

## Better Costa Brava?

Package tourism shaped Spain's Catalan coast before anyone knew better. Now what?

By Jonathan B. Tourtellot

*With a score of 46, the Costa Brava rated badly on our 2004 Destination Scorccard survey, in which experts on stewardship used six criteria (see box) to evaluate 115 destinations. The survey is at [www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/traveler).*

IT'S A BRIGHT JULY MORNING on the beach in the town of Lloret de Mar. Bemused sun-and-sand tourists watch as the mayor and a marching band help load a procession of townspeople down across the beach to the water. Several men bear a platform holding a statue of Santa Cristina. This is her day, and she's about to go to sea.

Although welcome to participate, most of the tourists are clueless. They are here for a cheap holiday, not folk culture. For decades, this toast has hosted such visitors-in the greatest numbers possible, at the lowest prices possible. The man leading the procession hopes to change that. Mayor Xavier Crespo i Llobet has slapped a moratorium on the runaway construction

that epitomizes the Costa Brava's downside-a sprawl of cheap vacation housing, construction cranes, souvenir shops, and booming discotheques. Crespo wants "visitors with culture and nature motivations." In short, people who want to savor Catalonia, not just the cheapest beers on the beach.

He's got a big job ahead.

The Costa Brava, stretching from northeast of Barcelona to the French border, is practically the birthplace of package tourism. It exemplifies how any sun-and-sand destination in the world can get economically hooked on tourists who care only about having a beach and familiar fast food tourists who readily defect to the next cheap place, leaving heavy footprints behind.

It's a waste of Catalonia, with its ruggedly scenic coast, rich history, flavorful cuisine, and distinctive culture-including today's fiesta. Drawn up to the sand, boats of every description are filling with townspeople. Santa Cristina gets a place of honor on one; the band takes the stern of another and plays on. Rowing crews launch racing shells, ready for the annual competition. Motorboats and dinghies fill out this instant flotilla. It heads out to sea, grandly circles the bay, then positions itself for the race. Rowers lift their oars vertically.

"Listen," says an American

woman, thrilled. "They're singing!" The saint's folk hymn finished, the rowers race to a cove down the coast, the flotilla in their wakes. From there, the saint is borne up a hill to her church, its nave lined with model ships, for a solemn service and a boisterous midday feast.

Santa Cristina is the patron saint of Lloret de Mar, once a proud Catalan sailing port. On this day, July 24, Lloret's true heritage bursts out, full of fun, from under the weight of sunblock, discos, and condo cement.

Catalan character and heritage are what Crespo and his allies want. They plan soon to open a new museum featuring Lloret's maritime traditions. They have put a hold on a new licenses for discotheques. They demolished the cramped old bus station. But they are also adding a sports arena to boost low-season visitation, sign of an economy still hooked on mass tourism. Crespo needs patience and time to change that.

And lots more dynamite.