



# Christmas time in Barcelona through the glance of a tourist

Written by **Vicenç Relats i Casas**, journalist

## **Santa Llúcia's Fair, since 1786**



Picture 1

If a tourist wanders around in Barcelona during the Christmas festivities he can find, if he is in the celebrating mood, the more genuine Barcelona atmosphere around the Cathedral Avenue, and some neighboring streets, at the famous **Santa Llúcia's Fair**. Away, far away, from the many commercial “Santas” all dressed in red and with a long white beard, located mostly at the entrance of department stores and heavily trafficked commercial streets. The very old air of **Santa**

**Llúcia** fair – dates back to 1786 – and there you will find all the necessary items related to Catalan traditions and the other more typically traditional ones since a month before Christmas.

**Santa Llúcia** (Saint Lucy) is the female patron saint for eyesight and has originated many popular expressions like “Wish that Santa Llúcia keeps your eyesight”. This is the reason why many professions, like dressmakers, electricians, drivers, knife sharpeners, graphic designers or writers have chosen her as their patron.

**Santa Llúcia's Day** is December 13th but the Christmas market begins quite in advance: on November 25th, Saint Catherine's Day. Talking about Saint Catherine, there is an old popular saying which states: “From Saint Catherine until Christmas, is a quite important month of the year”. And indeed it's a very important month to gather

and prepare all the necessary items to make the traditional cribs, the moss, the sand, the cave where the Infant Jesus was born and all the terracotta figurines, ( or plastic ones ), which bring the crib to life, like shepherds, little houses, farm animals, “**caganers**”, and so on. And more, many more things are displayed and can be bought at the **Santa Llúcia’s** fair. Walking around and listening to Christmas carols and other Christmas songs, the passers-by will also find all kinds of decoration for their home, such as Christmas trees, lights, candels, mistletoes - which bring good luck – as well as eucaliptus and branches of holly-tree and knee-holly, and all sort of hand-made objects which could be an excellent gift for Christmas.

The visitor might also find “Tions” or “Tions de Nadal”, which are popular elements of Catalan mythology related to fertility and the winter solstice. It consists of a piece of a



Picture 2

log or a thick branch which should be bought days before Christmas, usually at the beginning of Advent and, thereafter, brought home. It is placed on a corner with a blanket on top so as not to freeze and it is fed until it defecates, usually Christmas Day or Christmas Eve. The children, after singing Christmas carols gathered around the crib, hit the log with a stick asking it to defecate. Then, under the blanket appear “Turróns” (a sort of sweet made of nougat or almond paste ), “Neules” (sweet made with flour, sugar, essence and with a cylindrical shape), “llaminadures” ( delicacies ) and all kind of gifts.

## Christmas Market in the holy Family Park

It is a fair, similar to the one of **Santa Llúcia**, but of smaller dimensions. It is held on the same dates (starting November 25th ) in another emblematic place of the city. We are talking about “**Fira de Nadal de la Sagrada Família**”, in the Eixample district, which takes place in the park in front of the Holy Family Basilica, the magnificent church created by the genius Modernist architect, Antoni Gaudí. Apart all of the items related to the crib and the Christmas atmosphere, other Christmas celebrations take place. These are workshops to make small lanterns to greet the three Kings, donations, pick-up of letters to the three Kings, and all sorts of Christmas shows for the little ones.

## Pessebres i Caganers (Cribs and “Caganers”)



Picture 3

The representation of the Infant Jesus’ birth in the crib and the worshipping of the shepherds and the three Kings is a tradition which is deeply rooted in Catalan homes. It is also present in shop-windows all around the city, in churches and some public spaces. Amongst all of them , one stands out in a rather special manner - with modern features - which takes place every

single year at Sant Jaume's Square, headquarters of the top government Institutions of Barcelona and Catalonia.

A quite peculiar and scatological figurine of the Catalan crib is the “**caganer**”. He is, in fact, a shepherd who is defecating and who is usually placed a bit hidden from the principal Christmas ornaments. Originally the “caganer” symbolized the earth he had fertilized with the food he had previously eaten.

The visitor who would like to find something amusing and astonishing to bring home, at the **Santa Llúcia's Fair** will surely find a “**caganer**” to suit every taste, even with the face of worldwide famous people like the President of United States of America and Russia, Obama and Putin, among others, and even very well known football players like Lionel Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo. It goes without saying that these “Caganers” so media hype and ironical are not conceived at all to be regular shepherds in the crib but to be exhibited for fun as decorative figurines put in any bookshelf of the home when Christmas is over.



Picture 4

Christmas cribs are a tradition so deeply rooted in Catalonia that some of them are exhibited a month before Christmas and even a month later, like the one in the parish church of **Nostra Senyora de Betlem** – at a short distance from the **Rambles** – or the one at the Pedralbes cloister. Exhibitions can also be seen in a Dioramas exposition at Carrer Lladó, 11.

## **Shepherds, Christmas Popular Theatre**

A very typical stage play during Christmas in Catalonia is “**Els Pastorets**” ( little shepherds ). It comes from popular dramaturgy which combines the whole story of Christmas and the fight between Good and Bad, between angels and devils. Popular piety is mixed up with a bit of comedy on the shepherds way to Bethlehem. It amuses and sometimes scares the little ones. It's a play which became popular at the end of the 17th century though its origins date back from Medieval religious dramas. “**Els Pastorets**” or “**The Advent of Infant Jesus**”, written by Josep Maria Folch i Torres (1916 ) is the most popular version and has attracted tenths of thousands of popular actors to perform it. For the most part, actors come from amateur theatres and the play is performed in parish churches, social centers or theatres. In Barcelona one can find these plays run between Christmas and the three Kings (the equivalent of the traditional Santa Claus ) in places like “Teatre dels Lluïsos d'Horta or “Foment Hortenc”, at the “Centre Parroquial de Sant Vicenç de Sarrià, or even in a most sophisticated way like the musical “Pastorets Superestel” every year at the “Teatre Regina”.

## **La Misa del Gall I el Cant de la Sibilla (Midnight Mass and Sibyl's Song)**

Apart from religious ceremonies concentrated in the “**Missa del Gall**” (Midnight Mass) which takes place at midnight on December 24th in all the city parish churches or in the early morning of Christmas Day. But a unique musical and liturgical celebration on Christmas Eve is the “**Cant de la Sibilla**” ( Sibyl's Song ). It comes from a drama in Gregorian Chant originally from the Middle Ages and announces the end of the world and also proclaims the Last Judgment, with the Messiah presiding. Our Lord who also comes to human life in the Holy Christmas night. The Sibyl's Song is very well known in the churches of Mallorca and Barcelona and can be listened to after the Midnight Mass, in the Cathedral or also in the magnificent Gothic Basilica of “**Santa Maria del Mar**” ( Our Lady of the Sea ), in the Born district and in Bonanova's Church, as well as in all of Bonanova district.

## **Holy Innocents' Day , December 28<sup>th</sup>**

Another quite funny tradition in Barcelona which the tourist snooping around might fall into, during Christmas time, are the “Inocentadas” (practical jokes ) and all sort of jokes which take place all over – sometimes even in newspapers, by publishing fake news - is the “Holy Innocents' Day”, which is on December 28th. On this special day it is a custom to pull somebody's leg with fake news or stories. This a tradition which can give way to a lot of confusion. Infact in former times, it was a tradition to hang a “llufa”, human silhouette cut from a page of a newspaper, on the back of a friend or just a passer-by which meant that the poor soul had been hoaxed. The little puppet can be seen, with some luck, hanging on somebody's back. Even though it takes place only on the 28th but it's certainly worth waiting for.



Picture 5

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Our Lady of the Sea ), in the Born district and in Bonanova’s Church, as well as in all of Bonanova district.

## Escudella i carn d’olla, torrons i neules



Picture 6

The typical dish for Christmas lunch is “**L’escudella i carn d’olla**” (vegetables and meat stew) a winter dish which merges a main course – a soup with special small pasta – with a second course – composed of vegetables ( potatoes, chick-peas, celery, carrots... ) and the meat ( porc sausages, chunks of chicken, beef and “pilota” ( small balls of forcemeat with eggs and spice ).

With all these ingredients one makes the stew broth. It’s “the” Christmas dish, no question about it, even if one can also find it in the menu of some local and traditional restaurants in Barcelona during winter. Nowadays this tasty dish is also combined with excellent meat or fish , and always with “Cava” ( Catalan sparkling wine ) as a drink and “Torrans” and “Neules” for dessert. These two different kinds of pastries cannot be forgotten in a Catalan table during Christmas festivities. The day after Christmas, December 26th, “Sant Esteve” is also a holiday in Catalonia and the gastronomic feast goes on with a second Christmas lunch which traditionally consists on a main course “ Canelons” ( cannelloni ) , tubular pieces of pasta filled with meat ) and on top the “Beixamel” ( white sauce made with flour, milk and butter ) . The pastries “**Neules**” and ”**Torrans**” keep on being served during Christmas and all celebrations until New Year’s Eve and the three Kings.



Picture 7

## Campanades de Cap d’Any (New Year’s Eve Strokes)

In order to say farewell to the year which is fading away and to welcome the new one, the typical twelve bell strokes on December 31st, celebrated all around the world, in Barcelona it’s celebrated with friends and family in parties but also outdoors or in big places. Tradition says a

person is to eat one grain of grapes for each bell stroke until all 12 grains are eaten and the year is officially over. As part of recent tradition young people concentrate in the centrally located “Plaça de Catalunya” where music and dance combine to form a very special farewell.

By the way, on the last day of the year in Barcelona one can also see the “**Home dels Nassos**” ( Man of Noses) walking around. He is a visionary character belonging to the Catalan tradition, who has to have as



Picture 8

many noses as days of the year. He is still a fascinating character who makes children happy as they endeavor to discover him somewhere around the city...

## Els Reis d'Orient, La Festa Màgica (The Three Kings from the East) a magic Day



Picture 9

When Christmas festivities are over, “**La Diada dels Reis**”, January 6th, brings all kind of presents to the little ones and to the not so little... It commemorates the worship of the three Kings to the Infant of Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. On the three King’s Eve Barcelona has a captivating atmosphere for visitors who profess other religious beliefs. In the afternoon of January 5th, the streets of the centre of Barcelona will be full of families with children holding small lanterns and waiting for the “**Cavalcada dels Reis**” (Kings’ Cavalcade). The children are aware that on this night “the three Kings” will bring presents to their homes. The three Kings traditionally arrive at the port of Barcelona by ship and soon after set off on a cavalcade full of fantasy, candy throwing, hand waving and joy through the streets of the city. A lot of boys and girls will strive with hope to give their letters to their Majesties with their requests and wishes. All this is managed through the precious assistance of the many pages who escort the Kings. Even though Page Gregory, an efficient assistant of their Majesties, has already collected the children’s letters full of hope and tenderness.

But in order that nobody – specially children – remain without gifts, on the Eve, January 5th, stores and commercial centers work until very late to give the opportunity to help those looking for presents with all kind of toys and other presents. From December 20th until the eve of the three Kings, the sides of Gran Via avenue – between Muntaner and Calàbria streets – are filled with stands full of toys, jewellery and handcraft, among other objects. Barcelona celebrates its very popular “**Fira dels Reis**”, Kings fair.

To make festivities sweeter days before the arrival of the three Kings, one can already find in all the pastry-shops the typical desserts made for this wonderful day: The “**Tortell de Reis**” or “**Coca de Reis**”. It is a ring-shaped pastry, more or less round or egg-shaped, made of “pasta de briox” filled with marzipan and decorated with candied fruits (cherries, oranges...) and dried fruit (like pine-nuts or cut almond). The “**Tortell**” has two surprises inside: one nice and little figurine of a King in ceramics and a bean. The one who finds the King’s figurine will receive a golden paper crown as a prize, which will crown



Picture 10

his head the whole time that “Tortell de Reis” is being eaten on that day. On the other hand, the one who unexpectedly finds the ring-shaped faba bean will be extended

the courtesy of paying for the whole “Tortell de Reis”. Don’t miss this occasion and the “Tortell”: you’ll lick your fingers clean.

#### Descriptions:

Picture 1 : Cathedral Avenue and Santa Llúcia’s Fair

Picture 2 : “Tions de Nadal”

Picture 3 : Nativity figures

Picture 4 : Traditional Christmas lighting

Picture 5 : Passeig de Gracia and Casa Milà

Picture 6 : Dish: “Escudella I carn d’olla”

Picture 7 : “Torrans and neules”

Picture 8 : Cava

Picture 9 : ” Els Reis d’Orient”

Picture 10 : Passeig de Gràcia Street



# Winter festivities in Barcelona through the eyes of a tourist

**From *Tres Tombs* (the three laps) to Carnival, including *Santa Eulàlia*, the winter festival**

by Vicenç Relats, journalist

***Sant Antoni Abat*, a parade for animals and carriages**

**(17th January)**



In a modern and cosmopolitan capital such as Barcelona, the tourist visiting the city during winter will experience festive and traditional events deeply rooted, with carriages and horses, that will amaze him. So then, in mid-January, the tourist has the opportunity to live a local fiesta full of ancient and rural memories, which becomes totally urban when appearing in the Catalan capital. It consisted of



the *Tres Tombs* feast, right after Christmas holidays, on 17th January, Saint Anthony's Day. He is the patron saint of the wagoners –the shippers before the trains and motor vehicles– and the protector of the domestic animals and the beasts of burden.

Closely related to Carnival, the *Tres Tombs* feast is held –at least since 1826– in *Sant Antoni* neighbourhood, the heart of *Eixample* district.



In homage to muleteers, wagoners and peasant farmers, the horse parade is performed by ancient carriages animal drawn and several riders. It always appears the *Unitat Muntada de la Guàrdia Urbana* (Horse Guards of the local police) and riders who escort *Sant Antoni* and *Santa Eulàlia* flags, the co-patron saint of the city. But, overall, there are amazing carriages such as a firefighter truck driven by horses, the *Imperial* carriage of the funeral services, a delivery carriage for wineskins, one for the rice growers and some other historical ones from Barcelona and other Catalan cities.

Lots of citizens –and lots of kids- congregate together in front of the church to bless their domestic animals. The parade finishes in *Plaça Sant Jaume*, when the local authorities welcome the entourage.

### ***Santa Eulàlia* festival, co-patron saint of Barcelona**

**(12th February)**



Barcelona experiences a celebration that highlights the deeply rooted cultural elements and the Catalan tradition about 12th February, *Santa Eulàlia's* Day –also known as *Laià*-, patron saint of the city, together with the Virgin of *Mercè*. *Gegants* (huge painted papier-maché figures), *passacaglias*, *castells* (human towers) and *correfocs* (fire runs) are the main figures in the city winter festival. *Plaça Sant Jaume* and the alleys in the Gothic area are part of the central scene of a bunch of festive events



organised for the previous or the following weekend of 12th February, depending on the day of the week *Santa Eulàlia* patron saint Day falls.

*Eulàlia* was a brave girl in the fourth-century *Barcino* (the Roman Barcelona), martyred until dead at the age of 13 by the Roman authorities. *Santa Eulàlia* and its festivity both have been borne in mind for the inhabitants of Barcelona for centuries and the *Santa Eulàlia* flag or *Penó* (banner) is a dearly



beloved symbol all over the country. The reason is that holding this flag, Rafael Casanova, the person in charge of *Generalitat de Catalunya* (Government of Catalonia), was the defender of the city that fateful 11th September 1714 when Barcelona –and also Catalonia- fell under the dominion of the Spanish bourbon troops. In the middle of the banner it appears *Eulàlia* flanked by the four red bars and St. George’s Cross, the ensign and the patron saint of the Catalan nation.

### **Sardanes and concerts**

The typical dance par excellence in Catalonia, the *sardana*, danced in human circles with people joining their hands together, it is also shown in the festivities. In *Santa Eulàlia’s* Day, at half past seven, in *Plaça Sant Jaume*, the *Cobla Ciutat de Barcelona* performs the dance. (The *cobla* is a small music band playing wind instruments to play *sardanes*, with a *tenora* –a kind of oboe- and the *tambori* – small drum-). The dance finishes when arriving the *Processó de les Laies* (the patron saint parade).



Moreover and closely related to traditional music, the *Cobla Ciutat de Barcelona* plays also a concert on Friday night, usually inside the Cathedral and it allows the tourist to kill two birds with one stone: a visit to the monument and a concert. On the other hand and having a totally different musical style, it is also possible to enjoy the quality of the Municipal Band of Barcelona in the concert usually performed in *Plaça Sant Jaume*, on Saturday lunchtime.

### **The Eagle of the city, gegants (giants) and castellers (human tower builders)**



The performance –on Friday evening- of *Ball de l’Àliga* (*Dance of the Eagle*) is one of the nicest and majestic moments in this festival. Together with the giants, it is the great exponent of the traditional and festive imagery of Barcelona. The dance is solemnly performed with medieval music, played by a band of *ministrers* (the instrumentalists at the service of a troubadour), in a unique setting: the Basilica of *Santa Maria del Mar*. The Eagle is accompanied by a replica of the *Penó de Santa Eulàlia* and escorted by the Lion of Barcelona –another figure in the popular imagery- and *Santa Maria del Mar* Giants.



Last day of the festival is shown as a continuous string of events. During the meeting of giants, from ten o’clock, is held the Entourage of *Santa Eulàlia*. At *Plaça Reial* there is a gathering of all the giants involved; the parade begins at eleven and it goes from Rambla until *Plaça Sant Jaume*. Once the parade is finished, at about one o’clock, it begins (in this symbolic square) one of the main events of the festival: the *Diada Castellera* (a human tower meeting).

## **Correfocs (fire runs) as a final event**



In the evening, the festival finishes with two *correfocs*, where the *colles de diables* (groups of devils) of Ciutat Vella and the children groups are involved. Finally, the great roar of the firecrackers together with the spectacular colourfulness of the fire –to be careful is highly recommended as well as using protective clothing- lights the end of *Santa Eulàlia* festivity.

## **The Carnival, a very crowded week of debauchery**



The Carnival is a collective debauchery celebration linked with the lunar worship and it is defended as a precedent for all kinds of excesses in front of the forty days of penance imposed by the Christian Lent. That is why Ash Wednesday is the first day of the Lent and the last day of the Carnival, the Burial of the Sardine. On the other hand, the previous Thursday, known as Fat Thursday, is the traditional beginning of the Carnival week, a day to celebrate at home eating *botifarra d'ou* (type of sausage containing egg in the mixture) and *coca de llardons* (a dough bearing bacon), highly recommended if not tasted before. It means that,

depending on the lunar calendar and the Lent, the Carnival begins between 29th January and 4th March.

The first documents about Carnival date from 1333, as in other parts of Europe, in the heart of the Middle Ages. In those days, the Carnival began the Day of the Dead and it lengthened until, at least, Ash Wednesday. It is a festive period of time with lots of variations throughout the history based on social customs and depending on the political regime of the era, so that, it was prohibited by Franco's fascist dictatorship (1937-1977), less than thirty-five years ago.

The week celebrating the Carnival, the visitor staying in Barcelona will see lots of parades all over the city throughout the neighbourhoods, especially on Saturday evening. The main parade in the city is held on Saturday evening, changing districts every year, and all kinds of krewes and carriages from all over the city are involved, including the King of the Carnival and his entourage. Every year, a jury and the popular vote award the best krewes.

## Festival of sweets during *Sant Medir* Festival in the districts of *Gràcia* and *Sants*

(3rd March)



*Sant Medir* Festival, on 3rd March, is a popular celebration deeply rooted in the districts of *Gràcia* and *Bordeta* (in *Sants* district), and recalls the pilgrimage done by the *colles* (groups of residents) using carriages and horses many years ago up to the hermitage in honour of *Sant Medir*, located in the adjacent town of Sant Cugat del Vallès, based on legendary histories.

Located in the old village of *Gràcia*, this is a well-known festival due to the huge amount of sweets thrown to the participants from the horse carriages. The district of *Gràcia* is awakening by the sound of a bang, the *gralles* (traditional double reed instruments), the pilgrims, the horses and the special sound of sweets. The *colles* of *Sant Medir* go around the streets in memory of the first pilgrimage done, according to legend two centuries ago, by a baker from Sant Cugat del Vallès, who lived in Gran de Gràcia street. Until midday, the *colles* hand out sweets among the participants. Later, it begins the pilgrimage of the representative of the *colles* up to the patron saint hermitage; in the evening, Gran de Gràcia Street welcomes the symbolic return of the *colles*, represented by another spectacular shower of sweets.



## Spring Festivities in Barcelona through the eyes of a tourist

**The journey starts with the creme of Saint Joseph then it's time to Monas in Easter (special cake with a chocolate egg on top) all the way to books and roses on Saint George, the patron saint of lovers and ends up with Sant Ponç' fair ( Saint Poncius ).**

by Vicenç Relats, journalist

### **ON SAINT JOSEPH, MARCH 19TH, THE CATALAN CREAM**



During spring time Barcelona blooms with flowers, and green announcing Spring's arrival and combines that season with sweet traditions which begin on March 19th, Saint Joseph's Day, two days prior to the Spring calendar celebrations. Saint Joseph is the day on which to taste the Saint Joseph's cream also called Catalan cream or burned cream. This is undoubtedly

one of the most well known dishes of Catalan gastronomy.

It's actually quite an easy dessert to prepare at home. One eats it cold and all year round. You can find it in restaurants as a quite common dessert. It consists of a cream made with milk, sugar and egg's yolk. On top of these ingredients one can add spices and ingredients like cinnamon and lemon's peel. Quite often, Catalan cream is finished with a layer of burned sugar, burned just before is to be eaten, with a special kitchen hot iron.

Its roots go back to Catalan Medieval times and it is considered one of the oldest desserts in Europe. A tourist visiting Barcelona can't miss out on Catalan cream during Saint Joseph or in any other time for that matter with burned sugar or without it.

## **EASTER WEEK, WITH LENT'S WAFFLES AND CHOCOLATE EASTER EGGS**

This gastronomical explosion, sweet and merry, goes on through Lent's period with the **Bunyols de Quaresma** (Lent's waffles) – spongy and round shaped – and has its peak with the chocolate Easter eggs, eaten on Easter Sunday and also during Easter Monday because in Catalonia it's a holiday as well. **Bunyols** (waffles) are usually found in pastry shops every Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent. They are made with well stirred flour paste, then fried and with a lot of sugar on top and it's eaten for dessert or afternoon snack. Eat cautiously not to over do it, because otherwise you will encounter great difficulties in moving on to something else!



Easter week celebrations take place in different times during the year – March or April – depending on the dates in which Christian tradition celebrates the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. Holy Friday and Easter Monday are considered holidays in Barcelona which means that a lot of families leave the city and therefore Barcelona assumes a more calm and peaceful status. Nowadays Barcelona is not

specially well-known for big processions during Holy Friday, unlike some other Catalan cities, as a consequence of the II Vatican Council. Nevertheless there is one tradition imported from Andalusia (there are many Andalusians among Catalan population). The former is known as **Jesus of Nazareth's**

**Procession** and another one is called **Our Lady of the Sorrow's Procession**, just two samples of the typical Andalusian piety. Since the year 2002, on Palm Sunday, previous Sunday, in the Barcelona's old district there is a procession in which Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey. It's known as the **the Little Donkey Procession** or **La**

**Borriqueta Procession** ( the female little donkey ). It was also imported from Andalusian from people devoted to Our Lady of Macarena in Sevilla. The procession starts inside the Saint Agustin Church, located in the Raval district, and continues along the streets in the Gothic quarter returning back to the Saint Agustin Church where it takes place palms blessing.



Tradition of palms blessing ,and other green branches, like olive and laurel blessing , is well spread in the whole city. During Palm Sunday it's customary to see a lot of children with their families ,parents, grandparents and godfathers , go and have their palms blessed , specially in the Cathedral. It's also very common to see ,during the morning of the same day , people dance "Sardanes" ( typical Catalan dance ) around the Cathedral area.

Celebrations of Easter in Catalonia have a long tradition of pastries, the most famous is referred to one with a rather extravagant name : **Mona**. It consists of a pastry with a big chocolate egg in the center and the additional peculiarity that, as part of traditional



Easter Monday, all the children receive it from their godfathers or godmothers .

The **Mona** is very strongly rooted in Barcelona's Easter tradition and it appears in every single house. It is brought to children from christening godfathers or from any person fond of dainties. No doubt about it that Easter **Mona** is the pastry to which pastry-chefs dedicate their biggest

effort and pampering abilities to this wonderful pastry. The base of **Mona** is a spongy cake made with butter and almonds which displays an egg on top. Creativity from pastry-chefs has transformed that pastry in a different and sophisticated work of art. Yet, the one children like most is the **Mona** decorated with images of TV and movie characters. Fifty days after Easter, Barcelona celebrates its second Easter holiday known as Granada Easter ( or Whitsuntide) . That follow Monday, is also a holiday in Barcelona.

## **APRIL 23RD, SAINT GEORGE, BOOKS AND ROSES EVERYWHERE**



If a visitor comes or is in Barcelona on April 23rd, He or she will have a big surprise. The day of Saint George, patron saint of Catalonia, is a very special festivity in Catalonia. Streets and squares are adorned with culture and civicism like no other day and the main decoration are roses and books. Remember that Saint George is also the patron saint of lovers. In fact, that day is more celebrated than Valentine's Day. Tradition suggests that couples exchange a present, a book for him and a rose for her. Since April 23rd it's also a day dedicated to culture. Catalonia celebrates the Catalan language, a Roman language with more than a thousand years of history. Catalan, as a matter of fact, was banned by Spanish authorities during long periods of history but in the past decades has undergone an unprecedented social growth. On Saint George visitors will find all over the street stalls offering books and roses bound by the national Catalan flag as well as lots of people looking for books and roses in the main streets of Barcelona. The main activities take place in the famous "Rambles".



On Saint George it is also customary to have open doors day at the **Generalitat** Palace, a Medioeval building with some examples of Gothic and Renaissance styles. **Generalitat** houses the Catalan Autonomous Government. Therefore, the day of the Saint of Catalonia ( a working day although considered a festivity ) is a wonderful occasion to explore this palace located in Sant Jaume's Square, in front of the City Hall in which it is held a big exhibition with all variety of roses.

### **SAINT PONÇ, MAY 11TH, HEALING HERBS' FAIR**



Like many other places in Catalonia, Barcelona celebrates on May 11th an event quite peculiar in honour of Sant Ponç ( Saint Poncius ) patron saint of the herbalist shops and of beekeepers. In there healing herbs and all kind of natural products with therapeutics effects are the main attraction. The fair, takes place at Hospital street in Barcelona and is one of the most representatives among these specialities.





In Sant Ponç, in the same Hospital street, the entire day blooms with more than 200 stalls full of brilliant colours and smells where vendors and merchants from all over Catalonia meet. One can buy healing and aromatics herbs ( camomile, wild marjoram, vervain, mint, orange blossom, laurel,

broom, linden-flowers, rosemary and marjoram ) and also flowers and products directly coming from the countryside like honey, dried fruits, grape syrup, cheeses, traditional pastries and preserves.

Legend tells that escaping from his persecutors, Saint Ponç arrived in Barcelona and upon seeing so much misery and sickness, he started preparing draughts and healing herbs which he knew well. He wanted, to relieve the suffering of Barcelonese people. By doing so, he obtained the respect and admiration of local people whom, from then on, started to celebrate a healing herb fair to honour him.



The **Sant Ponç's Fair** located in Hospital street is not the only one held in Barcelona. Other districts have joined that tradition in the last years like the one in Sarrià-Sant Gervasi district ( Mañé Square and Flaquer and Sarrià Square ) and the one in Sants-Montjuïc district, where, in addition to streets stalls, bakery-shops of the area also display typical pastries and sweets of the saint festivity. This fair is also held in the street of Blai, in Poble Sec district, and in Via Júlia, in Nou Barris district, where many shop owners set up a stall in the streets.

## CORPUS, LOOK AT THE DANCING EGG !



During many centuries Corpus – the religious festivity of Corpus Christi which celebrates Incarnation of Jesus by means of eucharist – has been the most important religious celebration in Barcelona. Talking about that festivity, it is interesting to point out a misterious and traditional rite: “**L’Ou com Balla**” ( The Dancing Egg), the meaning of which is still being discussed.

During Courpus it is customary ,in many places in Barcelona, to place eggs on the fountains’ spouts of water and make them dance with the strength of the water. “ **L’Ou com Balla**” is nothing but an empty egg on top of a spout of water. Its base is decorated with flowers. The egg keeps on dancing because the water comes out continuously. When the egg goes down it will go up again and again. This tradition is a reference to the continous movement which can be related to life, history, with the year’s cycle... and with whatever one pleases.



Barcelona is one of the cities where this rite is more popular. One can see **L’Ou com Balla** (The Dancing Egg) in the Gothic quarter, in a circuit around the fountains of the Ateneu Barcelonès; La Casa de l’Ardiaca; the Cathedral’s cloister; the church of Saint Anne;Frederic Marés Museum; The Royal Academy of Language; Lloctinent Palace,and also in the church of Concepció ( at the parish house’s cloister), in the Eixample district, and in the Spanish Village and in Montjuïc, among other places.



## Summer festivals in Barcelona through a tourist's eyes

**From the fiery festivities of Sant Joan to the city's festival *par excellence*, the Festa Major de la Mercè, through the neighbourhood festivals of Gràcia and Sants**

By Vicenç Relats, journalist



**Sant Joan, 24th June, the festival of the summer solstice, with fire, sweet cakes and firecrackers**

“The night of Sant Joan is a night of happiness./ Studded with flowers, the summer arrives / through a will o’ the wisp that guides it along./Spring dies, winter withdraws./ If love came, it would never die”.

This excerpt from a song by Jaume Sisa, the idiosyncratic Barcelona-born singer-songwriter, encapsulates perfectly the magic of the *Nit de Sant Joan* – Saint John’s Eve – which commences on the night of 23rd and continues into the small hours of 24th June. This is a truly magical night in Barcelona, Catalonia and throughout the Catalan-speaking territories. The celebrations, which take place two days after the summer solstice, include parties with fire and the traditional cake, the *coca de Sant Joan*, as their key ingredients.



Private individuals, associations and organisations help make Sant Joan a vibrant and dynamic celebration and one of the city’s best-loved and most deeply rooted popular traditions. Sant Joan is also the Night of Fire and involves street parties in the neighbourhoods, streets, squares and terraces of the city where dancing, the *coca de Sant Joan*, fireworks and bonfires take centre stage. Hundreds and hundreds of organisers are responsible for just as many parties.

The festivities are based on a whole host of rituals ranging from purifying fire, midnight bathing and the herbs of Sant Joan to sweet cakes, sparkling wine – cava –, music and dancing. Fire and firecrackers are the protagonists of the shortest night of the year with parties and bonfires lit in Barcelona and around Catalonia by the *foc del Canigó*, a flame brought from Mount Canigou in the Pyrenees in French Catalonia (the area roughly corresponding to the ancient province of Roussillon which was once part of the Principality of Catalonia, now the department of the Pyrénées-Orientales). The tradition was started in 1955 by a hiker from the region and, since 1966, many groups and cultural organisations have brought the flame to all the Catalan-speaking territories. The flame is kept

alive throughout the year at the castle in Perpignan (the capital of the Pyrénées-Orientales) and every year the torch bearing the flame is replenished at the peak of Canigou. Early in morning of



23rd June, torches and lanterns are kindled by the flame and taken to every corner of the Catalan-speaking regions.

The *flama del Canigó* arrives in Barcelona's Plaça de Sant Jaume on 23rd June around 7.30 in the evening. It is welcomed by the local community and authorities and taken from there to the city's different neighbourhoods by their appointed representatives. When the flame-bearers arrive in the Plaça de Sant Jaume, the central characters from the city's traditional parades, the *Àliga* (the eagle) and *gegants* (giant figures) form a guard of honour which accompanies the flame to a cauldron in the middle of the square, while the band, the Cobla Ciutat de Barcelona, plays the tune of the popular folk song *Muntanyes de Canigó*.

The eve of Sant Joan is the perfect opportunity to lose yourself in any of the street parties around the city and celebrate without needing an invitation. You can also go to the beach and take the first dip of the season: a custom which, in recent years, has attracted people in their thousands, particularly a young crowd who go there to party.

### **The main festivals of Gràcia and Sants, with their decorated streets**



The most laid-back summer ambiance can be enjoyed al fresco at the Teatre Grec on Montjuïc during the Grec Festival, which offers a wide range of theatre, dance, circus and music throughout July, or at the nearby Montjuïc Fountains, which – from Thursday to Sunday – offer a spectacular and colourful son-et-lumière display, from 9 to 11pm.

In August you'll also find a festive atmosphere in every street in Barcelona, when it celebrates two vibrant neighbourhood festivals: the Festes de Gràcia and the Festes de Sants, two former villages that became part of the city in 1897. For one week in summer, they decorate their streets to create a fun, lively atmosphere and fill them with music, dancing and partying until the early hours.

The Festa Major de Gràcia takes place during the week following the 15th August. The evening before, a famous personality from the neighbourhood gives the welcome address, the *pregó*, in Gràcia's main square. The street decorations were first recorded in 1817 and are truly spectacular recreations of different settings which attract hundreds of people to the neighbourhood. They come here during the day to enjoy the fun atmosphere and at night to enjoy unbridled partying, which sometimes stops the neighbours from sleeping.



The streets of the neighbourhood vie with one another in a spirit of healthy rivalry to win the traditional best-decorated street competition. However, there are also more recently established competitions for the best-decorated balconies and doors. There are also other rituals and traditions associated with the festival, such as the *matinades* – which involve throwing as many rockets as there are streets from the roof of the town hall – and the processions with different popular culture associations. Both events take place on 15th August in the morning. On the last day of the festival you can enjoy the *correfoc*: a procession during which the participants dance through the crowds setting off fireworks and crackers. The street events include community meals, such as the *Sopar de veïns* for the local residents, dancing, musical performances and all kinds of games and other activities.

The streets are decorated with all manner of motifs and are often dedicated to historical, mythical and exotic themes as well as critiques of the current social and political situation. There's no limit to the type of materials used and this is what makes the decorations so expressive and full of impact. The locals use traditional materials, such as cardboard, wire and fabric, as well as recycled materials, including tin cans, plastic bottles, bottle tops...

The Festa Major de Sants has been celebrated in honour of Saint Bartholomew (24th August) since the middle of the 19th century and the locals have been decorating the streets for many years. The first photograph we know of dates from 1905. Nevertheless,

the first official competition for the best-decorated street was held in 1943. At the present time, a dozen streets and squares dress up in all their finery. For seven days they are decked out in spectacular decorations and host myriad events for all ages, including cultural and sporting activities organised by neighbourhood associations, such as the *jornada castellera* with its human tower displays and the concert by the Municipal Band.

## 11th September, Diada Nacional de Catalunya



Tourists arriving in Barcelona on 11th September will find it is the National Day of Catalonia and a public holiday. This is the date when the Catalans commemorate – rather than celebrate – the loss of their freedom as a nation. On the same day in 1714 – 2014 will mark the tricentenary –

Barcelona, the capital and stronghold of Catalonia, fell to the Castilian troops of Philip V, an episode that marked the end of the War of the Spanish Succession. The defeat led to the suppression of all Catalonia's laws and institutions and the restriction of their language by the new Spanish rulers. From that day, Catalonia became part of Spain and subject to Spanish law. For more than 100 years, *catalanisme* – the political and cultural movement founded in the early 19th century to defend the Catalan nation – has adopted 11th September as a day symbolising the struggle to become self-governing again. It was declared a national holiday in 1980, when Catalonia regained its parliament and institutions of self-government and became a politically autonomous region within Spain.



Every 11th September, Barcelona hosts a wide variety of events to commemorate the day, some of them attended by political figures, and holds demonstrations calling for the recognition of the Catalan nation. On the evening of 10th September, people go to the Fossar de les Moreres – which stands next to the Basilica of Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona's Born district – to pay tribute to the martyrs who fought to defend Barcelona

during the siege by the Bourbon troops, led by the last commander in chief of the Catalan government, Rafael de Casanova. Throughout 11th September, the Fossar de les Moreres is the setting for all kinds of events affirming Catalonia's national identity, which combine political meetings and other traditional demonstrations of popular culture, such as human tower displays, or *castells*.

In the morning, the public can attend the official institutional events, organised by the Catalan Parliament and presided over by the president of the Catalan government in the Parc de la Ciutadella, where the parliament building stands. In the afternoon, there are demonstrations in the streets in the centre of the Catalan capital defending self-government and calling for the independence of Catalonia.

This historic demonstration of 11th September 2012, which brought together 1.5 million Catalans calling for Catalonia to become a new European state, marked a watershed. The event triggered a political process whereby Catalonia and its autonomous parliament and government have laid down a challenge to Spain and called for a referendum and the right to decide.

### **La Mercè, 24th September, Barcelona's Main Festival**



Barcelona celebrates its main festival on 24th September to commemorate the Feast of Our Lady of Mercy – the Mare de Déu de la Mercè – the city's patron saint. The festival, which marks the end of summer, was first held in 1871 when the City Council organised the first series of festive events to mark the occasion. The festival has had a chequered history, but with the reinstatement of democracy in 1980, and the participation



of community organisations, it has re-established itself as a truly popular festival with a similar feel to other traditional Catalan festivals. Nowadays, La Mercè is a public holiday that includes celebrations in public spaces across the city, and events focusing on Mediterranean culture.





The Festes de la Mercè now last between four to six days, commencing around 24th September. If the Feast of La Mercè falls on a Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday, the festivities commence the previous Friday and end on the feast day proper. If it falls on a Thursday, the festivities begin on the previous Wednesday and last until Sunday. If La Mercè is on a Friday or Saturday, the festivities begin on the Wednesday or Thursday before and last until Sunday. And if La Mercè falls on a Sunday, the festival begins on the previous Thursday or Friday and lasts until the following Monday.

During the celebrations, the Catalan capital hosts a wide programme of activities, including street performances, human castle displays, processions and *correfocs*, concerts and the spectacular closing firework display set to music. The festivities begin with the opening address, the *pregó* – which invites everybody to the festival – in the great hall, the Saló de Cent, inside City



Hall in Plaça de Sant Jaume. It is followed by the solemn procession, the *Seguici Inaugural*, which takes place at 7pm on the first day of the festival. All Barcelona's traditional procession figures – the *Seguici Popular de Barcelona* – take part, including, the *gegants* (giant figures) and *capgrossos* (figures wearing giant papier-mâché heads) along with representatives from Barcelona's *colles de diables*, the traditional groups of devils who dance through the streets in their distinctive costumes brandishing forks with fireworks attached to them.



One of the highlights of the Mercè celebrations is the ritual sequence on 24th September, which begins with a loud wake-up call. Early in the morning, the Plaça de la Mercè is the starting point for the *matinades dels grallers* – when groups of musicians play the *gralla*, a traditional Catalan instrument, similar to a shawm. At the same time, the *trabucaires* – groups armed with a type of blunderbuss which they fire in the air – gather in the Avinguda Catedral. Both groups make their way to their final destination: the Plaça de Sant Jaume. The *Seguici Popular*, comprising all the figures from the traditional festivals in the old town (including the lion, giants, eagle, ox, wyvern, a mythical figure known as a tarasca, dragon, etc.), leaves City Hall and accompanies the authorities to the Mass held in honour of the patron saint at the Basilica of La Mercè at 10.30am. After the service, the *Seguici Popular* and the authorities return to the Plaça Sant Jaume, where the majestic dance of the giants, the *Ball dels Gegants*, is held, along with the *Ball de l'Àliga*, while the authorities look on from the balcony of City Hall. These festivities are followed by the human tower displays. The human towers, or *castells*, are formed by the main human tower associations from Barcelona who entertain the crowds with their spectacular displays.

The central event of the festivities is the procession known as the *Cavalcada de la Mercè*, which features some of the iconic mythical figures from popular Catalan culture. It starts in the Plaça Catalunya, makes its way to the Plaça de la Catedral and goes down La Rambla. Then, throughout the afternoon, different parts of the historic city centre are filled with performers from every discipline (circus, music, dance, street theatre, etc.) The Catalan *colles de diables* who take part in the *correfoc* light up the city centre for a few hours, in a high-adrenalin event that has become one of the highlights of La Mercè and attracts huge crowds. The magic atmosphere conveyed by the beasts and devils spewing out sparks and throwing fireworks conquers the city, while locals and visitors alike join in and jump through the sparks with the devils and follow them in their infernal dance.

The city also hosts a music festival, Barcelona Acció Musical (BAM), during the Festes de la Mercè. Open-air venues and squares around the city host night-time concerts of pop, rock and other musical genres. There is also a fun run, the *Cursa de la Mercè*,

during the festivities and the firework display set to music at the Montjuïc Magic Fountain on the Avinguda Maria Cristina which attracts thousands of people. This spectacular combination of fire, light, music and water closes the festival.



On the first Sunday after La Mercè, the Plaça de Sant Jaume plays host once again to a wonderful display of *castells*, by human tower associations from the rest of Catalonia who compete against the team from Barcelona, which hosts the event. An exceptional opportunity to enjoy these majestic human towers which are such a typical part of Catalan folklore.

