

THE EMPORDÀ, A BALCONY OVER THE MEDITERRANEAN

THE INHABITANTS OF THE EMPORDÀ ARE SAID TO BE STRONGLY INFLUENCED BY THE "TRAMUNTANA". THEY ARE OPEN BOTH TO THE SEA AND THE LAND, TIED TO THEIR COUNTRY BY THEIR CULTURE, AND MORE INCLINED TO LOOK TO THE FUTURE THAN TO HANKER AFTER THE PAST.

JOAN CARRERAS JOURNALIST



© ELOI BONJOCH

The Empordà is a complete microcosm of Catalonia: bordered in the north by the range of the Alberes, the foot-hills of the Pyrenees, to the east it stretches along the Mediterranean, with that wonder of nature, rugged and charming, known throughout the world as the Costa Brava. To the southwest it borders the Gironès, the plain of Banyoles —also called Terraprim de l'Empordà— and the mountain mass of the Garrotxa, which starts with the unmistakable silhouette of the Mont. Today, the inhabitants of the Empordà are proud of their cultural background, of the good taste they have inherited from the Greeks, of the independent spirit of the old Counts of Empúries, of the sense

of adventure of the seafarers who spread the local dialect to the Balearic Islands and the Pitiüses, of the wiliness of the federalists of the nineteenth century and the unique genius of the universal *empordanesos* whose names have travelled round the world: Monturiol —the inventor of the submarine—, Dalí or Josep Pla, to name just a few.

Figueres is, without doubt, the most European city in Catalonia: It has almost 30,000 inhabitants. Today it is an important commercial centre and its streets, clean and modern, take in thousands of visitors and tourists from the Costa Brava, on their continuous pilgrimage to the Dalí museum or the toy museum, another of the region's unique initiatives.



© ELOI BONJOCH



© ELOI BONJOCH

Being a commercial and tourist centre, it also has a superb gastronomic offer, which has raised the anecdotic local food to the category of international cuisine thanks to the efforts of brilliant restaurateurs such as the late Josep Mercader, creator of the mythical "Motel Empordà". La Bisbal, with an ancient religious tradition, is the administrative capital of the region. It has almost 10,000 inhabitants and reflects its classical spirit in the art of pottery. Its style of ceramics has gone right round the world.

The Empordà also has its New York: a cosmopolitan centre, artificial without being artistic, which maintains a surprising tourist atmosphere, winter and summer: Platja d'Aro, with its fifty-odd hotels, 3,000 hotel places and more than 5,000 villas and apartments. This child of the tourist boom of the sixties is now one

of the nerve centres for night-life, the "Montmartre" of the Costa Brava. Not only is it a shop window of Catalonia for the world, but it also acts as a safety valve for domestic tourism, especially from Barcelona. Around its dance-halls, night-clubs, restaurants and discotheques of international prestige, there takes place a select trade in furs and leather-goods and a healthy interchange of religious experiences in the *Centre Ecumènic Internacional*; without forgetting the annual "Solàrium" conferences, which, organized by the *Club Liberal*, give an indisputable cultural tone to the sophisticated tourist Platja d'Aro.

The classical historian Estrabon tells us of the foundation of Roses in the eighth century B.C. by sailors from the Isle of Rhodes. Later, from the mythical Emporium, began the routes that spread trade

and culture to the people of the Mediterranean; first the Roman roads, then the Romanesque routes. From the top of the Puig Rom, we can make out the magnificent Bay of Roses, before heading for the port to follow the fish auction, across the monumental *Porta del Mar*. A little further up, the old ruins of the Romanesque monastery point us towards Sant Pere de Rodes. This exceptional building must be visited; it will help us to understand the unique art, history, culture and even anthropology of the Empordà. Sant Pere de Rodes is mentioned as early as 877; the bell-tower, of Lombardic influence, is 27 metres high and the "Pati d'Armes" is formed by a rectangular courtyard and affords an incomparable view over the Costa Brava. Castelló is the capital of the old county of Empúries. Its streets and squares remind



© ELOI BONJOCH



© ELOI BONJOCH

one of the colourful medieval world of guilds and trades, markets, convents and the enigmatic *call*, or Jewish quarter. The parish church, known locally as the “Cathedral of the Empordà”, has important sculptures, like the tympanum of the magnificent portal, carved in white marble. The “Llotges de Contractació” are a remarkable example of civil Gothic. It is also worth pointing out the village and castle of Perelada, land of Ramon Muntaner, the most famous Catalan medieval chronicler, and seat of the Rocabertí, cultured nobles who started the valuable library last century, promoted the wine industry, now so established throughout the Empordà, and set up a technical school. It was Antoni de Rocabertí, patron of the poet Verdaguer, who also protected the school of music of the Empordà, one of the main centres for the

promotion of the *sardana*, a dance originally from the Empordà, now the national dance of Catalonia.

Bordering the ancient county of Besalú, near Figueres, we find the monastery of Santa Maria de Vilabertran, known as the “Basilica of the Empordà”, seat of the *Festival Internacional de Música* which forms part of the *Setembre Cultural* organized by the *Juventuts Musicals de Figueres*, and which offers a varied sample of art, science and literature of the Empordà.

From the end of June to the end of September, it could almost be said that the whole of the Empordà becomes a musical auditorium: Begur, Cadaqués, Calonge, Llançà, Palamós, Sant Feliu de Guíxols and, especially, Vilabertran and Torroella de Montgrí all hold their International Music Festivals in which

top orchestras and musicians take part. In the same way as the classical ring links the Empordà historically to Greece and Rome, the Romanesque ring links this land —born, according to the poet, “from the love of a shepherd for a mermaid”— to the Europe of Sant Benet and Charlemagne.

The inhabitants of the Empordà are said to be strongly influenced by the *tramuntana*. They are open both to the sea and the land, tied to their country by their culture, and more inclined to look to the future than to hanker after the past. For that reason, the Empordà is now a *città aperta* where Nordic and south American feel at home; a land where hospitality is part of the landscape that Josep Pla described as “cultivated”, “placid” and “peaceful”, swept from time to time by the gusting *tramuntana*. ■