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SIURANA (PRIORAT)

## **PRADES, RED HILLS BY A BLUE SEA**

THE HILLS OF PRADES HAVE PHYSICAL PROPERTIES MORE TYPICAL OF THE PYRENEAN FOOTHILLS THAN OF THE COASTAL RANGE, AND THIS GIVES THE IMPRESSION THAT THE SEA IS HUNDREDS OF KILOMETRES AWAY WHEN IN FACT THE MEDITERRANEAN IS BARELY A STONE'S THROW AWAY.

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**C**atalonia is, undoubtedly, a small country. One of its great attractions, though, is the combination of its small size and its great geographical variety. Plains, rivers, mountains, valleys and coastline live side by side in suggestive and often striking harmony. The hills of Prades are a clear example of this: with physical properties more typical of the Pyrenean foothills than of the coastal range, one might be tempted to believe that the sea is hundreds of kilometres away when in fact the Mediterranean is barely a stone's throw away. Take Salou, for example, one of the international tourist resorts that have grown up along the Catalan coast, where there is nothing to remind us of that medieval beach from which James I's

fleet of ships set off for Mallorca to expel the Arabs and conquer the Balearics for the Crown of Catalonia and Aragon. From Salou, halfway between Tarragona and Reus, we can take the main road to the latter town. Then we follow the road to Falset, and after a while we turn off towards Les Borges del Camp and Alforja. Suddenly, the road, which has taken a straight line along the plain, starts to climb, winding and twisting until before too long we find ourselves surrounded by mountains, the Montsant massif and the hills of Prades. We go through Cornudella de Montsant and turn off to Prades when we get to the village of Albarca. Les then three quarters of an hour after leaving Salou –travelling *slowly* because, amongst other reasons, after Les

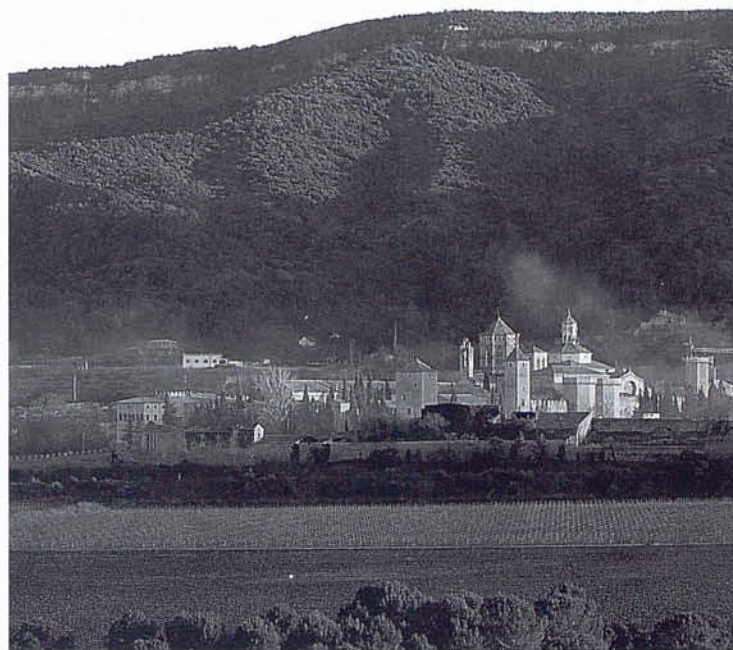
Borges and Alforja the road isn't recommended for high speed travel– we can step out into Prades's porticoed church square.

This is the highest point of the region known as Camp de Tarragona, once a large plain and mountains covered in woodland. For some centuries now this woodland has been reduced to this mountain backdrop circling the plain: Prades, Llaberia, Alforja, El Montsant, La Llena, La Mussara, Colldejou... A varied wooded landscape which as anyone will tell you is at its best in the autumn, the mushroom season. Catalonia is a great country for mushrooms and these woods are one of the richest areas there are for *rovellons* (lactarius) and other types. The forests of Prades are of oak and pine,





CARTHUSIAN MONASTERY OF SCALA DEI (PRIORAT)



MONASTERY OF POBLET (CONCA DE BARBERÀ)

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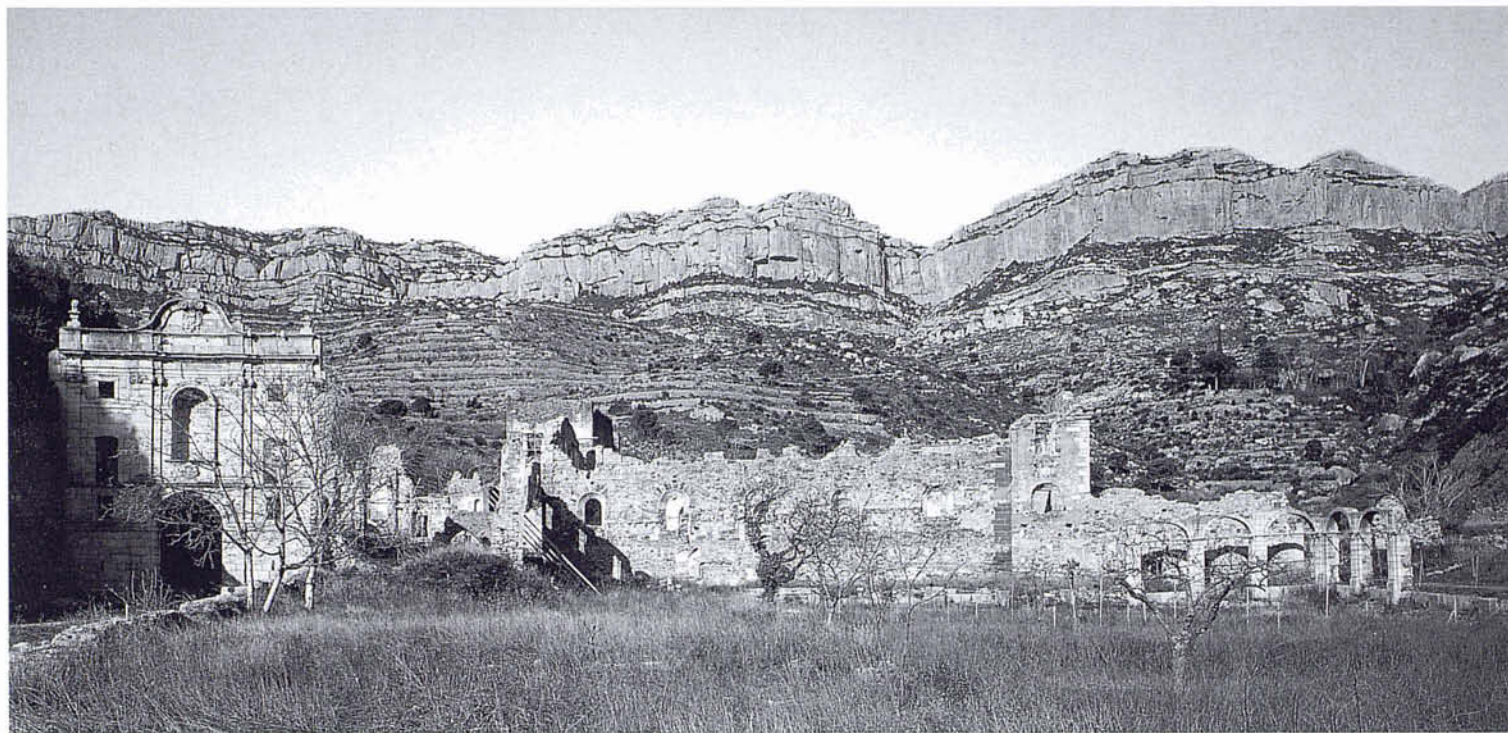
with bearberry here and there. The town, at an altitude of 1,000 metres, has little more than 500 inhabitants who live in houses built in the same red stone that characterizes the area, making a curious contrast with its surroundings and leaving a striking impression on the first-time visitor. The houses are of two or three storeys, making up a walled network of narrow streets, with the large, open church square, also of red stone, surrounded by arches and with the unique “font de maig”, a constant fountain of pure, fresh water, except for one day a year, when it runs with *cava* as the centrepiece of a celebration that shatters the town’s eternal peace. In holiday periods and at weekends, its inhabitants are joined by a small colony of outsiders who have houses in the town or in the few developments that have grown up around it, built with sufficient care and good fortune to have avoided damaging the landscape and the surroundings. There’s a camping site nearby, opened just a few months ago, in good conditions and with a swimming-pool with guaranteed cold water. In Prades, at night, it’s cool even in the hottest August. In winter, needless to say, snow is assured.

If you’re not one of these tourists from Salou –or any other place– who make a quick morning or afternoon visit, at most a day trip, and you can spend the night there, you’ll find a feeling of absolute peace. You can spend a long time sitting at a table outside one of the bars in the square –perhaps wrapped-up in a light jersey–, watching the time go by. You may even understand one of the many legends that have grown up around these stones. Prades is a land of little chapels, steeped in history, of honey and medicinal herbs, of bandits and of battles, a hundred years ago, between absolutists and liberals, a land of legends, of fairy tales that were told around the fire.

Prades is also the centre for all the little towns and villages, rich in tradition, that dot the daunting, almost Pyrenean landscape, at times overgrown with woodland, at others scorched dry. These towns and villages contain such an immense wealth, in spite of their small size, that the geographer Josep Iglésies didn’t hesitate to call them “the cities of the world” and devote a delightful book to them: Capafonts, Farena, la Febró, Siurana, Arbolí, la Mussara (now unin-

habited and the site of a well-known mountain refuge), Mont-ral, Poboleda, la Morera de Montsant, Scala Dei, etc. We can get to these villages along any one of the three narrow roads leaving Prades. Some are especially worth recommending. First of all, Siurana, a tiny group of houses set right on the edge of the great drop of the Prades ravine. Not easy to get to (from Prades itself or from Cornudella) and surrounded on three sides by high cliffs, Siurana rises majestically over the dam in the river that bears its name. With its frying-pan shape as seen from above, Siurana was –and is– so impregnable that the Arabs held out there for a long time. In fact, the mountains of Prades –and their fortress, Siurana– were reconquered very late by the Christians. Before that they had time to reach Tortosa and the length of the line of the River Ebro as far as Lleida. The Christians’ final assaults gave rise to one of the region’s most popular legends, the story of Abd-al-azia, the Moorish queen of Siurana. Secondly, Scala Dei. If you go back from Prades to Cornudella and, on leaving Cornudella, turn right, away from the road to Reus, you enter the





CARTHUSIAN MONASTERY OF SCALA DEI (PRIORAT)

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Priorat, a district well known for the strength and quality of its wines, especially the reds. A tough, difficult district, very hot in summer and cold in winter, full of vineyards and co-operative cellars, many of them built by important Catalan Modernist architects who were colleagues or pupils of Gaudí. On entering the Priorat, at the foot of the Montsant massif—dotted with caves and chapels— you soon come to Scala Dei. With its strongly medieval-sounding name, Scala Dei offers an agreeable combination. Rather than a village, Scala Dei is the perfect symbiosis of the district: cellars open to the visitor where you can buy one of the best wines of the area, and the ruins of the Carthusian monastery. After a short walk, the prioral monastery of Scala Dei, which gives its name to the region and was once the site of wealth and splendour, will greet you ruined but still imposing.

If you leave Prades in the opposite direction, towards Vilanova de Prades and Vimbodí, after taking a road that drops down into woodland you come to Poblet, a magnificent Cistercian monastery with centuries of history written into its

stones, still inhabited by one of the best-known and most respected religious communities in Catalonia. The monks of Poblet are a paradigm of agricultural work—they also have vineyards, of course—and of intellectual work, of inner withdrawal and of openness to society. Poblet, as well as its magnificent architecture standing out against the mountains of Prades behind it, offers a view of the Conca de Barbarà, another region rich in tradition, and at the same time, enclosed in this striking and changing geography is the home of the mausoleum of the medieval Catalan Count-Kings. One of the most frequently visited and reproduced tombs is in fact that of James I, the king who conquered the whole of Valencia and who one fine day set sail from the shores of Salou.

As Josep Iglésies said, these are “the cities of the world”, the heart of a rural, mountain world that survives with difficulty—the crisis in the farming world gets worse and the young people leave for the city—, rubbing shoulders with the industries of Reus and Tarragona and the Mediterranean tourist resorts—Cafell, Torredembarra, Salou, Cambrils,

Hospitalet, etc.—, but which seems to be years and kilometres away from it all. And in the middle of this world, a legend among the legends of this nostalgic countryside, the red town of Prades, proud and warm. Warm in spite of the climate, the cool of its waters, the stark contrast of its vegetation and its buildings. Prades, the red town, home of ancient counts, inspiration of poets and story-tellers. If you want a view of its majestic splendour, I can offer you some advice, even though it isn't very easy to follow. If you can go there by helicopter or small plane, there's nothing like flying over its forests before approaching Siurana—and perhaps seeing the hook-nosed, crab-bearded outline in stone of the face of a medieval Jew, perched, according to legend, at the corner of one of the cliff edges— and then effortlessly skipping over the hills towards Reus. In no time at all, instead of flying over the treetops, you will be flying far, far above the plain of El Camp. Salou will be right there, as I said, at arm's length. Of course, if you can't do it by air, you might try reaching this impressive, austere outcrop on foot. ■