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Wanderlust

Bonbon Barcelona

Hot On The Trail in the City of Chocolate



It was hard to focus on what Esther, our docent was saying, with the exhilarating fragrance of cocoa demanding my complete and undivided attention. I couldn't help but greedily breathe in. Then a tray of freshly made bonbons was brought out; the rich dark sprinkles looked heavenly. The group politely waited for her to finish talking but secretly, everyone already knew

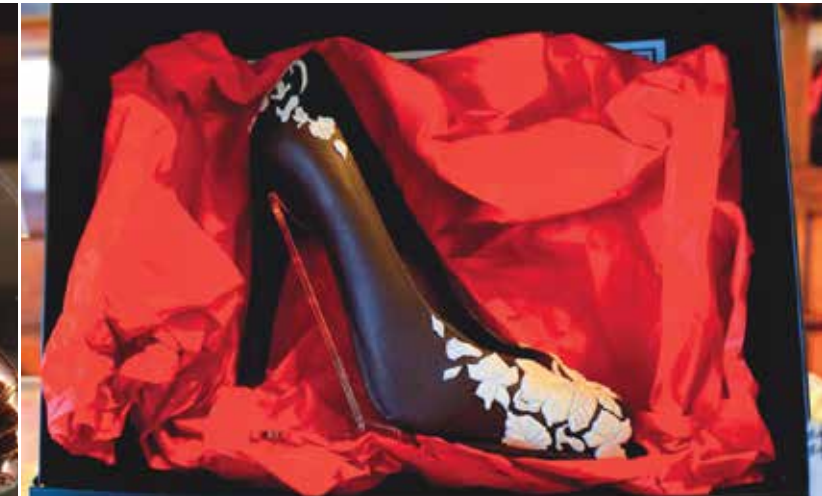
which bonbon they wanted to try first.

No, we weren't a bunch of five-year-olds on a school trip to a candy store. But we were standing in Barcelona's oldest chocolate shop, Fargas, our first stop on the City of Chocolate tour with Context Travel. Considering that Fargas has been whipping up some of the finest chocolate in Barcelona since 1827, it wasn't surprising

that we were under some kind of chocolate spell.

How come I'd never heard of Spanish chocolate?

That's the question I found myself asking over and over as Esther led our group of ten on a chocolate journey through the different neighborhoods of Barcelona, from the narrow lanes of the Gothic Quarter to the



swanky Passeig de Gràcia studded with the jewels of Modernist architecture. But the Spanish secrecy about chocolate isn't new; in fact, it's deeply rooted in history.

It was Columbus, she explained as we stood surrounded by crumbling façades somewhere in Barri Gòtic, who first brought chocolate to Spain in 1493. But when he presented the unprocessed cacao beans to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, he had no idea what they really were (or their magnifico potential). According to historians, it was conquistador Hernán Cortés who, after having tasted a chocolate drink as the guest of an Aztec emperor, brought it back to Spain in 1529. He added sugar to the drink and put into place events that would eventually make the drink popular with Spanish aristocracy and nobility for the next 100 years or more, even as they kept it a secret from the rest of Europe.

Well, I sure was glad the cat found its way out of the bag as we entered Granja La Pallaresa, on a narrow street in the Gothic



If you like your chocolate cold, order a Cacaolat, a chilled flavorsome and light chocolate drink that is very refreshing on a hot summer afternoon.

Quarter. A granja is a café that serves chocolate and pastries, and is typically visited mid-morning for breakfast or for mereinda (afternoon tea). The popularity of granjas with locals who like to unwind after a long day with hot chocolate and conversation means that granjas can be busy, noisy and wonderfully authentic. Here, we watched as cups of Suisse Hot Chocolate were placed before us. Topped with dreamy cloud-like swirls of cream reminiscent of the Swiss Alps, the Suisse is aptly named. "And what you should do," Esther said as we watched, "is dip the melindros in the drink like this," dunking the warm pastry into the chocolate through the cream before taking a bite. Following her example, I had to admit, the Spanish had really got afternoon tea right!

Our fourth stop on the chocolate trail was Escrivá, Barcelona's third oldest chocolatier on the busy La Rambla, open for business since 1906. We stood outside for a few minutes admiring the gorgeous Modernist façade of beautiful mosaics. Inside the café, it was obvious that the chocolate in Escrivá wasn't just a sweet indulgence; it was art sculpted into elaborate sculptures, shapes and objects proudly gracing the window and store displays. "Oh look!" a woman pointed out to a shoe that would have been right at home in a Louboutin store had it not been made of chocolate. On the wall, hung a photograph of an exquisite Louis Vuitton case made of chocolate.

A tray of bright red chocolate lips was brought out and Esther suggested taking

photos of us with the lips pursed between our own. There was a lot of pointing and giggling, mine melted fast and were gone before I could get a half decent picture but I didn't mind because they were delicious.

Then we were out again on the crowded La Rambla, hurrying behind Esther as she wove through crowds of tourists. "Keep your bags close," she warned as we followed her into the metro station. Barcelona is known for its crafty pickpockets, who often work in pairs, with one person diverting your attention with a random question, a bill on the floor or simply by holding your gaze, while the other one makes his way through your purse and takes your cash.

After a ten-minute ride, we arrived at the modern Cacao Sampaka store on Passeig De Gràcia, the same street is home to the Modernist Gaudi masterpieces of Casa Batlló and La Pedrera. Our tasting platter consisted of chocolates with sea salt, wasabi, lime, parmesan, and olive oil, each one a pleasantly surprising first for me.

Having learnt the art of chocolate tasting, "you must break it and hear it snap to know it's good quality," we'd been told, and armed with gift bags for loved ones, we said our goodbyes outside Casa Amatller.

A palatial residence that once housed traveler, photographer, collector and talented chocolatier Antoni Amatller, there couldn't have been a better place to end our sinfully sweet exploration of Barcelona.

