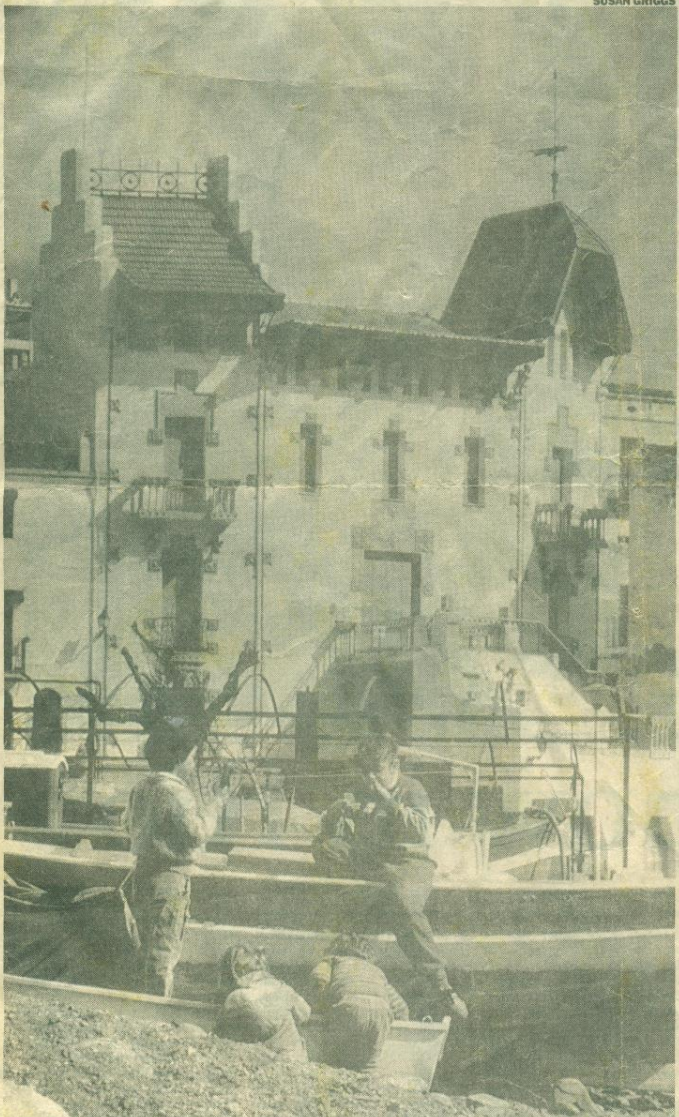


# Escape from East Enders on the Costa Brava



SUSAN GRIGGS

**M**ention to some people that you intend to visit the Costa Brava, and the reaction may be more one of sympathy than envy. For many people in Britain, the place conjures up endless miles of tourist development. If you do not fancy Lady Di pubs complete with *EastEnders* by satellite, the temptation can be to stay well away.

But there is another Costa Brava which still merits its name of the "wild coast". Remote cliffs, heathland and deserted rocky coves — some of the least developed parts of Spain's Mediterranean coast are here, bypassed both by the majority of visitors and by the tourist industry.

You cannot get much wilder than Cap de Creus, for example, when the wind sweeps down from the Pyrénées and the sea beats at the cliffs below. Standing beside the lighthouse (if you can stand — I was reduced to all fours to keep my balance), you look across the miles of moorland, covered with wild lavender and rosemary and crossed by deserted sandy tracks. This is how Land's End should feel, but does not.

Cap de Creus is the first bump into the sea on the map south of the French border. Down the coast across the mountains is Roses, where the popular image of the Costa Brava begins to be appropriate, and where the first *urbanization* spreads across the hillside. North of Roses, however, there is 40 miles of the Costa Brava before France is reached. The three towns Cadaqués, el Port de la Selva and Llancà are about as close as it is possible to get in Mediterranean Spain these days to that illusive dream of an unspoilt fishing harbour; all three remain little known to British visitors. This stretch of coast has one further natural feature in its favour: a little spur of mountain, the Serra de Roda, creeps down from the main range of the Pyrénées to provide a perfect backdrop.

Of the three towns, Cadaqués may be most people's favourite. The town is a maze of narrow twisting streets down to the sea, and there's a fine seventeenth-century church to complete the vista. Cadaqués (or at least Portlligat, a village just north of the town) was Salvador Dalí's home for many years. He took over some fishermen's cottages and promptly announced his arrival in the form of large white alabaster eggs which he deposited on their roofs. Thanks to Dalí, Cadaqués has attracted other artists, becoming a Mediterranean version of St Ives.

## Andrew Bibby finds the northernmost section of the Spanish Mediterranean coast still relatively unspoilt

If Cadaqués is just a little too self-conscious of its charms, El Port de la Selva, 10 miles north across the mountains, has fewer pretensions, but is closer to its original roots. It is not that the town, and its little sandy beach, do not attract tourists — though they come in fairly small numbers, mainly from France. Nevertheless, the fishing harbour remains both the geographical and economic centre of the town. One English visitor here told me he felt that he was intruding a little into the real life of the place.

A number of rocky coves can be reached across the heathland beyond el Port de la Selva; a long-distance footpath, waymarked in the white and red style of the Grande Randonnée network in France, heads off across the countryside towards Cadaqués.

El Port de la Selva, like other settlements along this stretch of coast, was vulnerable to attacks from pirates until relatively modern times, and a twin village, La Selva de Mar, grew up, only a mile inland, but completely hidden from the sea by the hills. Llancà, five miles to the north, also combines both inland and sea-shore settlements.

Between Llancà and el Port de la Selva is the tiny medieval village of La Vall de Santa Creu. It, too, grew up out of sight from the sea, tucked between two hills, and

it remains hidden and unknown to the majority of visitors to the coast. You have to be prepared to risk your car tyres and exhaust to get there (the village is two miles up a dirt track), but the sacrifice is worth it.

La Vall de Santa Creu can be used as the starting point for a walk to the tenth-century monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes, high on a mountain overlooking the bay. Lazy tourists will drive there, up the winding mountain road; walkers have the reward of watching out for hoopoes (distinctive, plumed birds, rare in Britain but common in this area).

**T**here is another reward for visiting La Vall de Santa Creu, and that is La Catedral del Vi restaurant. Customers sit between huge barrels of wine, the largest holding 6,000 litres, which are tapped up and when the kitchen needs another bottle. La Catedral del Vi attracts only a fraction of the trade of the tourist restaurants a few miles away, but serves excellent food, including the epic Catalan fish stew *sarsuela*. Whatever you choose can be washed down by a bottle of the powerful local "black" wine, *vi negre*.

La Catedral del Vi offers an English translation of its menu, but the bill will be in Catalan. And that is a point to bear in mind.

These days Castilian Spanish appears on the banknotes and the Civil Guard barracks in this part of Catalonia, but hardly anywhere else. The Catalan language is an important symbol of Catalonia's claims to nationhood, and of its aspirations in the post-Franco era. It was outlawed in public during the Franco years, when Castilian Spanish ruled alone. But Catalan has made a triumphant return.

It is easy to imagine that Catalan is just a simple Spanish dialect, or a linguistic relic surviving in rural areas. In fact, it is neither. Although it has similarities with both Spanish and French, linguists accord it full status as a language (it is also spoken in the Roussillon area of France, and in an area of Sardinia).

It is an urban, indeed metropolitan language, spoken in Barcelona, Spain's second city, and supported by several papers and an active publishing industry. The Generalitat, the autonomous government of Catalonia, has also established a Catalan television channel, TV3. *EastEnders* may not be available by satellite in the bars of Llancà and el Port de la Selva, but *Gent del Barr* is. British visitors will discover that this is the Catalan-dubbed version of the soap opera, running about three years behind Britain.

However, while Pauline, Mi-

chelle, Dot and the others are clearly fluent in Catalan, the rest of us are unlikely to be, and this can be a problem, or at least a challenge. Almost everyone in the area understands Castilian Spanish, but you often get the feeling that they would rather they did not. In the main towns, French is the language of tourism. But French will not help in some of the smaller restaurants, especially those away from the coast.

British travellers wanting to go prepared will look in vain for any kind of Catalan phrase book — an extraordinary gap since, as well as the Costa Brava and Costa Dorada, dialects of Catalan are spoken on the Costa Blanca and in the Balearic islands, which are popular tourist destinations. Alan Yates's book *Teach Yourself Catalan* is worth acquiring, though it follows a traditional grammar-based format.

In fact, the absolutely essential words can be picked up fairly easily. *Bon dia* and *Adéu*. *Si, us plau* (pronounced "cease plough") and *Què?* So on the basics of the menu. Watch out, however, for *truita*, which translates both as omelette and trout. If you want just a snack, expect to be offered the universal Catalan favourite, *pa amb tomàquet* (pronounced "pam tomarke"), which is a slice of white bread spread with tomato and oil.

If all this seems an unnecessary complication, all I can say is that the issue of the non-Castilian languages in Spain remains a burning political question. Faced with the choice, I use the Catalan spelling of place names as my small homage to Catalonia.

It would be a shame to leave the northern Costa Brava without taking in at least one bona fide tourist sight, and the Salvador Dalí museum in Figueres amply meets this criterion. Such is its importance as an attraction for visitors that it even remains open during the siesta, an almost unheard-of event in Spain. The local tourist board must be jumping up and down in delight at its effect on the local economy.

Dalí converted an old theatre in the town into a giddy shrine to his lifetime's devotion to surrealism. Whatever you think of Dalí (and the museum proves his extraordinary technical competence), it is worth visiting this bizarre building, as long as you do not take anything too seriously. My four-year-old daughter's verdict was that Dalí must have been very silly indeed, and I am inclined to agree with her. But we both enjoyed our visit.

### FACT FILE

**Flights:** Seat-only deals to Girona cost from around £79 with a charter broker such as Vivair (01-636 5466).

**Ferries:** The alternative is to travel through France; French Motorail, from Dover direct to Narbonne, is easy but expensive. Contact French Railways, 179 Piccadilly, London, W1V 0BA. (01-409 3518). A third option is the Brittany Ferries sailing to Santander (0752 221321), although that coast of Spain is further away than you might think.

**Packages:** Two small specialist tour operators offer self-catering accommodation in el Port de la Selva and Llancà: Catalan Villas (0823 400515) and Spanish Harbour Holidays (0279 78 353 and 0761 232252). Both their brochures are informative about the area.



**Accommodation:** Hotel Playa Sol and Hostal S'Aguarda in Cadaqués get the seal of approval from Alastair Boyd (see below), while Hotel Porto Cristo is the main hotel in el Port de la Selva. There are pleasant campsites in the area, including Camping La

Vall outside Llancà. **Books:** Alastair Boyd's *The Essence of Catalonia* (Andre Deutsch, £8.95) is a well-informed and interesting travel book, in the best classic tradition. In a very different tradition, there is the *Best of Costa Brava* guide for tourists (£2.95). *Teach Yourself Catalan* by Alan Yates (Hodder, £4.95) can be very useful.

**Useful information:** Leaflets are available from the Patronat de Turisme of the Girona province, which also publishes a free map of the area. Contact the Oficina de Turisme at Ciutadans 12, Girona; or the local offices at Av d'Europa, Llancà; Cobe 2-A, Cadaqués; and Plac a del Sol, Figueres. **Tourist Office:** Spanish Tourist Office, 57 St James's Street, London SW1A 1LD (01-499 0901).