

Top row, from left: Estudio Nómada artists' hub. The streets come alive with art during the Tallers Oberts BCN festival. Do a shopping tour with Antiques & Boutiques. Below: Choose from more than 3,000 wines at Monvinic. Bottom row, from left: Revamp your look at Changing Room. The Barcelona streetscape is a mix of architectural styles.



Barcelona is a city you can feel. You can distinctly taste it in your mouth and hear it in the sounds of the streets. It brushes past you, leaving a trace of its energy on your skin. It's a tactile city that has evolved over centuries into an alluring mix of the old and the new.

Located between the mountains and the sea and hanging on a dynamic architectural frame, Barcelona has always been popular with tourists. Recently, it has been on the radar again as Europe's next 'it' destination, fuelled by affordable European flights, a high-speed train connection to Madrid and investment from international hotels.

So, if Barcelona is on your 'to do' list this year, why not experience the cutting-edge scenes of the city - from food and wine to fashion, design, architecture and art - to discover just why it's so hip. Whatever your passion, this city won't disappoint.

THE ART SCENE

Forget Miró, Picasso and Dalí. Barcelona's new scene is driven by a hunger for art that has its roots firmly in the streets. The trick is to find it. Walk along Carrer del Call, Carrer de Ferran and Carrer d'Avinyó by day and you'll pass boulevards of shops. Come back at night and you'll find shuttered shopfronts transformed into a gallery of creative urban street art.

"The city has a positive artistic vibe," says Dutch writer and teacher Arnout Krediet, one of a community of expats drawn to the city's creative energy. "Many artists live and work, visibly, in Barcelona's city centre."

Krediet is one of the founders of Estudio Nómada, an artists' collective and art school that began when a friend suggested he rent a large building and share it with other artists rather than pay for an expensive smaller studio. "Within three months it was full of artists from all over the world," he says.

In December 2010 the collective rented its second building across the road from the studios. The success of the endeavour is a testament to the strong sense of community in the Barcelona art world.

"Art is a choice, no complaints needed," says Krediet. "The many artists struggling together give me more determination to achieve my artistic goals."

One of the best ways to get a feel for Barcelona's art scene is to visit during Tallers Oberts BCN, an arts festival that runs for two weeks at the end of May and the beginning of June. More than 150 artists' studios are opened to the public, and people can view artworks and artists in action and take part in workshops.

Krediet's advice to art lovers wanting to explore the scene is simple: "Just come over and be submerged."

FOR VINO LOVERS

Barcelona's wine culture barely used to rate a mention, but times have changed and wine bars are opening all over town.

There's one faux pas you can make when you pick up a glass of wine in Barcelona - drinking without food. "One cannot truly separate wine from food in Spain," says Gabriella Opaz, a food and wine blogger who, in 2005, founded Catavino

(www.catavino.net), a comprehensive guide to Spanish wine, with her partner.

The wine on offer in Barcelona has always been high quality, but the scene lacked sophistication and the focus was on regional Spanish wines served by the glass. Luckily for visitors, things have started to change.

"We've encountered... more bars offering a variety of regional and international wines by the bottle, as well as specialised wine bars focused on small, quality-driven producers," says Opaz. She recommends the established La Vinateria del Call, the knowledgeable La Vinya del Señor, wine boutique Vila Viniteca and the popular Monvinic when seeking out the best wines.

"Barcelona is an ideal city to develop the culture of wine," says Isabelle Brunet, a sommelier at Monvinic. "When I arrived 10 years ago, there was only La Vinya del Señor in the Gothic Quarter."

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Generating international buzz, Monvinic opened in 2008. The bar offers 3,000 wines, tablet computers to assist patrons in selecting wines and an on-site wine library for true wine lovers who want to brush up on their knowledge of the latest drops.

FASHIONISTA HEAVEN

Forget carbon-copy fashionistas and the latest trends. If you want the Barcelona look, turn your gaze to the streets.

"Barcelona is a city with a heritage of craft, not fashion like Milan or Paris," says Lisa Richardson from Antiques & Boutiques, which specialises in customised shopping tours of Barcelona. "There is a sense in the city that both designers and customers are moving away

from high-street mass-produced goods to well-made, contemporary design. Many young people are opening studios and following old traditions, making leather goods, accessories and jewellery and manufacturing everything in Catalunya."

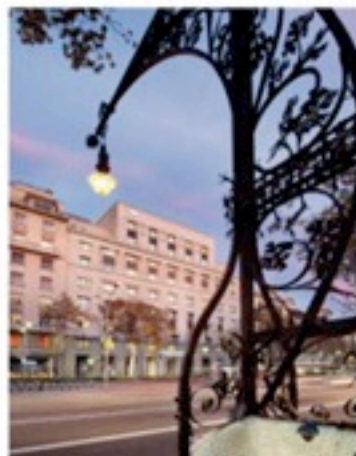
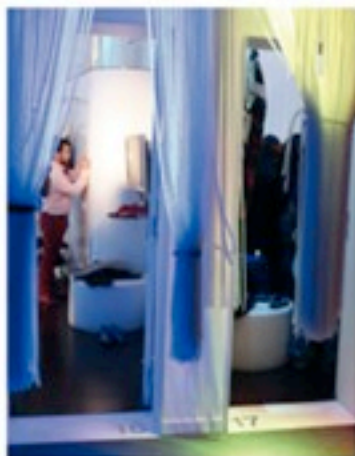
Find pieces by emerging Barcelona designers at innovative events such as Changing Room, held at Chic & Basic Born hotel in the newly gentrified El Born. Every six months the hotel surrenders 25 rooms to local designers for a day, allowing them to showcase and sell their wares to the public.

One of the biggest trends is the vintage revival. "The past couple of years have seen not only an increase in the number of vintage shops but also in the quality of the clothing," Richardson says. She recommends Paris Vintage for designer vintage, Heritage for retro bric-a-brac and clothes and the gorgeous L'Arca de l'Àvia for antique textiles and lace.

While the Barcelona look is definitely 'street', the city hasn't entirely turned its back on haute couture. Offering a €300,000 prize - the world's largest fashion grant for up-and-coming designers - is the El Botón Mango Fashion Awards held every 18 months (last held in October 2010) and judged by a jury of fashion heavyweights, including Jean Paul Gaultier. It has established Barcelona as a cradle for young design talent.

MODERN CITYSCAPE

Beyond the iconic structures created by world-renowned architect Antoni Gaudí, Barcelona is shifting into a new architectural era. The city's last major facelift was for the 1992 Olympics, when the seafront was redeveloped. ▶



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