



Spain:

Eat

(eat some more!),

Pray, Love



For a hesitant writer like me to churn out 800 words seemed daunting at first. I was requested to write the travelogue for this month's issue of CFO Connect. Multiple thoughts of previous vacations went through my mind, and I finally chose to go with the family trip that brought the widest smile to my face, and the happiest memories within: Spain. So here goes...

A historical context

Spain's is a fascinating history – after all, this is a culture that has helped shape the modern world. The country's timeline tells the story of a land that has been sought-after by many civilisations: the Carthaginians and Romans fought over it, the Arabs conquered it, and the Catholic monarchs subsequently 'recovered' Spain, turning it, with the discovery of America, into the world's most powerful empire. Each region of the country has its own unique history, built around different religions and varying relationships with other countries. You can see these influences in Spain's architecture, culture, food, and its cities. Be it the centuries-old monuments, the Alhambra of Granada, Barcelona's Barri Gothic district, or the Temple of Debod in Madrid, everywhere you look, history is yours to explore.

Madrid: Football, Messi and Fan-girls!

My husband and I were travelling with our two girls – 13 and 9 – and, as is the case with most siblings, they are diametrically opposite in thought and interests. Whilst Saisha is a history buff, Shloka, my younger daughter, a footballer, had a single-point agenda for visiting the country: to see her hero Messi play. Much to her delight, we managed to get tickets to the finals of the Copa Del Ray, with FCB facing off against Alaves. Shloka was in Seventh Heaven, with FCB winning



3-1, and the brilliant Messi scoring 2 out of the 3 goals. The girls and my husband returned from the match, their voices hoarse, having screamed for close to 3 hours, and incessantly chatted about the match till the wee hours of the morning. In their words, it was like our IPL, but with 10 times the energy and emotion!

For the Love of Food... Tapas, Paellas and Churros

Some of our most fabulous

food memories are from those four wonderful days in Madrid. A haven for foodies – Saisha and my husband in particular – Madrid has an unpretentious food scene filled with hearty, savoury dishes. Madrileños love to eat, and mealtimes are never skipped. Expect long lunches and dinners, filled with conversation, good wine, and of course, plenty of signature dishes.

Food markets – where we often ate during stay – are always a joy

to visit. We kept going back for the yummy, freshly-made vegetarian paella. These markets are a great way to get a sense of the local culture and food. *Mercado de San Miguel* is one of Madrid's top attractions, and a favourite among tourists and locals alike. It's probably best to stroll through the whole market and scope out all the vendors instead of settling on the first vendor you see. We did that during our first visit and quickly regretted it.



Churros con Chocolate are an essential part of a Spanish meal, and normally eaten during breakfast. Those golden beauties, also known as Spanish doughnuts, are dunked into a cup of rich, hot, melted chocolate for some mouth-watering goodness. If you've got chocolate leftover, it's perfectly acceptable to drink it. My kids (husband included!) could not get enough.

Another superb recommendation for vegetarians is Barcelona's exceptional Teresa Carles – among the best meals I have ever had. I make it a point to recommend it to anyone travelling to Spain, non-vegetarians too.

El Rastro...the iconic flea market

Think explosion of colours, think diverse nationalities, think hundreds of shops, and you have El Rastro, Madrid's oldest and most iconic street market. It's a must for tourists and locals alike, who browse through clothes, costume jewellery, decorative items, vinyl records, rock-band T-shirts, souvenirs of Madrid, hand-crafted leather products, prints, and art. El Rastro hits the senses. You are energised just being there and soaking in the atmosphere. Give yourself over to it and ride the wave: I quickly filled up my suitcase with tiny knick-knacks from there. And the icing on the cake was how reasonable everything was. (Traveller tip: haggling goes a long way here, and it brought out the true Sindhi in me!)

Barcelona...Of Gaudi, Sangria, and Beaches.....

Magical. Enchanting. A beach family, we tend to plan vacations around sea-towns, but Barcelona – the capital of Catalonia – far exceeds any beachside city we have visited.

A Gothic and Modernist marvel on the Mediterranean Sea, Barcelona is quirky, cosmopolitan, and effortlessly cool. This city breathes life. We decided to take the 'Hop On, Hop Off' tour on the first day there.



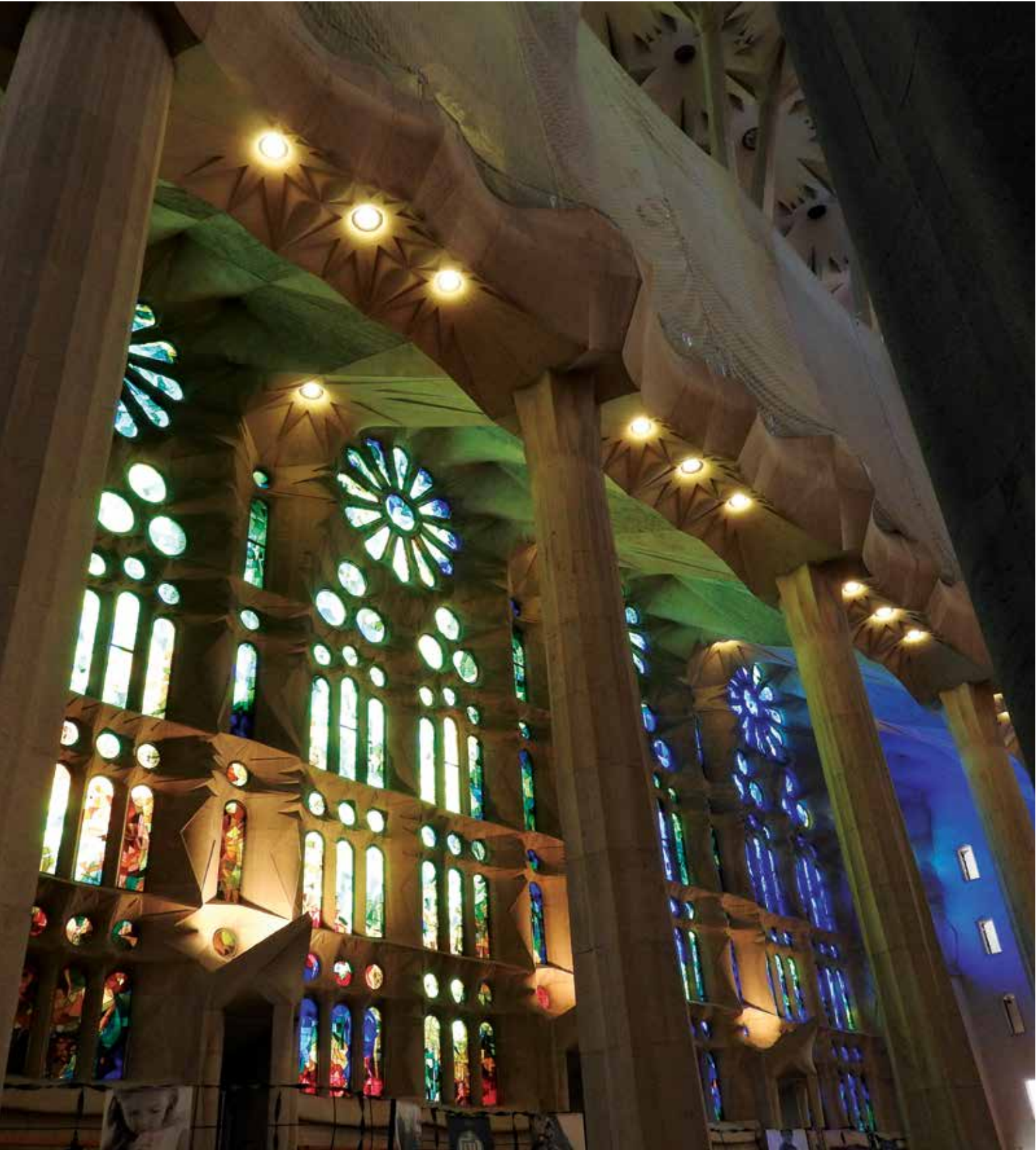
The Montjuic cable-car ride is arguably the most stunning and exhilarating way to get a bird's eye view of Barcelona, and the kids loved the whole experience. Port Vell was another place to spend an enjoyable time in the sun. It's a lively harbour, full of yachts and cruise-ships. The kids had a blast just sitting at the edge of the water, feeding the fish, and enjoying their gelatos.

Las Ramblas is the most happening street in Barcelona, with loads of street performers, portrait artists, cafes, and amazing shopping. La Boqueira Market on Las Ramblas is a sensory explosion.

It has wonderful little tapas bar-restaurants, with counter seating only. Stall after stall of fruit, herbs, wild mushrooms, vegetables, nuts, candied preserves, cheese, ham, fish, and poultry greet you as you stroll through. Though we loved walking through La Boqueira, the kids didn't enjoy the crowds and the produce too much, so perhaps its best for adults.

Gaudi's brilliance...

If anyone has left his mark on Barcelona, it is the architect Antoni Gaudí. His absolute masterpiece is the world-famous Basílica de la Sagrada Família. 'My client is in no





hurry,' he famously said, believing that God had all the time in the world, so there was no need to rush the completion of the Sagrada Família. Even though construction began in 1882, the basilica remains incomplete to this day, and is currently scheduled to be finished only in 2026. A visit to Barcelona isn't complete without visiting it: the sheer brilliance of its construction, the attention to detail, be it a tiny nook, or the colours of the stained glass that reflect the position of the sun, left us spell-bound. I wasn't sure if my younger daughter would appreciate spending half a day in the Basilica, but both kids loved it. They were amazed to see how beautifully Gaudi has merged various aspects of science, nature and art to create, in their words, this 'fairy-tale-like' structure.

Heaven is staying close to the Beach

There are broadly two kinds of travellers: those who minutely plan each day and ensure they

pack in all that is possible into it; and those who go with the flow, landing up in a new place with no agenda whatsoever. We fall into the second set. Seeing the Barceloneta shoreline, we fell in love with the city's beaches, becoming certified beach-bums for the next few days!

In the years since its shoreline was cleaned up for the 1992 Summer Olympics, Barcelona has become a glamorous seaside cultural mecca. There are several beaches that are just a 15-20 minute drive from the city centre. I highly recommend a wonderful beach called Nova Icaria – perfect for those who want to break away from the masses at the more touristy Barceloneta, yet not stray too far from the downtown core.

Our main agenda was packing hot and fresh croissants each morning from a bakery adjoining our hotel, hitting the beach with our books until early evening, and then strolling to dinner at one of the cafes along Las Ramblas. Tapas, paella, sangria and the beach made for a magical combination!

Eat, Pray, Love...

Very often we get so overwhelmed with our day-to-day lives that we don't step back and offer gratitude for what we have: the finances to travel the world, the physical fitness to explore new destinations, and most importantly, near and dear ones with whom to share our experiences. At the end of the day, a vacation – be it Barcelona, Beijing, or even Badlapur – are memorable not so much for the places you visit, but the memories they invoke. Think back to all the vacations you took as a child, and you will realise that what you remember most poignantly is the fun-time spent with your family and friends. So take a break from your busy schedules, appreciate some quality time with family. At the end of the day, that's what counts the most, isn't it? Go and create some memories. Eat, pray, love. ■



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