

TRAVEL



Padraic Gilligan travels to Barcelona and reflects on how often he travels, but rarely appreciates the places he visits.

Travelling but not visiting

I was miles away. ‘Sounds of Silence’ kept playing on my mental jukebox. I thought how powerful it is as a portrayal of our contemporary culture, plunging headlong into a sort of individualist nihilism:

*People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share...*

I wasn’t at all depressed, however, as one might be with terms like nihilism or, indeed, any in-depth reflection on this magnificent but profoundly sad song. I was simply remarking to myself that those of us whose work involves travel often find themselves in places we don’t actual visit. We’re people travelling without visiting. We find ourselves in wonderful, sometimes exotic places, usually not with our loved ones, and often with insufficient time there to get truly connected.

That’s what I was feeling following a short stay with my wife Rita in Barcelona, a city I must have been to at least twenty times for work. This time, over



a mere forty-eight hours, I achieved a deeper destination immersion than on any previous visit. Here’s how three aspects of a typical destination experience – an art gallery, a visitor attraction and a restaurant – impacted on us when we visited – *really* visited – over a recent weekend.

MACBA – Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona

About fifteen minutes walk from our hotel in El Raval, one of Barcelona’s oldest neighbourhoods, you’ll find MACBA aka ‘The Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art’. Designed by US based octogenarian, Richard Meier, the museum building sits in audacious modernist contrast to the ancient buildings and narrow laneways that surround it.

We spent two hours there immersed in the fascinating but sometimes disturbing works of Carol Rama, an Italian artist ignored for most of her career by the contemporary art community. This major retrospective entitled ‘The Passion according to Carol Rama’



Photo: Pixabay

featured two hundred works by Rama, giving final due prominence to an artist who has marched steadfastly to her own tune throughout seven decades of service to her art.

Rama's work employs extensive bricolage and draws on a narrow colour palette – mainly shades of brown – and, at least for me, couldn't be described as awe-inspiring, inspirational or beautiful. It is, however, powerfully expressive of that twentieth century *angst* that pervades much modernist poetry and finds its way into contemporary music from Jim Morrison to Paul Simon.

La Sagrada Familia

It stands in dramatic juxtaposition to Gaudi's sublime *Sagrada Familia* which we visited next day, a bright Autumn Sunday morning. Started during his lifetime in the 1880s, Gaudi's masterpiece remains a work in progress with completion expected somewhere between 2026 and 2028. The interior, however, is finished and was consecrated in 2010 by Pope Benedict XVI.

Although only two exterior elevations are now complete, you need at least an hour to visit them. The Nativity facade was actually done during the architect's lifetime and is an extraordinary portrayal of the story of the birth of Jesus, taking elements from all four gospels. The Nativity scene of Joseph, Mary and the child Jesus is central, surrounded by the vast array of figures – magi, shepherds, angels – all set amidst a natural backdrop of flora and fauna, beautifully frozen in a single moment of time. The expressions on the magi and shepherds are of wonder and awe and mirror our expressions as we behold the sheer magnificence of the work.

When we entered the basilica I thought of Dante, in the *Paradiso*, when he is finally rendered dumb by the mysteries and beauty of God, his imagination incapable of finding words to describe the immensity of the experience:

*all'alta fantasia qui manco possa
Here high fantasy lost its power*

Gaudi has created an interior of stone that stretches skywards like towering redwoods in a dense forest. It's simply astonishing. The massive interior is also flooded with beautifully filtered light shining through the stain glass panes of Joan Vila-Grau, installed as recently as 1999. It's a transcendent experience that lifts the soul and the spirit and convinces you of the transformative power of art.

El Nacional

But a man and a woman cannot live on high art alone. We also needed to eat. Barcelona has more than its share of great places to eat but, regrettably, the good ones don't do Saturday night walk-ins and many are closed on a Sunday. We exited our hotel on *Paseo de Gracia* and noticed some people heading down a lane, into a period building called *El Nacional*. Curious, we followed and discovered a wonderful, newly opened 'multispacio gastronómico' specialising in ultra-fresh foods from all over Spain – artisan cheeses, seafood, cold meats; in fact, four restaurants, four speciality bars and over a thousand different food and beverage items.

We sat up at a bar counter and enjoyed some wonderful cheese along with a Ribera del Duero. Surrounded by locals who were doing likewise we felt we'd crossed that boundary and were experiencing this amazing city as insiders, as true visitors who don't merely skate across the surface of the destination. This time I was really visiting, not just travelling. 🍷