




CITIES

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Barcelona: the most desirable hotspot for the world's wealthy?

In this special feature we examine Barcelona's emergence as a world leader in urban sustainability and find out why the city's Michelin-starred restaurants, superyacht marina and luxury developments place it among the world's most desirable UHNWI hotspots.

Generation-defining moments have a way of raising big questions about the role cities play in our societies. Safety fears following the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York prompted speculation as to whether high-rise living might have had its day – a debate conclusively settled by two decades of tower construction spanning Texas to Tokyo.

Now, the spectres of the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change are posing new challenges as to whether cities can be rethought in order to reduce their impact on the health of the public and the planet, and raising questions as to the role of city mayors in responding to national crises that have a disproportionate impact on urban locations.

Barcelona finds itself uniquely placed to provide answers. Nestled between the Mediterranean, the Collserola mountains and the Besòs and Llobregat rivers, the Catalan capital is home to some of the most densely populated urban spaces in Europe.

Its recent history is marked by innovations in urban planning as city officials seek to put space to better, more sustainable uses.



The revolution is urban

The 2015 election of Mayor Ada Colau, a radical raised in the city's Guinardó neighbourhood, brought new impetus to the city's revolution in urban planning.

Since taking office, Colau has been systematically retaking boulevards from cars, radically increasing green space and incorporating social and environmental criteria into public procurement.

“Change can begin in urban centres,” Colau told the press in December. “Cities can play a pivotal role in transitioning energy use away from fossil fuels. They can adopt non-polluting modes of transport and build green public spaces that absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen.”

The transition from fossil fuels is perhaps the most important plank in Colau’s approach. In 2016, the city initiated a new wave of “superblocks”, neighbourhoods of approximately 40 acres carved out and made car-free.

All vehicles other than those belonging to residents, delivery vehicles or emergency services were banished to surrounding larger roads, with a view to cutting private car and moped use by 21%.

The concept of a superblock wasn’t a new one – the first such zone was introduced in the Old Town’s El Born district in 1993. At the time, the Old Town was ragged and rundown, and it quickly became gentrified. Colau’s current plan, however, is on a much grander scale.

Over the next decade, superblocks “will transform the entire central grid of the city into a greener, more pedestrian-friendly and almost car-free area,” she said in December, shortly after announcing that 21 streets in the Eixample district would be pedestrianised at a cost of €38 million.

The ultimate goal is to implement more than 500 superblocks, which could prevent 667 premature deaths every year, according to a study carried out by the Barcelona Institute for Global Health Traffic.

Superblocks aren’t a response to the pandemic, but they reflect decisions made by a raft of municipal governments to repurpose public spaces that either don’t facilitate social distancing or are simply being wasted.

Policy decisions that put the happiness and wellbeing of the public first have unsurprisingly proved popular, and what were temporary reallocations of space are being made formalised – see New York Mayor Bill de Blasio’s decision to make sidewalk dining a permanent fixture.

Lockdowns have offered Barcelona's residents a taste of what may be to come, at least when it comes to air quality. One study by Spain's Institute of Environmental Assessment and Water Research revealed emissions declined by half amid the most strict restrictions on movement, largely down to the reduced number of vehicles on the city's roads.

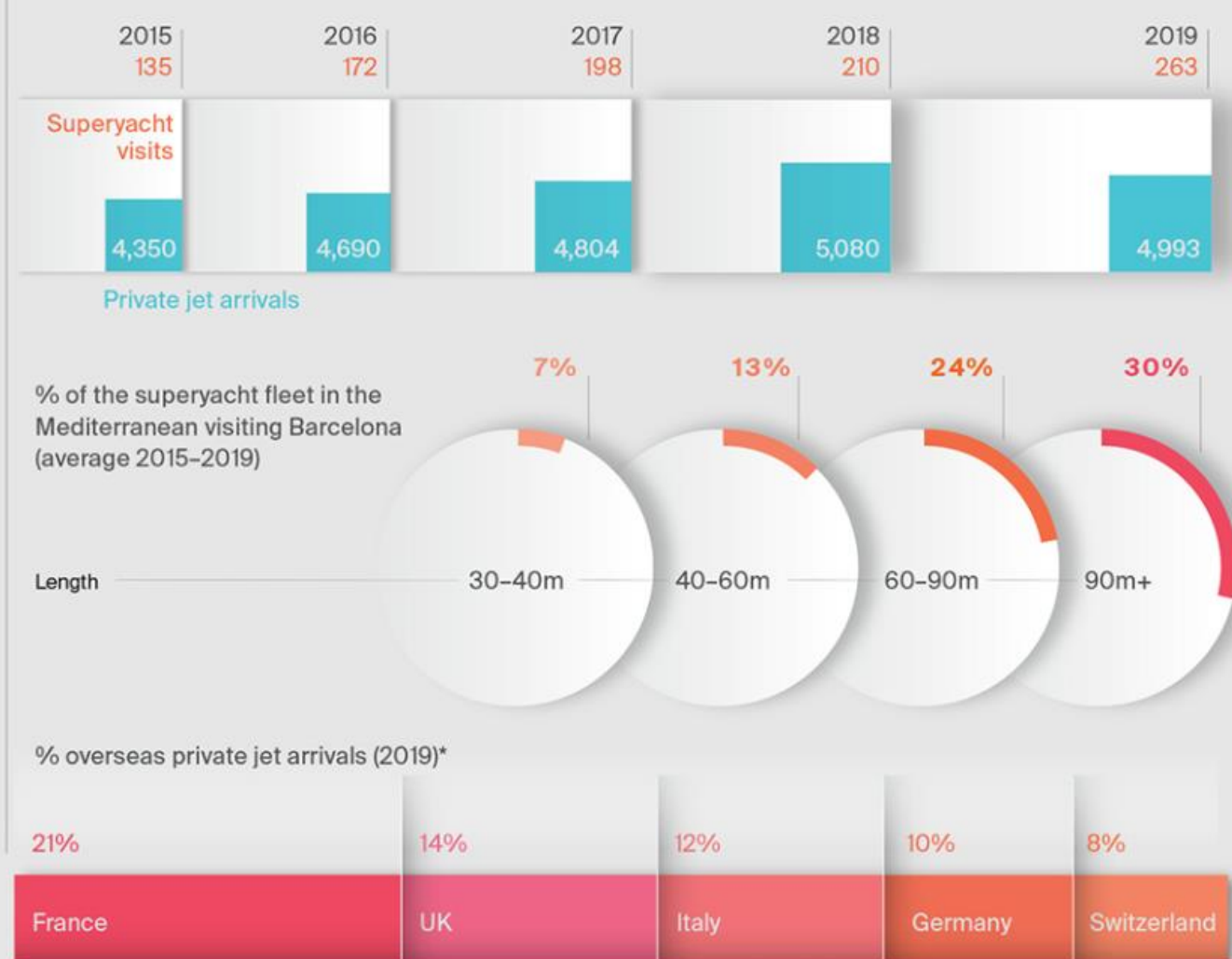
Underpinning all this is Barcelona's Climate Action Plan 2018–2030, a road map aimed at cutting emissions by 45% by 2030, on the journey to becoming carbon neutral by 2050.

This was bolstered in January 2020 when City Hall declared a climate emergency and pledged to spend more than half a billion euros by 2025 in order to ensure emissions dropped by half by 2030.

“We are talking about a profound transition in every aspect of the city: its productive system, its people, how we work, how we move around... not acting is too risky,” the government said in its declaration. “The revolution is clearly an urban one.”

Riding the airwaves

Barcelona superyacht and private jet trends



Travelling the world, at home

If you had walked to Barcelona's port one morning in 2020, you would have glimpsed one of the most valuable private yachts in existence.

At 180m, Azzam is among the longest private motor yachts in the world. It boasts accommodation for 36 guests and 80 crew, and 4,000 professionals were involved in its six-year build, according to Boat International. It has a golf training room and the chandeliers have been specially designed so they don't rattle at speed.

Last year, the vessel spent a period moored at Barcelona's MB92, the world's leading provider of refit and maintenance services for "superyachts".

The company works on more than 100 such vessels – generally defined as being at least 40m long – each year. At more than four times that length, Azzam is unique – at least for now.

"When I began working in the industry back in the early 1990s, 50m boats were considered huge," says Pepe García-Aubert, chief executive of MB92. "The largest would be up to 75m, whereas now that is becoming standard. Increasingly, we are seeing boats of more than 100m."

Barcelona stands uniquely placed to gain from the world's swelling fleet of superyachts. The city's position as the gateway between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, summer and winter hubs of the yachting season, make it an optimal location to refit and repair.

It is also a natural home port for superyachts exceeding 60m due to the facilities offered by the luxury Marina Port Vell, one of the Mediterranean's leading marinas.

Some 574 unique yachts entered the Barcelona region at least once between January 2015 to June 2020, according to Superyacht Intelligence. Arrivals of more than 60m increased from 44 in 2015 to 78 in 2019, and some 20 arrivals since 2019 have been more than 90m long.

The trend fits with Spain's growing reliance on the maritime industry. The Port de Barcelona handled more than €67 billion of foreign trade in 2019, supporting the jobs of 37,000 people.

All in, it accounts for a quarter of all Spain's maritime foreign trade, a proportion that is likely to increase in tandem with the world's reliance on e-commerce.

"The data alone shows the importance of the port," says Mercè Conesa, President of the Port de Barcelona. "But our main contribution to the economy of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain, Andorra and also southern France is to provide infrastructure and services that help importers and exporters to be competitive in global markets – and I think we've been successful in doing so."

Barcelona's reputation as a favourable place to do business is a major contributor to its emergence as a hub for the wealthy. Some 108,726 HNWI's, defined as having assets of at least US\$1 million, live in the city. Of those, 729 are UHNWI's, worth at least US\$30 million.

Meanwhile, some 5,000 private jets from around 85 different countries land in Barcelona in a typical year, up from fewer than 4,500 five years ago, according to data from aviation analyst WINGX.

Superyacht arrivals through the port typically include royals, chief executives of the world's biggest companies and famous entrepreneurs, according to Ignacio Erroz, general manager of Marina Port Vell, which neighbours MB92 and is fast becoming a centre for knowledge and innovation.

"Yachting is seen as a wholesome activity for people who want a family-oriented lifestyle. It offers the possibility of being in a private and controlled environment and choosing your destination without any restrictions," he says. "This is key: you get the finest and most luxurious experience travelling around the world, at home."

Inevitably, all this is attracting investment, and in 2019 Squirle Capital, a European alternative investment firm, purchased a controlling stake in MB92.

But while vessels themselves are set to continue to grow, the bigger trends in super-yachting now lie in sustainability, according to García-Aubert.

"There is huge demand to improve on the sustainability of the vessels, from the collection of waste to improving propulsion systems and lighting," he says. "Every time I see a new build something is improved, and the advances in hydrogen propulsion are particularly exciting."

With sustainability emerging as a key trend in the superyacht industry, companies across the world are striving to become leaders in the field. “Marina Port Vell will be a key player in implementing a sustainability scheme,” says Ignacio Erroz. “We are committed to being the preferred option for a new generation of shipowners and captains.”

Seven centuries of Catalan cuisine

The essence of Catalan cooking can be found in a 700-year old cookbook. Believed to have been published in 1324 and now located in the museum at the University of Valencia, *El llibre del Sent Soví* is the oldest surviving culinary text in Catalan.

There are many things that make it remarkable, not least its use of ingredients found in Arabic and Jewish cuisine, and its recipes from ancient Greece and Rome.

This piece of history, says Alberto Raurich, Michelin-starred chef at Barcelona's *Dos Pallilos*, offers a glimpse of what makes Catalan cuisine special. “Our food culture has been and is very rich,” he says. “Rich in diversity of products, and rich in knowledge.”

There are, perhaps, other reasons too why Raurich admires the anonymous cook behind *El llibre del Sent Soví*. The intelligent blending of styles and cultures that runs through the book is how he has made his name.

Dos Palillos, Spanish for “two chopsticks”, is among the most exciting restaurants in one of the most exciting food cities in the world, with 24 Michelin-starred restaurants holding a total of 34 stars between them.

At *Dos Palillos*, which was first awarded its star in 2012, Raurich serves up Spanish-Japanese fusion food, from Szechuan-style jellyfish to Iberian-Cantonese pork jowl.

It is, according to Ferran Adrià, former head chef at *El Bulli*, “the best Asian restaurant outside Asia.” Of course, Japanese-Spanish food might sound like an odd match, but distinct eating cultures often overlap in ways that can surprise. In both countries, “the concept of eating at a bar is of the essence,” Raurich says.

“At *Dos Palillos*, we take this to its highest expression – there is a bar around a kitchen served by cooks, where people can eat, drink and socialise.”

His success in doing justice to this shared tradition is down in part to Tamae Imachi, his Japanese wife. The pair met while working at Adrià's now legendary *El Bulli*, the Barcelona institution voted a record five times as the world's best restaurant.

Raurich, who was head chef there for more than a decade, and Imachi, the restaurant's former sommelier, are now co-owners of Dos Palillos.

It is Imachi's "great knowledge" of her country's food that has made it possible to meld the two cultures, according to Raurich.

"I think you cannot innovate or be creative from a condition of ignorance," he says.

"If a non-Japanese person wants to cook Japanese cuisine, he or she should know not only the food preparation and techniques but also the essential pillars of the cuisine, that is, its liturgy, spaces, dishes, movements, concepts and philosophy."

The new breed of modernist masterpieces

The Gothic masterpieces of the 13th to 15th centuries and the modernist movement pioneered by Antoni Gaudí epitomise Barcelona's long architectural history.

Nowadays, when you walk the city's tree-lined grids you pass a new breed of developments. However, you won't find anything like the towering form of the Sagrada Família.

Instead, expect sleek reinventions of modernist offices, like Francesc Macià 10, or the flamboyant geometric curves and primary colours of Antares, due for completion at the end of February.

"We scoured the world for the best architects and designers, bringing them to Barcelona and really capitalising on the cultural diversity there is in the city and this broader push to do new and exciting things," says John Nery, Head of Investments at Squircle Capital, the investor behind Francesc Macià 10.

"That's when Marcio Kogan came in and turned what some may have considered an ordinary-looking insurance building into a truly unique super prime residential asset that went on to achieve the highest price per sq m in Spain."

Kogan is the renowned Brazilian architect behind Studio MK27, set up in the late 1970s and famed for its minimalist luxury. Alongside his team Diana Radomysler and Suzana Glogowski, Kogan transformed the 1960s office building into eight vast lateral serviced apartments with panoramic views over the city.

The project – the city’s first super prime development – is striking for its use of American walnut, brass and marble and its 100m curved walls of floor-to-ceiling windows.

It is the first residential building in Spain to gain BREEAM certification, and won the award for Creative Re-use at the INSIDE World Festival of Interiors in 2018.

“We tried to be fair to all this modernist beauty while bringing in sophisticated details connected with our culture,” says Kogan. “The quality of the handcraft we brought from Brazil was very high, because we don’t yet have the culture of industrialisation.”

Prime asset prices have remained more stable than those in mainstream markets throughout the pandemic, underpinned by the influx of UHNWIs, Barcelona’s growing creative business environment, and its global reputation for fine dining, says Squircle’s Head of Development Gonzalo Álvarez.

That makes investing in super prime developments such as Francesc Macià 10 an attractive alternative for companies and individuals “with a limited appetite for risk and who tend to lean towards value-add strategies,” he adds. “As demand for rentals of this type of property is also on the rise, these investments offer a highly attractive yield.”

Six kilometres east of Francesc Macià 10, a short walk from Port Fòrum marina and Mar Bella beach, is Antares, a super prime development designed by French architect Odile Decq.

It is immediately recognisable by its bright red trim, curved lines and sweeping balconies. Like Francesc Macià 10, Antares boasts long, lateral spaces and blurs the lines between what constitutes outside and inside.

“We wanted to create a Miami-style building that didn’t exist in Barcelona,” says Philippe Camus, Chief Executive of Shaftesbury Fund Management, the investor behind the building. “We tried to create an object that is singular.”

Together, Francesc Macià 10 and Antares symbolise Barcelona’s arrival as a super prime hub to rival the likes of Paris and Los Angeles.

The growth of superyachts and private jets moving through the city, fuelled by its almost unrivalled amenities and fine dining, has long signalled Barcelona’s growing importance to the transient wealthy.

However, the arrival of super prime real estate to rival the most renowned developments reveals something different; that UHNWIs are putting down roots, investing locally and starting new businesses in the city.

Indeed, it is this shift of focus from being an attractive place to spend time to also being considered a global business city that is behind the city's rise – and it's a combination that is epitomised by these new super prime developments, says Nery.

“If you closed your eyes and travelled to Francesc Macià 10 then opened them in the apartment, you could be in New York, or the penthouse at One Hyde Park. Then you think that you're buying at €20,000 per sq m, when the comparable properties are multiples of that,” he says.

“That is symbolic of how attractive the city is to buyers of residential real estate as well as to investors looking to do business here. You've got that huge potential for growth that is just fundamental within the market.”