

Las Ramblas, Barcelona, Spain

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'A People's Promenade'



Las Ramblas is often considered the most famous street in Barcelona and well known around the world, exemplifying Barcelona's success in having public spaces for people to meet and socialize, as well as walk their daily lives. The street, which is actually broken into several distinct boulevards, is often crowded with both locals and tourists.

The success of Las Ramblas comes from the combination of factors. Its availability of eateries, shops, markets, and cultural institutions along the artful street create an attractive and diverse experience for pedestrians. The street is full of history and character, dating back hundreds of years. It is also physically well connected to key areas of Barcelona. The buildings, paths, vegetation, and details are proportioned so that pedestrians have pleasant spaces to interact in. Because of its social quality, some would call it the "emotional hub" of the city.

"Barcelona's democratic sympathy towards planning also means that public spaces are being conceived as places where social variances are perceptible, with the visionary intention of serving social interaction and communication. They are meant to strengthen day to day social relations, as well as to function as stages for special events such as district festivals or political rallies. -- Claus.

A People's Promenade



City Statistics

City Population: 1,582,000
(2003)

City Area: 101 sq. km.

Density Level:
14.9 ppl/ sq. km

Visitors: 250,000 ppl/day

Governing bodies:
City of Barcelona
Barcelona City Council

Context and History

Las Ramblas is set in Barcelona, Spain. It stretches about 1.5 kilometers long, running through the middle of the city on a former riverbed, and divides the Gothic area from El Raval, a working class district. During Roman and early medieval times, a wall there marked the city limits, and the stream acted as both a moat and a sewer that would occasionally flood. Until the beginning of the 18th century, Las Ramblas was a path along this stream, running between convents on one side and old city walls on the other. In the 1700s, houses were beginning to be put up at the site of some of the old city walls and trees began to be planted. In 1775, the old city walls by the Drassanes medieval shipyard were demolished, and by the end of the 18th century, the street began to be systematically developed into a kind of tree-lined avenue; it began to closely resemble the promenade there today. Its name comes from the Arabic word "ramla," which means "sandy ground."



Treatment of cars

Las Ramblas' promenade gives pedestrians precedence. It is wide enough to be lined on either side with seating for restaurants, kiosks, and more, while still allowing for hundreds of people.

- Buildings are 5-7 stories tall
- The walkway is, on average, 40 to 60 feet wide
- Sidewalks are less than 10 feet wide, encouraging walking in the center
- Cars are restricted to narrow lanes on either side of the promenade, plus a lane for parking and deliveries. They must accommodate pedestrians at every intersection
- The total width of Las Ramblas from building face to building face is 98 feet.



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Layout and Connections

The upper end of Las Ramblas runs into the Plaça de Catalunya, which is a large square that is generally considered to be Barcelona's city center. Several busy streets in Barcelona meet at this busy square and along the street that also acts as a transportation hub. There are three Metro stops that connect to Las Ramblas. Streets that meet Las Ramblas connect to important districts and destinations such as art and cultural institutions, the offices of the Municipal District Council, and important shopping streets. Las Ramblas is a street that has six sections, each with a different name. From north to south, these sections are:



Plaça de Catalunya



La Rambla de Canaletes: The northernmost rambla is named for the 19th century Canaleta fountain at this location. This is where supporters of "Barça," the football club, holds lively informal meetings. This portion of the street also has businesses of all kinds and many specialty music shops.



La Rambla dels Estudis: This section of La Rambla is named after the 16th century university that was originally sited here. Though the building was demolished in 1843, several important buildings remain such as theaters, churches, and palaces, some of which are housed in historically significant buildings.



La Rambla de les Flors (La Rambla de Sant Josep): La Rambla de les Flors is named for its many flower stalls which are joined by kiosks selling all kinds of books, magazines, and newspapers 24 hours a day. At the end of this part of La Rambla is a small square, the Plaça de la Boqueria, which has a mosaic by Joan Miró.



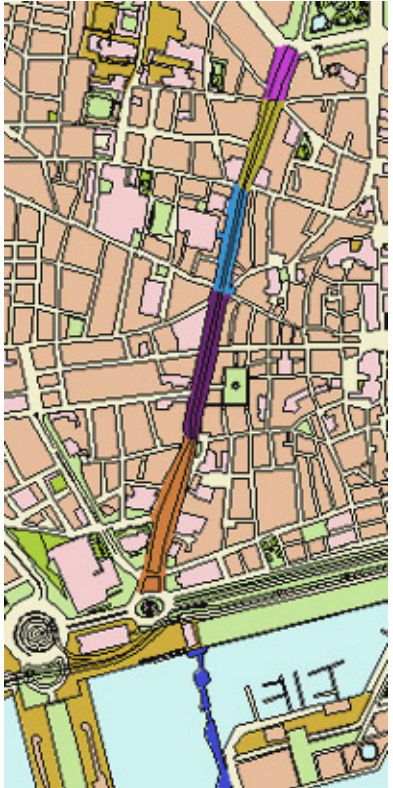
La Rambla del Centre (La Rambla dels Caputxins): This section was the first part of La Rambla to be converted into a promenade for people to meet friends in the morning. The street is the home of the Gran Theatre del Liceu and continues to the Plaça Reial, a lively square with details by Antoni Gaudí.



La Rambla de Santa Monica: This last section of La Rambla before reaching the waterfront begins with Plaça del Teatre, named after one of the oldest theaters in the city. La Rambla de Santa Monica acts as the threshold to the port, and it preserves some of its old buildings.



La Rambla de Mar: This newest rambla was added as part of Barcelona's reform to open the city to the sea. Its monument to Christopher Columbus which allows views of the port and the city and its wooden walkway allows both residents and visitors to enjoy the sea firsthand and to connect to Barcelona's history.



Rambla del Mar

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Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca once said that La Rambla was “the only street in the world which I wish would never end”.



Character and Details

Often touted as the Madison Avenue of Europe but more fun, the street has a center divider with traffic running on either side. The area outside of the divider is lined with shops and restaurants of every type, while the inner part of the divider has tiny market stands - covered by colorful umbrellas - that sell everything from flowers to live canaries and sweet dough churros. Beautiful trees line the walkway and provide shade as you stroll around and there are benches to sit on if you get tired. At night, the whole place lights up and exemplifies a European street scene at it's best. Pedestrian traffic rules in this area, and the blocks are made for easy walking. The subway runs down the entire street with three stations opening up to Las Ramblas and all three running along the green line.

Entertainers such as mimes or musicians dot the street and will play for tourists' pocket change. Artists sell their beautiful watercolor paintings, pottery and carvings. It is customary to haggle for anything you buy here to get a better price, a tradition the Spaniards love. There is a lively and large food market along the promenade where people go to find the various culinary pleasures and chefs from all over the local area go to buy their ingredients for the restaurants, which offers a tremendous variety. Las Ramblas ends at the port where an enormous statue of Christopher Columbus sits. Many people actually climb the monument to get an amazing view of Barcelona and the ocean. There is something happening 24/7 on Las Ramblas, and it is pretty hard to get bored at such a vibrant and colorful place.

Activities and Users

In addition to the variety of restaurants, street performers and array of art, one place of note along the corridor is the Gran Teatre del Liceu, or simply Liceu, Barcelona's renowned opera house. Opened in 1847, it is among the world's finest and most frequented. A public museum of contemporary art is located on the Raval side of Rambla de Santa Monica, Centre d'Art Santa Monica, and has regular exhibitions of international artists. The city's most iconic street market known as Mercat de la Boqueria also call Las Ramblas home. The street has formed from a very diverse culture and is home to a sizable Indian community. It is also here that you will find the city's most famous fountain, Font de Canaletes, and its most popular meeting point.





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Issues

Barcelona's tree-lined boulevard is at the center of fierce debate whether drunken tourists, desperate prostitutes and petty crooks have rendered it charmless, tawdry and dangerous. These days there is a dark underside to the late-night revelry and a growing number of residents are raising their voices in complaint. Fights, vandalism and arrests marred celebrations last year to mark Barcelona's winning of both Spain's national soccer cup and the league title. But soccer-related violence is the least of the problems Las Ramblas faces.

Critics worry that global mafias now see Barcelona's liberal reputation as a business opportunity. Some hoteliers complain that violent crime and robberies are on the increase, although they could offer only anecdotal evidence. A local hostel receptionist even claims there are weeks when she has had clients that have been robbed every single day. The authorities blame the press for the fuss, claiming newspapers are trying to oust Socialist mayor Jordi Hereu by exaggerating the problems of a neighborhood that has always had prostitutes and petty crime. The mayor has admitted, however, that the city wanted to shed its reputation as a place for drunken tourists.

Hoteliers, shop and bar owners argue that the street's success makes it a magnet for both the good and the bad. It is a very lively street that changes hour by hour, which they agree is a reflection of society as a whole and if you have 250,000 people here all sorts of things will happen. There is no law against prostitution but locals believe there is need for debate. Prostitutes have stood on the Ramblas for centuries, but have not been as aggressive as they are now and usually stayed near the port end. Some locals have recently moved out of the area because the prostitution problem has become out of control.

Some critics believe, however, that the situation is not beyond repair. They state that Las Ramblas has always had a wild side to it and no one wants to lose that completely. The town hall has even asked permission to install street cameras, demonstrating that local officials must be worried about something.

Lessons Learned

The Ramblas "is a street clearly designed for people to be on, to walk, to meet, to talk," writes Allan Jacobs, an expert on urban design and former San Francisco city planner, in his book "Great Streets" (1995, MIT Press). "The Ramblas ... succeeds so well that it would stand out anywhere." The buildings provide the street with clear edges, while the large number of windows and building entrances provides a sense of fluidity. Moreover, the street has defined its own program of events by permitting performances by local artists and musicians. This makes its visual and cultural landscape different with every visit.

"The success of Barcelona's public spaces requires two kinds of people behind the scenes. Only sensitive and open-minded designers have the talent and the time for such probing explorations. And only enlightened politicians can recognize the meanings and effects generated by good urban design." --Gwendolyn Wright



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Story in a Box

The Ramblas has been called Barcelona's most original contribution to urban design, though it developed completely unplanned. It neatly reverses the urban relationship between pedestrians and vehicles. The street width, building height, and landscaping work together to create a pedestrian-friendly scale well complemented by a dynamic mix of retail space and space for festivals, bazaars and live performers. The central promenade is usually full of retail pushcarts, sales kiosks, and arts and crafts exhibitions. Benches and planters are used as sitting areas, allowing people to enjoy daily entertainment, conversation, and people-watching. Some of the paving was decorated by the artist Joan Miró. Adjacent to The Ramblas are several interesting squares and plazas. Plaza Reial, located about the street's midpoint, is a beautiful square lined by buildings with five-story neo-classical arcades broken only by the entrance to The Ramblas. It was designed in 1848 and remodeled and renovated recently as a city project.



Resources

www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/La%20Rambla

www.aviewoncities.com

www.barcelona.de/en/barcelona-rambla.html

www.bcn.es/turisme/english/turisme/llocs/05_1.htm

www.boston.com/beyond_bigdig/cases/barcelona/index.shtml#ramblas

depts.washington.edu/open2100/

www.dkimages.com

www.grec.net/cgi-bin/hecangcl2.pgm?NDCHEC=0007610

www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/may/24/barcelona-crime-las-ramblas

iberianature.com/barcelona/history-of-barcelona/history-of-la-rambla/

www.pps.org/great_public_spaces/one?public_place_id=59#

www.qf.ub.es/admin/miscel/historia/historia_cas.html

www.tenfootsquare.com/barcelona-at-its-best-las-ramblas/



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“No one can survive merely by conservation. If there is no new construction, the city cannot stand; not even the old will endure.

-Pasqual Maragall,
Mayor of Barcelona
1982-97