

We picked Barcelona as a vacation destination for the same reason that many families do: great weather, design, architecture, the hub of the global food scene and a non-stop flight from India. Choosing hotels to stay in was trickier. As a travel writer, I wanted to stay in some of the best hotels in the city. Being a vegetarian family, we needed

to spend at least part of our stay in an apartment with its own kitchen. And we wanted to be by the ocean for at least part of the time.

**Hotel Arts**, managed by the Ritz Carlton ([hotelartsbarcelona.com/en](http://hotelartsbarcelona.com/en)), fit the bill on all counts. We decided to stay in one of the apartments on the top floor because they came with a

kitchen. What we didn't realise was that the architecture and location would also make for stunning rooms, or in our case, apartment. Designed by the late great architect David Graham for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, and in the shadow of the famous 'Peix' or fish sculpture that Frank Gehry built for the same occasion, Hotel Arts

has aged well and was full of architectural surprises, not to mention service surprises. We got to know the staff even before we got there. My husband wanted tickets to the Copa Del Ray or King's Cup between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. We bombarded the staff with questions about where to buy tickets and would they hold our tickets if they

were couriered to them. They did.

What makes a hotel great? Sure, a lot of it is hardware. Nobody wants to come into a lobby with drooping flower arrangements or dodgy showers. Even though luxury hotels don't like to admit it, small mistakes happen even in the best hotels. What redeems every hotel's

flaws is the way the staff treat the guest. The woman who responded to our emails, Melanie Dorange, was one such. She researched Valencia, held our football tickets, arranged for a rental car, and answered all our insistent and sometimes inconsequential questions. When she learnt that my daughter wanted to be a chef, she took us on a guided

tour through the kitchens and introduced her to the pastry chef. It is these gestures that make for memory.

Our apartment too was fantastic. Spread over two floors, and overlooking the blue sea, it included a spacious living room, study, dining room, kitchen, and two bedrooms upstairs. Light flooded the space and

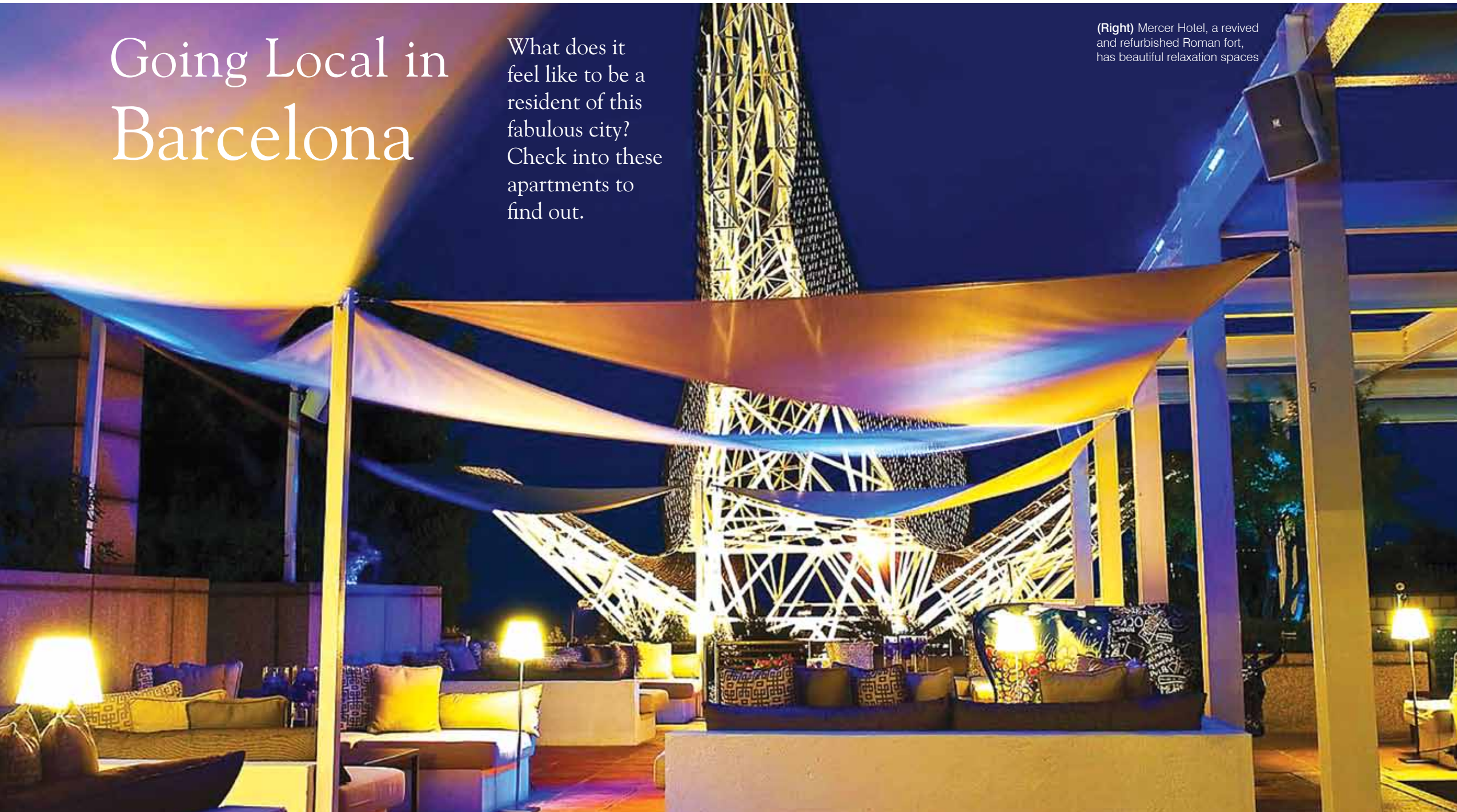
created angles and lines in the shadows. We had access to the club floor for sparkling cava or champagne along with snacks and sandwiches throughout the day. Breakfast was in the lawns under Gehry's fish, with children doing cartwheels or jumping into the pool.

We were reluctant to leave the Hotel Arts but we wanted to try out a real

# Going Local in Barcelona

What does it feel like to be a resident of this fabulous city? Check into these apartments to find out.

(Right) Mercer Hotel, a revived and refurbished Roman fort, has beautiful relaxation spaces



Hotel Arts was designed by architect David Graham for the 1992 Olympics, and has stunning rooms and terraces





The Urban Suites apartments come with two bedrooms, bathrooms, a living room, dining room, kitchen and a balcony; **(below)** the location is great for shopping, hiking and taking in museums

Barcelona apartment, to see how the locals lived. **The Urban Suites** ([theurbansuites.com](http://theurbansuites.com)) came highly recommended on Tripadvisor: two bedrooms, bathrooms, living, kitchen, dining, and best of all, a spacious balcony. We had dinner there in the light of flickering candles and read books on the loungers under the Catalan sun. The Urban Suites was located near Montjuic hill, where the Olympics were held. It was a great location for

shopping, hiking and taking in museums such as the Joan Miro Fondation. We walked to the local grocery store manned by Indians (surprise, or no surprise) and bought Manchego cheese, crusty bread, tomatoes, olives, onions and herbs for a great sandwich lunch. We sat in the sun and drank the famed Rioja wine and sparkling cava. Round the corner was Barcelona's most happening nightclub and one night, we joined a long line of teenagers to watch local bands perform. For a family that wants independence without the fuss of staff, that wants to live like the locals at stylish digs, that wants to live in a vibrant neighbourhood with great access to public transport, malls, museums and restaurants, The Urban Suites is a good choice.

**Mercer Barcelona** ([mercerbarcelona.com](http://mercerbarcelona.com)) is a revived and refurbished Roman fort in the old Gothic quarter and the red brick fort walls are still visible at the

back of the hotel. Our room, a Junior Suite on the top floor, overlooked a beautiful courtyard with orange trees and the scent of orange blossom delighted at night. On the rooftop terrace, we could sip Bellinis and look over the turrets and cathedrals that dot this beautiful city. Best of all, we could walk out of the grand swinging door of the Mercer and merge into the narrow lanes and cobblestoned streets of the ancient Roman city that has recently spawned the likes of uberchef Ferran Adria and his cohorts who are still cooking up a Catalan storm in the city they cherish. **S**



**Shoba Narayan**