

THE “CENTRE EXCURSIONISTA DE CATALUNYA”



THE “CENTRE EXCURSIONISTA DE CATALUNYA”, FOUNDED IN BARCELONA IN 1890, HAS NOT ONLY BEEN IMPORTANT FOR ITS SCIENTIFIC AND RECREATIONAL ASPECTS. OVER THE YEARS, WITH A PROFOUND WISH TO SERVE, IT HAS DEVELOPED A LARGE NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES AIMED AT CULTURAL VINDICATION, THE RECOVERY OF THE ARTISTIC HERITAGE AND THE DEFENCE OF OUR COUNTRY’S NATURAL PARKS.

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During the greater part of the nineteenth century a movement took place in Catalonia which was known as the *Renaixença* and whose aim was to recover and rebuild the signs of identity of a culture, the Catalan culture, which had suffered a long period of decline. On its romantic side, the *Renaixença* was concerned with tradition, history and direct contact with nature. The birth of rambling in Catalonia is inseparable from this movement, although it is also linked to developments in communications and the particular geography of the country. The "Centre Excursionista de Catalunya" (CEC) was founded in Barcelona in 1890, as a result of the fusion between the "Associació Catalana d'Excursions Científiques" (created in 1876 and the predecessor of the present centre) and the "Associació Catalana d'Excursions" (1878). It is the oldest ramblers organisation in the whole of the Spanish state, and originally combined scientific and recreational aspects, though during the early years it was the former that prevailed: geologists, botanists, philologists, historians and folklorists saw rambling as a direct form of contact with reality. Today this tendency has been reversed, and the majority of the centre's members look to it above all as a sporting or leisure organisation. Of the eight sections that go to make it up (mountaineering, skiing, camping, speleology, geography & natural sciences, science & art, photography and cinema), by far the most active and numerous is that of mountaineering, which accounts for almost half of the centre's 5,000 members, followed by skiing. The older members prefer sections such as geography or art. The first years of the CEC were marked by the discovery and subsequent vindication of the Catalan cultural heritage –artistic and architectural as well as natural. The restoration of the monastery of Ripoll (1879), the rescuing of



Barcelona's city walls (1912) and the campaign against the demolition of the city's shipyards (1912) are all due to the centre. The constant defence of national parks and protected areas today takes up a large part of the energies of the organisation, which has been at the forefront of our country's ecological movement.

The first sports section to be founded, in 1908, was that of mountain sports, which introduced skiing, camping, climbing and speleology to Catalonia. Since then, the "Centre Excursionista" has contributed to the consolidation of an infrastructure to facilitate the practice of these sports: it has published a mass of maps, guides to footpaths, geographical, historical and archaeological monographs and botanical and meteorological guides, as well as having several regular specialist publications, which include *Muntanya* and *Espeleòleg*. It has also carried out a graphic inventory of Catalonia and constructed a series of mountain and ski refuges, chalets and shelters which it now

administers. The La Molina chalet, opened in 1925, provided the first winter sports facilities in Catalonia. The CEC's specialized library contains 30,000 volumes and a collection of 35,000 maps, both ancient and modern. The photographic archive consists of some 150,000 documents. The centre does a lot of work organising conferences, exhibitions and projections.

Because of its cultural origins and the repression of Catalan which took place under the Franco régime, the CEC played the part that corresponded to it as a Catalan association during a difficult period, giving classes of Catalan language and culture. Today, though, it concentrates on its true function, organising all sorts of rambling activities, from an outing by coach to visit a particular region of Catalonia to excursions to the Himalaya or the Polar regions, including walking races, cycle trips and rock climbing, amongst other events. Members of the centre have pioneered the ascent of African, South-American and Asian peaks. The CEC in fact organised the first Catalan expedition to Mount Everest, in 1982, which reached 8,500 metres.

Catalan rambling has always had links with all the cultural manifestations. In 1903 the centre lent its premises to the *Estudis Universitaris Catalans* to give classes in subjects such as Catalan literature, Catalan medieval painting and Catalan history. In 1906 a conference took place at the centre's club rooms to consider what was later to become the *Institut d'Estudis Catalans*. Past members of the CEC include the architect Antoni Gaudí, the painters Ramon Casas and Santiago Rusiñol, the philologist Pompeu Fabra and the writers Joan Maragall and Narcís Oller, to give just a few examples. Rambling has been and is today extremely popular in Catalonia, so much so that the centre's present president, Josep Maria Sala, claims that it is "our national sport". ■