

Port Bo, Calella de Palafrugell



Perfect *Costa Brava*

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Photographs by **GUIDO CASTAGNOLI**

The Baix Empordà, aka the Golden Triangle, sees this glorious coastline at its most dramatic and authentic. It's also ideal for sorties inland



Charm personified: Luis, maître d' at the Hotel Aiguà Brava

The name Costa Brava, literally the "Wild Coast," was dreamed up by local journalist Ferran Agulló in 1908 to describe the jagged cliffs and rugged inlets of this stretch of coastline. It runs all the way from Llançà, on the border with France, to Blanes, about an hour north of Barcelona, and is something of a chameleon. If the southernmost resorts of Lloret de Mar and Platja d'Aro have long done their best to emulate the questionable style of the Costa del Sol, those to the north, like Cadaqués, while wildly beautiful, are continually battered by a fierce Tramuntana wind said to drive people mad.

Between these two extremes, the flower-flecked countryside of the Baix Empordà, a cluster of medieval villages bordering the coast, has remained a closely guarded secret. Known as the Golden Triangle, the region first became popular in the 1950s when Hollywood earmarked it as a cheaper film location than the French Riviera. Ava Gardner and Frank Sinatra conducted their affair here, Truman Capote wrote *In Cold Blood* in the fishing town of Palamós, and Elizabeth Taylor, Katherine Hepburn and Montgomery Clift frolicked along the cliff tops while filming *Suddenly*.



Last Summer (1959), partying at the Hotel Llafranc through the night.

Cap Roig Gardens

1. The cliff-top walk

The Camino de Ronda runs north to south from Begur to s'Agaró and for those prepared to make the trek takes in some of the prettiest coves and beaches in Spain. It was built by the Civil Guard as part of an anti-smuggling campaign in the 19th century, and comprises a network of jaw-droppingly beautiful paths and staircases fringed by umbrella pines and pink-hued cliffs that connect the towns and villages of the region. Strolling from one to another, stopping to jump off the rocks for a swim or to picnic at a deserted saltwater creek, is a delight. Starting from sa Riera, near Begur, the path takes you to Aiguafreda



Urchin King
El Didal's Isidro



Stoll's Divebase instructor
Tom and Maria Eichmüller

(about an hour) offering splendid views of the Medes Islands and culminating in a cute cove with a simple *chiringuito* (beach bar) for a plate of grilled sardines. The path that follows the shallow cliffs from Calella de Palafrugell to Llafranc (about 30 minutes) is easier going especially if you have little ones in tow, while the stretch from s'Agaró to Platja d'Aro and Sant Antoni de Calonge to Palamós boasts a string of scallop-shaped beaches ideal for idle sun worshipping.

2. The inside track

Away from the coast, the Baix Empordà's rolling green hills are dotted with postcard-perfect medieval villages. The honey-colored town of Pals is known for its rice paddies (cultivated since 1492), the emblematic dish being not paella, but *arròs a la cassola*, a sloppy, deeply flavored stew made with seafood and sausages. The local arts and crafts are somewhat twee – crystals, Indian silver and scarves, and whimsically painted pottery – but Bar Bonavista (Carrer Muralla 5) is worth stopping at for a window onto village life: a crossroads where locals and tourists come together for a glass of Empordà wine. Eight kilometers west of here, *Peratallada* is sculpted straight out of the rock and surrounded by a moat. The pretty stone buildings and plazas sheathed in jasmine and honeysuckle frame antique stores and



Hastal Sa Tuna's
seafood paella

delis perfect for whiling away a couple of hours.

3. The fisherman's fancy

Calella de Palafrugell is the charmer when it comes to the Costa Brava's myriad seaside towns: a cluster of whitewashed cottages framed by arches and woodwork painted as many shades of blue as the Mediterranean. Right on the shoreline, *El Didal* is housed in a brick boathouse from the 18th century. During La Garoinada, the sea urchin festival that runs mid-January through March, the self-appointed Urchin King, Isidro, shucks *erizos del mar* for dapper Barcelonans to slurp down before lunch.



There's also the daily catch from the Palamós fish market. Grab a spot on the terrace and feast on shrimp, whole grilled *besugo* (red sea bream), *rodaballo* (turbot) and San Pedro (John Dory).
Plaça del Port Bo s/n, Calella de Palafrugell.
Tel: +34 972 615 776.

4. The garden soiree

One of Europe's best music festivals, the *Cap Roig Gardens Festival*, kicks off on July 14 this year with none other than Bob Dylan. Among others, Kiri Te Kawana, George Benson and Tony Bennett will serenade music lovers in the cliff-top botanical gardens through August. Built by the Russian colonel

PERFECT COSTA BRAVA

Nicolai Woevodsky for his English aristocrat wife, Dorothy Webster, the gardens spill out from the main plaza where the festival is held in a series of scented terraces and lovers lanes that cascade down the cliffs to a sea the color of lapis lazuli. Tickets from \$30.

*Carrer Palafrugell-Mont-ras, Calella de Palafrugell. Tel: +972 614 582.
www.caproigfestival.com*

5. The dive school

Stolli's Divebase in Tamariu is one of the Costa Brava's oldest dive outfits. It celebrated its 40th anniversary last year and continues to offer the same personal service and small group dives that made it special way back when. That and its own house reef (along a small jetty just meters from the store) offering



Wine on the terrace at the Hotel Aigua Blanca



Miguel Grassot (left) runs Bar Bonavista in the pretty medieval village of Pals (above)

instant access to an underwater field of sea grass; home to everything from octopuses and stargazers to sea horses and pipefish. It's a great choice for young divers and beginners, and beats a test dive in a swimming pool any day. Experienced divers can head out on the *Gabriella*, an 85-year-old fishing sloop, to the Tamarit Canyons, considered one of Europe's best dive sites for its technicolor corals and gorgonians.

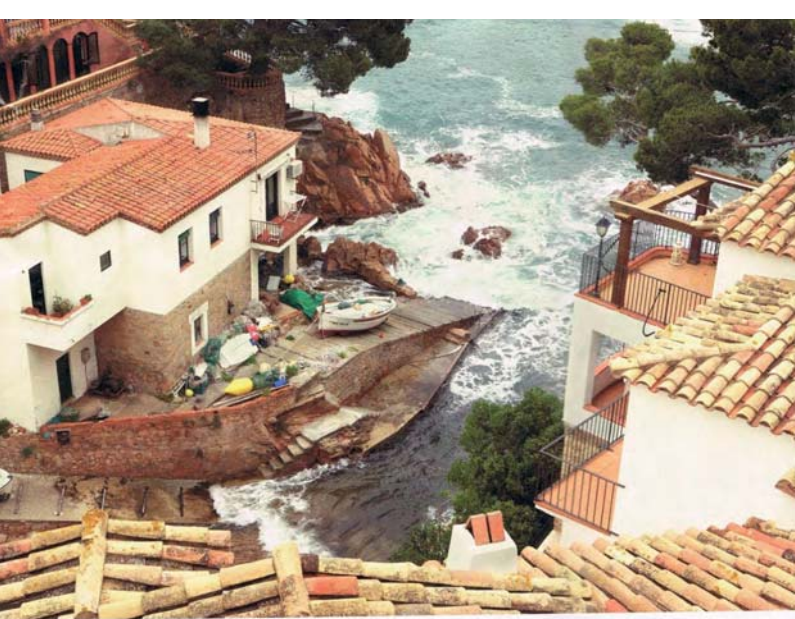
Tamarit. Tel: +972 620 035.
www.stollis-divebase.eu

6. **The untouched beach**

Just north of Palamós, the **Platja de Castell** is the only virgin beach on the Costa Brava, a large expanse of golden sand backed by low dunes and dense

A swimming hole on the Camino del Ronda, not far from the Hotel Aigua Blava

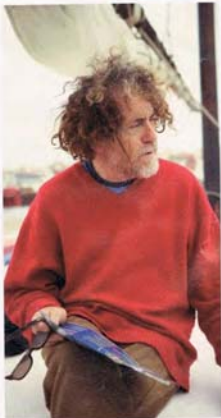




pine forest. It was discovered by the Catalan art set in the 1930s, when the painter Josep Maria Sert bought a plot of land set back from the beach and built the Villa Mas Juny for his princess bride, Isabelle Roussy Mdivani of Georgia. When her brother, Alexis, was killed in a car crash nearby they left never to return, selling the property to industrialist Albert Puig Palau, who threw some of the most glamorous parties of the era. Dali was among the guests and set up a studio in the woods, La Porta Torta ("the Crooked Door"), although reportedly he never used it. It's well signposted from the beach.

7. The charter boat

Joan Santolaria worked for the Costa Brava's department of art and culture for many years before the *Rafael*, an old wooden fishing boat built in 1915, fell into his hands and he started his own charter business. Based in the Port of Palamós, *Tela Mariner* operates three boats offering 1.5 hour trips along the coast to full-day charters and



*Inlet at Fornells,
Hotel Aigua Blava*

*Stoll's Divebase
arrived in Tamarit 40
years ago*

overnight cruises. The *Rafael* offers the most authentic experience, a workboat where you are encouraged to try your hand at sailing. "It's fun for kids," he says. "Especially when Red Beard, the pirate who once terrorized this part of the coast, comes aboard." If hands-off is more your style, the *Jolie Biche* (max 12 passengers) is a handsome, turn-of-the-century schooner ideal for sailing into the sunset with a glass of cava. For those looking to live out a Kennedy-Onassis fantasy nothing beats riding the waves in *La Baronessa*, a classic 1970s wooden speedboat.

Moll Pesquer s/n, Palamós. Tel: +972 609 307 623. Trips aboard the Rafael start from €30 per person (max 25 passengers). Private charters on inquiry: www.telamariner.es

8. The sundowner

High up on the cliffs of Llafranc, where the Sant Sebastià Lighthouse sends out its warning to passing ships, the **El Far Hotel** provides safe haven for travelers looking to escape the party town below. There's nowhere quite like it for a Gin Mare and tonic (made with a local rosemary-infused gin) served over uninterrupted views of the big blue.

Muntanya de Sant Sebastià s/n, Llafranc.
Tel: +972 301 639. www.elfar.net

9. The moonlit dinner

Development has been kept to a minimum at Cala Sa Tuna, a small bay almost completely enclosed by rocks. Just as well given that during the summer finding a spot on the beach is akin to playing sardines. Once the sun goes down and the day-trippers have gone home, it's one of the most romantic hideaways on the coast. Built right up against the sand, the restaurant at the **Hostal Sa Tuna** has been going since 1944 and plates up inventive interpretations of the local cuisine - *mar i muntanya* (sea and mountain). Bag a table under the stars and treat yourself to unexpected combinations such as tuna tartare with chorizo, cod with peas and blood sausage, and suckling pig with peaches.

Passeig de l'Ancora 5, Cala Sa Tuna. Tel: +972 622 198. www.hostalsatuna.com



Bar Bonavista, Pals



Charters new: Joan Santolaria captains Tela Marineria; the bridge of the Jolie Biche (top)

10. Home away from home

You don't come to the **Hotel Aigua Blava** for designer digs or because it's hip and happening; you come because it's a classic. Located on the Platja de Fornells, the inspiration for Norman Lewis's memoir *Voices of the Old Sea* about life on the Costa Brava after

World War II, it's the place that keeps on giving. There's always something new to discover, like a swimming hole cut into the cliffs (just three minutes walk in the direction of Platja Fondà).

When it opened in 1934, the Aigua Blava was one of the first hotels on the Costa Brava and has stayed in the same family ever since. Over the decades the property has spread around lush gardens and a long pool to include rooms, suites and self-catering apartments (suites 51 and 52 have delightful balconies over a tiny inlet). The result is a higgledy-piggledy pile of a place, unpretentious and jolly, that draws people back year after year.

Platja de Fornells, Begur. Tel: +972 622 058.

www.aiguablava.com

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