



## SPAIN

A feast for the eyes, a banquet for the mind

**From the flouncing swirl of flamenco to the intense drama of a bull fight and the rustic flavours of the Basques' food movement, the Spanish are a passionate people. Who can blame them, gifted with stunning emerald green mountains in the North, monumental art and architecture in the middle, and whitewashed villages dripping with fiery traditions in the South, there is plenty to be passionate about.**

**This journey was crafted for a small group of 3 couples with very diverse interests. Common in all of them was a passion for wonderful and unique hotels, delicious cuisine and excellent wines. Some liked plenty of physical activities, including hiking and high-end road cycling. Others were more interested in the historical and cultural aspects of the region. Our bespoke journey combined these varied interests into one cohesive story that flowed fluidly and with plenty of flexibility for serendipity and spontaneity to flourish.**

We commenced our journey in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia. Set in stunning geography, rich in history and with a distinct culture, many Catalans think of their home as a separate country. Barcelona sizzles and dazzles, and has been breaking ground in art, architecture and style since the late 19th century.

After a restful night at the understated, yet incredibly elegant Hotel Abac, we headed for the bustling Boqueria market. We dropped by a local butcher to learn how the finest Jamon Serrano is produced. Later, the culture aficionados in the group met with a published architectural historian to discover why Gaudi's unfinished church, Sagrada Familia, and surrounding Gothic quarter are renowned world-wide. Then they took to the skies in a helicopter to view these iconic monuments from a unique perspective.

Everyone headed into Barcelona's trendy and timeless bustling streets for some avant-garde shopping. A top designer from The



Born – the hippest area in Barcelona, showed them why the city remains a hotbed of talent and creativity for the world’s fashionista. We soaked up Barcelona’s art scene at Carrer Montcada and afterwards, in the leafy streets of the Eixample, snacked on paamb tomquet – the classic tomato-bread appetiser, beautifully updated at Paco Meralgo.

Barcelona’s avant-garde chefs have a reputation for creating ingenious and beautifully crafted dishes - in the face of which even the French are reaching for superlatives. In the evening it was time to test them with the help of some rather knowledgeable friends. Ryan Opaz, the renowned food critic, and his wife Gabriella hosted our party at the Michelin starred Cinc Sentis by Amelia and Jordi Arta. It was an evening full of culinary insight, inventive dishes, diverse Catalan wines and much laughter.

When Lance Armstrong most keenly felt the glare of the public eye he escaped to the Spanish town of Girona to the north of Barcelona. He liked it so much there that he made it his main winter training base. We couldn’t think of a more appropriate place to get into the saddle and explore its cobbled streets by bike, delving deep into the labyrinth of the Barri Vell with its centuries old houses. Our group visited the Arab Baths, and the Jewish Quarter, and then strolled along the wall for the best view of the city.

Cycling along the Mediterranean coast, more commonly known as the Costa Brava, we came across steep cliffs, dropping sharply into the sea. Secluded, tightly enclosed coves with small beaches added to the cyclist’s idea of heaven. North of Girona we visited the white village of Cadaqués, one of Salvador Dalí’s favourite haunts. To honour the great man, we took a route inland from Cadaqués to visit his birth place at Figueras dropping by the Dalí Museum.

Then we headed onto the Basque Country, straddling the Pyrenees. Bilbao is its biggest and busiest city. It throngs with sophisticated yet earthy locals, and its cuisine is positively lip-smacking. Basque culture is intense and is perfectly reflected by the internationalism of Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum. This is a magnificent example of the 20th century’s most ground breaking architecture. An expert guide introduced our travellers to the titanium clad building and its extraordinary combination of interconnecting shapes.

We lunched at the Asador Etxebarria and enjoyed a first taste of fabulous Basque cuisine, blending tradition with startling innovation. In the afternoon we took back to the saddle and rode along the impressive coastline. The landscape here reaches from the Atlantic coast, indented with natural harbours and fishing communities, to the hills and mountains majestically clothed with broad leaf forests. En route we passed through picturesque villages in dramatic settings such as Elantxobe, which is completely surrounded



### Facts about this Brown + Hudson journey

*Size of group:* Up to 16

*Lead time from initial enquiry:* 4-6 weeks

*Length of journey:* 8 days 7 nights

*Seasonality:* Best in May and September

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by high cliffs, and visited the town of Guernica, subject of the famous painting by Picasso. Later, we headed into the wine country of La Rioja to the Hotel Marques de Riscal. The hotel is a unique modern masterpiece, with metal sculptures twisting around the exterior, and is entirely surrounded by lush vineyards.

After another incredible dinner and a good night's sleep we visited one of Rioja's most historical family-run wineries. Joining one of the scions of the family, we learned how traditional methods are used in all facets of the wine-making process, and discovered the ancient techniques still used by the in-house cobblers and barrel makers. Of course there was ample opportunity to sample the family's finest vintages. Afterwards, we contrasted the old with the new at one of Spain's most modern and innovative wineries. A sommelier took us through the latest technology in wine production and gave us the opportunity to compare if modern science wins over tradition.

The group flew south to Seville, the captivating and intoxicating capital of Andalucia. It is the city of flamenco, bulls, Carmen and Don Juan; its history and culture give rise to pride in tradition, passion and joy. We were quickly seduced strolling through the enchanting barrios to find hidden plazas soaked in the scent of orange blossom, where the colours of the South reign supreme.

It's not only the home of those two bulwarks of Andalusian tradition, flamenco and bullfighting; its heritage of art and architecture is without rival in southern Spain. With its dedicated cycle lanes, a pleasant climate and generally flat topography, the best way to explore the city is by bike. We took this thought to heart, riding through the Triana market, the Plaza de San Francisco, the Jewish quarter, the old tobacco factory, the Plaza de España passing by key city monuments en route.

At night we discovered how flamenco encapsulates the fire, mystery and magic that swirls through the music of southern Spain. We enjoyed a private flamenco performance led by Andalusian gypsies and learned how it pervades local customs and culture.

At the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art we got first-hand insights into how the ancestral abilities of the Andalusian horse have been conserved, and how the traditions of Spanish baroque horsemanship are maintained. As a special treat we savoured an exquisite dressage performance by riders in traditional dress.

Later, we learned the truth behind the legend of the Spanish bull with a private escorted visit to one of Spain's most prestigious bull breeding farms. The bulls, owned by a Marquess, are considered among the finest in Spain. We talked with the estate manager about life in rural Andalucía as well as the history and traditions of raising fighting bulls. We enjoyed an exclusive viewing of the Marquess's private collection of memorabilia before a final night's feast to conclude the journey.