

Bravo to the Costa Brava

A new tour of Spain's rugged Costa Brava coast includes wine tasting, Michelin-starred meals – and running a half marathon every day. Jonathan Thompson loosens his running shorts

THE scene before me – all high body counts and ancient towers – would put Game Of Thrones to shame. I'm standing in front of Girona's Baroque cathedral while a steady stream of Catalans clamber up my back.

It's the final morning of a five-day visit to the Costa Brava and I'm at the bottom of a six-storey human tower. 'How did we end up here?' grunts my friend Joe as a small child in a crash helmet plants a foot on his shoulder. But he knows the answer as well as I do: we ran 56 miles.

'The Costa Brava has a bad reputation,' said our host Albert Diks over dinner at the Castell d'Emporda hotel the previous evening. 'People think of drunk Englishmen on beaches. People think it's not beautiful. People run away.'

Over the past five days, Joe and I had done the opposite. As part of an 11-strong group, we'd run through the heart of Catalonia, from undulating cliffside paths to fortified hilltop towns, at a rate of about 12 miles a day. And not only was it beautiful but the majority of the people on the beaches were neither English nor drunk: they were largely Catalan – and often naked.

'Pack white trousers,' was the main instruction from Running Costa Brava's owner, Pablo Rodriguez. 'And prepare for some surprises.'

Rodriguez, a self-confessed 'running geek', traded his native Costa Rica for the Costa Brava nine years ago. He began these tours on a smaller scale last year and is launching them fully this summer. Part businessman, part mountain



Tasty stop: Jonathan (left) and his mate Joe tuck into lunch; (inset) Jonathan tries the local way of drinking

goat, he's so full of energy you expect him to pull off a somersault at any moment.

The tone for our week was set on the first morning, over breakfast at Mas Cals, a 1,000-year-old farmhouse. This is el porron,' says Rodriguez, waving around what looks like a large glass teapot with a long, sharp spout. 'It's the traditional way of drinking local wine.'

This way of drinking (at 8.30am), involves no glasses and no contact

with the spout. You pour red wine into your mouth from as great a distance as possible. By the time we hit the trail half an hour later, we're all extremely good spirits.

We descend from the farmhouse, through pines and clusters of cork trees,

their lower halves stripped away to plug those delicious bottles of Catalan wine.

By midday, we've reached sea level, where we spend an hour running along a path above the glittering Mediterranean. We barely see a soul – except for a stretch along a remote beach where the dozen or so sunbathers are almost entirely naked. One of them, playing a Spanish guitar and wearing just a pair of Ray-Bans, smiles and nods as we pass.

'How do you find these obscure trails?' I ask Rodriguez. He shrugs: 'Often I go for long runs on my own. Sometimes the trails are there but forgotten. Other times, I find tracks made by wild boar and make them bigger with my machete.'

On our first evening, he reveals one of his surprises: we're dining at the Michelin-starred Restaurant Casamar in the town of Llafranc. It's one of the best meals I've ever eaten – cured sausage stuffed with foie gras, blue cheese, beef cheek and a cantal cheese salad.

By the time we reach Girona on day five, I've experienced more Michelin stars than blisters. Rodriguez's final surprise awaits us there. 'You have your white trousers?' he asks, leading us towards the town hall through a throng of tourists. Here, we're greeted by one of Catalonia's largest group of Castellars, or human tower builders.

Handed blue shirts and red sashes, we're thrown straight into their carefully mapped pile of bodies. It's a fitting end to what has been an extraordinarily well-planned trip.

As our tower of bodies is carefully disassembled, Rodriguez leads us to a nearby bar, emerging with a tray of beers. 'What happens next?' I ask him. He grins: 'It's a surprise.'

Running & Trekking Costa Brava (www.runningcostabrava.com) has running tours starting from £544 per person for a four-day/three-night trip, with hotels, breakfast and dinner included. Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies direct to Girona, from £55.

CATALAN COAST GO EXPLORING

If running isn't your thing, here are some alternative ways to enjoy the area...

KAYAK THE COAST

Local tour operator Breaks In Europe offers guided trips around the Costa Brava's rugged coastline in one or two-man kayaks. Its tours can be as short or as long as your time – or arms – will allow. For those who'd prefer to let an engine do the hard work, there's a fleet of motorboats too. www.touristservice.es/



EAT AT THE WORLD'S BEST RESTAURANT

El Celler de Can Roca (pictured above) on the outskirts of Girona was named the finest place to eat in the world this year, knocking Denmark's Noma from the top spot. Serving classic Catalan dishes with an injection of molecular wizardry, it now has three Michelin stars – one for each of the three Roca brothers who run it. www.elcellerdecanroca.com

TAP INTO DALI'S INSPIRATION

For the more cultured, the Salvador Dali house museum in Portlligat, just outside Cadaques, is a must-see. Home to the surrealist genius for some 50 years, it's as eccentric as you'd expect. At the entrance, there's a 7ft stuffed bear with a handheld photo flash in its paw, while a model of Michaelangelo's David in a fencing mask greets visitors to the equally wacky garden. www.salvador-dali.org

ROAM the GLOBE with Lisa Scott

This week, Lisa takes us to three of the world's political hotspots. Where do you think we should go next?

Twitter your suggestions to @LisaScott

CHINA

Current affairs junkies will be spoilt for choice thanks to Political Tours' international news destinations, including North Korea, Greece and Libya. Former New York Times Balkans correspondent Nicholas Wood founded the company in 2009 after recognising that intrepid travellers want a better understanding of complex global situations. His ten-day tour to China explores how the country is undergoing enormous social and economic changes, taking



in rural Sichuan, the boom cities of Chongqing and Chengdu and Beijing. £3,200. www.politicaltours.com

KOSOVO

The newest country in the Balkans (the Republic of Kosovo declared independence in 2008) has been working hard to improve its global reputation and its relations with the EU and Serbia. Explore has a new 14-



day tour that takes in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo, and the capital Pristina, which has an impressive nightlife scene.

From £1,329. www.explore.co.uk



IRAQ

Although the Foreign Office advises only essential travel to Iraq, there are signs it could become a future tourist destination. After the

relaunch of Iraqi Airways' Baghdad-to-London connection and the restoration of the Mesopotamian marshes in southern Iraq, drained by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, it is now primed as an eco tourism hotspot. Hinterland Travel's Geoff Hann has led trips to Iraq for 30 years with armed security personnel. His next nine-day tour takes in Baghdad, Erbil, Babylon and Nippur, one of the oldest cities in the world.

£1,900. www.hinterlandtravel.com