

A high-angle photograph of a rugged coastline. The foreground shows a steep, rocky cliffside covered in green vegetation. The middle ground features a rocky beach with clear, turquoise water. The background shows a deep blue sea meeting a distant, hazy coastline under a clear sky.

# **The Costa Brava**

**a town by town guide  
to booking your  
perfect summer holiday**

*The Costa Brava: a town by town guide to booking your perfect summer holiday*

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## Contents

Who should read this?.....	3
What's on the Costa Brava?.....	3
Alt Empordà .....	4
Portbou.....	6
Colera .....	7
Llançà.....	8
El Port de la Selva .....	9
Cadaqués .....	10
Roses .....	11
Empuriabrava .....	12
Sant Pere Pescador .....	13
L'Escala .....	14
Baix Empordà .....	15
Estartit.....	19
Pals .....	20
Begur .....	21
Palafrugell .....	22
Palamós .....	23
Sant Antoni de Calonge .....	24
Platja d'Aro.....	25
S'Agaró .....	26
Sant Feliu de Guíxols .....	27
La Selva .....	28
Tossa de Mar .....	31
Lloret de Mar .....	32
Blanes .....	33
Additional resources .....	34

# Who should read this?

Currently planning your summer holidays? Thinking about heading for the Costa Brava? If so this guide was written for you.

Because your annual leave is so precious you need to get it right. A fortnight spent somewhere you don't enjoy won't do you any good at all. Instead of relaxing you it'll end up even more stressed. And what's the point of that?

So let's get it right so you can enjoy your holiday completely. Whether you want to spend the entire holiday on the beach, just relaxing with a good book, or if you want a more active holiday you'll find your perfect location here.

# What's on the Costa Brava?

The Costa Brava has some of the best blue flag beaches in Europe, with a coastline similar to France's Cote d'Azur for a fraction of the price.

It also has one of the highest concentrations of Michelin starred restaurants in Spain and vineyards producing DO Empordà wines.

Step back in time while marvelling at Greco-Roman ruins or while visiting well preserved villages from mediaeval times and even castles.

And the Costa Brava has great walking, water sports including some of the best scuba diving in Spain and cycling. It was also the home to the great surrealist artists Salvador Dalí.

In the following pages I'll give you an overview of the three *comarcas* (counties) that make up Costa Brava then give you an idea of what each town is like and what you'll find there.

And if you don't find what you're looking for in these pages, just ask!

You can email me here and ask anything you like: [costabravalifestyle@gmail.com](mailto:costabravalifestyle@gmail.com)

# Alt Empordà

The very northern Costa Brava lies in the *comarca* of Alt Empordà, where Catalonia borders with France.



The character of the Alt Empordà coastline varies between the rocky Cap de Creus, the most easterly point of the Iberian Peninsula formed from the foothills of the Pyrenees, and the long sandy beaches in the bay of Roses towards the south.

While starkly beautiful in the north (and the inspiration for much of Salvador Dalí's work), it can also be bleak in the winter thanks to the intense cold and powerful *tramuntana* that sometimes gusts at more than 100 km/h.

The Alt Empordà was created in 1936 when historical region of Empordà was divided into two *comarcas* (counties). And as the most important city for trade in the area Figueres became the capital.

Today the area is popular with the French due to the proximity of the border with France and many locals speak fluent French in addition to Catalan and Spanish. The area is also popular with tourists from Germany, Holland and Belgium.

While close to the border, it's not altogether straightforward to cross because of the Pyrenees. Although the railway cuts through the rock, Cerbère, on the other side of the border, is reached from Portbou by car via a winding mountain road.

## Natural parks

Several areas here are protected by law. Nature lovers will want to visit the *Parc Natural dels Aiguamolls de l'Empordà*, marshland with numerous bird species. Among the birds there is a colony of storks with their huge nests. It's definitely worth spending a morning or afternoon there, but best done when it's not too hot. Basically any time but summer.

Apart from the sheer beauty of the place and dozens of coves to visit on foot or by sea, Parc Natural del Cap de Creus has a number of dolmens and other megalithic monuments you might want to see. And while *Parc Natural del Montgrí, les Illes Medes i el Baix Ter* is mainly in the Baix Empordà it starts in l'Escala. It's an area of land between the port that runs on towards Montgó right next to the sea. At one time a military base, the area still has a couple of former gun emplacements. It is partly pine covered with a cliff top path that drops down, at one point at least, to a rocky beach.

## Archeology and history

Apart from its spectacular scenery, the Alt Empordà is also notable for the Greco-Roman settlement of Empúries, near l'Escala. Founded by Greek settlers in around 550 BC, the city became largest Greek colony in the Iberian Peninsula. Later it became part of the Roman Empire. Archeological work on the site began in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and is ongoing. Other historical sites include the ruined Citadel of Roses and the castle at Peralada, while you can find the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes high in the hills between Port de la Selva and Llançà.

## Notable people

The best known native of the Alt Empordà is Salvador Dalí. The surrealist was born in Figueres where there is a museum dedicated to his work. He also owned a house at Portlligat and a castle at Púbol in Baix Empordà. All three are open to the public. The museum in Figueres is located in the old theatre and easily spotted from a distance. Large eggs decorate the roof and loaves of bread cover the walls!

Less well known to Anglophones is Caterina Albert, who wrote under the pseudonym Victor Català. A native of l'Escala, you can visit her grave in the municipal cemetery. The house in which she was born still stands, as is the house given to her to recognise her literary output. The latter is now a museum dedicated to the author.



## Portbou

Set among the Pyrenean foothills, Portbou is where the Costa Brava borders France. But despite having a good pebble beach the town isn't a major tourist destination. You can be sure of some real peace and quiet.

The town is dominated by a huge railway station that once provided customs and immigration facilities between the two countries. It was also one of the few Republican supply routes from abroad during the Spanish Civil War. The German philosopher Walter Benjamin lived here until his death by suicide in 1940. There's a monument erected in his honour.

But you are certain to enjoy the tranquillity. With limited nightlife in the centre of town peace and quiet are almost guaranteed. As well as the main beach there are a number of smaller coves to the north of the town. They're easy to get to from Portbou and good for snorkelling. There is also a small marina.

Portbou is ideal for anyone who wants a quiet holiday by the sea but who doesn't mind if the beach isn't sandy. It's also ideal for exploring the surroundings on foot and there is a dive centre offering boat excursions and scuba diving lessons.

*Photo: [Nicolas Vigier](#)*



## Colera

Another town to largely stay off the tourist map is Colera, where you'll find a number of great pebble beaches among spectacular mountainous terrain. The town mainly consists of a small marina, a handful of hotels, tourist apartments and a camp site.

The seafront is surprisingly small, even considering the size of the village. The main beach is right next to the port, but there are two others nearby. All are pebble rather than sand.

In the town itself there is the parish church of Sant Miquel de Colera and a collection of sculptures by Joan Padern on the seafront. Plaça Pi i Margall is dominated by a spectacular plane tree that apparently dates from 1898. And if you explore the hill overlooking the port you'll find two cannons dating from 1789.

Get out of the village and you can explore a number of historical sites, including the ruins of a fortified farmhouse, a 17th century watermill and a 12th century hermitage, which dates from the. The monastery of Sant Quirze de Colera is 40 minutes drive.

The village has a dive centre with boat excursions to dive sites on the Cap de Creus and the French coast. Keen walkers will want to explore coastal paths and hiking trails in the hills.

*Photo: [Diazda](#)*





## Llançà

Located just north of the Cap de Creus, Llançà is located on the final stretch of the Costa Brava that extends northwards before meeting France. There you'll find a major marina and a decent sized sand beach.

Foodies will also be thrilled to dine at Miramar, awarded two stars by the Michelin Guide.

From the port you take a boat tour of Cap de Creus and there is a dive centre with daily excursions to various locations along the coast. You might want to explore between Llançà and Port de la Selva rather than the town beach and the coastal path between the towns is worthwhile doing if you like walking. It'll take a few hours there and back.

Here you'll find a rugged coastline with many small coves, ideal to explore with a face mask and snorkel. Plastic sandals are a good idea too, as there is no shortage of sea urchins underfoot.



## **El Port de la Selva**

Port de la Selva is right on the boundary with the Cap de Creus natural park. The whole area has a stark beauty that is hard to match but within the park construction is completely prohibited.

The former fishing village remains largely untouched and even in August it doesn't get overcrowded. Many of the houses along the sea front were once used by fishermen and so the town has lots of charm.

The 500 metre town beach has fine sand and close to the centre. While the water is noticeably cooler than further south it is also exceptionally clear. Whether you like beaches or rocky coves, there are plenty of places to swim or snorkel. You'll see lots of submarine life.

Just inside the natural park is Cala Tamariua, a small cove with a pebble beach and larger rocks where nudity isn't uncommon. It's about a kilometre from Port de la Selva and great for snorkelling but you're better off walking as parking can be difficult.

*Photo: [Jean-Pierre Bazard](#)*



## Cadaqués

With its narrow streets and whitewashed houses Cadaqués is a world away from the high rise resorts. Artists flock to the town from around the world, attracted by the brilliant light and abundant nature.

It should be no surprise that the great Catalan surrealist Salvador Dalí loved the area. In nearby Portlligat you can visit Salvador Dalí's house and studio, now turned into a museum. You need to pre-book and places are limited.

Despite its popularity, Cadaqués retains its charm and with much of the town pedestrianised it's easy to get around on foot to explore the winding streets. If you're looking for beautiful sand beaches then Cadaqués is probably not your ideal destination. Most of the beaches in and around Cadaqués consist of pebbles, with rocks or rather coarse sand.

But that's not a good reason to avoid the town. The water is exceptionally clear and there are many fantastic locations for snorkelling. Divers will be happy to learn there are a number of dive centres and might want to explore the wreck of The Llanishen.

*Photo: [Blacknight](#)*



## Roses

Situated on the southern side of Cap de Creus, Roses is a hugely popular summer destination with the largest fishing fleet on the entire Costa Brava. As well as the 1.8 kilometre stretch of sand along the promenade, there are a number of smaller beaches close by. And as well as spending time on the beaches, you can learn about the town's history.

The Ciutadella de Roses and *Castell de la Trinitat* both date from the mid-sixteenth century. They were built to defend the city from pirate raids and to protect the entire Bay of Roses from the French.

Roses is also well situated for day trips. The town enjoys easy access to the historic city of Girona as well as the Dalí triangle - Portlligat, Figueres and Púbol – where you can view the artist's work.

There are a number of dive centres in the area to learn to scuba dive or go out on organised excursions. And at the nearby neighbourhood of Santa Margarida, which is built around a large residential marina, keen sailors can rent a boat to explore the local coastline.

*Photo:* [Michael Pfeiffer](#)



## Empuriabrava

With an extensive canal network for leisure boats, Empuriabrava is one of the largest residential marinas in the world. Located in the bay of Roses, it consists of a 40 kilometre canal network.

The town was built on swampland during the 1960s and '70s and in the summer sees its population swell from less than 8,000 to 80,000. Most holiday accommodation here consists of privately owned villas and apartments. You can also camp nearby.

Although the town itself is relatively new it does at least have a large beach consisting of 1.6 kilometres of sand. The beach is bounded by the entrance to the marina in the north and the mouth of the river Muga in the south but can be accessed from the promenade.

Keen sailors might want to rent a boat and one of Europe's premier skydiving centres is on the edge of town. If you're feeling daring you can book a tandem jump.

*Photo: [Cliché Online](#)*



## Sant Pere Pescador

While Sant Pere Pescador may not top the list of tourist destinations on the Costa Brava, the long sandy beach and proximity to a natural park make it ideal for anyone looking to get close to nature. This entire area is worthwhile exploring on foot or by bicycle.

Although hotel accommodation in the town is extremely limited there are some major campsites nearby which back onto the beach, which runs the entire seven kilometres from Sant Martí d'Empúries up to Empuriabrava. The beach is a well known destination for windsurfers and kiteboarders.

The town is surrounded by farmland and borders the natural park of *Els Aiguamolls de l'Empordà*. Here you can see dozens of varieties of birds and other wildlife in this area of protected marshland.

Sant Pere Pescador is also just a few kilometres from Figueres where you can visit the Dalí museum.

*Photo: [Lidia Esparraquera](#)*



## L'Escola

L'Escola is a hugely popular tourist destination close to the earliest Greco-Roman settlement in Spain. As well as the Greco-Roman ruins, the town is famous for its anchovies and boasts a number of really good beaches.

The old town of l'Escola retains its charm and it is easy to pass time in one of the cafes while looking out to sea. There are a handful of hotels and campsites but most holiday accommodation is privately owned.

The main beach is at Riells, a 600 metre curve of sand that is fairly shallow and good for kids, as is the picturesque beach at Montgó. There are a couple of smaller beaches in the old town too. Less densely populated are the beaches close to the archaeological site at Empúries, while further on several kilometres of sand run to Sant Pere Pescador.

L'Escola's port area has undergone considerable expansion over the last two decades to cater for the large number of leisure boats moored there. And here is an active fishing fleet, although the number of fishing boats is massively outnumbered now by motor yachts, sailing boats and dinghies.

In the port you'll also find several dive centres with boats going out a couple of times daily during the peak season. These include boats heading for the Medes Islands off Estartit.

# Baix Empordà

**The area of the central Costa Brava is within Baix Empordà, the southern part of the historical Empordà.**



After the long sandy beach that extends down from Estartit down towards Sa Riera is some of the most spectacular coastline on the entire Costa Brava. In the area where the mountains around Begur drop into the sea you'll find one picturesque fishing village after another. It's simply stunning.

Further south there are plenty of sand beaches, but the coastline is in places spoilt by the number of holiday homes in the area. Some areas stand out though, even here. Just south of Platja d'Aro, S'Agarò dates from the 1920s and gets the balance right. Property prices are eye watering, some of the most expensive anywhere on the Costa Brava, but the houses are something to believe. You can get an idea of the properties by walking along the vertiginous coastal path between Sa Conca beach and Sant Pol.

Like the Alt Empordà, the *comarca* of Baix Empordà was created in 1936. At that time Catalonia was split into the *comarcas* that exist today. The capital is La Bisbal, located some 15 km inland, a town famous for its ceramics. There you'll find many shops selling locally produced pottery throughout the town.

Much of Baix Emporà is mountainous and around a fifth covered in forest. Once predominantly oak, much has been replaced by pine at lower elevations. A lot of the oak is cork so it's little surprise that one of the traditional industries here is



producing wine bottle corks. Fishing is another, although the only remaining fishing ports are at Palamós and Sant Feliu de Guíxols. And of course there are the vineyards. Today part of the DO Empordà wine region lies in the *comarca*.

But whereas rice was at one time widely cultivated now it is mainly limited to the area around Pals. You'll find the local rice in many shops. Much of the farmland is instead given over to growing apples and pears.

## Natural parks

Baix Empordà has a number of protected areas both inland and on the coast. The Montrí massif, which borders with Alt Empordà, forms part of a natural park created in 2010. This area is covered in pine and low scrub.

Along the rocky coastline here, between l'Escala and Estartit, there are some really good diving sites. Both towns have a number of dive centres with twice or thrice daily boats during summer. As well as the wetlands at the mouth of the river Ter to the south of Estartit, and an area of former military land in l'Escala, the park also includes the Medes Islands.



The Medes lie a mile offshore from Estartit and diver numbers strictly controlled. In fact you'll pay a surcharge to dive there in fact. The islands have been protected since 1983 and you'll sometimes find police launches ensuring the dive boats and other craft operate within the law.

But the result is one of the best areas to dive in Spain with an abundance of fish and coral. Visibility is often extremely clear and on Meda Petita (also known as Meda Xica) there is a large cavern through which you can dive. Here you can see huge groupers that are so tame they'll follow you around on the dive. Elsewhere you may see conger eels, barracudas and numerous other marine life.

Back on dry land, a large part of the Gavarres mountain range is also protected as a place of natural interest. Plans to declare it a natural park were scuppered but there is still an area, primarily the southern slope, where the construction of housing is permanently forbidden.

## History

Away from the coast you'll notice many of the villages have a mediaeval influence. Two of the best examples are Pals and Peratallada, but notice how so many villages are centred around a church tower on a hill. Ullastret is another, but dates back to the 6th century BC when the area was settled by an Iberian tribe.

Towering above Torroella de Montgrí is a castle dating from the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. It's a spectacular construction, built in the style of the Middle Eastern fortresses popular following the crusades. Designed so Barcelona could keep an eye on the Counts of Empordà, worked stopped in 1301 when Barcelona consolidated its power over the region.

The castle is still worth a visit though. It takes maybe an hour to reach from Torroella so you're better off visiting off season. You get a great view too! Calonge is another town with a mediaeval castle, close to the resort of Sant Antoni de Calonge.

## Notable people

Catalonia's most important post-war author lived in Romanyà. Mercè Rodoreda's best known work internationally is *La plaça del diamant* (1962, translated into English as *The Time of the Doves*). She lived in this tiny village in the Gavarres from 1972 until her death in 1983.

Internationally, many stars have stayed at the five-star Hostal de la Gavina at S'Agarò since the Costa Brava first became popular with the Hollywood set. Frank Sinatra, Liz Taylor, Jean Cocteau, Sean Connery and Lady Gaga have all stayed at the luxury hotel over the years.

And Salvador Dalí owned property inland at Púbol, which he dedicated to his wife. Gala Dalí Castle is now a museum dedicated to the surrealist's work, the third apex of the Dalí triangle. The other two are the theatre-museum at Figueres and his house at Portlligat near Cadaqués.



## Estartit

Estartit has long been a popular tourist destination because of its fabulous sand beach. But while the town has changed beyond recognition since the early days of tourism, the old town retains the charm of the former fishing village it once was.

The town has a large marina focused on leisure boats and during the summer there is much activity in the marina area. And just a kilometre or so off shore are the Medes Islands, an archipelago that has enjoyed protected status since the 1990s to allow the re-growth of coral and marine life in the area.

Most visitors stay in private holiday apartments and villas, although there are a number of hotels and campsites too. Foreign tourists mainly come from France, Britain and Ireland but Germany and Holland are also well represented.

The town is one of the top locations for diving on the Costa Brava, with a number of spectacular dive sites at the Medes Islands and along the coast towards l'Escala. Keen golfers will also be happy to know that two golf courses are a short drive away.



## Pals

The mediaeval town of Pals is a couple of kilometres from the beach, but it's still close enough to make staying here a viable option if you have a car. It's also a great location to explore the rocky stretch of coast near Begur and Palafrugell.

Apart from Pals itself there is accommodation at Massos de Pals, midway between Pals and the coast. Estartit and L'Escala are also nearby for the beaches, diving or l'Escala's Greco-Roman ruins. And nearby are Golf Platja de Pals and Empordà Golf Club.

*Photo: [Michele Ursino](#)*



## Begur

Standing high above Begur is a mediaeval castle overlooking a rocky stretch of coast where you'll find numerous fishing villages connected by winding roads. Sa Riera, Aiguafreda, Sa Tuna and Fornells are all a world away from the type of low-budget tourism with which the region is sometimes unfairly associated.

The area around Begur hasn't been over-developed like some other towns and the seaside towns remain full of charm. Here is the Costa Brava of pine covered cliffs and rocky coves, days spent swimming and snorkelling followed by evenings dining under the stars on fresh seafood washed down with a local wine.

As well as Begur itself and the former fishing villages, the hamlet of Esclanyà lies inside the municipality. There you'll find Roman remains, a thirteenth century church and a fifteenth century castle.

Really you need a car to make the most of your stay Begur, which is less than an hour from Girona and 45 minutes from Figueres. It's also well situated for a number of golf courses. The clubs of Empordà, Pals, Platja d'Aro and Golf Costa Brava are all within 30 minutes by car, while PGA Catalunya is 45 minutes.

*Photo: [Albert Torelló](#)*



## **Palafrugell**

The mediaeval town of Palafrugell lies some four kilometres inland but within the municipality lie a number of fishing villages and inland towns. These include the popular tourist resorts of Tamariu, Llafranc and Calella de Palafrugell.

The coastline here is rugged, with smaller beaches and rocky coves ideal for swimming and snorkelling. The fishing villages of the municipality are far quieter than the larger resorts and have plenty of good restaurants with fresh seafood and great for fining al fresco.

The town itself was at one time fortified although only some remains of the city walls still exist. The old town is largely pedestrianised and full of bars, restaurants and shops. Here you'll find the church of Sant Martí which dates from the 11th century.

Each year the town hosts a music festival in the botanical gardens of Cap Roig, near Calella de Palafrugell. It runs from early July to mid-August and features both local bands and internationally acclaimed artists.

To explore the area fully you'll need a car while staying in Palafrugell or any of the associated villages. You can also get to both Figueres and Girona in under an hour, while a number of golf courses are less than half an hour by car.

*Photo: [Moritz Barcelona](#)*



## **Palamós**

Renowned throughout Spain for its prawns, Palamós remains one of the few towns on the Costa Brava with an active fishing industry. It remains a popular tourist destination thanks to the nearby beaches and is now one of the top cruise ship stop-offs from Barcelona.

Despite the tourism driven construction boom the old town has retained much its charm. Much of the new construction took place to the south of Palamós, at Sant Antoni de Calonge. The two towns now merge. Wander the streets and stop for a coffee or beer, or find a restaurant you like the look of nestled in the narrow streets close to the harbour.

The town's main beach, Platja Gran, is 575 metres of medium golden sand and has full tourist facilities including a Red Cross point and showers. But with a fairly steep shelf, it isn't suitable for all. However if you head to Platja des Monestri, near Sant Antoni de Calonge, you'll find the beach has a much more gradual shelf with similar sand.

A short distance out of Palamós you'll find Platja de Castell, the only sandy beach of its size to have escaped development on the entire Costa Brava. Also nearby is Platja Fosca, which is perfect for young kids due to the gentle slope.

*Photo: [Bocachete](#)*





## Sant Antoni de Calonge

Sant Antoni de Calonge was originally a fishing village inhabited by locals migrating from the medieval town of Calonge after piracy declined in the area. Today the town is a busy tourist destination thanks to the long beach that extends to Palamós.

Although there are some buildings from the 18th and 19th centuries, the majority of construction in Sant Antoni de Calonge dates from the 20th century. While of not much interest as a town, both Calonge and Palamós are close by. The long beach here is the real attraction.

The beach is a couple of kilometres long with a number of T-shaped breakwaters along its length. They were built to prevent sand erosion, partially caused by the development of the port at Palamós.

Located near the C-31, the town is well placed for exploring this stretch of coast. As well as Calonge and Palamós, it's an easy drive to Sant Feliu de Guíxols, Palafrugell, Begur and Pals. Estartit, l'Escala, Figueres and Girona are also well within reach without spending too long in the car.

*Photo: [Timo Tervo](#)*



## Platja d'Aro

The long sandy beach and sporting marina make Platja d'Aro a great summer location. But the wide selection of shops and restaurants mean the town is busy throughout the year.

Although Platja d'Aro has been occupied since prehistoric times and was at one time settled by the Romans, the town is thoroughly modern. The big attraction of Platja d'Aro is the sandy beach, which runs for several kilometres down to the marina. And on the far side of the marina you'll find Sa Conca beach and the gated community of S'Agaró.

The town also has a good selection of shops including a number of large supermarkets, and the high street is full of Spanish and international chains. There are also plenty of restaurants and bars on the high street and along the beachfront, which is permanently busy in the summer months. It's ideal to relax after a hard day on the beach.

Platja d'Aro has a cinema that shows an English language film every couple of weeks, a bowling alley and amusement arcades. Golfers might also like the nearby course at Club Golf d'Aro, while there is also a local tennis club with around 20 courts.



## S'Agaró

S'Agaró lies in one of the most privileged areas of the Costa Brava with spectacular views from the winding path connecting Sant Pol and Sa Concha beaches. The gated community was designed to be sympathetic to the surrounding landscape and almost exclusively uses traditional Catalan design.

The 5-star Hostal de la Gavina was built as part of the project, which dates back to the 1920s. Over the years this luxury hotel has had scores of big names from Hollywood and the music business as guests.

Nearby Sant Pol beach is one of the best urban beaches on the Costa Brava and absolutely perfect for youngsters. The area of the beach closest Hostal de la Gavina has a line of coloured beach huts next to the Taverna del Mar restaurant. Although pricey, its reputation is excellent.

The promenade is lined with restaurants and there are a few modest sized hotels too. The seafront includes some Catalan modernist houses built for those locals returning from the Americas wanting to show off their newfound wealth.

The winding path along the seafront between Sant Pol and Sa Concha beaches provides some spectacular views of the Mediterranean and glimpses of some equally spectacular S'Agaró properties with matching price tags.



## **Sant Feliu de Guíxols**

Until the 1950s the historic port of Sant Feliu de Guíxols was reliant on the cork industry. Since then though it has become one of the major centres of tourism on the Costa Brava, benefitting from stretches of sandy beach between rocky outcrops.

The town itself is relatively active throughout the year, with a busy Sunday market, but the summer is when tourism takes over. The town beach itself is protected by the harbour wall, but further north is the beach of Sant Pol and then the gated community of S'Agaró, dominated on the Sant Pol side by 5-star Hostal de la Gavina. It's been a firm favourite of the Hollywood set since the 1950s.

The town consists of a jumble of narrow streets with many old buildings giving some real character, although the promenade (Passeig Mar) includes a number of 1960s apartment blocks. The town also has an important Benedictine Monastery first referenced in the 10th century.

In the summer the town holds the Porta Ferrada festival with a variety of concerts and other performances from local and international artists. Performances take place down near the harbour.

*Photo: [IMBiblio](#)*

# La Selva

The very southern Costa Brava is in the *comarca* of La Selva, which literally means “the forest”.



La Selva is where the forest-covered Cadiretes massif meets the sea between Lloret de Mar and Sant Feliu de Guíxols (Baix Empordà) resulting in a rugged coast with many coves. It's worthwhile driving along here just for the scenery. Inland is an extensive plain where much of the land is used for agriculture, while in the west is more forest covering the Guillerics mountain range and Montseny massif.

The capital of La Selva is Santa Coloma de Farners, a town that dates from at least the ninth century. The town is notable for the church of Santa Coloma, which dates from the 14th century and as a spa town, for which it became popular in the early 20th century. You can stay at the Balneari Termes-Orion today. Nearby are also a 12th century castle and the Monastery of Sant Pere Cercada.

But in some areas of the coast picturesque coves contrast radically with nearby over development. Blanes was once a village that survived on fishing and agriculture but

today its principal industry is tourism. Inhabited in pre-Roman times, today it is sometimes known as “the gateway to the Costa Brava”, but it has lost some of its charm. The seafront is dominated by apartment buildings.

Much worse is Lloret de Mar. The nucleus of the town was lost following the unchecked development that started in the 1960s. That and the way Lloret was promoted helped tarnish the reputation of the entire Costa Brava. But if you know where to look, there are still gems around Lloret.

Fenals beach is much better than Lloret’s main beach, which is lined with block after block of apartment buildings. Lying on the sand at Fenals you can almost forget what is around the corner as the botanical gardens overlook the beach.

Even better is the Santa Cristina beach. While it has quite a large hotel high on the cliffs above, the beach isn’t completely straightforward to get to and tends not to get overcrowded even at the height of summer. Above it is an 18th century hermitage with a steep path down to the beach.

## Nature

Part of the Montseny Natural Park lies in La Selva. Here is the Montseny massif which at its highest point reaches more than 1700 metres. The area has been protected since 1987 and, uniquely, is home to an endangered species of newt. The area also has a number of megaliths. These indicate it was inhabited in very primitive times, perhaps several millennia BC.

There is also the *Estany de Sils*, which until the mid 19th century was the largest lake in Catalonia. It was drained in 1851 and the resulting reclaimed land used for growing crops. However in the late 20th century a project was set up by the Generalitat (Catalan Government) backed by the European Union to buy back some of the reclaimed land to convert to marshes and ponds. The final part of the plan is to re-establish a lake and forest. The area here is extremely damp and it’s sometimes prone to huge fog banks. The AP7 toll road goes by Sils and can be affected by the fog.

Three out of the Costa Brava’s four botanical gardens are located in La Selva. Marimurtra Botanical Garden and Pinya de Rosa Tropical Botanical Garden are both in Blanes, while Santa Clotilde Gardens is in Lloret de Mar.

## History

I already mentioned Santa Coloma de Farners, but it isn’t the only spa town in the southern Costa Brava. Caldes de Malavella is famous for its sparkling water and you can visit the remains of the town’s Roman baths.

Water brands include Vichy Catalan, Malavella and San Narciso and there are also two traditional spas with warm water provided direct from the springs below. These are Balneari Vichy Catalan, located right next to the bottling plant, and Balneari Prats. If you're not staying at either of these spas the former has an hour long "thermal circuit", with two warm water pools, sauna and various other water treatments. The latter has a warm water pool in its gardens available to non-guests during the lunch period.

While Blanes and Lloret de Mar have been largely spoilt, Tossa de Mar has a fantastic 14th century castle towering over the town's main beach. Within the walls is a lighthouse. Tossa was originally settled at the end of the Stone Age and is believed to have been populated ever since. Later it became an Iberian settlement followed soon after by the Romans. Although on the coast, Tossa's main industries starting in the middle ages were wine and cork rather than fishing. These days tourism is the town's main breadwinner.

## People

Tossa de Mar may be something of a faded glory these days but in 1951 Ava Gardner spent time in the town to shoot *Pandora and the flying Dutchman* with James Mason. There is a life-size statue of the actress watching over the town from within the castle walls.



## **Tossa de Mar**

The castle towering above Tossa de Mar provides the Costa Brava with one of its most iconic images. The town remains a popular destination with British holidaymakers attracted by the beach and the town's history.

Before the arrival of mass tourism in the 1950s the primary industries of Tossa de Mar were grapes and cork. Much of the surrounding area consists of forest with cork oak. This was shipped to the Americas in the 18th and 19th centuries. It also had a small fishing fleet on which the population relied when times got hard.

In 1950s the town was famous for the arrival of Ava Gardner to film "The Flying Dutchman" with James Mason. In 1998 a bronze statue was erected within the castle walls to honour her.

As well as the traditional old town and castle areas, modern Tossa has expanded considerably along the length of the beach. If you're simply looking for a beach holiday with a little bit of history thrown in with great views then Tossa de Mar still makes a great choice.





## Lloret de Mar

Lloret de Mar was one of the first towns on the Costa Brava to benefit from the 1950s tourist boom. As the first destination for Club 18-30 it gained a reputation for noisy excess but remains popular as it tries to reposition itself as a family friendly resort.

The town was once fishing village that became popular for its long sandy beach. But in the rush to cater for cheap package tours all that was swallowed up by high-rise apartments and hotels. There is little remaining of the town it once was and in the summer it gets extremely busy.

However, just a little bit out of the town and there are some surprises. Fenals and Boadella beaches are a world away from the main beach. Nearby Santa Cristina boasts a 14th century hermitage overlooking the sea and a fairly small beach. There are also the botanical gardens overlooking Boadella beach, considered to be the best example of contemporary landscaped gardens in Catalonia.

However, many visitors to Lloret de Mar simply go for the nightlife. There are numerous clubs with big name guest DJs over the summer and foam parties are a frequent fixture. While the town did have a reputation for anything goes, these days you'll find the authorities aren't quite so tolerant as they try to keep anti-social behaviour under check.



## Blanes

As the Costa Brava's most southerly town Blanes is sometimes known as the "gateway to the Costa Brava". And with its long beach and history, it is little wonder so many people from Barcelona own second homes in Blanes. It's the first resort on the Costa Brava you get to from Barcelona.

The town has a wide promenade with restaurants and bars and while some of the buildings are with six or seven storeys tall many are lower. It's nothing like Lloret. Get away from the seafront and you'll still find the heart of the fishing village Blanes once was. A bit of old world charm with all the convenience of modern amenities close by.

Every year Blanes hosts a firework competition (*Els Focs de Blanes*), which coincides with its *festa major*. The competition lasts four around four days, ending on 26th July to celebrate Santa Anna.

As well as the beach, Blanes is also famous for its botanical gardens. They attract thousands of visitors every year. The harbour was refurbished after massive storm damage sustained in 2008 after years of neglect.

Photo: [Alex Alishevskikh](#)

# Additional resources

I hope this report has helped you decide the ideal Costa Brava location for you. If you have any questions about any aspect of the Costa Brava then email me at [costabravalifestyle@gmail.com](mailto:costabravalifestyle@gmail.com) and I'll respond as soon as I can!

If you'd like more information to help you decide where to go this summer then you might also want to check out the following resources:

1. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/spain/catalonia/costa-brava/>
2. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/spain/eastcoast/718451/Spain-Costa-Brava-beyond-the-cliches.html>
3. <https://www.thehotelguru.com/en-gb/best-hotels-in/spain/costa-brava>
4. <https://www.bluevalleycarhire.com/costabrava.htm>
5. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/spain/catalonia/costa-brava/cadaques/articles/36-hours-in-cadaques/>
6. <https://en.costabrava.org/what-to-do/wine-and-gastronomy/michelin-starred-restaurants>