



Boundless warmth:
Laundromat owner
Reyes Huguet (left)
with Cristina Falco.



A LAUNDROMAT IN BARCELONA

White-wise

It's a dirty business. But since 1957, in a wonderful laundromat in the heart of Barcelona, whites turn white again and colours regain their vitality. From theatrical costumes to cuddly toys: a working day in the Tintoreria Huguet, where almost everything that goes around comes around.

By Michael Thiem; photos by José Carlos Zarcero





Wash by hand?
An amusing idea
for Reyes Huguet:
In the Tintoreria
the machines
are plus-sized.





Business is looking good! Mountains of dirty laundry and a shirtless, waiting customer.



And how did FC Barcelona do? The laundromat is the place to catch up on the news.

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Shortly after ten o'clock in the morning, Barcelona awakens. Slowly. The Carrer Nou de la Rambla is a sleepy little street in the Poble Sec district, at the foot of the 173-meter (567.6-ft) high Montjuïc. A delivery van unloads beverage crates and slides them under the half-open rolling shutter of the Monjuïc bar. On the other side of the street, the Sanwar hair salon is opening. There is a poster offering you the exact cut sported by the Brazilian soccer star Neymar. No one has dared to try it yet. In the Bodega Vidal, the type of corner bar that you see at almost every intersection of the city, Tallat is flowing liberally. It's a strong espresso with a dash of hot milk—a true Catalan classic that really gets your blood pumping.

Nobody at the unassuming-looking business next door at number 143 needs such a powerful morning kick-start. In Tintoreria Huguet everything is already running perfectly smoothly. It is a beautiful la undromat. "Come in—the show is about to start", says the sign over the door in Catalan (*"Entra i que l'espectacle comenci"*). The spectacle usually arrives in the form of Reyes Huguet who quickly approaches each visitor. The proprietor combines vitality with boundless warmth, exuberant energy and irrepressible zest. Visitors are not just customers, but friends. If you don't believe it, you know it after you experience one of her hugs.

The perfect ending

"We wash a lot of costumes for the theater," says Reyes, showing her small collection of big memories under a glass countertop: a Venetian mask, feather boa, opera glasses, black gloves. Silent witnesses. "I love these things because I love the theater," she rhapsodizes. "On stage, dreams come true. And everyone who goes to the theater, expects a perfect ending. The same applies to the laundry that customers leave here. They come here expecting everything to turn out perfectly in the end." →

→ Drum-roll. In this theater of dreams, sixteen washing machines play the leading roles. Most are on heavy rotation schedules from early morning onwards. The smaller ones accommodate seven kilograms, the two larger ones handle twice the volume. Dirty laundry is washed here six days a week. Then everything runs in circles, except the conversations! Opened in 1957 by Reyes' parents, the laundromat is more than a place to do laundry. It's a meeting place, a living room where customers like to hang out. Some pour out their hearts while waiting here. Lost love, family celebrations, bereavement—soap opera up close and personal.

The business is a charmingly quirky place barely 4 meters wide (13 ft) and about 30 meters long (100 ft). The family used to live in the rear part of the building. Now it's home to the storage room and the ironing area for two employees. The business currently employs three people in addition to a driver who picks up the dirty laundry and delivers the clean laundry.

“White is white and red is red. Laundry must be clean, no matter what colour it is.” Reyes Huguet

Small, framed photos hang on the walls. They are souvenir shots made by Reyes' son. He has taken pictures of people doing their washing in India, the Philippines, Burkina Faso, Togo, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. A truly impressive gallery of memories. Impressive also applies to the smell of fresh laundry, which tickles the visitor's nose immediately. It's almost like a walk through a field of flowers, enriched with a hint of lemon.

When bedspreads, curtains and towels are packed carefully and waiting to be picked up, you easily forget that it always begins with dirty, musty bags stuffed with crumpled clothes or home textiles that are too large for their owners' machines. Reyes and her team are challenged every day. Washing, drying ironing, folding, wrapping, delivering. The re-

sult has to sparkle. Their goal: not just clean, but immaculate. Do experts prefer washing whites? Won't that show off the quality of the work best? “No,” replies Reyes. “White is white and red is red. Laundry has to be clean, no matter what colour it is. That is all that counts.”

And Cristina Falco adds: “Some customers just want some advice.” She remains confident even when faced with a Sangria stain on a white shirt. There is a stain remover in a little bottle for that. It's a German product that works on almost anything. Yellowed fabrics are more likely to cause concern. “Some costumes are decades old, and the material has started to degrade, so you have to be extreme-



White remains white, colours bright. In the end it just has to be clean.



Same but different: Whether ruffles or lace—the experts always have the best advice.



“When some customers deliver their laundry, it is as if they were handing over their children to our care.”

Cristina Falco



Curtain up, the spectacle begins: The laundromat owner Reyes Hugué loves the theatre.



Do not wash or dry clean, bleach or iron—for the experts that’s still not a problem.

ly careful,” explains Cristina while lifting white blankets and towels from wire mesh containers, reminiscent of shopping carts, and stuffing them into a silver-coloured industrial washing machine. The cycle is finished twenty minutes later. Quick wash.

Not everyone comes to do their laundry. With a grin Cristina, recalls the recent visit of a man who stormed in to get his shirt ironed. The customer waited with his torso bared because he was in such a hurry. “He looked pretty good to me,” says the 47-year-old woman. “Too bad we finished the ironing in only five minutes.” That’s a new meaning for “hot wash job”.

Prominent customers

Ironing a shirt is one of the easiest tasks. But Tintoreria Hugué is now well-known for their ability to solve even the most difficult cases. Since the salon is located in the middle of the theater district, the women have always been part of the Barcelona theater scene. The Apolo, one of the oldest theaters in the city, the Molino, the Victoria and the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya are only four big names on the long list of customers. That means washing the stage wear of international stars such as the iconic Spanish actress Sara Montiel or the ensembles of the musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *We Will Rock You*, *Hair*, *Thriller Live* and *Mamma Mia*.

Even the flamboyant costumes of Lady Gaga’s dancers land in Reyes’ machines as do the outfits of U2’s singer Bono, or others like Bruce Springsteen. And film crews are always knocking on the door. They have washed for Woody Allen’s *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and for *Red Lights* starring Robert de Niro. Even the sweat of victories and tears of defeat have been washed from “Periquito”, the colourful budgie mascot costume of the Spanish premier league team Espanyol Barcelona. And of course, stuffed animals en-masse—the big stars of the little ones. Cristina: “Some customers really need a lot of encouragement. When they are dropping off their washing, you would think they are handing over their children.”

The customer satisfaction is evident by the extensive autograph collection on the wall. Reyes knows many of them personally. She gets regular invitations to theater premieres. There is another one the day after tomorrow. The piece is called *Patas arriba*, which translates as “Chaos.” The 68 year-old loves these evenings. Tune out and dive in, knowing that in a short time, the show will be repeated at the laundromat. Why? Because a superstition has it that costumes should never be washed before the premiere. The day after is always busy. Reyes laughs. And perhaps for once, her day will also start with a Tallat ... ■