



ALTHOUGH truly steeped in history and conflict and fiercely protective of its Catalan language and identity, much of Barcelona is in fact a modern, post-1992 Olympic Games style construct. Nowhere is this truer than in the queer quarter - just behind the chaotic Old Town bordering the Med - in part of the ordered nineteenth century Example road grid system the locals call "Gaixample".

Here the gay bars quite literally cluster around the blocks. Huge, noisy and welcoming **Punto** (C/Muntaner 63; T: +34 93 453 6123) is one of the few venues to open its doors as early as 6pm in a late Latin culture where you eat at 10pm, hit bars at midnight and rarely reach a club before 3am. As ever, we poor English boys mostly need to take a "club kip" 5pm-9pm if we want to last the course. That gives you time to wake up, doll up and find that restaurant base camp.

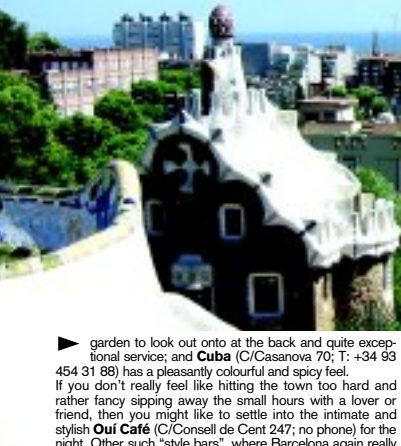
I'm convinced that gay eateries are actually one of the best reasons to visit Barcelona. There are quite a few of them, all different, and mostly excelling in food, service and ambience. They all have set menus where you can pick up an interesting three course meal including bread, wine, coffee and service for under a tenner each, so setting you up nicely for the hours ahead.

King of the crop in many ways is **Castro** (C/Casanova 85; T: +34 93 323 6784) with its stylish metal-and-chain interior, Mediterranean cuisine and very humorous "sexual" portraits on the wall featuring rivets and nuts in various uncompromising states of screwing. **La Bodegueta** (C/Muntaner 64; T: +34 93 451 51 04) is a far less "industrial" restaurant with an inner ►

BARCELONA BOYS

QX's ADRIAN GILLAN visits the Catalan capital of camp and cool. Still one of the hottest, hippest gay places in Europe?





► garden to look out onto at the back and quite exceptional service; and **Cuba** (C/Casanova 70; T: +34 93 454 31 88) has a pleasantly colourful and spicy feel.

If you don't really feel like hitting the town too hard and rather fancy sipping away the small hours with a lover or friend, then you might like to settle into the intimate and stylish **Oui Café** (C/Consell de Cent 247; no phone) for the night. Other such "style bars", where Barcelona again really comes into its own, include **Quizas** (C/Diputació 161; T: +34 93 451 52 58), **Maclin** (C/Casanova 48; T: +34 93 350 46 56) and **Fenix** (C/Casanova 64; no phone). In all you'll be able to preen and be seen, and yet still have a good old wag.

If you're feeling particularly precious one night, you must check out **Caligula** (C/Consell de Cent 257; T: +34 93 451 48 92), an exotic and intoxicating kitsch experience with its plush red carpets and curtains, candles and mirrors, incense and rose petals – maybe even nude slaves and lion cubs! Quite a one off. Earthy **Zeitlas** (C/Casanova 75; T: +34 93 454 19 02) is a very popular and highly welcoming venue too.

However, if you want to up the nocturnal tempo there's also quite a choice. **Ironie Café** (C/Consell de Cent 242; T: +34 627 92 98 53) gets busy amidst its wood and iron décor and **Atame** (C/Consell de Cent 257; no phone) is a heaving down-to-earth bar where they're not so cool they can't dance, and that means cheese. **Café Dietrich** (C/Consell de Cent 255; T: +34 93 451 77 070), just next to imperial Caligula is - along with stalwart early-bird Punto - the most popular pre-club venue, almost too much so for its own good. It boasts an amazing array of chandeliers and glitter balls, and lovely languid sepia projections of its diva namesake cover the walls. Or meet bears at **Eagle** (Passeig de Sant Joan 152; T: +34 93 207 5658) and old chaps at **New Chaps** (Avinguda Diagonal 365; T: +34 93 215 5365).

The truth is the gay club scene in Barcelona isn't a London or a New York. There's a definite dip in the style stakes as you hit the gay floors - but still fun to be had. **Arena Madre** (C/Balmes 32; T: +34 93 487 8342) is the mainstay hand-bag and house club with a fairly young and no-too-up-itself

crowd. Slightly older ones tend to fill the **Arena Classic** (C/Diputació 233; T: +34 93 487 8342) for cheese, pop and retro next door. The "Arena" brand may technically extend to the **Arena VIP & Dandy** (Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes 593; T: +34 93 487 83 42) with its doubtless fine house, garage and trance – but you'll find more straight than gay in here on any given night.

Metro (C/Sepúlveda 185; T: +34 93 323 52 27) has a rather interesting and underground feel to it with backroom and porn chamber, and gets hot and sweaty in its sprawling labyrinthine dance space. The largest gay club in town, **Salvation** (Ronda Sant Pere 19-21; T: +34 93 318 06 86) sports two main rooms playing some hard-to-place music that certainly seems to get the men-as-muscle flexing. **Martins** (Passeig de Gràcia 130; T: +34 93 218 71 67) is a busy, cruisy ultra late-night venue, opening midnight and pulling in the older crew from nearby Eagle and New Chaps.

Beyond the bars and clubs, there's much to get you steaming in Barcelona. **Sauna Casanova** (C/Casanova 57; T: +34 93 323 78 60) is the most popular and youthful "men's health" complex, bang in the centre with a brilliant red neon sign behind frosted glass luring in of the streets purters of all ages. **Sauna Condal**



(C/Espolsa Sacs 1; T: +34 93 301 96 80) is older in more senses than one and not so hot.

The famous **La Rambla** boulevard that crosses a swathe through the heart of the old town from the gay district right down to the sea is in truth a little too public for serious gay cruising. Boys in the know rise up the **Mont Jüic** overlooking the city, to its many gardens and Olympic area. And the midday sun can't hide the gays and strays all along the miles of **Barceloneta**, the unique and amazing inner-city beach.

Sestlenda (C/Raüc 11; T: +34 93 318 8576) is the oldest sex prop shop in town and very friendly with it too although it now fights for queer attentions with a raft of younger boy boutiques. We can fully recommend the limitlessly friendly and beautifully laid out gay **Qué Tal** (C/Mallorca 290; T: +34 93 459 2366; www.quetalbarcelona.com) hostel in a lovely old corner building less than ten minutes walk from the city's gay heart.

Barcelona is a rightly celebrated gay cosmopolitan haven on the edge of the Med, under two hours away via several low-cost carriers. Perhaps time your visit to coincide with the **International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival** every October; or the annual February Carnival at the famous **Sitges** resort nearby, just 20 minutes away down coast.

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