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small WORLD

A kind of travel column

Rome-ing Tarragona

Over 2,000 years ago, the Roman Empire made one of its greatest discoveries: the beguiling Catalan coast. Travel writer **BRENDAN HARDING** takes a short tour of the city of Tarragona, second only architecturally to the empire's ancient capital city Rome.

THE quietness in the room was unnerving, filling the space with a tangible density of expectation. Breaths were held, hands covered anxious mouths, handkerchiefs were twisted in sweating palms, and every eye was trained squarely on the small girl as she clambered with the agility of a forest-dwelling animal towards the castle's summit.

She climbed higher, using each hand-hold expertly, contorting her young limbs into shapes long forgotten by the elderly onlookers. With one last firm foothold, she raised her body to the summit, stood briefly to attention and counted to four on her small fingers, before clambering back down the tower's wall with well-practiced ease.

The watching crowd erupted into rapturous applause, releasing their collective breaths amid cheers of adulation. The child, wearing a proud smile, was passed from hand to hand across the tightly-knit mass of adult bodies like a precious gift.

This is the town of Tarragona in the Spanish province of Catalonia and this is the centuries-old tradition of human tower building: an ancient and endemically Catalan ritual, where communities come together in groups known as colles to build these human spires (castells). Throughout the mild Costa Daurada winter and spring, the colles gather to improve their technique, hone their strength and agility and consolidate the principles on which the tradition is built: co-operation, trust, unity and solidarity. The colles constantly strive to surpass their past achievements and prepare for the many competitions which are held over the summer months in the villages and towns across the region.

In the high-roofed practice hall of the colles, everyone is considered equal, regardless of age, creed, race, colour, sex or social status. Standing on the second floor mezzanine of the hall, looking down on the intertwined mass of purple-shirted Castellars



of all ages and sizes, Sergio, my guide and local dignitary – a title which is forgotten here – whispers softly to me: "In Catalonia, when people speak of solidarity, this is it..." He was truly proud.

Without these principals and the presence of this solidarity, the towers would falter unceremoniously. The colles works as a single unflinching unit, from the circular-base layer, which binds staunchly into a human foundation, to the more agile, who climb ever higher in precisely practiced movements, crowned by the smallest, nimblest children (wearing protective head gear, I'm glad to say – accidents are rare but happen from time to time) who trump the tower with their fearless agility. Watching the mutual trust required by every member of this living edifice, I began to understand Sergio's notion of solidarity founded in tradition.

It is no accident that the pink-stoned city of Tarragona, on the edge of the Mediterranean, is rooted in tradition. Founded over two centuries ago, it possesses a wealth of monuments and

buildings, dating back to a time when the ever-expanding and ceaselessly hungry Roman Empire found the benign and welcoming climates of eastern Iberia pleasing to their discerning tastes. With safe bays and a multitude of easily defensible cliff-top sites, the conquering Romans built their fortifications and called the place, which they named Tarraco, their home.

The evidence, and essence, of the Roman presence still overshadows the city's modern architecture. With Tarraco as the capital of the empire's Nearer Hispania (Hispania Citerior), the city has been recognised as a world heritage site, boasting an impressive total of 13 Roman monuments, including the Praetorium, the Tower of Spices, the Roman Theatre, the Amphitheatre, an Aqueduct, a Roman Circus, and much more. The huge stone-clad amphitheatre still hosts gladiatorial contests in which fights are staged exactly as they would have been seen by the locals and their Roman conquerors more than two centuries earlier. Using both

historians and actors, playing the parts of gladiators and slaves, the fights appear almost real – even drawing blood, much to the delight of the full house of baying spectators.

But it's not all blood and gore. Tarragona, only a short drive from its near and better-known neighbour Barcelona, has assimilated the

finer points of Rome into its cosmopolitan culture. Festivals of authentic Roman food, wine, song and music are presented in various locations throughout the city and throughout the year. In the museum of Roma Norum Vita, visitors are treated to painstakingly recreating dioramas of living history, presented with the sights, sounds and smells of how the city would have appeared all those centuries ago.

With Reus airport (scheduled flights from Dublin with Ryanair) only a short bus ride from Tarragona, the city and its hinterlands of long beaches (Salou and its surrounding seaside towns), quaint villages, gastronomic discoveries, stunning scenery and nature are all brought within easy striking distance for family days out, or even more detailed and off-the-beaten-track exploration.

One of the most fun and efficient ways to discover the city in detail is by donning a helmet and joining one of the guided Segway tours. Zipping easily and safely in and out of the crowds and traffic, the extensive

city sights can be revealed in a manner that's sure to put a beaming smile on the faces of even the most reluctant fan of history and culture.

From ancient history, sun-soaked beaches, quaint family restaurants, open countryside or experiencing the human towers of Tarragona, the one aspect which pervades all is the Catalan spirit of solidarity. The Catalans are fiercely proud of their homeland and its culture – a pride which will only enhance a visit to this thought-provoking, and fun-filled corner of the Iberian peninsula.

GETTING THERE

RyanAir flies directly from Dublin to Reus – www.ryanair.ie

PLACES OF INTEREST

Tower building: Colla Jove Xinquets de Tarragona – www.collajove.com
 Roman tours – www.turismotarragona.com
 Romanorum Vita exhibition – www.obrasocial.lacaixa.es/laCaixaFoundation
 Additional cultural activities – www.tarracoviva.com

EATING THERE

Degusta Restaurant, www.degusta.com
 Restaurant De Vins, www.devins.es
 Belandra Restaurant (seafood), Espinach 18, 43004 Tarragona. Tel: +34 977 221238
 El Terrat Restaurant, www.elterratrestaurant.com
 El Llagut, Nazaret 10, (Placa del Rei), 43003 Tarragona. Tel: +34 977 228938
 20 a la Rambla, www.20alarambla.cat

SPECIAL INTEREST

Tarragona by Segway, Jaume Comajuncosa, www.segwaaytarragona.com
 Tel: +34 977 213917