

Girona's city walls

'Are you sure you still want to go?', my mother asks me, 24 hours before I fly to Girona. My mother worries about everything, but even she would not have considered worrying about me going for a short break to one of Catalonia's most elegant cities until a week ago. Before then, for the tourist, Girona only had two faces: as the 'gateway to Costa Brava', proudly proclaimed by its airport, in letters large enough to see before you hit the runway, and as an intriguing cultural destination for anyone searching for the 'new Barcelona'. It was the second of these Gironas that I was hoping to find, yet a week before we arrived there the city had taken on a new identity as a place of struggle and rebellion following the Catalan independence referendum. To my mother's concern, Girona had made front page news as thousands marched in the streets protesting against the actions of the Spanish government.

We didn't know what to expect. The news distills the momentary passion and drama of a particular place, and you imagine you will see it there still, days later, that energy imprinted on its streets, on the faces of its people. But Girona, on that first morning, was full of tourists revelling in sunshine and locals chattering in animated Catalan in cafes clustered around stately squares. Yet as we rambled around the medieval old town, in every cramped alleyway we saw defiant 'Si' posters, urgent claims for independence, and, on banners, mouths taped shut, speaking of unresolved arguments, conflicts waiting for a spark to rekindle them again.

The first thing that any dutiful tourist will do in Girona is walk around its city walls. Built by the Romans, then besieged by time, the walls were fortified in the Middle Ages to lock out the threat of the world. We walk around them at first, unable to find a way in, shut out like Moors by those imposing fortifications. Finally, we climb up, and look down on a Girona once safe and protected from its enemies. We walk through its history, behind us the dark labyrinths of Barri Vell, the old town with its moon-white cathedral, past bridges where Modernista houses weave a red and ochre patchwork over riverbanks, towards modern apartment blocks where Catalan flags share the wind with untidy laundry streaming from balconies.

Bridges and walls. Isaac Newton once said that 'we build too many walls, and not enough bridges'. I don't know how to read Girona. I don't know if these flags, these banners, raised up as earnestly as these enduring stones were once glued together, are walls between this city and the rest of Spain, or whether they are bridges between its people, a bond of solidarity against the oppression of the past. I have no-one to ask, I walk outside these lives, a tourist following a trail above the city. What's more, communication is a problem. Diligently, I had been storing crumbs of Spanish from other trips, and could now proudly consider myself competent enough to ask for the bill in a restaurant or extract information about the location of the train station. Yet now, these phrases too, instead of building bridges, raise up walls. People respond in Catalan, language yet another banner of identity, savoured by Girona's people after long years of Francoist suppression.

Beneath the walls, I hear the city beating with its many hearts. We pass playgrounds, full of speed and voices, we smell, before we see, heaving paella pans brought out to impatient restaurant tables, and in a dim courtyard, an old woman, slowly walking. I stop to look at her. We are alone, my stretch of wall suddenly empty. In her courtyard, the dark tendrils of an overhanging tree stretch out between us. She is moving one step at a time, and I can hear her slippers scraping ancient stones, her walking stick tentatively searching them, like the horns of a snail, guiding her step by step to safety. A distant church bell rings, paling under the scraping sound. She is history, snailing her way through decades of war, dictatorship, into an uncertain future. Unseen, I watch her for a long time, yet cannot see her destination.