

THE Costa Brava

Dubbed the Savage Coast by a journalist in the early 20th century, this north-eastern coastline has a far softer side, as **Andy Mossack** discovers.



Looking out at the small bay opposite Chef Lluís Ferrés' fine restaurant at the Aiguà Blava Hotel in beautiful Begur, you would be forgiven for thinking you were somewhere else entirely. Amalfi, or even Positano perhaps? All the ingredients are there, the shimmering Mediterranean, the cosy whitewashed houses rising up high above the small bay, the craggy coastline.

But somewhat surprisingly, this is the Costa Brava, and the Aiguà Blava occupies a rather beautiful piece of it. For many, this 100-mile stretch of Catalan coastline in north-east Spain, has struggled to compete with the more glamorous reputation of the other Costas further south, mainly due to the notoriety of Lloret de Mar, its less than illustrious high rise resort just north of Barcelona. But for those in the know, the Costa Brava is Spain's hidden gem; a provider of some of the finest cuisine in Spain with 14 Michelin stars, the birthplace of Salvador Dalí and the inspiration for Picasso, no less than nine championship golf courses, and some simply stunning towns, villages, forests and bays.

Back on 12th September 1908, Girona based journalist Ferran Agulló wrote a piece in the esteemed Catalan newspaper La Veu de Catalunya, where he described the rugged coastline stretching from Blanes to the French border at Portbou, as the 'Savage Coast' or Costa Brava in Catalan. A hundred years on, although the Costa moniker may have been



hijacked by its other coastal neighbours, and perhaps these days is synonymous for many things Spanish, in Catalonia it's still somewhere very special. After all, it's a part of Spain that's fiercely proud and protective of its heritage, culture, language and cuisine.

Taking a journey around its historic shores, is Ferran Agulló's Costa Brava really as savage as its name suggests?

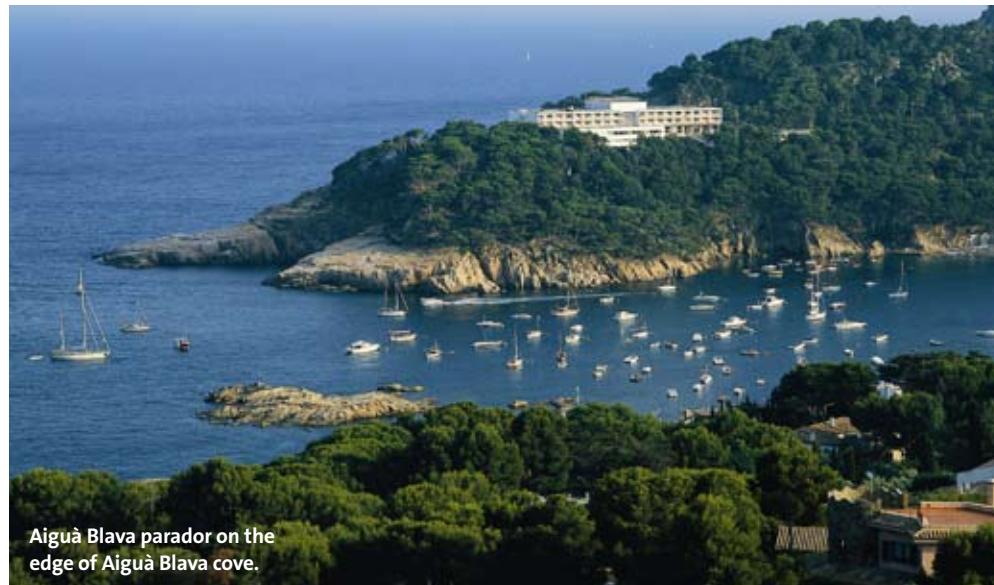
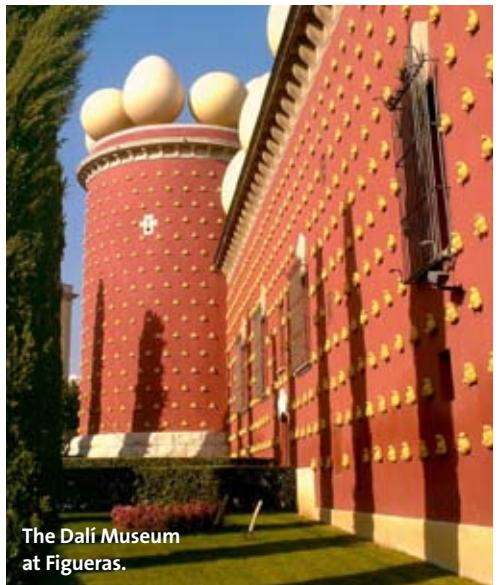
Tucked away in the north-east corner is Salvador Dalí's home town of Figueres, a beautiful area that not only provided much of his inspiration, but where today his legacy and influence is still very much in evidence. No more so than at the striking egg domed Dalí Theatre-Museum, a structure that was Dalí's largest

work and where, since his death in 1989, his remains lie (under the largest egg of course!). It was originally the old town theatre before it was bombed during the civil war and after The Prado, it's the most visited museum in Spain. Figueres itself is worth a day or two to wander around, with its charming old town and castle as focal points. You can also use it as an excellent base to explore the rest of the surrounding Alt Empordà region and in particular, the sleepy fishing village of Cadaqués which became a veritable bohemian magnet for many artists including Picasso, Duchamp and Miro.

Not to be outdone, Dalí built a maze-like home studio nearby out of old abandoned fishing huts which you can visit today with a reservation in advance (www.salvador-dali.org/museus).

While in the area, how about visiting the best chef in the world? Just a five-minute drive from the nearby popular harbour town of Roses lies the little pebbly beach of Cala Monjoi hidden within the Cap de Creus Natural Park. Here you'll find the famous Michelin three-star elBulli Restaurant, owned and run by Ferran Adrià, said to be the world's best chef. The restaurant reputedly gets over three million dining requests a year, but is sadly no longer taking reservations. It closes in July and in 2014 will be reborn as a foundation of gastronomic creativity. Still, it's worth a visit just to see a piece of culinary history (www.elbulli.info).

Travelling further south, the Baix Empordà region is home to some of the best coastal scenery in Spain, its mountainous terrain courtesy of ➤



the nearby Begur Massif. Reaching the delightful medieval town of Begur with its 16th century castle and assorted Roman remains, you come to realise just how strategically important it was, perched high up there overlooking the coast. The narrow cobbled streets in Begur's old town resonate a timeless quality as they lead you down into the stunning beaches and bays that lie below. This is a town that is pure living history; its eight beaches and coves all linked by a complex network of smugglers' paths were the life canvas for pirates, sailors and fishermen; all past generations of the townsfolk today.

Nestled inside one of these delightful coves is the Aiguà Blava Hotel. As hotels go, it's a little

different from the norm, as you'll find it spread out all around the small fishing cove, from the main house through to smaller little houses right next to the sea, a product of bit-by-bit expansion by the Sabater family, now in their fourth generation as owners and managers. There are lovely little niches and courtyards everywhere, and it is difficult to distinguish hotel from village house.

That said though, it's the position of the Aiguà Blava that's so memorable. It's as if the little cove is your own personal property, the water lapping up gently to the village edge. No crowds, no traffic, just a lovely cove (www.aiguabla.com).

If there's time on your coastal journey south, it is well worth a 30-minute detour inland to the

regional capital Girona, the Costa Brava's beating heart. The walled old town on the western bank of the Onyar is a fascinating journey through a thousand years of history. After all, it's been occupied more than seven times and, naturally enough, absorbed many of the occupying cultures as a consequence. Take a ramparts walk along the old walls, visit the stunning 14th century cathedral and get hopelessly lost walking around El Call, the old Jewish Quarter with its myriad cobbled streets and alleyways.

Girona is an easy place to walk around on foot, like a smaller Barcelona but without the crowds. Talking of Barcelona, don't confuse Barca's famous tourist trap Las Ramblas with Girona's

La Rambla, which is its own shopping and social centre, but nowhere near as touristic.

Back on the coastal trail now and heading for Blanes' botanical wonders, you pass through the delightful Tossa de Mar with its remarkable old town, fortress and wide sandy beach. It was once the bohemian haunt of writers and artists who became captivated by the beautiful scenery, so grab a lunch of cheese, bread, chorizo, olives and wine and sit awhile under a fragrant pine to soak it all in, in a manner of speaking.

Blanes is a favourite coastal haunt of local Catalans looking to escape Barcelona, its wide beach and village atmosphere presenting a compelling argument to down tools and head for the sea. But it's not all about sea and sangría here. Blanes has two botanical garden paradises that will be irresistible to any green-fingered lover of the leaf.

The Marimurtra Gardens were founded in 1924 by German botanist Karl Faust and contain plant life and fauna from around the world in three separate areas: tropical, temperate and Mediterranean. Boasting over 4,000 different species, it fast became one of the most important botanical centres in Europe.

Pinya de Rosa on the other hand, another botanical garden nearby, is a unique collection of over 7,000 tropical plants and cacti that have managed to adjust to their new surroundings, thriving happily in the Mediterranean climate.

So the Savage Coast is not that savage after all really. Perhaps sly old Ferran Agulló was just trying to keep it all for himself.



Teeing off

The Costa del Sol has long been the signature destination for Spanish golf, but the Costa Brava has been quietly building a reputation amongst the golfing fraternity as a preferred option. Less crowds, lower green fees and superb courses such as the PGA Catalunya combine to offer a real alternative. Here are three of my personal favourites:

Emporda Golf www.empordagolf.com

Designed by the highly regarded American architect Robert von Hagge there are two outstanding courses here; The Forest is a mature course with fairways meandering through Mediterranean pine forest. The newer Links course is another matter entirely. This runs through lakes and dunes in true links fashion and certainly wouldn't be out of place in Scotland. Each hole has been devilishly crafted to entice you into making shots that you would steer clear of at home. But you'll make them anyway.

Serres de Pals www.golfserresdepals.com

Serres de Pals may be only 10 years old, but it

plays with the maturity of many more years under its belt. A mix of pines, olive trees, lakes and rice fields, there is enough going on here to keep you focused on just hitting straight. Stand out holes for me are the water stretches of 13, 14, 15 and 16, where the threat of a watery grave is literally with you all along the fairways and right up to the greens. I suppose the only saving grace, if you are suffering badly, is the spectacular view of the Montgrí mountains behind; the only trouble is they're too far away to throw yourself off!

Gualta www.gualta.com

As daft as it may seem to Brits, Pitch and Putt is big in Spain. Not just big, but professionally big. Par 3 golf is taken very seriously as a professional sport, and when you think about it, it helps regular players practice their short game and gives new players a feel for what a golf course is really like. There are 'full size' Par 3s across the country and right here in the Costa Brava, Gualta is one of the most established. It has it all in miniature; lakes, bunkers, and forest.

Factfile

f Getting there

Ryanair has frequent flights to Girona www.ryanair.com. Barcelona, just an hour from Girona, is served by all the major international carriers. A new TGV high speed service has started from Paris to Figueres with direct routes to Barcelona to begin in 2012.

h Staying there

The Aiguà Blava Hotel is spread across the cove of the same name, with the main house as well as smaller houses next to the sea providing a good range of accommodation.

Platja de Fornells, Begur. 0034 972 622 058, www.aiguabla.com

Hotel Castell d'Empordà is a lovingly restored rural castle, its rooms adorned with artifacts from around the world.

La Bisbal, 0034 972 646 254, www.castelldemporda.com

La Costa Hotel is a beach and golf resort open from April to October. Platja de Pals, 0034 972 667 740, www.resortlacosta.com

r Costa Brava Cuisine

The legendary Ferran Adrià and the region's other Michelin decorated chefs have lit the touchpaper on a huge resurgence of local gastronomy. The mountains and sea both provide an abundance of fresh ingredients that celebrate delicious traditional Catalan cuisine with a local twist. *Suquet* is a classic scorpion fish stew made with fish, potatoes, garlic and tomatoes, whilst *Paella Catalan* is the classic Sunday rice casserole using rice from the wetlands of Pals, where it is in plentiful supply. *Escalivada*, baked onions, peppers and aubergine is another favourite together with local lamb cooked with ratatouille. *Brunyols* are sweet sausage and apple dessert fritters whilst *Xuixo* are delicious cream-filled doughnuts.