

Romanesque in the Pyrenees

Pallars Sobirà



THE COUNTY OF THE PALLARS SOBIRÀ covers the area, from south to north, starting at the Gorge of Collegats up until the village of Alós d'Isil, following the course of the waters of the Noguera Pallaresa River. It is the fourth biggest comarca (roughly, a county or district) in Catalonia and it has one of the lowest population densities of the country, with its 7,400 inhabitants; 4 people per km². In this comarca we find the biggest lake of the Pyrenees, Certascan, and the highest peak in Catalonia, la Pica d'Estats, with an altitude of 3,143 m. Most of the area in the Pallars Sobirà is protected. There are several zones including the PEIN (Natural Interest Landscape Plan of Catalonia), the AIGÜESTORTES I ESTANY DE SANT MAURICI NATIONAL PARK, the ALT PIRINEU NATURAL PARK, the PARTIAL NATURAL RESERVE OF NOGUERA PALLARESA-COLLEGATS, vast extensions of the NATURA 2000 NETWORK, the NATIONAL HUNTING RESERVE OF BOUMORT...

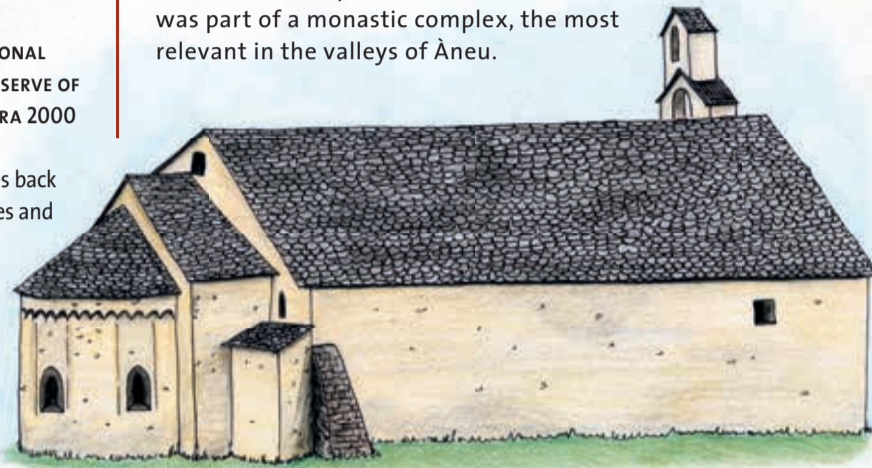
IN TERMS OF HISTORY, THE FIRST SETTLEMENT IN THE PALLARS goes back into PREHISTORY, from which period there are many testimonies and remains, specially the megalithic monuments. The PRESENCE OF ROMANS seems, at first, to not have been very intense, as a contrast to that in the Val d'Aran. However, the most recent archaeological finds in the Pallars are starting to indicate quite the opposite.

Later, in the MEDIEVAL TIMES and after the dismantling of the Roman world, the high mountain communities were responsible for the exploitation of the natural resources. After the conquest and reign of the counts of Toulouse, the House of Pallars started its dominion, which would end up being the longest in time in all the Catalan counties and which finished in 1487 with the loss of the castle of València d'Àneu and the end of Hug Roger III's power. The general crisis of the feudalism had its continuity into the MODERN AGE and in the transformation of the Pallaresan County into a marquise with the House of Cardona. At the same time of this nobility authority of a marquise, several dominions existed too, but they composed a royal, superior structure, known as sotsvegueria of Pallars, which would be substituted by the corregiment de Talarn in the eighteenth century.

From the end of the EIGHTEENTH CENTURY UNTIL 1870 there was a growth in the population which reached then the highest moment in demographic development: 20,348 inhabitants in 1860. From 1870 and until 1910 there is a serious CRISIS ON THE SUBSISTENCE ECONOMY, which was prevailing until that moment, at the same time that a dramatic decline in the economy and population takes place, also caused by the civil confiscation under Madoz, Minister of Finance, as well as the bad weather conditions and the outbreak of the phylloxera pest in vineyards, among others. From 1910 until 1960, as a consequence of the IMPROVEMENTS IN COMMUNICATION and the building of the first hydroelectric power stations, there is a period of modernization, unfortunately interrupted by the Civil War and its aftermath. From 1960 until 1980 the county experiences a SECOND CRISIS caused by the mechanization of work in the country and the industrialization of cities. Cities will become an alluring opportunity for Pallaresan people, a fact that will lead to a new demographic decline to the point of having only half of the population (5,247 inhabitants) remaining in the comarca.

◇ CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA D'ÀNEU, IN ESCALARRE

The church, with its large dimensions, can be found in the outskirts of Esterri d'Àneu. To get there, take the path to Escalarre and, only 800m away, there will be the crossing of Santa Maria. Continue for another 900m and you will see the temple on the right. The church has a structure of an only nave, covered in wood, on pointed arches. It is also probable that the church was part of a monastic complex, the most relevant in the valleys of Àneu.



CENTRAL APSE: Lombard in decoration with arches between the lesenes (pilaster strips), and three double-thick windows.



PAINTINGS: Attributed to the workshop of the painter Master of Pedret. In the upper part, there is a representation of the Epiphany with Her Highness Maria. Among other scenes and characters, in the lower part there are two seraphs, with their three pairs of wings each, and the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel.

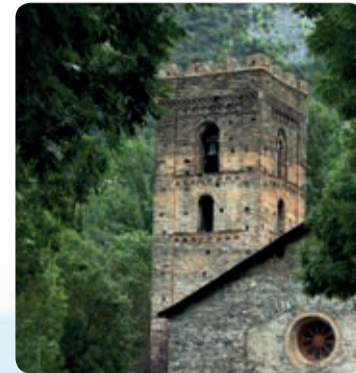


PLAN: The structure possibly follows the forms of the fifteenth century and, according to some authors, the original was a basilical plan with three naves.

◇ CHURCH OF SANTA MARIA DE RIBERA DE CARDÓS

It is considered to be one of the most monumental in the comarca, thanks to the medieval bell tower standing at the side of the church. The rather large size of the church and the changes it has undergone, in particular during the eighteenth century, have given the temple a special light, not very usual in Romanesque churches. In 2001, in an agreement reached in a plenary session by the administrative organisation of Consell Comarcal del Pallars Sobirà, the building was considered to be a Cultural Heritage of Local Interest.

BELL TOWER: The most remarkable feature of the church. Crowned with defensive elements, merlons, it divides its four sections with friezes in saw-toothed patterns.



ROSE WINDOW: Its geometrical decoration shows two enclosing arches. A series of triangles in relief encircle the external perimeter.



APSE CHAPEL: Lombard ornamentation and arcing, with a double-thick window in pumice stone.

◇ CHURCH OF SANTA EULÀLIA D'ALENDO

A magical church in the heart of the Pyrenees. Follow the local road in Tirvia to Burg and Ferrera; after another 7 km you will get to Ferrera, go through the village and continue along the main road towards Alendo. The church stands on a serrat, a lower but protruding part of the range of mountains. The semicircular nave and apse have a pointed chancel arch, with external supporting buttresses. At the union between the nave and the apse, on the outside, there is a bell-gable. On the southern façade, where the round-arched door is, the remains of a porch or arcade can be seen. There are two double-thick windows at the apse.



◇ SANTA MARIA DE GERRI DE LA SAL

The most remarkable and outstanding church of the Pallars Sobirà. What remains of the old Benedictine abbey is the Romanesque church of the twelfth century, with a basilica plan featuring three naves and three apses, an atrium with three attached structures that shelter the door at the eastern end; also, there is a bell-gable with three different floors. Most of the alterations have been in its external features, where the most remarkable ones have been the atrium and the accessing portal, apart from the decoration of the apses and the bell-gable.



ATRIUM: It consists of three parts, or bodies, with columns and sculpted capitals on the external walls and on the portal walls. The portal to access the church is framed by a round arch, with three decreasing archivolts, which show sculpted decoration on the capitals of the columns at the door. Of the exterior apse, there are only visible a lateral apse and a part of the central one, both with decorated series of arches and a saw-toothed frieze supported by columns at the central apse.



INTERIOR: It is the most interesting part, where we can see the structure of a barrel vault and some transversal, toral arches supported by pillars with columns and sculpted capitals.



APSE: The central apse has an arcade supported by seven columns. There are up to thirty capitals to be seen, twenty of which have human motifs and vegetation sculpted on them.



◇ CHURCH OF MARE DE DÉU DE BERNUI

This Pyrenean legend tells about two shepherds from Bernui who were walking through the lands of the neighbouring village, Seurí, when they found the Virgin. Both villages claimed the image and since there was no agreement reached, they decided to leave it in the hands of fate, or the will of the Virgin. They threw a càntir, a clay container for water, down the slope of the mountain. It was agreed that if it remained unbroken, the image of the Virgin would be for the people of Bernui, who trusted in her blindly; if the càntir broke, the people from Seurí would keep the image. The miracle was when the clay container did not break as proof of the will of the Virgin who wished to remain with those who most believed in her. In the church, the most recent discovery can be seen: some Baroque paintings which have been kept hidden under a layer of white paint. The process of restoration has brought to light those in better conditions, the circular motifs in relief on the ceiling.



As you walk down to the village, the first house in sight is named Casa Alegre, one of the «cases fortes», strong or powerful houses of the valley, which still has the circular balcony from where the priest used to read the sermon on the village festival and on Corpus Christi.



TOURIST OFFICES

PALLARS SOBIRÀ TOURIST OFFICE
Cami de la Cabanera, s/n. 25560 Sort
Tel. 973 621 002. www.pallarssobira.info

ESTERRI D'ÀNEU MUNICIPAL TOURIST OFFICE
C. Major, 40 bis. 25594 Esterri d'Àneu
Tel. 973 626 345. www.vallsdaneu.org

BAIX PALLARS TOURIST OFFICE
Baix Pallars Town Council. Gerri de la Sal
Tel. 973 662 040. <http://baixpallars.ddl.net>

TAVASCAN TOURIST OFFICE
Carretera de Tavascan, s/n. Tavascan
Tel. 973 623 079. www.tavascan.info

LLAVORSÍ TOURIST OFFICE
Carretera de Cardós, s/n. Llavorsí
Tel. 973 622 217. <http://llavorsi.ddl.net>

VALÈNCIA D'ÀNEU TOURIST OFFICE
Avda. Port de la Bonaigua, 9. València d'Àneu
Tel. 973 626 038. <http://altaneu.ddl.net>

VALL DE CARDÓS TOURIST OFFICE
Cami Comunidor, s/n. Ribera de Cardós
Tel. 973 623 239. <http://vallsdcardos.ddl.net>

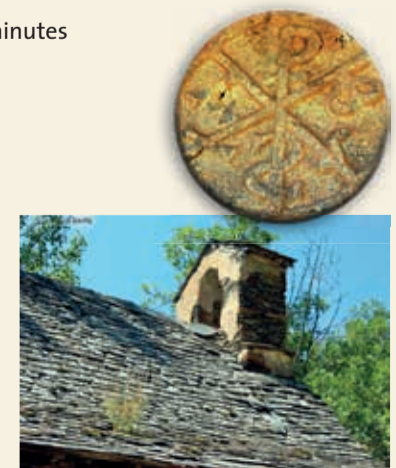
HEADQUARTERS OF THE PARC NATURAL DE L'ALT PIRINEU
Carrer de la Riba, 1. Llavorsí
Tel. 973 622 335. <http://parcsnaturals.gencat.cat>

NATIONAL PARK OF AIGÜESTORTES I ESTANY DE SANT MAURICI
Carrer de Sant Maurici, 5. Espot
Tel. 973 624 036. <http://parcsnaturals.gencat.cat>

1. A WALK AROUND THE CHURCH OF MARE DE DÉU DE LES NEUS

ITINERARY: Borén - Mare de Déu de les Neus - bordes d'Àreu - Àreu - Borén
DURATION: 1 hour 30 minutes
GRADIENT: 400 m
DISTANCE: 3,700 km

OF SPECIAL INTEREST: Church of Sant Martí de Borén, hermitage of Mare de Déu de les Neus, bordes (summer dwelling) d'Àreu, panoramic views, the village of Àreu.



2. FROM VILLAGE TO VILLAGE CROSSING THE MEDIEVAL BRIDGES

ITINERARY: Ribera de Cardós - Cassibrós - Ainet de Cardós - Arrós de Cardós - Bridge of Lladrés - Lladorre
DURATION: 2 hours 30 minutes
GRADIENT: 100 m
DISTANCE: 8,800 km

OF SPECIAL INTEREST: Bridges in the medieval style, Romanesque architecture, panoramic views, specific typology of village building.
VARIATION: From Arrós de Cardós, walk up to Esterri de Cardós and from there, walk down towards the Bridge of Lladrés. 45 minutes must be added to the basic itinerary.



Foto: Roger Gras

3. AFTER THE FOOTPRINTS OF THE ROMANESQUE

ITINERARY: Llavorsí - Montesclado - Mallolis - Alendo - Ferrera - Glorieta - Tirvia - Llavorsí
DURATION: 5 hours
GRADIENT: 500 m
DISTANCE: 16,700 km

OF SPECIAL INTEREST: Romanesque churches, panoramic views, specific typology of village building.



4. THE ROUTE OF PLA DE CORTS

ITINERARY: Peramea - Cortcastell - Montcortès - Bretui - Masia d'Enjaume - Peramea
DURATION: 3 hours 30 minutes
GRADIENT: 700 m
DISTANCE: 10,300 km

ACCESS WITH A VEHICLE: Take the local road in Gerri de la Sal to get to Peramea. Park the car in Peramea, at the Plaça de la Font (Fountain Square).



5. AROUND THE VALLEY OF ÀSSUA AND THE OLD PATH IN SURP

ITINERARY: Rialp - Surp - Escàs - Sorre - Llessui - Bernui - Seurí - Altron - Rialp
DURATION: 6 hours
GRADIENT: 700 m
DISTANCE: 10,300 km

ACCESS WITH A VEHICLE: The itinerary starts in Rialp, cars can be parked there; panoramic views and remarkable examples of specific typology of village building.





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Collection of interactive guides

(Available at the Pallars Sobirà Tourist Office)

1. Romanesque churches and hermitages
2. Frescoes, paintings and carvings on wood. Romanesque heritage
3. Altarpieces

Medieval Villages

Fortified medieval village of Escaló
 Fortified medieval village of Peramea
 Fortified medieval village of Rialp
 Fortified medieval village of Vilamur

Bridges in the Medieval Style

Alós	Àrreu
Borito (Lladorre)	Cassibrós
Espot	Esterrí d'Àneu
Gerri de la Sal	Isil
Lladrós	Tavascan
La Torrassa	

Hermitages

Hermitage of Sant Quirc (Alins)
 Pre-Romanesque hermitage of Sant Francesc (Araós)
 Hermitage of Mare de Déu de les Neus (Àrreu)
 Hermitage of Santa Eulàlia d'Alendo (Farrera)
 Hermitage of Santa Eulàlia de Serra (Lladorre)
 Hermitage of Mare de Déu d'Arboló (Soriguera)
 Pre-Romanesque hermitage of Sant Llíser (Virós)

Churches

Church of Sant Romà (Aineto)
 Church of Santa Maria de la Torre (Alins)
 Church of Sant Llíser (Alós d'Isil)
 Church of Sant Esteve (Araós)
 Church of Sant Feliu de la Força (Àreu)
 Church of Sant Serni (Baiasca)
 Church of Santa Maria de Besan
 Church of Mare de Déu de Bernui
 Church of Sant Martí (Escalarre)
 Church of Santa Maria d'Àneu (Escalarre)
 Church of Sant Pau (Esterrí de Cardós)
 Church of Santa Maria (Gerri de la Sal)
 Church of Santa Maria (Ginestarre)
 Church of Sant Pere del Burgal (Escaló)
 Church of Sant Llorenç (Isavarre)
 Church of Sant Joan (Isil)
 Church of Santa Maria (Ribera de Cardós)
 Church of Sant Just and Sant Pastor (Son)
 Church of Sant Pere (Sorpe)
 Church of Sant Iscle and Santa Victòria (Surp)
 Church of Sant Pere (Tor)
 Church of Sant Andreu (València d'Àneu)
 Church of Mare de Déu de Medina (Vilamur)

Monasteries

Remains of Sant Pere del Burgal (Escaló)
 Remains of Santa Maria de Gerri (Gerri de la Sal)

Original Frescoes

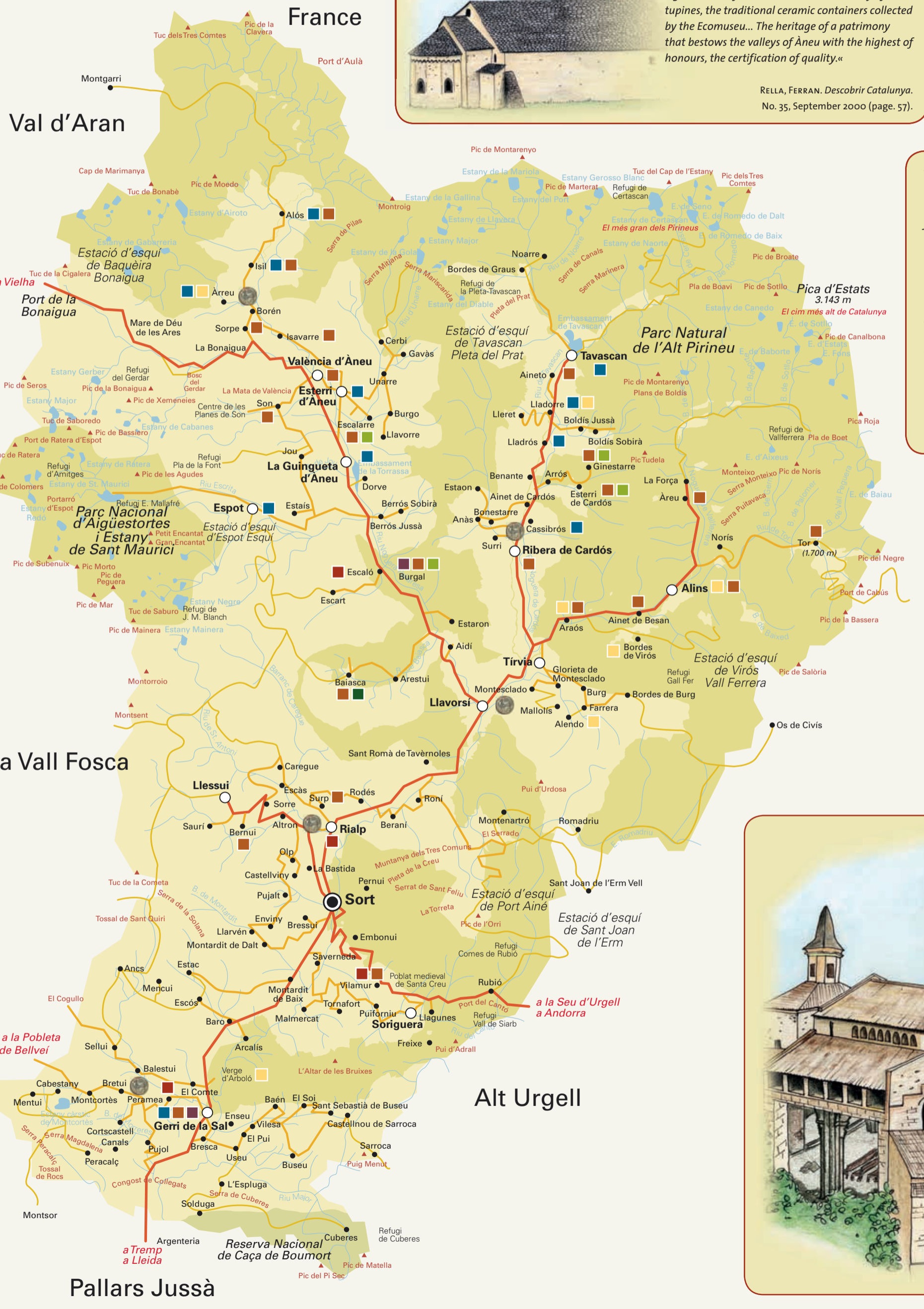
Church of Sant Serni (Baiasca)

Reproductions of Frescoes

Church of Santa Maria d'Àneu (Escalarre)
 Church of Sant Pere del Burgal (Escaló)
 Church of Santa Maria (Ginestarre)
 Church of Sant Pau and Sant Pere (Esterrí de Cardós)

NOTICE: This is only a representative selection of the Romanesque in the comarca (what would correspond to an English county) of the Pallars Sobirà. For more extensive information, there are some further resources available at the Pallars Sobirà Tourist Office.

Starting point for the recommended routes



THE VALLEYS OF ÀNEU AND ESPOT. The only National Park in Catalonia

»The valleys of Àneu are a paradigm of nature in themselves, with a clearly marked geographical identity. These lands have their own historical personality, defined and framed by the watch towers, in the medieval town of Escaló, or in the natural vantage point that the castle of València d'Àneu represents. These valleys are a natural phenomenon, with its centre right at the heart of the Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park. They offer cultural singularity, human warmth, the touching rusticity of Romanesque churches, with the wooden carvings, the altarpieces, the holy water and oil fonts, the unique simplicity of the stone bridges; the perpetual magic of the summer solstice celebrated with the falles in Isil, the generous fascination of villages with their gleaming slate roofs and eight sided belfries, even in the authenticity of the tupines, the traditional ceramic containers collected by the Ecomuseu... The heritage of a patrimony that bestows the valleys of Àneu with the highest of honours, the certification of quality.»

RELLA, FERRAN. *Descobrir Catalunya*. No. 35, September 2000 (page 57).

THE VALLEY OF CARDÓS. Water and Romanesque in its purest state

»In the eleventh century the plenitude that represented the high medieval times arrived to the county of the Pallars, with the triumph of the Romanesque, (...) the political and military fights could not stop the drive for organization of the government of these lands and allowed for some economic development during the twelfth century, which gave the funds for the construction of the Romanesque churches that were built then, some of which were later substituted for more modern constructions from the seventeenth century onwards. In addition to this natural prosperity, there was another way of income thanks to some special circumstances: the benefits that the Catalan counts had from the paeria, the tax paid by Saracens for protection, as well as the participation in the re-conquest of the new Catalonia, by noblemen or either by individuals born in the Pallars Sobirà working as almogàvers, a kind of mercenary soldier with service pay and right to the spoils of war; apart from this, there were other possibilities for wealth such as trading with raw materials, with wool or parchment, for instance.»

AMICS DE L'ART ROMÀNIC, *Les esglésies romàniques de la Vall de Cardós*. Barcelona, IEC, 2007 (page 33).

THE MID PALLARS. Where the river becomes adventure

»The Noguera Pallaresa River is the soul of the Pallars Sobirà, and from time immemorial, it became the essential axis for transportation. In the precise point where this network of waters and roads meet, where it absorbs the waters of the tributary, the Noguera de Cardós, and the roads meet at the crossing of the three valleys – the vall Ferrera, the valleys of Àneu and the valley of Cardós –, there the village of Llavorsí was established. (...) Thanks to its geographical situation, in the double crossing of rivers and roads, the town of Llavorsí is seen as a confluence of all the valleys in the Alt Pallars, and, at the same time, as the door or the hinge between the lower lands of the southern half of the Pallars Sobirà and the abrupt lands of the high Pallaresan valleys.»

MARUGAN, CARMEN MARIA AND OTHERS. *Un passeig per la història de Llavorsí*. Ajuntament de Llavorsí and Pagès Editors, SL (2007).

THE VALLEY OF ÀSSUA. The valley of poets and writers

»Àssua is to me the paradise of my childhood. The name, I learned it much, much later. Even though the meaning of the Basque-origin word is a place of stones, to me it is the valley of water; wherever you are, that transparently crystal sound is next to you: a fountain, a pond, an irrigation canal, a ravine, a stream... (...) Under the solemn and welcoming presence of the Montsent, I can assure you that the valley of Àssua represents an unexpected tour, full of shelters and surprises, the fond memory of a home that you will miss when you are far away»

BARBAL, MARIA. *La Vall d'Àssua* (pròleg). Editorial Piolet, 2000 (page 7).

THE ROUTE OF THE BAIX PALLARS. The richness of salt

»And the Almighty said: "Let there be light". And the light divided from the darkness. It was then that Adam and Eve realised they were in the Pallars. They crossed the pass of Collegats, skirted around the Gorge of Hell, dived in front of l'Argenteria and walked happily towards Gerri de la Sal. They fished some trout with their own hands under the Romanesque bridge and settled down in the square of el Mercadal. They took shelter in the Alfoli, the salt warehouse; they salted the trout and ate them. From the warehouse they contemplated how the airy bell gable of the Monastery of Santa Maria – a majestic example of the Romanesque of the eleventh century, and one of the jewels of the Benedictine monks – painted its reflection in the vast sea of the salt lakes. The villagers, fierce Pallaresan people, welcomed them with local products: the best artisan salt of the world, the cured sausages, named xolis, secallona, and girella, the cheese made from cow's, goat's or sheep's milk and the sweet nectar of the liquor called retasia. In the evening, Adam and Eve, full of gratitude, walked to the hermitage of Arboló, built in the twelfth century, as a space for pilgrimage and votive offerings... After singing the joys of the Madonna, or Mare de Déu, of Arboló, they took advantage of a rafting boat that was going down stream sailing the crystalline waters of the Noguera Pallaresa River and returned to the village. When they were expelled from Paradise, they realised how good it had been spending their time in Gerri de la Sal.»

CARLES CANUT, actor, and CARLOS PÉREZ DE ROZAS, journalist, descendants of Adam and Eve, brothers-in-law and dwellers of Casa Tatet of Gerri de la Sal. August 2008