gardens of Montjuïc, high above the city. Wedding parties step out of cars decorated with pink tulle. In a nearby amusement park are the distant screams of children. On the white roofs of the Miró Foundation are the artist's whimsical colored sculptures. One quietly stunning room displays works of crayon and pencil with titles such as *Escape by the Music of Perfume*.

On another part of Montjuïc is a castle with yellow towers left over from the 1929 World's Fair. Off a busy avenue at the edge of the park is the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion, destroyed, then rebuilt with marble from his father's quarry. With its pools and glass, it is a place of astonishing tranquillity. Of course, the construction is everywhere: red earth, earth, raised paths. The stadiums are located atop Montjuïc. Alongside wide tiered stairways with blue enamel tiles are silvery escalators not yet operating. Around the Palau Nacional is a hive of netting. The Museum of Catalan Art, one of Barcelona's great treasures, has been closed for renovations—the damn Olympics again.

In the early afternoon the gates rattle down over the storefronts, and in the narrow streets the buzz of a motor scooter flashes down an alley and leaves a silence floating with the gentle clicking of silverware and voices out of the high shuttered buildings.

An old restaurant on Carrer d'Avinyó is Pitarra, with a



From Robert Hughes's *Barcelona*, due out this spring: chimneys and ventilators of Gaudí's Casa Milà

mound of fruit by the bar and lace curtains over the window. A friend from America has joined me on her way to Rome. We eat a Spanish omelet—potato and cheese—and a favorite Catalan dish, *bottifara con judías*, grilled sausage with buttery beans. One of the oldest bodegas in the city, with high tables and cracked walls, is El Portalón, on Banyes Nous. A thin light falls from a dusty skylight; *tapas* are displayed under dusty glass cases. My friend eats *pescaditos*, small fried fish; I eat *pulпитos*, miniature octopuses.

Not far from BD Editions, the sleek design store with Gaudí reproductions and the latest European furniture, is the similarly sleek Gran Colmado with cool gourmet shelves and wine racks and spices being ground on the marble counters. An appealing place for lunch is in the Plaça Sant Josep Oriol, where in the dappled shade alongside the stone Santa Maria del Pi church, which has one of the largest rose stained-glass windows in Spain, we eat gazpacho under white umbrellas. In the adjoining Plaça del Pi is a canopied flea market. We buy old keys, postcards, black lace shawls. Nearby are dark antiques stores with chairs on tables and monk figurines. My friend buys a blazing gold heart on wood. Shopping for clothes is not so successful—in the galleries the prices are high and the selection poor. A better place for buying is at the Boqueria, the huge food market off the Rambla, with its trays of fish and snails and salted cod, piles of cherries, honeyed nectarines, and bright candy shaped like rats.

The trees are leafy on the Rambla, where we stroll the wide central island in the evening swarm. Behind the hotels with their doors open to vast empty lounges is the red-light district, with what a connoisseur told me are some of the best brothels in Europe, most destined to fall prey to the Olympic clean-up scourge. In the arcaded Plaça Reial, tribal drums play among shadowy crowds. We are invited by a pair of Brazilian sailors to a party on their ship docked in the harbor. My friend notes afterward that they didn't seem as if they were trying to get laid *right* away.

The lights are on in the spraying fountains of the Plaça de Catalunya; the moon appears in a navy sky. In Barcelona one doesn't sleep much.

Through a mutual friend we meet Cristina, a young journalist. She takes us around to restaurants and bars, smiling with secrets. El Tragaluz is a state-of-the-art restaurant de-

signed by Javier Mariscal. At the entrance bar, where lamps with conical rice shades are set in a line at a tilt, we drink kava, a champagnelike local wine, and Cristina talks to the bartender. Though raised in Barcelona, she did not learn Catalan, the official language of Catalonia, till university. Upstairs the restaurant has a large tropical room with latticed shades and overhead fans and a sliding-glass ceiling open to the night sky. Up a spiral staircase is a bar with a purple velvet back curved like a J. The floors change from black marble to corrugated steel to wood to white marble, the walls from green iron to brass to plaster to stone.

We drive up above the city to Tibidabo to eat in La Venta's green trellised terrace. We share a plate of *pimentons de Padrón*, grilled peppers, bracing ourselves—one out of five is burning hot. Nearby the bars Merbeyé and Mirablau overlook the glittering city. Lower down is La Cúpula, in a mansion where we sit against flowery cushions drinking *orujo*, a clear liqueur, discussing a Catalan expression for dying: to go dry.

La Carassa, named for the brothel kept by Louis XIV, is a fondue restaurant tucked away in the old section. Among the dark oils and masks crowding beneath the rafters, we huddle around small candles and eat salty rice salad. Off the Rambla is the more touristy Los Caracoles, with its sizzling grill and white tablecloths, where a live lobster is brought creaking to our table for inspection. The best seafood can be found in the restaurants off Barceloneta, the strip of beach south of the harbor. On Sundays, under the latticed porches in sight of the tanned and the topless, one eats paella and rice with black squid. Cristina's favorite neighborhood restaurant is Can Punyetes, in the maze of the Gràcia section. We rub our toast with tomato, eat thinly sliced lamb chops, and drink amber-colored wine served from the barrels above the grill.

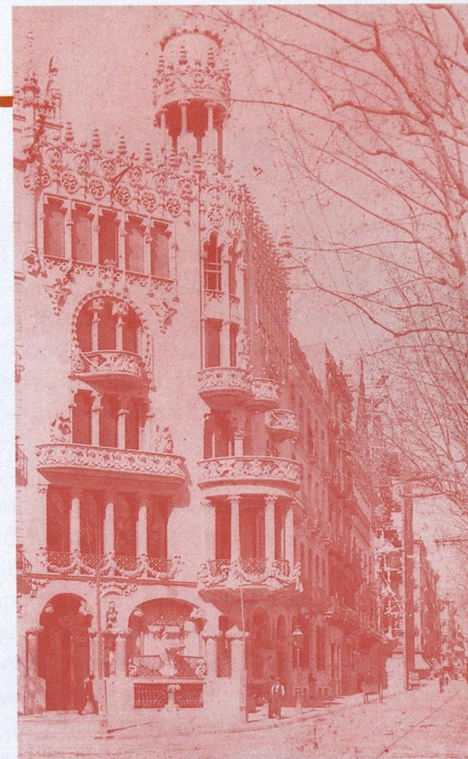
We drift through Barcelona's famous late nights. El Born, off the lozenge-shaped Plaça del Born, is a petite bar with dictionaries in the back room and a cheery dining room up a narrow staircase. Nick Havana is a cellar club with a grid of televisions in a distressed wall and a vending machine dispensing French existentialist paperbacks. Torres de Avila swarms with gawkers—and there's plenty to look at, from the glass elevators and holes in the floor revealing billiard

**Barcelona's Great Hall: Saló del Tinell—
part of the Catalan royal palace**



games to green neon circular bars, suede butterfly chairs, and torpedo-shaped bathroom sinks.

I make one excursion out of Barcelona, to the hills of Montserrat, where the angels came down and modeled the rocks into fragmented pillars in honor of the Black Madonna in the monastery there. A hot wind blows across the terrace, and inside the church is the gold-encrusted niche where men and kerchiefed women touch the Madonna's hand, then kiss their own fingers. Winding out of the mountains in the bus, we listen to a tape of a boys' chorus singing Gregorian chants on the loudspeaker. The light falls on different spots of the dry valley; clouds swirl the tubular cliffs.—SUSAN MINOT



**1905 photo of architect Domènec
i Montaner's Casa Lleó Morera**

IN THE MONTHS LEADING UP TO THE 1992 SUMMER Olympics, Barcelona is a city where nothing can be put on hold. It's trying to do everything at once—invent a future, put its past in order, and cope with the hassles of modern urban life. Late last summer, when I visited the cramped La Rambla offices of the Olimpíada Cultural, which directs visual and performing arts activities for the Olympics, the staff seemed to be on a communal caffeine jag. The 1992 Olympics are sometimes presented as the city's final triumph over the living death of the Franco years, so in Barcelona cultural life can feel as important as life itself.

At the Olimpíada Cultural, journalists receive a big, slickly packaged picture book that illustrates dozens of major new architectural projects, ranging from parks to sports complexes to museums—it gives the impression of an entire city that's been put on the drawing board for redesign. This isn't far from the truth. Up on Montjuïc, the central site for Olympic activities (which travelers may remember from visits to the whitewashed geometric spaces of the Miró Foundation), the new arena by Japanese architect Arata Isozaki sits in immaculate splendor. This futuristic composition of steel, glass, and concrete is the best among the new Olympic buildings.

A cab ride away, around La Rambla—the nineteenth-century thoroughfare where the youth of the Western world have been tuning in and dropping out for more decades than many of the current crop have been alive—are more signs of renewal. There's been a top-to-bottom restoration of the Palau Güell, the first major work by Barcelona's visionary master builder Antoni Gaudí. From the windows of a studio he had in the neighborhood, Picasso could see its famous roofscape of chimneys covered in shattered tiles, and some ▶ 188

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now believe it was an early inspiration for Cubism. Cross La Rambla from the Palau Güell and you're nearly in the Gothic Quarter, where the American architect Richard Meier is shoehorning an all-white high-tech Museum of Contemporary Art into the nut brown alleyways and interiors that probably look much as they did five hundred years ago. A twenty- or thirty-minute walk from there and you're in the Quadrat d'Or, the one-hundred-odd-block area that is Barcelona's mother lode of turn-of-the-century *modernista* architecture—and more restorations. At the Casa Milà, Gaudí's grottolike apartment building, decades of neglect are being reversed, returning dignity to the expressionist balcony railings of curling, unfurling wrought iron and to the undulating stone facades that have been chiseled so that they have the matte sheen of pewter.

In Barcelona the juxtaposition and layering of periods can leave a visitor with dissonant, seemingly irreconcilable impressions. A stolid bourgeois conservatism is joined to a fierce Catalan desire for independence (and sometimes a passionate anarchism). The city is as much about unity in difference as those Gaudí facades covered with collages of broken tiles (the technical term for this ancient practice is *trencadís*) in which various patterns, colors, textures, and styles jar with one another but also harmonize. This city is medieval, fin de siècle, and futuristic all at once.

Visit the Museu Marés, just steps from the Cathedral, and you will find rooms that have the peacefulness of a scholar's study. There's a gallery full of doll-like Catalan wooden Madonnas in all sizes, sporting all manner of grave and goofy facial expressions; another room is so packed with nineteenth-century kitsch souvenirs of pilgrimages to the shrine of the Virgin on nearby Montserrat that it looks like an oversize version of one of Joseph Cornell's nostalgic, surrealist boxes. But walk out of the Museu Marés and almost immediately you're face-to-face with the shops full of Olympic trinkets (images of Cobi, the '92 cartoon mascot; Joan Miró ashtrays and coffee mugs; Gaudí calendars, greeting cards, construction sets) and all the traffic and noise—the pressures, in short, of a history that will not stop.

If you're like me, you may not give all that much thought to a city before you're actually there, but once there you want to know more and more. I think that's what inspired the new book by Robert Hughes, the art critic for *Time*. About a year ago, when I asked Hughes what the title would be, he said with his characteristic mix of take-me-as-I-am bluntness and what-do-you-think curiosity, "It's called *Barcelona*. Kind of plain, but I couldn't think of what else to call it." The title fits. This is a foursquare account, albeit in the easygoing Robert Hughes voice, of the two-thousand-year career of a port city on the western edge of the Mediterranean. Some will pack it with the luggage, but my guess is that more people will give it a quick look before they go to Barcelona and an end-to-end read when they come back. With a TV tie-in that will be aired on PBS this spring, the book has all the signs of bestsellerdom.

While *Barcelona* (Knopf) is not, by and large, a personal reminiscence, it opens with the story of how Hughes be-

came "a Barcelona enthusiast, as near as I can recall, in the spring of 1966." He describes the sculptor Xavier Corberó, whom he met in London and who turned out to be his "key to the city." Corberó "was one of the last of its dandies. . . a wiry bantam of a man with a bladelike gypsy nose, a sharp cackling sense of humor, and an aptitude for carving marble into refined shells, wings, and demilunes." When in Barcelona, you may want to go to see Corberó's composition of softly curved marble forms that rises out of a shallow pool in the Plaça de Sòller. It's one of more than two dozen outdoor sculptures (including work by Tàpies, Kelly, Chillida, and many others) that have been developed in Barcelona in recent years.

Corberó "lived in a dark, rambling *masia*, or farmhouse, preserved along with the rest of a rural lane, south of the city," Hughes explains. "Given the Spanish hours and a floating population of polyglot houseguests, one was apt to lose track of time and place alike in this labyrinth; but most mornings I would manage to lurch out into the white-gold coastal light like a disoriented bat and head for the city, there to study—if that was the *mot juste*—the works of Gaudí and his circle, to riffle through the boxes of prints and cards and old photos in the dark narrow bookshops in the Barri gòtic, and then, at three in the afternoon, have lunch." The Gothic Quarter is even today full of shops selling old things, only they are now far more elegant and, doubtless, more expensive.

Twenty-five years after this love at first sight, Hughes is delving into the history that might explain what he loves. In the first chapter he surveys the city, touching on images out of its past, such as Miró's crystalline painting *The Farm*, which Hemingway once owned and in which the ancestral homestead of Catalonia "is turned to the light, delineated, listed, fixed." Hughes confronts the city as it is now, with its nearly terminal traffic problems, its "glaciers of simmering metal." He describes the mixed essences of the Catalan spirit—the mysterious *seny*, a common sense; and its opposite, *rauxa*, uncontrollable emotion, an outburst. He deals humorously with Barcelona's modern-design obsession, speaking of the "bitching, competition, and stylistic froufrou. In what other city would you find a bilingual *Design Guide* rating its bars, discos, and restaurants not by the quality of their food or service but entirely by their design ambience?"

In successive chapters, Hughes goes back to the beginning and takes Barcelona and Catalonia from Roman times through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance and the nineteenth century. He moves in and out of lives: Guifre el Pelòs, or "Wilfred the Hairy," is said to be the founder of Catalan independence and "comes down to us swathed in apocryphal deeds"; the fifteenth-century poet Ausiàs March, whom Hughes calls "the last of the troubadours, the first of the moderns," addressed God in a poem: "I do not know why I do not obey you"; the nineteenth-century dreamer Narcís Monturiol set off with a band of socialists to found an ill-fated community called Icaria near Shreveport, Louisiana. Finally, there are the great urban renewal

projects of nineteenth-century Barcelona and the *modernista* architects, who gave form to the fin de siècle city: Hughes will be introducing many Americans to Lluís Domènech i Montaner, whose Palace of Catalan Music, designed for the performance of Catalan choral compositions, joins stained glass, statuary, and mosaic into a gaudy Mediterranean version of Wagner's total artwork.

Visitors looking for a guide to "happening" Barcelona may be disappointed by Hughes's approach; he's skeptical (to say the least) about the high-tech glamour of the contemporary city, and he doesn't have much to say about the young artists who have emerged in Barcelona in recent years, such as the sculptors Susana Solano and Juame Plensa. But I think Hughes is right to draw our attention away from the glittering surface of Barcelona '92; he's conscious that too many writers jet around the world not to find what's different about different places but to give the nod to copycat versions of what's hip at home. A lot of the newer projects in Barcelona are in an international-design/Mafia/automatic-pilot mode that isn't very interesting. So Hughes wants to show us what's specific to this city that sits in the northeast of Spain, a city so determined to retain its local (and not necessarily Spanish) savor that it has its own flourishing language, Catalan.

I suspect that part of what interests Hughes about Gaudí—the subject of *Barcelona's* closing chapter—is the extent to which this extraordinary turn-of-the-century artist operated outside any cultural empire or imperial center. The Gaudí Hughes presents is not a modern artist but a Catalan artist: deeply pious and profoundly conservative; a man whose work doesn't jibe with the accounts in the histories of modern art, where Gaudí is thought to have smashed the conventional forms of European architecture and made a transition between the Beaux Arts and the Bauhaus.

Anyone who looks closely at Gaudí's buildings appreciates the expense (and care and concentration) that went into every detail. Hughes describes how, in the 1880s, Count Eusebi Güell and a few other wealthy patrons gave Gaudí the total support that enabled him to work at his own pace, in his own way. During the building of the Palau Güell, Güell's secretary "showed his boss a sheaf of bills and begged him to tell Gaudí to economize. Güell leafed through them. 'Is *that* all he spent?' asked the patron airily." Gaudí worked without elaborate drawings or plans; his great structures were really on-site improvisations carried out by a raft of expert craftsmen (iron- and stoneworkers, specialists in tile and stained glass) who became Gaudí's hands, giving his visionary inventions concrete form. The whole crafts tradition of Catalonia is behind Gaudí's imagination, pushing his flashes of insight into the curving, mosaic-encrusted benches of Parc Güell; the palm-leaf pattern of the fence around the Casa Vicenç; the ultramodern (for 1910) car ramp of the Casa Milà; the columns of the crypt for the Colonia Güell, which echo so beautifully with the trunks of the surrounding trees; and the hyperbolic Gothic romanticism of his unfinished church, La Sagrada Família. Gaudí's art is a confluence of

all the visual powers of Catalonia—that's why it's the beating heart of the city.

When I first went to Barcelona, a few years ago, I stood in the clear morning light in front of the iridescent mosaic cliff that is the facade of Gaudí's Casa Batlló, and I remembered how in high school I'd looked at photographs of his buildings and loved the craziness and the complexity and the sheer nerve. Later on I lost interest in Gaudí. To my somewhat older self his work felt a little silly, exaggerated, overblown. But Barcelona changed all that. The miracle of seeing Gaudí's buildings in context is that their eccentricities suddenly look like the most natural things in the world. Walk into the first floor of the Casa Batlló (and you're welcome to) and you will find spaces suffused with a cool blue light, spaces that open into one another so mysteriously yet so inevitably, it's as if you're walking into someone else's daydream. That daydream—sober and elegant and shot through with fantasy—is about as close as you may ever come to understanding Barcelona. Gaudí's art, like Barcelona itself, treasures its paradoxes. And why not? Fierce, generous, and self-reliant, it is a city of survivors. They know that if you can explain them completely, you will shortly thereafter explain them away.—JED PERL

BEST OF BARCELONA

Hotels

Condes de Barcelona Charming 100-room hotel in a restored Modernist building. Passeig de Gràcia 75. Phone: 215-0616.

Gran Hotel Havana New and chic: 149 rooms with hyper-moderne interiors. Gran Vía de les Corts Catalanes, 647. Phone: 412-1115.

Hotel Alexandra Big with businesspeople; 75 rooms; excellent services. Calle de Mallorca 251. Phone: 215-7931.

Hotel Colón The location's the thing—in the heart of the Gothic Quarter and just across from the Cathedral. Avinguda de la Cathedral, 7. Phone: 301-1404; in the U.S.: (212) 686-9213.

Hotel Ritz A 1919 landmark, the city's grandest hotel. Gran Vía de les Corts Catalanes 668. Phone: 318-5200. **Note: area code for Barcelona is 34-3.**

Restaurants

Agut d'Avignon Innovative Catalan cuisine in a beautiful Gothic Quarter setting; one of Barcelona's best restaurants. Trinitat 3. Phone: 302-6034.

Can Punyetes Marià Cubí 189. Phone: 200-9159.

El Dorado Petit Prime spot for *nueva cocina catalana*. Dolors Monserdá 51. Phone: 204-5153.

El Tragaluz Passatge de la Concepció 5. Phone: 487-0196.

La Carassa Brosolí 1. Phone: 310-3306.

La Cúpula Teodoro Roviralta 37. Phone: 212-4888.

La Venta Plaça del Dr. Andreu. Phone: 212-6455.

Passadis d'en Pep Hidden restaurant with good seafood. Plaça del Palau 2. Phone: 310-1021.

Pitarra Carrer d'Avinyó 56. Phone: 301-1647.

Set Portes Excellent seafood restaurant on the waterfront. Passeig d' Isabel Segona 14. Phone: 319-3033.

Bars, bodegas, and clubs

El Born Passeig del Born 26. Phone: 319-5333.

El Portalón Banys Nous 20. Phone: 302-1187.

Merbeye Plaça del Dr. Andreu. Phone: 212-6455.

Mirablau Plaça del Dr. Andreu. Phone: 418-5879.

Nick Havanna Roselló 208. Phone: 215-6591.

Torres de Avila Marqués de Comillas. Phone: 426-8174.