



Almanac Barcelona: Spain's Convenient, Healthy Homebase

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When making your way around one of the world's beautiful cities, it's important to have your home base be somewhere you can count on for comfort, good food, and good information. For writer Sandy Bornstein and her husband, Ira, that was Almanac Barcelona, located in the heart of the city, making sightseeing easy. Sandy tells us what to expect from the hotel – and the city.

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Almanac Barcelona:

Convenient and Healthy Homebase
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Stay at the Almanac Barcelona for Convenience and Healthy Cuisine

Cruise reservations made during the height of the pandemic were speculative and filled with a host of concerns. When we rebooked our pre-pandemic reservation for an [Azamara](#) European cruise, we decided to minimize our anxieties

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surrounding our pre- and post-cruise stays by letting the cruise line handle these additional reservations. Even though our options were limited to one hotel in Lisbon and one in Barcelona, we felt confident that our money would be reimbursed or applied to a future sailing if the ship didn't depart due to COVID restrictions. By deferring to Azamara Cruises' discretion in selecting accommodations, we hoped that their criteria for choosing accommodations would match up with our priorities—a convenient Barcelona location along with onsite healthy cuisine.



The Azamara Pursuit at Cartagena Spain Port.

Hungry for more? Get Sandra's advice for picking cruise shore excursions.

Check in at Almanac Barcelona

When we disembarked from the ship at the Barcelona Terminal, we were immediately met by a private limousine that drove us to the Almanac Barcelona. This private ride to the [hotel](#) was included in our post-cruise hotel package and prevented

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unnecessary issues often associated with finding an English-speaking driver at a crowded cruise terminal.

We were not surprised that our room was not available when we arrived at 8:30am. Fortunately, the inability to check into a room did not prevent us from once again exploring Barcelona. The front desk staff was happy to store our luggage, provide water bottles, and offer directions to the places we planned to visit.

Within Walking Distance of Barcelona's Key Attractions

Since we were within walking distance of many of Barcelona's prime attractions, we simply followed the concierge's advice on how to route to our intended stops. Within no time, we were on our way.

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After previously staying in Barcelona hotels outside the city's center, we immediately realized the advantage of our more convenient location. We could walk to and from the hotel without having to rely on a taxi or public transportation. When you have only one post-cruise day, the distance between your accommodation and the sites you want to explore is

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After exploring six cities in a little more than a week, we allotted about six hours for our self-guided tour. Our itinerary included some previously visited Barcelona favorites as well as a couple of new places.

On our way to the [Museo Picasso](#), we strolled down Barcelona's iconic street, La Rambla. Our route also included a first-time tour of the [Palau de la Musica Catalana](#). Along our route, the concierge had drawn our attention to some of Barcelona's notable sites and suggested that we revisit Gaudi's Sagrada Familia.



Gaudi's Sagrada Familia.

Due to the popularity of Pablo Picasso's artwork, art lovers can see Picasso exhibits in various places around the world. However, the Museu Picasso stands out from the other places because it focuses on Picasso's formative years and his relationship with Barcelona.

Our visit to the Palau de la Musica Catalana took us back in time to the early 20th century, when this opulent concert hall



was constructed. During our self-guided tour, we sat and listened to a rehearsal for an upcoming performance.



Inside Palau de la Musica Catalana.

Virens for Lunch, Dinner, and Picnic Bag for our Return Flight

By the time we returned to the hotel, our spacious corner room was ready, and we were eager to eat lunch. From inside the hotel, we entered [Virens](#). Two menus were presented— a quick Western-style lunch and a more leisurely three-course European-Style meal.

We selected the seasonal three-course menu and started our Mediterranean inspired feast by selecting the fire-roasted eggplant with almond milk and spices garnished with pomegranate seeds and chickpeas. For the main course, we had black garlic gnocchi with roasted red cabbage in a liquified juice. While the first two nutrient-dense innovative dishes were tasty, our dessert option was the most interesting. It was a cauliflower ice cream and chocolate Contessa.



Black Garlic Gnocchi with Roasted Red Cabbage, served at Virens restaurant in the Almanac Barcelona.

Few restaurants dare to incorporate vegetables into their dessert recipes. We also experienced this same phenomenon on the dinner menu when we shared a pumpkin Catalan crème brûlée with vanilla and ginger, the star of the restaurant's winter menu, to complement our orders of vegetarian Catalan style roasted cannelloni with a vegetarian pea-based protein created by Chef Rodrigo. Each dish offered a creative way to combine plant-based ingredients with an inspiring presentation. Both our lunch and dinner options were served with freshly baked bread.



Pumpkin Catalan Creme with Vanilla and Ginger Brule served at Virens.

In between lunch and dinner, we sat on the hotel's scenic rooftop deck with a small pool. This serene spot offered the opportunity to wind down after a faced-paced cruise with only one sea day. Knowing that we had an early start and full day of traveling back to the United States, we remained in the hotel for the remainder of the day.

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Upon check out, the hotel accommodated us with a bag filled with food for our long journey home. For breakfast, we enjoyed a freshly baked croissant along with an apple and for lunch we had a vegetarian sandwich prepared on seeded bread.

Hungry for more? Read about Spain's love for Marzipan.

Almanac Barcelona Extra: Chef Sergio Ruiz and Chef Rodrigo de la Calle of Virens

Our exceptional food experience piqued my curiosity. Once home, I reached out to the culinary team to learn more about Executive Chef Sergio Ruiz and award-winning [Chef Rodrigo de la Calle's backgrounds](#), as well as the restaurant.

Chef Sergio received his culinary training at the Barcelona School of gastronomy and then was mentored by Chef Tony Bombaci and Chef Paco Perez. Chef Sergio opted to take a farm to table approach to his cooking because he felt it was "the ideal option to achieve the best and freshest produce."

Chef Rodrigo is the son of a farmer and grandson of chefs. He wants to show how cooking and nature go hand in hand. To make his point clearer, Rodrigo stated, "A greener, healthier world is possible, and I am cooking for it."

In 2011, Chef Rodrigo was awarded his first Michelin Star and a few years later his Madrid restaurant, El Invernadero, received its first Michelin Star. When asked to comment about these incredible accomplishments, as well as an assortment of other awards, Chef Rodrigo said, "I haven't worked just for the awards, but they help a lot. For me it's my passion for the products and nature. The Michelin Star and Green Michelin Star help in giving the spotlight to my work and innovations. I have been working with vegetables a long time, even when it was not as popular and recognizable. I wish to continue my pursuit and hope awards put a spotlight on my work."

Hungry for more? Read about the importance of saffron in Spain.

Chef Sergio began working with Chef Rodrigo approximately two years ago when Virens opened in 2020. He had been tracking Chef Rodrigo's culinary accomplishments and appreciated his work. When Chef Sergio and Chef Rodrigo launched Virens, they wanted to meet the needs of their restaurant guests, not just the people staying in the hotel.

While approximately 80-85% of the menu is vegetarian, they chose the name Viren, translated "green," because Chef Rodrigo liked the name. Even though they work together, Chef Sergio continues to look to Chef Rodrigo as a mentor. He remarked candidly, "I learn a lot from Chef Rodrigo. He is very professional and has a lot of knowledge."

We learned after we returned home that Virens has two signature dishes, the beetroot tartar and the leek tatin. The restaurant is also known for its specially prepared fermented beverages that are made in a temperature-controlled room designed for the fermentation process.

In addition to Virens, Chef Rodrigo concentrates his efforts on two places in Madrid. He designs creative vegetable dishes for El Invernadero, and has Paella Power, a store in El Mercado de San Miguel. The latter has fresh paellas cooked daily.

Chef Rodrigo has authored numerous books but chose to draw attention to only two. The first one mentioned is *Paella Power*, a book concentrated on the back story, the process, and the preparation of paella dishes. He considers it a "Bible for paellas." The second book, *Cocina Verde*, was written for people that want to know more about vegetables and to take their cooking to the next level.

After people depart from Virens, Chef Sergio hopes that diners will recall the innovative food options that made them ponder the combination of flavors from an incredible assortment of produce. Chef Rodrigo has a slightly different viewpoint.

“Virens is my home in Barcelona. It blends nature, vegetables, and design in a unique space. The Virens’ menu is more varied than El Invernadero as it has a weekly menu that changes according to the season.”

If your future travels take you to Barcelona, consider [staying](#) at the Almanac Barcelona and dining at [Virens](#).

-Story and photos by Sandra Bornstein

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Sandy has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, *May This Be the Best Year of Your Life*, is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. Sandy writes about food, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences, historical sites, and Jewish culture and history. You can follow Sandy on Facebook and Instagram.

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