

FLOWER POWER IN GIRONA



Every May, this small Spanish town welcomes spring with a stunning display of flowers. We were there this year and came away enchanted

I am overwhelmed by the rainbow colours splashed across town and the intoxicating fragrances. Everywhere I look I see cascades of carnations, red roses, yellow gerberas, waxy lilies, exotic orchids and birds of paradise, bouquets, baskets and bonsais. There are floral chains decorating alleyways and spilling over balconies, webs made from recycled plastic and some tethered to lamp-posts. I am in Girona, Spain for the annual spring festival called Temps de Flors or Flower Season. It started long ago as a simple flower display competition but has now blossomed into the town's most important festival. The whole city comes alive with a creativity that blooms unrestrained among amateurs and professionals alike.

Girona has a turbulent past: it used to be called the 'city of a thousand sieges'. Strategically located at the foothills of the Pyrenees, it was attacked by the Romans, Visigoths, the Moors and the French. I walk with our guide Anna Aliu along the murky Onyar River, crossed by five bridges, including the red Fishmonger's Bridge in wood and metal designed by Gustave Eiffel. The banks of the river are lined with weeping willows and typical Florence-style houses in warm shades of pink, orange and ochre that are called Cases Penjades or hanging houses. The town's showpiece, the Santa Maria Cathedral with its precipitous flight of 90 steps, is today decked in a carpet of flowers. The cathedral's construction started in the 11th century and went on till the 18th century, and it's a cocktail of architectural styles: a Baroque facade hiding a Gothic interior, and houses treasures like the marble throne of Charlemagne and a 11th century altar.

Just outside the Cathedral is the Call or Jewish quarter, where the Jews were confined in ancient times. After they were expelled or asked to convert, Christians moved in and either destroyed the original homes or built their own over them. One of the main streets here is the Calle de la Forca, once Via Augusta or the Roman Cardus Maximus (Main Street), which led all the way to Rome. I walk through its tangled web of narrow winding alleys, intricate network of patios and cul de sacs, balconies brimming with flowers and vivid red and yellow Catalan flags, and it all feels like a multi-layered history lesson.

I am floored by the vignettes of the Flower Festival in various public buildings, private courtyard gardens and even offices. Giant ladybugs made of flowers and leaves adorn the steps of the Cathedral of Saint Felipe, which has the tomb of the patron saint of the town. Legend has it that when French troops attacked the saint's tomb, they were warded off by a giant swarm of flies. Today, the city's souvenirs use fly motifs, and the local beer is called Mosca after the humble insect. Even the formal grey spaces of a lawyer's office, with its gold-etched tomes and wooden tables, have been brightened up with clusters of multi-hued flowers.

Besides real flowers, the festival uses ingeniously crafted flowers in silk, ceramics, wood and paper in inventive planters, ranging from conventional pots to quirky shoes or bicycle wheels.

I walk around the crenellated walls that surround the historic centre with vantage views of the city. I go back in time at Sant Pere de Galligants, a 12th century Benedictine monastery, decorated with ceramic flowers in indigo blue in the central quadrangle set to the haunting tones of Gregorian chants in the background.

Of all the venues, though, my vote goes to the Arab Baths, built in the 12th century and showcasing the best of Moorish architecture. The baths have had a chequered history; they became a nun's convent in the 15th century and were also used as laundry rooms. In 1929, they were restored by the modernist architect Rafael Maso. With horseshoe arches, changing rooms with niches in the walls for clothes, a central octagonal pool surrounded by pillars, and light streaming in from the dome, I find it decked out in colourful flowers and wispy vines like a veritable Garden of Eden.

Girona's cuisine like the rest of Catalonia is inspired by the sea and its farms, and loaded with fish, asparagus, wild mushrooms and more. But to celebrate Flower Season, even the food is flower-themed. At La Calendula, run by Chef Iolanda Bustos and her husband, we are greeted by the celebrity chef who has laid out a menu filled with edible flowers and forest herbs, inspired by her mother and grandmother's recipes. I enjoy a salty flower-and-herb tempura, pasta with marigold pesto, and even a flower beer and a sweet, flower-infused liqueur. Girona sure knows how to say it with flowers!

QUICK GUIDE

Getting there

Girona is an hour from Barcelona by train or bus.

Where to stay

Hotel Carlmany, 10 minutes from the Old Town, is a four-star hotel with good amenities and location. www.carlmany.es/en

What to eat

Catalan specialities like cod fish, prawns, and smoked sea bass, and Xuixo, their famous dessert. Don't miss the local sparkling wine called Cava, and Cortado, shot of espresso with a dash of milk.

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