

Montserrat, Spain: Santa Maria de Montserrat

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

There are some places in the world that you just know you want to visit, if you ever get the opportunity. For me, one of those places was the monastery of Montserrat. I first came across the place when we took our Mediterranean cruise with Disney back in 2007, as it was one of the optional excursions offered. At the time, we were on our first visit to Barcelona, and I was more concerned with seeing the city's main sights. As the months wore on after our inaugural cruise around the Med, I read more and more people's trip reports of their cruise experiences. A number of them had taken the excursion to Montserrat, and from the photos they had taken, it looked like a stunning place to visit. It was immediately added to my list of places that one day I would make it to.

It took another three years for that opportunity to arise, but when we were planning our road trip through France and Spain down to the villa owned by my parents-in-law, I instantly knew that, either on the way there or the way back, we had to pay a visit to Montserrat.

Santa Maria de Montserrat, to give it its correct name, is located around 30 miles west of Barcelona. It's the sort of place that you can spot from a long distance away, which is something to do with the fact that it's literally perched on top of a mountain. As we drove towards it, we could see a building and wondered if that was the monastery. The closer we got, the more apparent it became that this was our destination.

I have to be honest and say that I felt woefully unprepared when visiting Montserrat, because finding information about the place online is very difficult. Despite the fact that it's a huge tourist attraction, with millions of people visiting each year, its website can be hard to find through search engines, with many other options coming up first. For those wanting to plan a visit, the website you need is www.montserratvisita.com/

As we approached, we saw signs for a rack (cog) railway or cremallera, its native name, so rather than doing our original plan of driving up to the monastery itself, we decided to park up in the huge free multi-story car parks at the station and let the train take the strain. The trains run about every 20 minutes, and the journey takes about 15 minutes. It's not cheap, with prices running at €15 each when we visited (about \$20), but it's spectacular, with the railway rising 550 metres/1,800 ft., as it travels up the mountainside. There are some beautiful views to the valleys below and it really is an amazing feat of engineering. I was in

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awe during the whole journey at how on earth this was created. The current system was opened in 2003, but they used a railway track dating back to the 1880s. You can't begin to imagine how much hard work creating a track would've been in those days.

The train brings you out in the center of Montserrat, with the main square, the Placa de Santa Maria, located almost opposite. This in front of the basilica and is lined with beautiful marble statues, each depicting individuals or, in some cases, adults with children, all in their own alcoves, with the view of the valleys below behind them. It's a spectacular sight, but more stunning is still to come. Although there's been a monastery on this site since the 9th century, what's here today dates from 1844, as it was attacked and destroyed by the French during the Napoleonic Wars.

As we entered the inner courtyard at the entrance to the basilica, our jaws dropped even further. Not only were there more statues and sculptures and colourful wall designs on all four sides of the courtyard, but the main facade of the monastery was a joy to look at. It's got a very simple brickwork, but underneath the clock and stained glass window are more statues and exquisite carvings. It's unlike any church design I've ever seen before and we've visited many on our travels. On the other three walls of the courtyard are colourful and bold fresco designs.

Inside the basilica, the feeling of uniqueness continued, as the place is filled with some unusual lighting, an enamelled altar, various paintings by Catalan artists, and of course stained glass windows. But somehow they all combine together to provide a feel that's very different to most churches. It seems to use different styles of architecture and, oddly considering its location, I couldn't help but sense some of the style that we'd previously seen in Russian Orthodox churches.

The highlight here is the baptistery, which is home to La Moreneta, the dark one, a famous statue of the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus on her lap. She is said to have been made by St. Luke, then brought to this location by St. Peter in 50 AD. Unfortunately, modern day carbon dating has shattered that story, as she appears to date from the 12th century. Visiting pilgrims can touch her wooden orb, with the rest of her safely protected behind glass. She was a wonder to behold, as was the amount of gold and fine metals used to decorate the walls and ceilings around her!

One issue we did find was food at Montserrat. It would be fair to say that the restaurants there were very pricey and the menus didn't inspire us. We were also disappointed that the ones we found were all inside with none of the stunning views the area offers for the prices they were

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charging. There are fast food options, but they aren't great quality and I struggled to find something that didn't have meat in, ending up with Spanish omelette with potatoes in, which was very stodgy.

It's perhaps the only downside of a fascinating place to visit. I can see why this is such a popular excursion destination for cruise ships, and it's certainly well worth a visit to see it.

The basilica is open on weekdays from 9:00 am to 5:45 pm, and at weekends from 9:00am to 6:45pm. There are regular trains from Barcelona to Montserrat every hour from early in the morning.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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