

Travel

Page

46

'I'd bet two nights here create more enduring memories than two weeks in the Maldives'

Susan d'Arcy on Claridge's new Côte d'Azur hotel



Sa Tuna

How the Costa Brava got cool

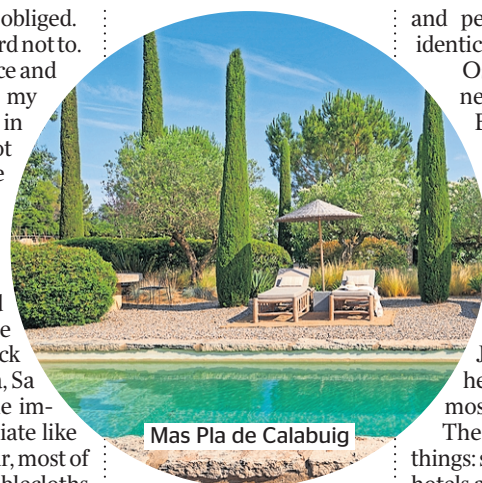
Stylish new hotels are helping to reinvent Spain's northern Med coast. Lifelong devotee **Amanda Hyde** shares her top picks

My first love? A hotel on the Costa Brava. I may have been only seven when my family checked in to Hotel Aigua Blava, but I fell hard. A splodge of whitewashed building shaped like a giant walnut, the hotel careered down to the sea from a curvy coastal road in an alchemical combo of sun-dappled paths, pine-scented air and wave-swish soundtrack.

I spent days in the hotel pool and nights dashing through the gardens with newly made friends. At the bar we signed Shirley Temples to our rooms and they came served like Manhattans, complete with paper doilies and fancy straws. I begged my parents to come back year after year

and, for a decade, they willingly obliged.

Everyone comes back — it's hard not to. I've visited a handful of times since and when I return this year with my mum, husband and our own kids in tow, I meet a woman who has not missed her annual fix over the past four decades. There's comfort in the way the hotel never changes — even some of the waiters remained, albeit with slightly bigger waistlines and slightly less hair. For a long time the area around the hotel was stuck in a time warp too: at Aigua Blava, Sa Tuna, Sa Riera and Tamariu, the impossibly beautiful coves that radiate like rays of sun from the town of Begur, most of the restaurants sported white tablecloths



Mas Pla de Calabuig

and peeling blue windows and served identical menus of squid, chips and paella.

Oscar Górriz, who set up the pioneering Hostal Sa Rascassa in one of Begur's tiniest bays, tells me: "When we arrived, my wife and I joked that other restaurants served up rustic, old-fashioned food and paid no attention at all to style or decoration — and still their businesses were booming. But in recent years there has been a bunch of new openings: fusion, Japanese, street food. The choice here is now really wide, better than in most coastal areas of Spain."

The change is down to a couple of things: sons and daughters inheriting staid hotels and restaurants — and, of course, ►

► Covid. “It feels very different now,” says Amanda Kendzior, an estate agent who has lived in the area for six years and runs the Instagram account @onthewildcoast. “There are so many international people, including families, who have moved here full-time since Covid.”

This cosmopolitan crowd expect more for their money so, beyond the wisteria walls of Hotel Aigua Blava, this wedge of the Costa Brava is becoming cool. And in places it feels positively Balearic. You can sense it in Sa Riera, once the poor relation to the upmarket bays to its south. Now, Palm Beach-style villas slink across the forested hillside and two Ibiza-esque

beach-shack restaurants squat on the shore. At the more casual one, La Gandula, staff mill around looking longingly at the sea (who can blame them?). But the one belonging to Hostal Ses Negres — a redone, sorbet-hued hotel along Sa Riera’s gleaming back streets — is a revelation. Seeking shade there one lunchtime, we gobble up ceviche and aubergine with sesame and sheep’s cheese from a menu devised by the Catalan celebrity chef Vicenç Fajardo, while straw lanterns swing above us Maldives-style.

Later we take the coastal path that veers left across the rocks towards the very edge of Begur and the wide sweep of Platja del

Need to know

Amanda Hyde travelled independently. Hotel Aigua Blava has B&B doubles from £104 (hotelaiguablava.com) and Hostal Ses Negres has room-only doubles from £58 (hostalsesnegres.com). Fly to Girona or Barcelona

Raco (it crosses a nudist beach with typical Catalan nonchalance, much to my kids’ amusement). Here, whispers of the resorts to the north announce themselves in banana-yellow apartment complexes, but there’s plenty of room on the shingly swathe for a few more chiringuitos. The best is hip Ultramar, where we’re given rum and Cokes huge enough to match the prolonged pastel dusk.

There’s no sunset on these east-facing beaches, though — for those (huge, tangerine explosions in lilac skies), you need to head inland to Begur town, where Alta House Hotel, one of a new breed of boutique hotels, has a rooftop bar with 360-degree views over the coast and countryside. The town has been fashionable before — in the 19th century it was the place to build a villa if you were a successful merchant returning from Cuba. The grand mansions that hide in its maze of shaded streets and cobbled squares have more than a hint of Havana about them, especially the opulent, baby-pink-and-raspberry façade of what’s now Hotel Aiguadara. Inside, however, an interior lovingly curated by ex-Barcelonians Joan and Clara feels surprisingly boho with raffia-framed mirrors, swinging hammocks and signs extolling peace and love.

Still, the town stubbornly displays as many signs of the old as the new: no-frills tapas bars fringe the main square, and the scruffy courtyard bars of my youth, C-Roack and La Lluna, are going strong a quarter of a century later. A ten-minute drive from town, the fishing village of Tamariu remains a carbon copy of my childhood memories — the mouth of its hazy bay hemmed by jagged white houses huddling like exceptionally pretty teeth.

The next village along, Llafranc, has seen a few more incarnations. Once the party town of choice for Ava Gardner (who came to film on the Costa Brava and fell in love with it too), it was popular with the bucket-and-spade brigade when I was little and now appears to have grown old — all manicured roundabouts and twitching curtains. Look closely, though, and you’ll find traces of another renaissance thanks to the Nomo Group, a posh sushi chain with branches in Barcelona and Madrid. It owns Jani, a radical reinterpretation of all those old beach restaurants, as well as Far Nomo, the place to be seen since 2015.

Inland too things are changing. Kendzior tells me about Grava in the neighbouring town of Pals, a casual courtyard restaurant set up with the area’s surging number of cyclists in mind (they’re everywhere, and we meet the hippest ones zipping along the pedestrian coastal paths accompanied by bandana-wearing dogs). In the sleepy inland village of Regencos, there’s another sure sign of hipsterfication: a street-food joint that does out much-lauded burgers and tacos. And, when we visit Esclanya, once a slightly ramshackle hamlet, we find converted apartments gleaming in spotless alleys, all clothed in artfully tended cloaks of bougainvillea, and, at the edge of town, the fairy-lit courtyard of just-opened Alfok, where we settle in for a lazy lunch of pulled-pork enchiladas, homemade nachos and fresh fish.

Back at the hotel my kids do everything I once did: play ping-pong with new friends; paddle in the coves; and sign for lollies by the pool (the Shirley Temples are one thing that’s gone with time). Despite the changes all around, Hotel Aigua Blava has no plans for radical modernisation. “We’re doing up a couple of rooms and we painted the outside in lockdown,” the receptionist tells me. At a place this perfect, anything more would seem like sacrilege. Just as long as you know there’s a new world waiting outside the gates...



Mas Pla de Calabuig

The best Costa Brava hotels

Hotel Vistabella, Roses

This is one of those geographically gifted hotels where the craze for drone photography comes into its own — to really show off the clifftop locale, its sunny balconies jutting out like the tiers of a wedding cake, then the sun-bleached wooden pontoons out to sea, and lastly the crystal-clear Med. No surprise, then, that sunset is a big draw here, luring guests and locals to the hotel’s five bars and restaurants, with the gourmet spot being Els Brancs (Roses town was the original home of El Bulli, so local food is serious business). **Details** B&B doubles from £132 (hotelvistabella.com)

El Delfin Verde, El Mas Pinell

Not all resort hotels have endless pools, family rooms and a water park (with a pirate ship), and happen to be three minutes’ walk from a long sandy beach. But that’s the Green Dolphin: a bells-and-whistles family-friendly hotel that offers a bit more than similar Costa Brava set-ups because of its location near upmarket Begur and the stunning coves (with swanky fish restaurants) along this stretch. Interiors aren’t as gaudy as you might expect of a hotel with water slides, either: low-key, bright and light with blond wood, pastel blues and white linens. **Details** B&B doubles from £100 (eldelfinverde.com)

Hostal Empuries, L’Escala

If this hotel were on the flashier Costa del Sol or Ibiza it would shout about its location on a “private beach”. Because, essentially, that’s what you have here: a preposterously pretty *hostal* — part whitewashed original, part modern and sleek in glass — on a sandy bay that hosts only the Empuries. It’s not a basic bolt hole, either; there’s a serious spa and two restaurants. It also offers yoga classes plus bike and boat hire. **Details** Room-only doubles from £73 (hostalempuries.com)

Alta House, Begur

Begur is one of the most characterful villages on the Costa Brava — if not *the* most: a medieval marvel of cobbles, churches and small plazas with excellent places to eat. If you have a car it’s a good base from which to explore the busier beach resorts, or it makes an excellent haven after a day’s hiking. Despite the hotel’s town location there are still sea views from its upper rooms, as well as the stylish outdoor pool and roof terrace. gorgeously decorated spaces have a beach-house feel: rattan chairs, tropical planting, bare-wood floors. **Details** B&B doubles from £73 (altahousehotel.com)

Hotel Montecarlo, Roses

The famed bay of Roses is a beauty: long, sandy, wide and in a perfect arc. But these magic ingredients have brought with them development and, while the bay’s edges are forest-fringed, the promenade is hotel-and-tapas-bar central. Hotel Montecarlo is one of the best, though: a modern build where

every room has a terrace and sea view, and the ground-floor spa, with its glass-fronted heated pool, gives great vistas whatever the weather (although be aware that the hotel closes for winter). **Details** Room-only doubles from £84 (hotelmontecarlo.net)

Hotel Playa Sol, Cadaques

Cadaques has the lot: a Dali connection that ensures a cultured crowd; a beautiful flower-filled town that has enough to attract visitors year-round, irrespective of the beach; and amazing hiking, particularly in the nearby Cap de Creus National Park. The only fly in the ointment is the pebbly beach, so pack your jelly shoes. Or check in to Hotel Playa Sol, which has its own private cove that is sandier than the one at Cadaques. This is your classic coastal getaway of whitewashed rooms, bright stripey furnishings and a lawn-hemmed pool. **Details** B&B doubles from £111 (playasol.com)

Hotel Cap Sa Sal, Aiguafreda

It’s adults only. It has a private beach, accessed by movie-set stone stairs from its cliffside location. And it’s in ravishing Aiguafreda, a crinkly coast of crystalline coves and umbrella pines. Honestly, if you don’t propose to your loved one here, you’re never going to do it. The hotel itself is the perfect setting, with an angular pool that juts out over the sea, and a hillside terrace restaurant just asking to be plastered across social



Mas de Torrent



Arkhe, Pals

translated English menu, which includes “slices of old cow”. **Details** Room-only doubles from £105 (hoteldelteatre.com)

Mas de Torrent, Torrent

This understated five-star is a great choice for family holidays. Fashionable enough to entice a stream of VIPs (including Shakira and Kylie), it’s set between fields 30 minutes’ drive from Begur. Expect pared-back luxury at its best: tiled floors and a palette of sand and smoke. The large, interconnecting garden suites are good for children and there’s a babysitting service — handy if you want to try the excellent spa or restaurant. **Details** B&B doubles from £230 (hotelmastorrent.com)

Hotel Villa Gala, Cadaques

Villa Gala isn’t right on the seafront, but in the village proper, not far from the Dali museum, and with rooms — each has a terrace or balcony — that give that like-a-local feel from the moment you open the shutters. With only 14 rooms it’s a wee thing, but there’s still a pool and a fabulous restaurant where octopus, cod and leek are served at terrace tables with spire views. **Details** B&B doubles from £193 (hotelvillagala.com)

Arkhe, Pals

The medieval village of Pals is like the smart, cobbled tourist towns of the south of France: all geranium-hemmed windows and posh pottery shops. Seven-roomed, adults-only Arkhe is slap bang in the middle — and it’s every bit as pretty as its surroundings. Rooms with lulling accents of cream and aqua sit under beamed ceilings, and an impressive vegan breakfast of smoothies, cakes and cereals makes even seeds seem enticing. **Details** B&B doubles from £95 (arkhehotelboutiquepals.com)

Mas Pla de Calabuig, Calabuig

This sprawling estate is designed by the Spanish interiors whizz Carme Pardo. Among gardens stippled with cypress trees, there’s a salt-water swimming pool alongside three two-bedroom houses and a studio. The layout makes it ideal for friends or extended family (escape them all in the outdoor shower, shaded by high bamboo). **Details** One night’s self-catering for 14 from £1,195 (maspladecalabuig.com)

More hotels next page



Glorious.

Save up to £400pp on a holiday to Lake Como and see it all for yourself



Terms & Conditions - The £400 per person saving refers to package holidays departing from 1st June - 31st July on a holiday based on 2 adults sharing. The offer applies to holidays booked on tui.co.uk and does not apply to flight only, any holidays where the flight is not a TUI Airways aircraft and accommodation only. Savings are from the latest edition of the relevant brochure. Additional supplements may apply.

44 Travel

Casa Vincke, Palamos

You haven't seen a wedding-cake façade until you've witnessed the grey-on-white tiers of this mansion near the beach in busy Palamos. It's run by the people behind the Costa Brava's slickest restaurants, Far Nomo and Jani, and inside it's every bit as polished as you'd expect — chandeliers drip from the ceilings; ornate marble adorns the floors and staircases; and there's a pool shaded by ancient trees in the walled garden. Big groups can book the whole place exclusively (there are nine bedrooms).

Details B&B doubles from £80 (hotelcasavincke.com)

Hotel Tuna, Sa Tuna

One of the best coves on the Costa for families, sleepy Sa Tuna is home to this tiny five-room establishment right on the shore. After a recent makeover rooms are decked out in crumpled white sheets, black-and-white prints and swaying raffia lamps; all come with splendid sea views. Catalan families book into the restaurant on Sundays for long lunches in the sun while there's paddling to be enjoyed on the beach.

Details B&B doubles from £110 (hostalsatuna.com)

Park Hotel San Jorge, Platja d'Aro

With old-school appeal and a regular roster of repeat guests, this one's a stroll from Platja d'Aro and is popular with a French crowd. Check in for shady



Calella de Palafrugell beach

cliffside gardens, a seaview swimming pool and direct access to two of the costa's cutest coves. Opt for one of the revamped Belladonna rooms because they have been given a welcome update with natty stripes and raffia.

Details B&B doubles from £50 (parkhotelsanjorge.com)

Mas Lazuli, Pau

The costa's old mansion conversions can be stuffy, but not this one with its white exterior bordered by palms and an enticing infinity pool overlooking countryside. Monochrome rooms sport Basquiat-style art, and a much-lauded restaurant terrace exudes Ibiza vibes thanks to overstuffed white sofas and

straw lanterns. With dishes including lobster, celery and summer truffle salad, the food is intricately excellent. The spa in the old wine cellar is the perfect place to escape the heat.

Details B&B doubles from £150 (hotelmaslazuli.es)

La Bionda, Begur

This diminutive boutique number is right in Begur's cheery centre. What it lacks in rooms (there are eight), it makes up for with design chutzpah. Every space has been curated to a tight colour palette, from the terracotta-and-white tiled bathroom floors to the russet-fringed umbrellas on the little roof terrace. Meanwhile, Carla the owner is

the antidote to traditionally cool Catalan service — everyone loves her.

Details B&B doubles from £125 (labiondabegur.com)

Alabriga, Sant Feliu de Guixols

Incongruous among the typically tiny two-star hotels of the Baix Emporda region, this newly opened behemoth resembles a cruise ship beached on the cliffs. But it's the one to go for if you like glitz as it does everything to excess — so no simple bedrooms, only sprawling suites. Butler service, a spa and a restaurant terrace add to the opulence.

Details B&B suites from £275 (hotelalabriga.com)

Can Liret, Palafrugell

Calella de Palafrugell is where most visitors to this popular area stay — a fishing village turned resort with a lovely beach, great views and a prime spot on the coastal path. But the accommodation here isn't top notch, so this converted townhouse in the nearby historic town of the same name is a brilliant option if you want atmosphere and Spanish accents after a day on the coast. There are just nine rooms (many with original vaulted ceilings, wooden beams and exposed rock walls), but the owners have still found room for a small sun terrace and plunge pool.

Details B&B doubles from £115 (canlirethotel.com)

Katie Bowman and Amanda Hyde

The magic is yours at Walt Disney World Resort

Get up to \$1200 Disney Dining and Merchandise Credit per room, 14 Disney Park days for the price of 7 and \$200 Disney Spending Money with selected 2023 holidays.*

TUI
Live Happy



*A Disney dining and merchandise card will be included for Disney Resort Hotel bookings made between 26th May 2022 to 29th September 2022 inclusive for arrivals from 1st January 2023 to 25th March 2023 and 17th April 2023 to 17th December 2023, room type and Resort exclusions apply. \$200 Disney gift card is included for selected Disney Resort hotel bookings with a minimum stay of 5 nights made between 26th May 2022 to 27th July 2022 inclusive for stays from 1st January 2023 to 25th March 2023, 17th April 2023 to 17th December 2023 to satisfy the below criteria. To qualify for this dining and merchandise card offer and \$200 giftcard, a Disney Resort Hotel and a Disney Magic ticket must be purchased at the time of booking. Disney's 14-Day Magic Ticket for the price of a Disney's 7-Day Magic Ticket is available for Disney Resort hotel bookings, for eight nights or more made from 26th May 2022 to 29th September 2022 inclusive for arrivals from 1st January 2023 to 25th March 2023, 17th April 2023 to 17th December 2023. The Disney Magic Ticket must be purchased at the time of booking. Valid on new bookings only. All the flights and flight-inclusive holidays on this website are financially protected by the ATOL scheme. When you pay you will be supplied with an ATOL Certificate. Please ask for it and check to ensure that everything you booked (flights, hotels and other services) is listed on it. Please see our booking conditions for further information or for more information about financial protection and the ATOL Certificate go to: www.caa.co.uk. TUI is a trading name of TUI UK Limited, a member of TUI Group. Registered Office: Wigmore House, Wigmore Lane, Luton, LU2 9TN. Registered in England No: 2830117. ATOL No: 2524. ABTA No: V5126.