



FAIRMONT
MAGAZINE

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Indonesia's
New
Artisans

The Sporty
Side of
Barcelona

Mayan Spirit
in Mexico

Fairmont

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California Living

(A guide for the rest of us)

#MYCALIMOMENT

FLEX IN THE CITY

Long known for its nightlife,
Barcelona is sporting a
new reputation as a health
and fitness destination.

By [Natasha Mekhail](#)
Photos by [Gunnar Knechtel](#)

Sporty scenes are
common sights from
the Barceloneta
Beach boardwalk,
where locals come
to swim, bike, jog,
rollerblade and show
off their six-packs.



Barcelona is a city with two speeds. There's the Gothic Quarter pace, where the fun is in meandering through its twisted streets, turning a corner when medieval doorway catches your eye, and changing course at a column left behind by the Romans. Then there's the La Rambla pace, characterized by the endless rush of people who populate the cafes, tapas bars and nightclubs of the pulsating strip from morning coffee to after-hours cocktail. But today I'm resolved to tracking down the city's elusive third gear, and told I'll find it along Avinguda Diagonal, the multi-lane thoroughfare that bisects the city from mountains to Mediterranean.

It's 9 p.m., and, with my sneakers laced up, I set out for the ample avenue just in time to catch the start of Barcelona's fitness golden hour – the time when temperatures dip low enough that city dwellers can voluntarily break a sweat. And sure enough, they come: In-line skaters and runners take to the long, straight sidewalks, their fluorescent footwear a blur in the glow of the streetlights. Beside them, the slim profiles of road bikes zip through the cycle lanes. I join the joggers on the pavement, where, along the way, I spot more nocturnal creatures – these ones shooting hoops and lobbing tennis balls on courts lit by flood lamps.

The Catalonian capital has long held a reputation as a city of languid living and nightlife. And while both still hold true (one need only count its Michelin stars or witness the pedestrian traffic at 5 a.m. for the proof), another side of Barcelona has quietly emerged: that of a health-conscious, fitness-loving city. It means visitors are discovering a new dimension to their Catalan experience, one in which they can still have fun – but then burn it all off at the end.

The cool early morning hours bring a repeat performance of the nighttime fitness ceremony, and nowhere is Barcelona's sporty side more evident than from the 14th-floor window of my room in the Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I. Directly below lies the spa, home to one of the top sports-medicine facilities in Europe, and the pool, where guests are swimming morning laps. In the distance to the left, I make out Barcelona's soccer stadium, one of the largest in Europe, where the joke is that the roars following FC Barcelona goals can register on the Richter scale. To the right lies the Barcelona Polo Club, where riders are warming up the horses. A constellation of tennis and paddle courts marks the club's perimeter. The polo club and hotel's shared grounds form one of the largest green spaces in the city. The scene is about as far from either the Gothic Quarter's slo-mo vibe or La Rambla's bacchanal as you can imagine.

"Before and after the Olympics, you saw two different Barcelonas," Josef Ajram tells me later in the day over a coffee in the hotel lobby. Tall, lean and tattooed from the neck down, Ajram looks more like a rock star than his true vocation: a stockbroker who moonlights as a fitness guru (and counts more than 200,000 Twitter followers). His "Where Is the Limit?" club assists its members in achieving their fitness goals – and then setting more ambitious ones.

Ajram explains that, prior to 1992, Barcelonans were fairly sedentary. But with the introduction of Olympic infrastructure, such as bike lanes and improved sidewalks – not to mention the inspiration of having the world's best athletes flood the city – the collective mindset began to change.

Those like Ajram, who came of age in the decade, got mobile. One of the biggest cultural shifts was toward cycling: Relatively scarce pre-Olympics, bike commuters today number about 80,000. Ajram, who is an Ironman triathlete and marathon runner outside of his finance job, has a prosperity-linked philosophy when it comes to the effect of sport on a population's psyche. •••

“During the financial crisis, people really discovered sports here,” he says, “the idea that if they go running for 45 minutes, their thoughts are more clear. They set goals and achieved them. They understood that if you could do that in sport, you could do that in life and in business. You can start down a new career path and improve the economic recovery of the country.”

Carlos Gella might just be the embodiment of Ajram’s theory. The former executive switched his own career during the recession. Today, he still works part time as a business consultant. But when he’s not taking meetings in a suit and tie, he’s in Oakleys and hiking boots running Scenic Walking Barcelona through the Serra de Collserola mountains that border the city to the north.

This low-lying range holds 186 miles (300 kilometers) of trails and, on our morning hike, Gella and his guiding partner, Pere Sauret, take me rambling along the summit. On the way, they point out the tracks of wild boars, the fruit on the fig trees and even a piece of artillery left over from the Spanish Civil War. “Barcelona was the last city to fall to Franco,” Gella says.

Sauret explains that such interpretive treks are known as *excursionismo*, a popular Spanish pastime. “It means so much more than just walking,” he says. “It’s about discovering nature, the country and history, learning as much about the plants you encounter as about the cathedrals you see along the way.”

From up here, we can take in the whole city and get a sense of how it came to be: How the Llobregat River from the Pyrenees travelled down to form a delta, creating a fertile valley at the edge of the Mediterranean on which the first inhabitants settled. We can see the highway, which follows the same route as Via Augusta, the original Roman road. In the city center is Antoni Gaudí’s Sagrada Familia cathedral, now in its 133th year of construction. When completed, it will be Barcelona’s tallest building. “Gaudí’s only restriction is that the height not exceed the mountain which God built,” says Gella.

But as fascinating as all the sights taken together is the actual physical grid of the city, its square blocks as defined as a checker board – something that can only be appreciated from above. During the industrial revolution, nothing existed outside the Gothic Quarter, which was then a walled city. The stifled inhabitants suffered the effects of medieval sanitation and water systems. The average lifespan was 35.

In 1850, city architect Ildefons Cerdà was commissioned to come up with a plan for Barcelona’s expansion that would see life expectancy increase. What followed was the construction of an unprecedented grid of long, continuous streets running north-to-south and east-to-west that meant pedestrians could finally walk (or run, or bike) unhindered by the old labyrinthine alleys. Each housing block formed a square around a central courtyard garden. These *patios de manzana* were designed to give everybody in the city access to a green space. The height of each block was further restricted to provide each apartment, even those on the ground floor, with a minimum of sunlight each day. The new city was finished in 1900 after only 50 years – and once done, life expectancy doubled. Barcelona was literally designed around health.

I feel honored when I find out that executive chef Claudio Aguirre and chef de cuisine Antonio Nunes from Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I will accompany me and a small group of hotel staff on a market tour. That’s before ...



CLOCKWISE Barcelona’s city grid is eye candy from above; in the Gothic Quarter, kids play in streets that date back to the time of the Romans; Gaudí designed the rooftop of Torre Bellesguard to resemble a dragon.

Part of the Olympic infrastructure of the 1990s, widened streets with bike lanes led to the rise in popularity of cycling. Now 80,000 Barcelonians commute by bike.

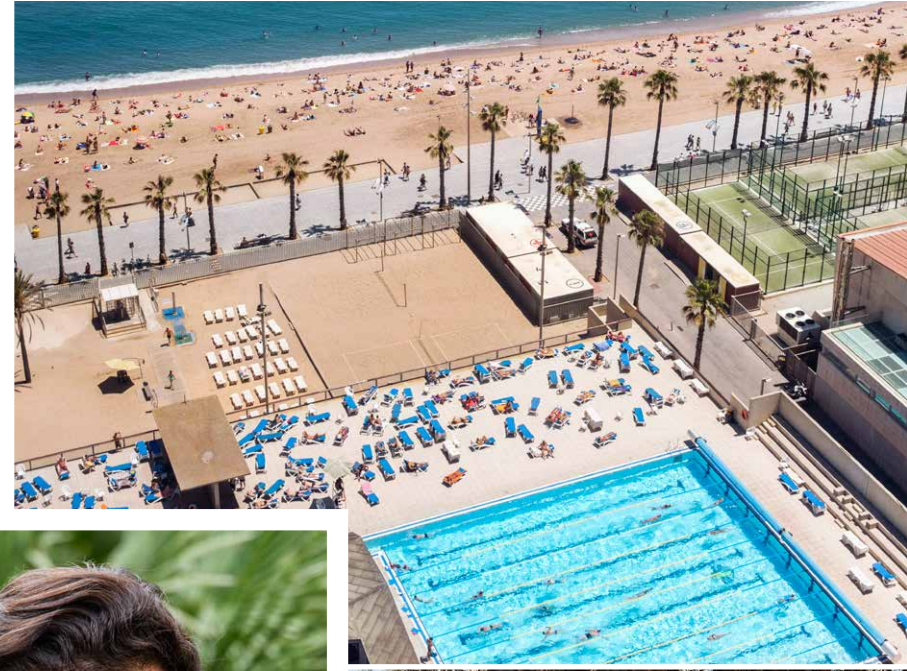


The new city was finished in 1900 after only **50 years** – and once done, life expectancy doubled. Barcelona was literally designed around health.

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CLOCKWISE The Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I's garden setting borders the Barcelona Polo Club; athletes receive training and sports medicine at the hotel's onsite fitness facility; a rider works with a horse at the polo club.



CLOCKWISE A lap pool provides an alternative to soaking in the nearby Mediterranean Sea; Carlos Gella and Pere Sauret lead trekking tours through the Serra de Collserola mountains; Josef Ajram is Spain's work-hard/play-hard guru.

BARCELONA

I learn that the personalized service is not just for visiting journalists, but for any interested guest. Chef is testing out a new program aimed at introducing visitors to the healthful benefits – and joys – of the Catalan larder. The first stop is Mercat del Ninot, newly re-opened after a five-year renovation.

Inside, we find that, in an analogy for the city itself, the formerly crowded aisles have been replaced with spacious passages, and every stand redone. The most significant change is the introduction of tasting counters at the stalls. So, whereas before, tourists could have a look and maybe pick up a few items to squeeze into their mini-bar fridge, now they can now sit and sample on the spot.

For a taste, we head to one of Aguirre’s favorites, Barra Perelló, a specialist in olives and anchovies dating back to 1898. It’s only 11 a.m., but the chefs order a bottle of local cava (you can’t be healthy all the time!) and a selection of stuffed olives.

This guided visit is not just a show for tourists. Aguirre really buys from this market for the hotel. He loves the Barra Perelló anchovies, rich in omega-3s and packed with protein. He describes how the family removes the tiny bones by hand and cures the fish in a process that can take months. It’s a labor of love that is revealed in the salty, oily flavour and a texture that melts on the tongue.

Next we travel to Boqueria. The market off La Rambla is a major tourist draw, but locals shop here too. Everything you need to know about it can be summed up in its numbers, which our guide, market president Salvador Capdevila, cheerfully lists off to us on his fingers as we stroll its busy lanes: 175 years old, 6,000 square meters, 20,000 different products. He points to historic photographs that show Picasso eating at a stall, and to a set of windows, behind which the king of molecular gastronomy, Ferran Adrià, kept a discreet test kitchen in the elBulli era.

“The amount of fish sold here in one day equals that sold in Paris in a month,” Capdevila exclaims proudly. In fact, Spain is the largest consumer of fish after Japan. Cholesterol-lowering fish is a healthy choice at meals, and chef Aguirre reminds us that Mediterranean preparation methods tend to skip the sauce, grilling seafood and vegetables with just a brush of olive oil to let their subtle flavours come through. Condiments, meanwhile, tend to be little more than a squeeze of lemon. The Catalan diet is healthy without even trying to be.

To illustrate, Aguirre leads the gang out again the following day in Part Two of the chef excursion, this time to the hotel’s own offsite kitchen garden. There, we meet 86-year-old Josep Maria, a farmer who looks remarkable for his age and still tends to the produce and herbs he grows.

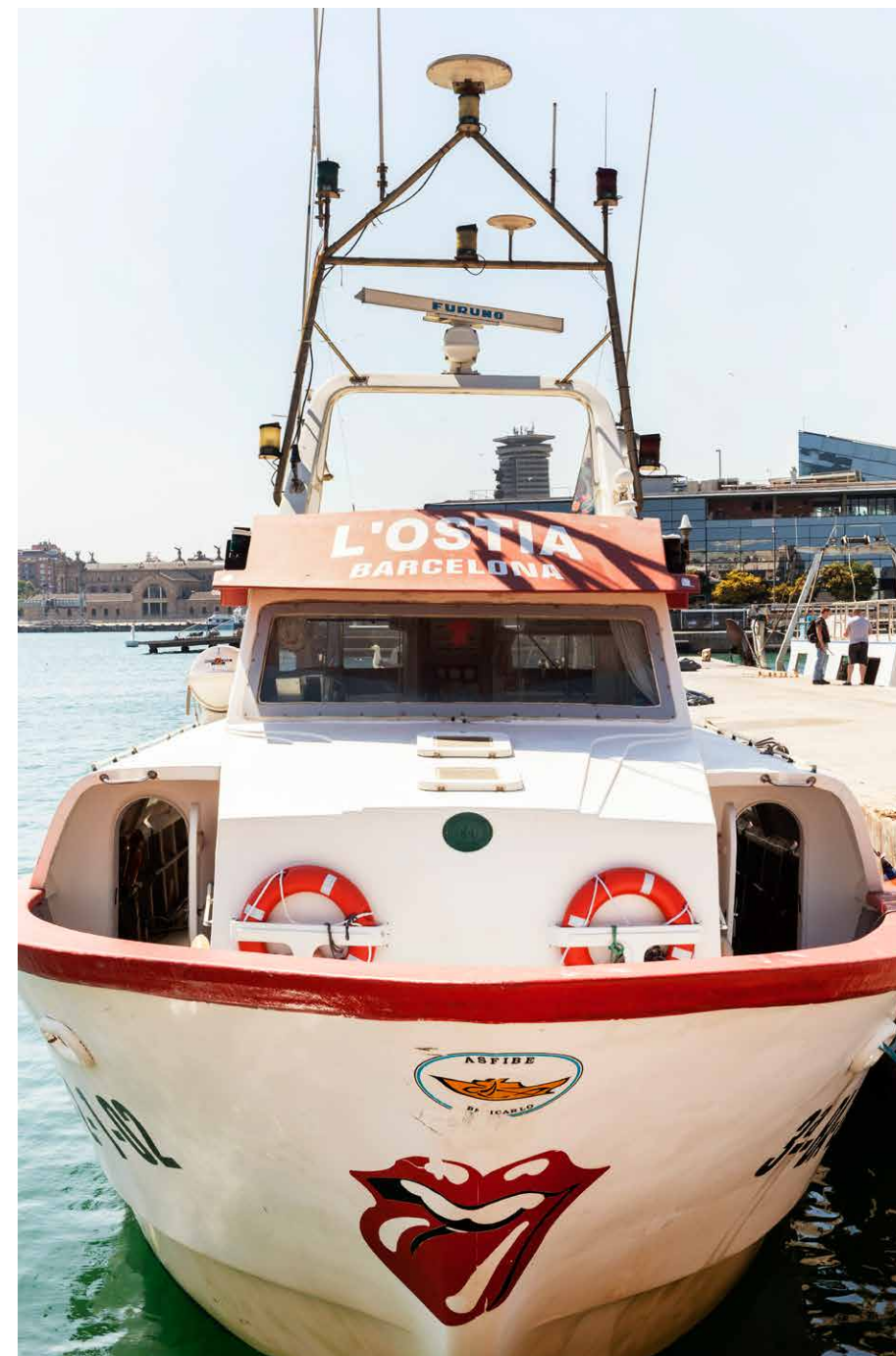
After touring the fields, we all head back to the farm’s entrance area where the chefs have laid out a picnic on a long table under the shade of a large tree. I recognize the breads, cheeses, cold cuts and anchovies from our market visits and the chefs have topped up the meal with sausage, tortilla española and fresh beefsteak tomatoes grown onsite.

Suddenly, out comes the *porrón*, a decanter that, when tipped towards the holder’s mouth, delivers a long stream of wine. Chef asks if I’d like some cheese and sends back a mountain of runny Queso de La Serena on a thick slice of bread. I protest, but, after the first delicious bite, quickly gobble the rest down.

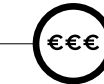
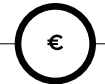
Of everything I’ve done in Barcelona, this day is the most memorable. The food, sun and company feels like essence of Catalonia. But I’ve eaten a tad too much, and a nagging voice inside reminds me that between this outing and dinner plans, I won’t have time for a run today. As I raise this lament to Blanca Aguirre, a member of the hotel team who joined the excursion, she places a hand on my shoulder and delivers the final word on Barcelona’s third speed that had, until now, eluded me: “The meaning of health,” she says, “is happiness.”



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
With its low calorie count relative to other cocktails, gin and tonic is considered a “skinny drink,” and you can find Barcelona’s best (officially: they won a competition) at Boca Chica, where a G&T involves dry ice; at Flax & Kale the titular ingredients factor prominently into its healthy menu. **OPPOSITE** Fishing is life in Spain, the world’s second largest consumer of seafood after Japan.



GUILTLESS INDULGENCES



A healthy new arrival on the city’s food scene is **Flax & Kale** and, as the name suggests, you’ll find the vegetarian- and vegan-friendly menu chock full of superfoods. But this fare is anything but bland, featuring Spanish and comfort food staples reimaged in fresh new ways. teresacarles.com

For fine dining from a different perspective, head to the top of the **Torre d’Alta Mar**. Lunchtime is ideal to both take in a light version of chef Albert Dolcet’s elaborate, seafood-rich tasting menu as well as mid-day views of the raucous human theater on Barceloneta Beach. torredaltamar.com



STAY

Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I, the latest European addition to the Fairmont portfolio, is a modernist icon designed by renowned Barcelona architect Carlos Ferrater. Its lush garden setting, among the largest green spaces in the city, makes the hotel a true haven from the bustle of the Catalan capital.

fairmont.com/barcelona

DINE

Fairmont’s **The Terrace** restaurant provides the ultimate al fresco dining experience. Its newly installed Argentinian-style barbecue has inspired a menu of churrasco meats as well as Spanish fare, such as octopus and Spanish sausage. Your selections arrive at the table still sizzling on a mini charcoal grill.

DO

Everybody knows Sagrada Família, but Gaudí and his architectural contemporaries have many other sites with all of the presence and none of the crowds. Recently opened to the public, the Gaudí-designed home **Torre Bellesguard** has a dragon theme and its rooftop makes the shape of the mythic creature. **Casa Amatller**, meanwhile, designed by Josep Puig i Cadafalch, is the latest of the Art Nouveau houses along Passeig de Gràcia to open as a museum.

For a **personalized foodie adventure**, speak to the concierge at Fairmont Rey Juan Carlos I about joining a chef on a trip through city markets or to the farm where the hotel’s produce is grown. On the way, stop in cava country to sample the crisp Spanish sparkling at its source. You’ll take home Catalan products, recipes and unforgettable memories.