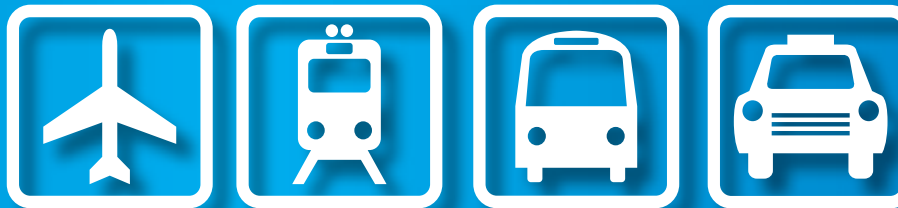


GO FOR IT



Edited by VICKY LISSAMAN



OXFORD: A last-minute B&B break at the four-star boutique Vanbrugh House Hotel in Oxford from £165 per room per night. Go to vanbrughhousehotel.co.uk or call 01865 244 622.

+ LATES & BREAKS + LATES & BREAKS +

AMSTERDAM: Leave from Liverpool, March 26, for three nights B&B at four-star Hampshire Hotel for £250. Check out easyjet.com/holidays or call 020 3499 5232.

LINCOLNSHIRE: A three-night Absolute 80s Weekender break at Butlin's Skegness Resort features Sonia, Roachford, Go West, Pat Sharp and more. £189 per person based on four sharing a gold self-catering apartment. Book by March 28. Arrive May 5. Hit bigweekends.com or call 0330 102 5295.

IRELAND FERRY DEAL: Book by Tuesday and save 20% on all crossings until December 15. With the deal, fares for a car and two adults start at £170.40 return.

Phone 08717 300 400 or visit irishferries.com.

WALES: Trystor Y Mor is a seafront Edwardian townhouse in the coastal village of North. It sleeps six and is available for seven nights for £399. Arrive on dates from April 1 to April 8. Visit sykescottages.co.uk or phone 01244 617 687. Property Reference 28596.

THAILAND: Explore Koh Samui, pictured left, on 10-night B&B holiday at the four-star Chaba Cabana Beach Resort for £827. Fly from Manchester April 5. Book at southalltravel.co.uk or ring on 0208 705 0086.

DISNEYLAND PARIS: Flybe from Birmingham on April 3 for a two-night/three-day holiday to Disney's three-star Hotel Santa Fe on a half-board basis. Pay £1,337 for two adults and two children sharing including park tickets. Visit disneylandparis.com or call 08448 008 111 to book.

FRANCE SKI: Seven nights chalet catered at the four-star Chalet Hotel Des Deux Domaines in Macot-la-Plagne in Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes, £625 per person. Based on two adults and two children sharing. Depart Stansted on April 9. See espritski.com.

ESSEX: Sea Folly is a property in the seaside town of Brightlingsea. Sleeps five in three bedrooms with two pets welcome. Seven nights for £507. Arrive on April 7. welcomecottages.com or ring 0345 268 0616. Ref. UKC472.



High life!

BARCELONA'S TOP OF TRAVEL LEAGUE

by JOEY MILLAR

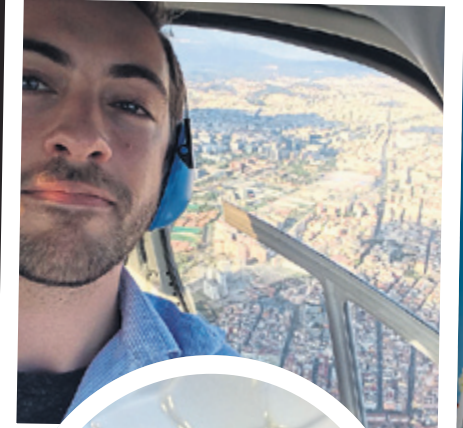
SOARING over Barcelona in a tiny four-person helicopter, it was easy to see why the Catalan capital has become Europe's latest travel success story.

Far below, squeezed between the Mediterranean and the mountains, was a mosaic of some of the world's most famous sights.

They ranged from the flabbergasting architecture of Antoni Gaudi to the footballing cathedral of the Nou Camp.

Nearly 10million people visited Catalonia in north-eastern Spain last summer – that's an 11 per cent increase on the previous year.

Judging by the size of the crowds enjoying the beaches and shopping streets hundreds of feet beneath me, most of them still appeared to be there.



FACT FILE

GETTING THERE: Vueling Airlines operates year-round flights to Barcelona from Gatwick, Heathrow and Luton with fares, including taxes, starting from £43 one way. Book at vueling.com

WHERE TO STAY: Rates at Barceló Sant's start from £104 per night based on two sharing a room on a B&B basis. For more information or to book visit barcelosants.com or call +34 93 503 53 00.



SOARING: Sagrada Familia church. Left, our Joey in a chopper and yummy Catalan sea food

station, this property is out of this world. Themed on space travel, guests are welcomed at a "boarding desk" by staff wearing Star Trek-style uniforms.

After making our way past a life-sized astronaut statue in the lobby, we inspected the hotel's stylish bars and restaurants – named Orbital, Oxygen, Hydrogen and Nitrogen.

Next we headed to Placa Reial – a square so perfectly framed by balconies and charmingly lit by flickering lanterns it could be created with Instagram in mind.

One of its star attractions is Restaurante Ocana, a gloriously decadent venue decked out in shades of coral and rose.

We were shown to our table by an eccentric maitre d', whose outfit resembled one of Gaudi's more creative mosaics.

A procession of colourful Catalan-inspired dishes, fused with Asian and North African flavours, began to arrive.

Perfect

Rasperry-tinged charcuterie, blueberry-hued dips and fish filets on bruschetta sprinkled with lavender flowers were as eye-catching as the restaurant.

Up early next day, we went to the harbour for a boat ride and swim in the Med – the perfect way to blow away the cobwebs.

Then we sped around the city, browsing Spanish cigars in the wide shopping boulevard of Las Ramblas, tasting cheese, olives and oysters in Mercat de La Boqueria, a cavernous food market, and hunting for bargains on the beach-front souvenir stalls.

To toast our final night in the city, we headed to Barceló Raval, located not far from Las Ramblas and run by the same team as our hotel.

With its 360-degree view of the city, open air swimming pool and a performance area for bands and DJs, this exceptional rooftop bar has to be the best place in the city to catch those perfect Catalan sunsets.

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+ TRAVEL NEWS +



ALL ABOARD: Be nice for a Monarch upgrade

BLAGGERS can forget trying to bag an upgrade on Monarch flights using old tricks like honeymoons and birthdays.

The airline is to offer complimentary perks to customers for simply being nice.

In a year-long campaign to promote chivalry, courtesy and respect, 10 passengers per week will be rewarded with extra leg-room and priority check-in for polite behaviour. See monarch.co.uk

BRAND-new Nature Rockz activities will be taking place at Haven

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Scenic

As our pilot looped back towards the harbour, the afternoon sun, which shines for an average of 10 hours a day during the summer months, glinted off the Med.

Barcelona, as everyone from taxi drivers to waiters will tell you, has never looked better.

For those who would rather spend the price of a Cat Helicopters ticket (from £53 per person for a six-minute flight to £300 for 40 minutes in the sky) on seeing the sights up close, Barcelona is just as scenic at street level.

Top of any visitor's to-do list is Gaudi's Sagrada Familia, arguably the most recognisable church in the world (basic tickets start at £13 and rise to £25 for access to the tower – well worth it for the views).

When Gaudi died, around four decades after construction first began, the mammoth project was still only a quarter completed. Even today, 136

Perfect

years on, it remains unfinished and it certainly takes a special kind of building to amaze even while covered in cranes and scaffolding.

With our Gaudi curiosity suitably piqued, we made our way to Parc Guell. Boasting Gaudi's old home, as

FACT FILE

WHERE TO STAY: Heights Hotel from £60 to £110 per night including breakfast, free parking, wifi and use of 24-hour gym. To book call 01305 821361 or visit heightshotel.com

For sailing activities visit andrewsimpson.sailing.co.uk or call 01305 457400.

For bike hire see jurassictrailscyclehire.co.uk or call 01305 836428.

DAILY STAR READER OFFERS: Get 20% off any individual adult or child sailing course during 2017. Must be booked before the end of April 2017. Quote DS1103 when booking.

For windsurfing and stand-up paddleboarding at The Official Test Centre (OTC) see otc-windsurf.com or call 01305 230266.

Two-hour windsurfing taster costs £45, two-day course is £185. Get 10% off windsurfing and sailing packages at the OTC on bookings made before end of April. Quote DS1103.

Two-hour jetskiing session with Jurassic Jetski Tours. £90 for one or £130 for two. jurassicjetskitours.co.uk

by JIM SELBY

WITH the gib expanded to the max, our seat pushing up at 45 degrees and sea spray splashing in our faces, the yacht was in full sail.

"Don't worry," said Tim, our instructor, "the RS Venture Keel is almost impossible to capsize. It has a lead keel that corrects itself if we go over too far."

In the same hallowed waters in which Sir Ben Ainslie won a gold medal and four other Team GB sailors won silver at the 2012 Olympics, our first sailing experience was one of pure exhilaration.

If you fancy giving it a go, the Andrew Simpson Sailing Centre, at the Weymouth & Portland National Sailing Academy, offers all types of water sports for all abilities.

High on adrenaline we peeled off our wetsuits and headed back to our base, The Heights Hotel, which commands stunning views over Portland Harbour, Weymouth and Chesil Beach from its dining room.

Our bedroom was large and stylish with a super kingsize bed, seating area with TV and a spacious en-suite bathroom with a corner bath and shower. The hotel also boasts 24-hour gym and a tourist information office.

Next day we explored Weymouth on two wheels. Bike hire is available at Jurassic Trails Cycle Hire where staff will give you a map and advice on pit-stops such as Chesil Beach visitor centre and Lodmoor Country Park.

Part of the Rodwell Trail is a disused railway track. As you ride along you can spot the old railway stations and speed through the tunnels.

If you're looking for something more high-octane, try a jetski ride around the Dorset coastline. Jurassic Jetski Tours offer a two-hour experience including 60 minutes of independent jetski riding.

On our final night we headed for Stables Pizza at Custom House Quay, right on the harbour which is filled with fishing boats.

Their seafood pizza was loaded with great chunks of mackerel and salmon.

They also specialise in a large range of ciders. The Cornish Bluff which complimented the meal was the perfect end to a great weekend.

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