



● The Santa Clotilde gardens at Lloret de Mar, which were declared a national treasure of Catalonia in 1995; below left, the bronze statue of Ava Gardner in Tossa de Mar



WAY back when I was a disco-going teenager I spent two weeks in Lloret de Mar with a fellow disco girl. Even by my package holiday standards back then... cheap, cheerful, loads of booze and hangovers that you slept off on the beach only to reinvigorate the next night... it was horrible.

Over the years I only have bad memories of a hotel where the food was unpalatable, the streets were awash with people the worse for wear (and that was in the morning) and most eateries sold chicken and chips... or fish and chips... or burger and chips.

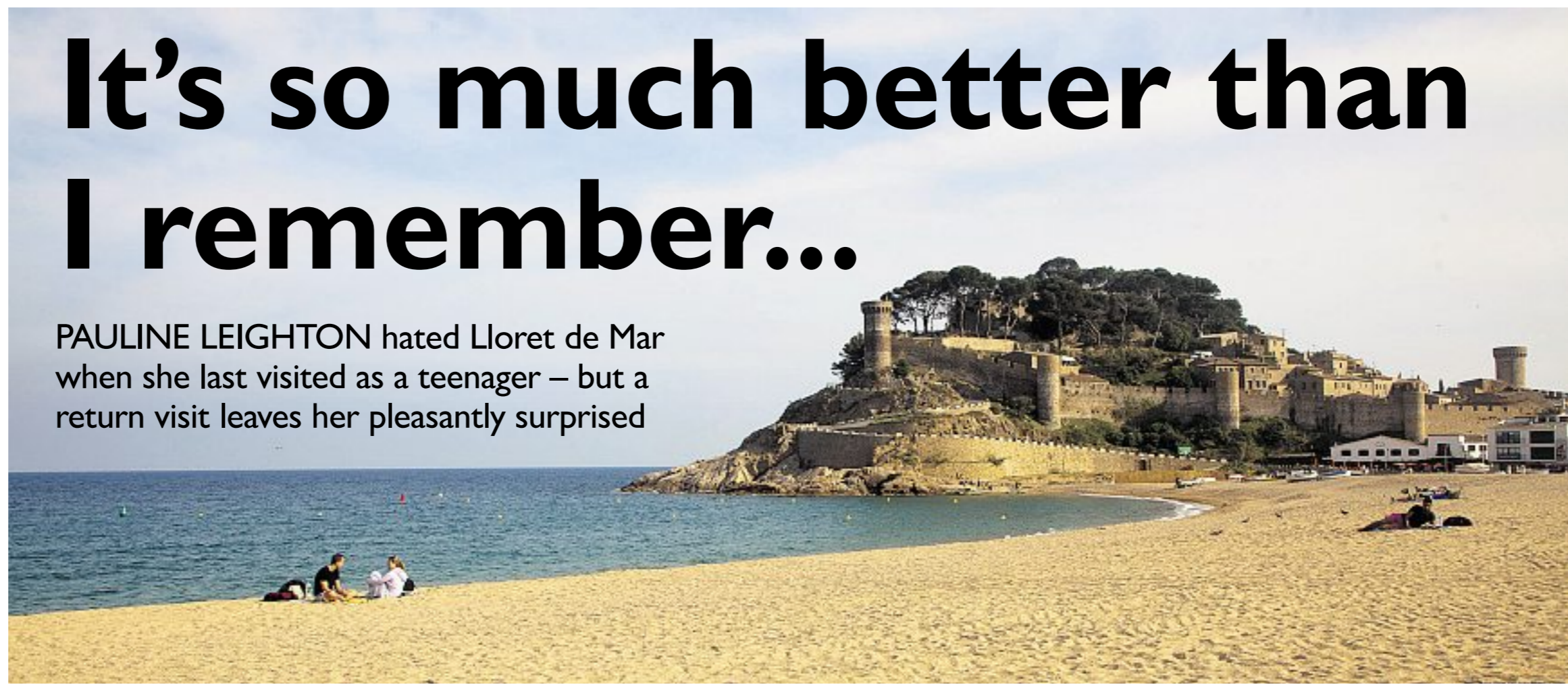
I put on half a stone... and vowed never to go back there.

I broke that promise a few weeks ago when the Advertiser was invited to sample a new flight out of Bristol to Girona. The trip involved a visit to Lloret.

I needn't have worried. All those horrific memories flew out the window as soon as we arrived. The nightclubs filled with yobs plastered on cheap vodka and gin are restricted to just one street in this beautiful town on Spain's Costa Brava. And let's face it... you don't have to go there. Particularly when you're no longer a teenager out for a tan and a tankful.

Lloret de Mar is a haven for beach-goers, museum lovers, sporty types... and has enough history to keep even the most inquisitive of us occupied.

It has churches, castles, a medieval stronghold – and miles and miles of pristine, classy beaches. The main one consistently wins the Blue Flag for cleanliness.



● The beach at Tossa de Mar with the medieval city in the background

What you don't expect are fabulous gardens and a cemetery which just takes your breath away.

We took a stroll around Santa Clotilde gardens, a spectacular setting on a picturesque coastal slope with a stunning view of the Mediterranean. The park was created in the early 20th century and was declared a national treasure of Catalonia in 1995.

Easy to see why. Acres of terraces, paths, fountains and statues exude the influence of Italian Renaissance garden. It's the perfect escape from the heat of the day.

"I could spend hours here just reading a book," said a member of our party. You could too... peace and tranquillity ooze from every corner of this perfect place.

Equally as stunning, and certainly not something I expected to find, is the Modernist Cemetery, slap bang in the middle of the town. A cemetery is not usually on the 'to-do' list for a holiday but this one is a must. It's more a collection of marvellous sculptures and works of art than a place of death.

Beautifully-adorned mausoleums project the wealth of the people who commissioned them, many who had made their fortunes in America and returned to their home town to build huge mansions and eventually be interred in this incredible place.

Just down the road from Lloret is Tossa de Mar, quieter, more family-oriented and with a bit of Hollywood history about it.

As we took a walk around the old medieval part of town, we came upon a bronze statue of the glamorous Ava Gardner... one of THE leading ladies of the Fifties.

What's she doing there then?

Well, her star was on the ascendant and she came to the Costa Brava to make Pandora and the Flying Dutchman. One of her co-stars was matador Mario Cabre and he began making eyes at her. This got back to crooner Frank Sinatra who was involved in a steamy affair with Gardner and he flew over from the States with an emerald necklace to prise her away from the bullfighter.

The film – and the romance between the two stars – did wonders for tourism in Tossa... hence the statue of the actress.

Not too far away from Lloret and Tossa is Girona.

Its latest claim to fame is that it boasts the 'best restaurant in the world' by Restaurant magazine.

El Cellar de Can Roca is a typically-Catalan

restaurant founded by two brothers who wanted to keep up the traditional cuisine, prepared as mum makes it. Sadly we didn't get to see whether it lives up to its reputation... the waiting list is a year long!

There's more to Girona than food, though. It's a small city with big city ideas.

History buffs will love to wander through more than 2,000 years of history in the fortified enclosures of the Força Vella and the Medieval Quarter.

The Força Vella dates back to the Roman foundation while the medieval extension of the city walls was carried out during the 14th and 15th centuries.

An historic walk took us through the impressive old Jewish Quarter, with its beautiful streets and porticoed squares.

Shoppers can indulge themselves in the many boutiques, and the lazy ones among you can simply sit at a cafe in one of the lovely old squares sipping a Cava and watching the stylish natives passing by. It may not have the Gaudi walk or the Sagrada Familia as does its much-touted (albeit deservedly so) neighbouring city of Barcelona – but Girona has less of the hassle and plenty of its own attractions to offer.

TRAVEL FACTS

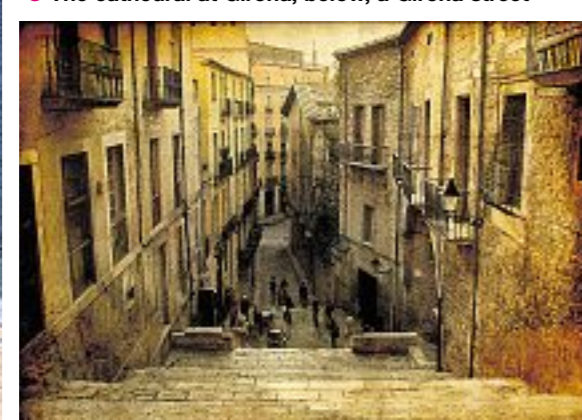
- Pauline Leighton flew to Girona from Bristol Airport with Ryanair. Ryanair operates daily flights from Bristol to Girona Barcelona. Fares are from £27.99 for booking until April 14 for travel between May and June 14. For a full list of destinations and low fares from 15 UK airports visit www.ryanair.com.
- The recently-opened Aspire lounge at Bristol Airport serves food and some brand-name drinks, but April 30, the pre-book price is £17.49 per adult and £9.99 per child (aged 2-12). For arrivals from May 1 onwards, prices are £18.99 per adult and £14.99 per child. Infants (0-2) are free. Passengers can qualify for a £2.50 discount by signing up for Bristol Airport's Rewards programme.



● Lloret de Mar beach, overlooked by a castle-like house



● The cathedral at Girona; below, a Girona street



Dalí museum is a must-see

PRIDE of place in our house is a skinny-legged metal elephant from the Dalí Theatre and Museum, a homage to the artist in his home town of Figueres.

We bought it on a visit to the truly awe-inspiring museum some years ago. It did cause a bit of a domestic. It's about four feet tall and my husband insisted it would not fit in the back of the car.

After much sweating and swearing it did, and now has pride of place in our house.

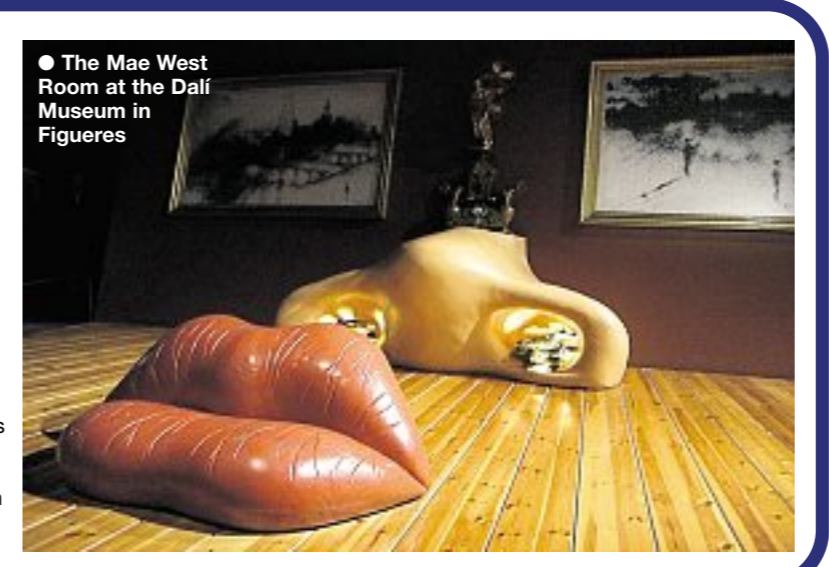
Figueres is less than 30 miles from Girona. Hire a car, get a bus or a taxi, but do go and see that museum.

The heart of the museum was the building that housed the town's theatre when Dalí was a child, and where one of his first public exhibitions was shown. In

later years Dalí and the mayor of Figueres decided to rebuild the theatre, which was bombed during the Spanish Civil War, as a museum dedicated to the town's most famous son in 1960.

The museum houses the single largest and most diverse collection of works by Salvador Dalí. There are sculptures, collages, mechanical devices and a living-room with custom furniture that looks like the face of Mae West when viewed from above.

The entrance houses a Cadillac that rains inside... and squint your eyes up to look at the picture of Gala, Dalí's muse, looking over the Med. It turns into Abraham Lincoln from a few metres away. Dalí is buried in a crypt in the Teatre-Museum basement.



● The Mae West Room at the Dalí Museum in Figueres

WE STAYED AT...



● Salles Hotel Mas Tapiolas, Santa Cristina d'Aro

A beautiful hotel set in the midst of perfect scenery... and with one of the most sumptuous buffet breakfasts I have ever seen. Everything you could possibly wish for – including asparagus! Visit www.hotelmastapiolas.com/en

● **Hotel Marsol, Lloret de Mar**
Great balcony views over the beach. Comfortable rooms and a rooftop pool... although it wasn't quite warm enough for us to try it out. Visit www.marsolhotel.com/Ca/?idioma=eng

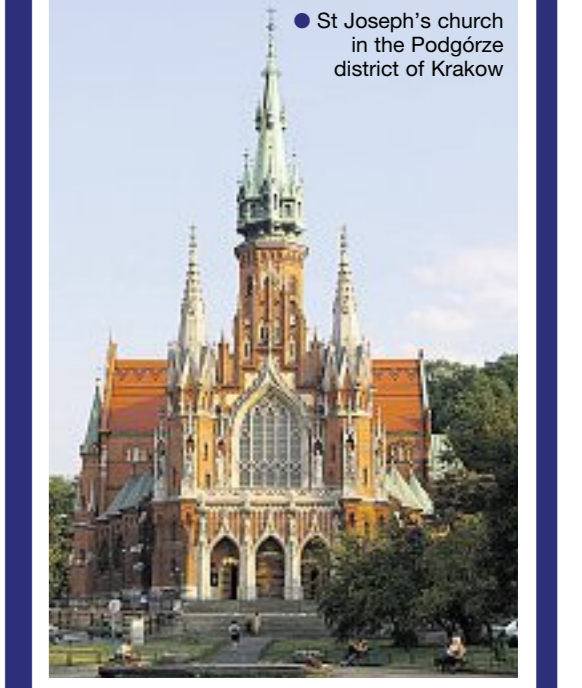
● **Hotel URH, Girona**
Very modern, very comfortable... and soon to become part of the Hilton stable. Just outside the historical centre of the city, but it only takes a few minutes to be right in the heart of Girona. Also has a terrace pool. Visit www.hotelurhgirona.com/EN/hotel.html



● Hotel URH, Girona

TRAVEL TAKE-OFF
Last minute availability

- **COSTA DEL SOL:** Travelzoo (travelzoo.com) offers seven nights at the Globales Playa Estepona (all-inclusive) from £299pp (two sharing) - saving up to 35%. Includes flights from a choice of 14 UK airports, room upgrade, welcome hamper and late check out until 6pm. Departs on select dates from May 2-June 4; September 25-October 17.
- **KOS:** Inspired Luxury Escapes (inspiredluxuryescapes.com; 0800 011 4977) offers seven nights at the five-star Atki Palace in Kardemena (all-inclusive) from £399pp (two sharing) - saving 45%. Includes flights from various UK airports on selected dates between April and October.
- **MENORCA:** Directline Holidays (directline-holidays.co.uk; 0800 088 7018) offers seven nights at the four-star Globales Club Almirante Farragut in Cala' N Forcat (all-inclusive) from £289pp (two sharing) - saving 42%. Includes flights from various UK airports on selected dates in May and October.
- **JAMAICA:** Tropical Sky (tropicsky.co.uk; 0843 636 7485) offers seven nights at in Rooms on the Beach Negril (B&B) from £699pp (two sharing) - saving £400. Includes flights from Gatwick. Book by April 11 for departures between September 7 and December 4.
- **CRETE:** Broadway Travel (broadwaytravel.com) offers seven nights at the five-star Fillion Suites Resort & Spa (half-board) from £299pp (two sharing) - saving 40%. Includes flights from Leeds Bradford. Departs April 23.
- **CUBA:** Hayes & Jarvis (hayesandjarvis.co.uk; 01293 735831) offers a 10-night holiday to Cuba with three nights at the four-star Melia Cohiba in Havana (B&B) and seven nights at the four-star Melia Varadero (all-inclusive) from £1,199pp (two sharing) - saving £223pp. Includes flights with Virgin Atlantic from Gatwick and transfers.



● St Joseph's church in the Podgórze district of Krakow

- **POLAND:** Jet2holidays (jet2holidays.com; 0800 408 5594) offers three nights at the three-star Hotel Chopin Krakow (B&B) from £279pp (two sharing). Incl flights from Newcastle on April 11.
- **FUJAIARAH:** Premier Holidays (premierholidays.co.uk; 08444 937 542) offers seven nights at the five-star Le Meridien Al Aqah Beach Resort (B&B with light refreshments available in the Club Lounge), on the eastern side of the Arabian peninsula, from £1,099pp (two sharing). Includes flights with Quantas Airways from Heathrow, transfers and complimentary daily cocktails from 7-9pm. Travel between May 11 and July 15, and August 11 and September 22.
- **GALAPAGOS:** Intrepid Travel (intrepidtravel.com; 0844 4998 487) offers the six-day Glimpse of Galapagos tour of the northern islands from £1,372pp (two sharing), saving £243pp. Incl two nights on a motorised yacht, two nights in a hotel, all breakfasts and some meals, most activities and domestic flights. Departs April 19.