

My homage to Catalonia

The woman behind the counter smiles. I have just greeted her with the Catalan “*bon dia*,” thereby acknowledging that she is Catalan, not Spanish. It does not matter that I don’t know any more Catalan because she is now willing to continue in Spanish. For the Catalans it is important to be accepted as such. Catalonia is different from Spain, and the Catalans want this difference to be respected. They have a distinct culture, their own language, their own traditions and a strong sense of national pride. Those who come to Catalonia expecting to find Spanish folklore will be disappointed; *flamenco* is only performed for the tourists. Catalonia has its own culture, which is cultivated intensely. Being aware of this, one will find a vivid and intriguing culture and a people who are always eager to explain their Catalan traditions to an interested foreigner.

When asked why they take their culture so seriously most Catalans will explain that they are afraid it might die out if they do not preserve it. This seems absurd as Catalan culture is so omnipresent that it can sometimes become annoying. Walking through Barcelona one is consistently reminded of where one is. Signs are written in Catalan, streets are named after famous Catalans or Catalan places, the Catalan flag is waving everywhere, everybody speaks Catalan, and there seems to be a celebration of some Catalan event almost every day.

The Catalans are not so wrong though. In medieval time Catalonia dominated the western part of the Mediterranean. The dialects spoken in Naples and on the islands of Sicily and Sardinia are influenced by Catalan, and dialects of modern Catalan are still spoken on the Balearics, in Valencia, Andorra, and parts of France. Since these influential days the number of people who identify themselves as Catalan has immensely decreased, as Catalonia lost power and became subordinated to the Spanish crown. Under Franco smaller ethnic groups

like the Basques, Galicians, and Catalans were oppressed in the name of a united nation. Catalans were not allowed to speak their own language, and schools taught mainstream Spanish traditions and culture. After Franco died in 1975 the Catalans were granted autonomy in the “Catalan Statute of Autonomy” of 1979. Since then the Catalans have worked hard to revive their culture and traditions. Today almost the entire population is bilingual, and Catalan is taught in schools. Younger children often only speak Catalan. When dealing with Catalans there are therefore some very important factors to bear in mind:

1. Catalan is not Spanish! One important fact about Catalan is that it is not a dialect of either French or Spanish. Catalan is a Romance language in its own right. It is similar to both French and Spanish; thus, speakers of both languages can understand speakers of Catalan. As a visitor to Catalonia it is recommendable to know at least the most important bits of Catalan as people open up immediately when being greeted in their language. Most people also speak English and Spanish, so it is no problem to communicate with them in those languages. To stay in Catalonia for a longer period of time, one should consider learning Catalan. After all it is the official and everyday language.

2. Catalonia is not Spain! Catalonia can be found in the north-eastern corner of the Iberian Peninsula. Although it is politically a part of Spain, it has its own government and administration. Only questions of national importance, like education or health systems, are decided together with Madrid. Unlike the Basques the Catalans do not want independence from Spain. Most of them are content with the autonomous government. Catalonia has its own flag with four red stripes on yellow ground which are representative of the four provinces: Tarragona, Lleida, Barcelona and Girona. Geographically Catalonia has everything a country needs. The Costa Dorada south of Barcelona and Costa Brava in the north offer beautiful beaches, the large mountains of the Pyrenees are just north of Barcelona, and the capital itself is one of the most exciting cities in the world. Some of the best cava and white wine is produced in the Penedes area, west of Barcelona. The main trades outside of Barcelona are

agriculture and fishery, the urban area is one of the most industrialised on the Iberian Peninsula. Barcelona is the second biggest city after Madrid and can offer an equally diverse scene of emerging and sophisticated artists and designers, small galleries and large museums.

3. Catalans are no Spaniards! The stereotypical Catalan is hard-working, clever, but not sophisticated, a bit arrogant and rather stubborn, economically successful but avaricious. All of this probably bears some truth, but in real life Catalans are as diverse as the rest of the world. A typical cross section of the Catalan population can be observed at the *Boquería*, the large food market in the centre of Barcelona. There will be the hip youngster with an avantgarde hairstyle and latest fashion clothes buying some vegetables, wine and cheese to make dinner for his flatmates. Middle-aged Catalan women convey the impression that Catalonia is actually a matriarchal society. They are extremely resolute and order their share in loud voices. There are little old women who have experienced the civil war and Franco and seem a bit lost in this modern society. After making their purchases, they meet their husbands and walk into the labyrinthine passages of the old working-class quarters on their way home. While they are shopping their husbands are sitting at the bars, drinking their coffee or glass of wine and sharing the latest news. Mothers with their children try to find their way through the masses of people crowding in front of the stalls. And there are the multitudes of people from all over the world who have found a home in Catalonia. The vendors are friendly to everybody. Working hard they spend their lives at the market, often three or more in a stall of not more than 3 m². They have to be admired for losing neither their temper nor control over their stall. When I go there I like to pay them my respect and greet them in their language. This normally sends a smile to their face.

When I bring home my purchase I have to pass in front of the cathedral. Today there is a band playing and Catalans of all ages and classes are dancing their traditional dance, the *Sardanas*. While I pass them, more and more people are joining the circles until the whole square is filled with dancing people.