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September 2013



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Running Through Paradise

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Girona and the “wild coast” (translation of *costa brava*) are located in the Catalonia region of northeastern Spain, an area with its own culture, language and economy—and hopes of one day becoming an independent nationality, yet again. Catalan is the official language, but most residents speak Spanish and English as well.



Discover the route less traveled on Spain's Costa Brava Way Trail.

BY ALLISON PATTILLO

Relaxation. Culture. Adventure. Rare is the trip that successfully delivers the ultimate travel trifecta. But after traveling to Spain for a running vacation, I discovered that spending a few days following the Costa Brava Way Trail doesn't just meet these lofty desires—it surpasses them on every level.

Maybe it was the speeding through ancient towns and olive groves, dining at Michelin-starred restaurants or falling asleep happily exhausted in a bed overlooking the sea—and dreaming of repeating it all again the next

day? Whatever the reason, head to northeastern Spain and tap into the Mediterranean way of life.

Getting Organized

An easy train or car ride from Barcelona, the city of Girona is a convenient central hub and home of Pablo and Christina Rodriguez of Running & Trekking Costa Brava. This active travel company offers a number of packaged trips on which the partners serve as sage guides.

The expansive trail is an incredibly popular route to follow, so you *can* go it alone, but having arrangements taken

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care of, luggage transported and a personal trail guide who speaks Catalan is well worth the extra Euros.

Running Away

Over the course of our four-day trip, we covered approximately 36 miles. The beauty of running along the well-marked Costa Brava Way Trail is that it has a variety of terrain and is dotted with a seemingly endless array of charming towns for fortifying stops. You can even leave your caffeinated gels at home and try the real thing. For me, sipping a thick, dark, double shot of espresso with one sugar cube at a hilltop café mid-run was a definite “life is amazing” moment!

The trail is more than 120 miles long, but it is set up in such a manner that travelers can run the whole thing or explore a section and still get a sense for the diverse region. Seaside promenades, limestone steps, loamy forest trails, wild flower-filled mead-

PACKAGE OPTIONS

Having a guide provides a sense of comfort that someone's always around the corner with a translation, a bottle of water and a ride back to your villa. **Running & Trekking Costa Brava** offers a variety of packages and will also work with you to create a custom experience. runningcostabrava.com

ows and dirt roads—it's not uncommon to encounter all of these and more in the same day. If you hire guides, they meet you with refreshments and a shuttle. To adventure out on your own, plan your route and allow for a slower pace—there is simply too much to see!

Postcard Perfect

If I had to choose a favorite day, it would be the first. We began at a Mas Cals, a 1000-year-old farmhouse, about an hour outside of Girona. No matter your standard pre-run breakfast, it was easy to adjust to a traditional meal of cured meats, cheeses, thick slices of toasted bread, tomatoes, olive oil, coffee and wine, enjoyed on a terrace overlooking verdant pastures. Our band was quite merry by the time we began climbing up into the hills!

As the day progressed, we passed ancient churches, castle ruins and medieval villages. Eventually we landed at the edge of the perfectly azure Mediterranean Sea. Then we continued to run along deserted beaches and on cliff side trails until we came to a dead end in a cove, surrounded on three sides by high rock cliffs. There we were met with a picnic lunch and sea kayaks. Paddling into the postcard perfect town of Calella capped off a day that couldn't be more perfect—until it went over the top with massages at our hotel and dinner at the Michelin-starred Casamar restaurant. Now that's what I call paradise. ■

Clockwise from top: Runners cool off with a diving board splash in Tamariu; Post-run vineyard lunch at the Mas Perafita winery near Cadaques; Author, Allison Pattillo, at the Verdura Castle ruins; Christina Rodriguez running through the streets of Begur village; An afternoon *siesta* at La Banyera de la Rusa; Approaching the St. Pere de Rodes Monastery.

MUST-SEE SPOTS

- The diving board in Tamariu is a stout wooden plank secured in the rocks, perfect for a bracing mid-run plunge.
- Drink wine the Catalan way, with an *el porro*. (Much like it sounds, you pour it into your mouth. Have a dribble cloth at the ready!).
- Kiss the Leona de Girona—if you smooch the statue's backside, it means you will return to Girona.
- If you visit during a Catalonian festival, be sure to watch highly trained locals building intricate human towers called *castells*.
- The Market in Girona features all the delicacies of the region, including the melt-in-your-mouth Iberico ham, an olive oil vending machine and a steal of a deal on *espadrilles*!
- A vineyard visit—when timed around lunch, it is a beautiful thing! On my trip, we visited Perafita Winery for a delicious lunch on the lawn and wine tastings.

MENJA!

Local is the focus when it comes to food in Costa Brava, with options like pork (botifarra is a sweet dried sausage), seafood, rice, apples, olive oil, tomatoes and wine in abundance. Some fantastic dining destinations include...

Restaurant La Curcuma

The Girona-based chef focuses on local ingredients prepared to highlight the quality of the elements' new takes on traditional preparations.

Casamar

This Michelin-starred restaurant in Calella delivered an amazingly delicious meal enhancing clean flavors with unimaginable nuances.

SLEEP EASY

Rest your weary head (and legs) at these rustic inns and gorgeous castles.

Hotel Nord 1901

Like your own luxury apartment in downtown Girona, this hotel boasts multi-bedroom suites, perfect for a party, a quiet courtyard pool and complimentary breakfast. nord1901.com

Hotel Rocamar

Spacious rooms (ask for one with a balcony overlooking Cadaques Bay), a welcoming patio for afternoon libations and a fantastic breakfast spread made this a win with weary runners. rocamar.com

Hotel Castell d'Emporda

Watch your princess fantasies come to life when you're escorted to your room in this renovated castle. Complete with an amazing restaurant, patio meant for lounging and a pool to soak tired muscles or hop in for a midnight skinny dip! castelldeporda.com