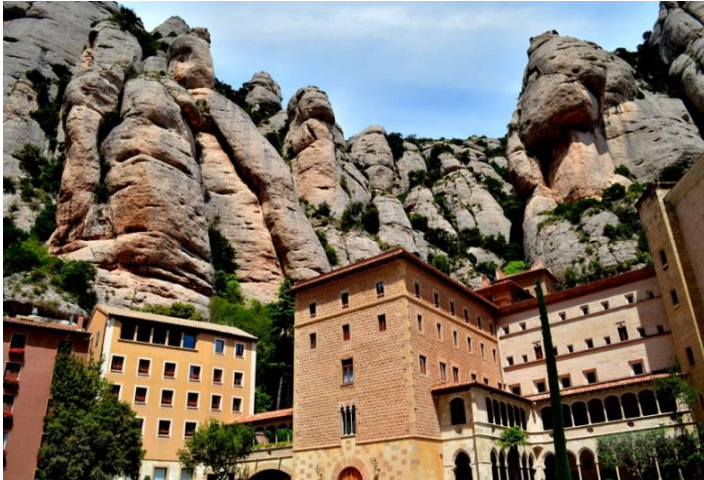


Montserrat Royal Basilica Tour

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As our tour bus rounded the steep turns ascending towards the summit, the odd, otherworldly peaks began to pierce the periwinkle horizon. The bizarre-looking rounded rock pillars, formed by thousands of years of wind, rain and frost announced our impending presence.

“Are we still in Spain or are we orbiting another planet?” I said to my travel companion.

While Barcelona itself holds more than its share of enticing sights, any trip the Catalonia region of Spain would be incomplete without taking the Montserrat Royal Basilica Half-Day Trip up the mountainside to the ancient Benedictine monastery and grounds.

“Montserrat means “serrated,” said our tour guide, Susana in both fluent English and Spanish. “At a height of 4055 feet, Montserrat is the highest point of the Catalan lowlands,” Throughout the hour-long ride from Barcelona, Susana’s extensive knowledge of Montserrat’s history provided a base of knowledge from which we would later draw.

We exited the bus to see the Benedictine monastery of Santa Maria de Montserrat looming before us, juxtaposed against those jagged peaks that looked almost close enough to touch. The monastery was founded in 1025 by expanding the hermitage that had been currently on site.



We were given two hours of free time with which to explore the grounds at our leisure. To get a feel for the site, we first went to a museum dedicated to the history of Montserrat which included a stirring video starting with an aerial tour and ending with a melodic song by the choir boys.



We made our way to the Basilica around 15 minutes before the service was to begin and recalled Susana's entreat to the group to get there early – the glistening gold palatial hall was already crammed to capacity! I held my breath and was able to squeeze into a small spot along the back-side wall. I had barely exhaled when I heard angels begin to sing. No, not angels, but the choir boys' sweet vocals wafting their Gregorian chants over the crowd.

The basilica is also a famous pilgrimage spot due to its most famous occupant – the 12th century wooden statue of La Moreneta (The Black Virgin), Catalonia's patron. Catholic tradition states that the statue was carved around 50 AD by St. Luke and brought to Spain. It was subsequently hidden from the Moors in a cave and rediscovered in 880. The statue stands sentry above the high altar in the basilica. There is a narrow alley where visitors can pass by the Black Virgin to pray or pay respects, but be forewarned there is a long queue of an hour or more.



On the grounds there is also a museum with works of major artists such as Dali, El Greco, Monet and Giordano on display, several gift shops, one of which offers a free tasting of some of the rich local liquors.

I really enjoyed the rich cultural and spiritual significance of Montserrat, but my favorite pastime was just walking around the grounds absorbing and photographing the unbeatable panorama around me.