

THE WITHE TOWN OF SITGES



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ACCORDING TO TRADITION AND TO SOME ARCHAEOLOGISTS, THE HISTORY OF SITGES GOES BACK TO THE OLD ROMAN CITY OF SUBUR, MENTIONED BY THE HISTORIANS STRABO, MELA AND PLINY, AND FROM WHICH WE GET THE EXPRESSION "LA BLANCA SÚBUR". HOWEVER, THE TRUTH IS THAT THE FIRST KNOWN REFERENCE TO THE TOWN DATES FROM 992 AND APPEARS IN A LATIN DOCUMENT WHICH GIVES IT THE NAME "CEGIAS".

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Some forty kilometres south of Barcelona, past the Garraf coast and in the region of the same name, we come across the town of Sitges reflected on the Mediterranean: 17 kilometres of sea front from the Aiguadolç beach, with its sports and tourist harbour, to the Terramar golf course, at the southern end of the residential development of Vinyet.

According to tradition and to some archaeologists, the history of Sitges goes back to the old Roman city of Subur, mentioned by the historians Strabo, Mela and Pliny, and from which we get the expression *la Blanca Súbur* used in the town's tourist promotion. However, the truth is that the first known reference to the town dates from 999 and appears in a Latin document which gives it the name *Cegias*. Linguists connect this name with the plural of the Catalan word *sitja*, meaning "a deep hole in the ground", "a ditch" or "a small chasm".

The present town grew up around the castle of Sitges, first documented in 1047. The lordship of the castle—within the county of Barcelona—belonged to the bishop of the county town and later pas-

sed to the Centelles and Fonollar lineages until 1353, when it was purchased by Barcelona cathedral's *Pia Almoina* for the sum of a hundred thousand sous. The castle suffered a series of mishaps. It was rebuilt in 1525, destroyed by Castilian troops in 1649, during the War of the "Segadors", and rebuilt again in 1681. In 1804, the town freed itself from the feudal ecclesiastic yoke and became a part of the crown. The castle was finally demolished in 1888 and the town hall, the work of the architect Salvador Vinyals, was built on the site.

In 1778, following the full liberalization

of trade with America under Carles III, the town's inhabitants started to put to sea on commercial enterprises which were to bring wealth and prosperity. The euphoria took the boats of Sitges to America (Buenos Aires, Mexico and the Antilles, mainly) and Northern Europe as far as Saint Petersburg, beyond the Baltic. Between 1718 and 1787, there was a considerable increase in the town's population, which went from one thousand six hundred inhabitants to three thousand four hundred and eighty-five. However, in the nineteenth century, a series of events interrupted the town's economic rise. The most important were the War of "the French", the Carlist Wars, the loss of the last colonies and the Phylloxera plague.

Luckily, these events were made up for by the investments on the part of the *americanos*, who had returned to the town after making their fortunes in the New World. It would be interesting to draw up a catalogue of the houses these *americanos* built themselves so as to spend the rest of their days in their home town.

Phylloxera appeared in Sitges in the last



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decade of the nineteenth century, but failed to put a stop to the production of the sweet, fragrant malvasia, the typical wine that the people of Sitges had been exporting to America since the eighteenth century. This unique nectar is named after the grape it comes from, which is grown in the Iberian Peninsula, Occitania, southern Greece and southern Italy. It is therefore a genuinely Mediterranean wine, whose name comes from the port of Monenbasía, in the Peloponesian, known as *Napoli di Malvasia* by the Venetians.

1881 was an important year for the town, since it saw the arrival of the railway as well as piped gas and water, and the opening of the Garraf road brought it closer to Barcelona.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, new prospects opened up for *la Blanca Súbur*. The *Foment Sitgetà*, founded in 1901, started to promote tourism with a message that extolled the town's natural beauty and the openness of its inhabitants. The painter Santiago Rusiñol and the Modernist movement also contributed in a big way. In 1909, the Hotel Súbur was built, considered the best in Catalonia, and in 1918, work started on the residential development at the Terra-

mar Park. Today, Sitges has over eleven thousand inhabitants and a hundred hotels, with a total of some six thousand places, and about four thousand more places in camping sites.

In the old town, built around the *carrer Major*, or High Street, which joins the town hall with the Cap de la Vila (a centre for civic and religious events), we find the eighteenth century Can Llopis Romantic Museum (the building was originally the property of the Falç family) and the Baluard district with its characteristic church of Sant Bartomeu and Santa Tecla, proudly looking out over the la Ribera beach. Next to it is the Maricel complex, built on the site of a fourteenth century hospital by the American Charles Deering, and the Cau Ferrat, which Santiago Rusiñol had built over some sixteenth century fishermen's houses, and which was converted to a museum after his death. Next to the Vilanova road, close to the golf club, stands the church of the Mare de Déu del Vinyet, which gives its name to the chief residential area. Beside the sea is the magnificent *Passeig Marítim*, one of the most beautiful sea-fronts in Catalonia.

As well as its historical and artistic monuments and the natural beauty of its

surroundings, Sitges is a tourist resort which also attracts a large number of visitors for a series of regular events: the Barcelona-Sitges International Vintage Car rally; Corpus Christi, when the streets are carpeted with flowers; the National Carnation Exhibition; the festivity of Sant Bartomeu, with its typical *Moixigangam* dance of devils and sticks; the grape-harvest festival; the International Theatre Festival; the International Horror Film Festival; the International Menéndez y Pelayo University, and, especially, its Carnival.

Sitges can also boast a very peculiar characteristic. The openness of its inhabitants, its contact with artists and intellectuals, its climate and its coastal situation close to a large capital, have made it one of the three most important gay resorts in the Mediterranean, along with Ibiza and Ilkonos. In the town or the residential areas that surround it, especially during the carnival, this gives a happier, "gayer" —even erotic— note to its streets and beaches. On these beaches, as in many other parts of Catalonia, nudism is the norm. Sitges is a "special" offer for all those tourists interested in seeing a part of the Mediterranean coast which is also "special". ■