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## L'EMPORDANET

FOR GENERATIONS, THE SONS OF THE EMPORDÀ AND THE NEWCOMERS HAVE WRITTEN AND SUNG ABOUT THE AREA. ONE OF THE EMPORDÀ'S GREATEST TWENTIETH CENTURY WRITERS, JOSEP PLA, MADE IT HIS ETERNAL LITERARY THEME.

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**T**he Catalans have their stock of clichés, just like people all over the world. One of their favourites is the idea that Catalonia, in spite of being a small country, has everything: sea, mountains and plain. We can find these three elements combined in the Empordà region. If the Catalans had to say which they thought was the country's most beautiful spot, the majority would probably choose somewhere in the Empordà.

The Empordà is in the north-east corner of the *Principat de Catalunya*. The Pyrenees are only a stone's throw away. In fact, the imposing Cape Creus, jutting out into the sea, is the tip of this mountain barrier that has separated the northern Catalans from those of the peninsula.

For generations, the sons of the Empordà and the newcomers have written and sung about the region. One of the Empordà's greatest twentieth century writers, Josep Pla, made it his eternal literary theme. In it he found an endless source of inspiration. Born in Palafrugell, Josep Pla faithfully described the region and its inhabitants, which he found loaded with universally applicable lessons on human-



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ity and irony. He was a great traveller at a time when travelling was far from simple. He spoke of many countries. He even commented on parliamentary political activity, something which few contemporary writers dared to do. And he always returned to the Empordà, and more precisely, to the Empordanet (little Empordà), which he made the main theme of his creative work.

The reader will probably have guessed that the region under discussion is what tourists call the Costa Brava —tourists and a good many Catalans, especially the city-dwellers. Not to mention the hoteliers, who have made the name popular all over the world. The famous Costa Brava, as such, is less than eighty years old. It was a Barcelona journalist who first used the expression, in a famous article in "La Veu de Catalunya". The name is therefore a newly-invented one. More than just a discotheque in Lloret or Platja d'Aro, or a block of hastily knocked-up apartments, the Costa Brava is a blend of colours: the blue of the sea, the green of the pines and holm-oaks and the yellow-brown of the cork and the fields of corn. One of the







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greatest journalists alive today, Manuel Ibáñez Escofet, always likes to say he is an expert on shades of green, because of the time he has spent in the Empordà. He has written many articles explaining the subtle differences amongst the greens to be found there.

As you can see, this is no ordinary country. Take the town of Calella de Palafrugell, for example. In the last few years, it has become a sort of Mecca for tourists in Catalonia. However, this massification has not managed to spoil the vivid contrast between the blue of the sea and the green of the pines that march unstopably towards the water. Visitors should make for the coves, where thousands of people crowd together to bathe and take part in water sports. In the evening, you should sit at one of the many street cafés on the water's edge. The traffic is banned and the only sound is the lapping of the waves and the murmuring of the people. On your first visit, you should submit to the ritual of the *cremat*, a heady, seaman's drink, which is prepared in an earthenware bowl from coffee and rum which is allowed to burn. With luck, the lights of the fishing-boats on the horizon will complete the picture.

The sea is more than just beaches. During the day, it is wise to avoid the coves and take a look at some of the places that surround the town. A first choice might be the so-called "Russian's bathtub", named after a Russian princess who ended up there in her flight from the Bolsheviks. A strange spot, it would be difficult to find

anywhere like it on the whole of the Costa Brava. Another choice might be the Cape Planes, from which one can see the little Formigues Isles, still echoing with the sound of ancient battles between pirates or between French and Catalans.

Ten kilometres south of Calella is the town of Palamós, a very different place altogether. Whereas not even the hotel owners stay in Calella during the winter, Palamós has a definite identity of its own as a fishing, trading and cultural town. In summer, its population is increased a thousand-fold as people arrive there from all over the world. The old quarter forms the nucleus of the town, which, in hot weather, stretches along the wide bay, so characteristic of the place.

It is worth trying to make friends with one of the local fishermen and get him to take you out to sea with him. You would set out early in the morning and come back around five in the afternoon. A crowd of fish-merchants, hotel owners and locals of all sorts will be waiting for you on the harbour, where the fish auction takes place. To take part in the auction, you have to know the fishermen's code, otherwise you could end up buying sardines for the price of salmon. Wisest, then, is to buy the fish at the stands that are put up next door immediately after the auction. On his boat-trip, the traveller will have seen all the traditional fishing tackle and techniques: *fluixa*, *arrossegall*, *volanti*, etc.

There is a market in Palamós almost every morning. The peasant women come in from the countryside around to sell fruit

and vegetables. This is the other Catalonia, the one you can find two kilometres inland. Not so long ago, the majority of the population of the Empordà made a living from agriculture -an activity which is still very much in evidence. Apparently, young farmers who inherited their parents' fields rejected the land closest to the sea. The salt and the *tramuntana* (the local wind) made it useless for growing on. A little later, the ones who benefited were the youngest sons, who had received this land almost against their will. These are the ones who have become millionaires through their speculation.

Calella is the beauty; Palamós is the tourist town that has preserved its traditional economy in spite of tourism. But on the Costa Brava, tradition and distinction are summed up in one name: S'Agaró, on the coast south of Palamós.

When the name "Costa Brava" had yet to be invented, when there was still not a single night-club, before the French had got past Cadaqués and donkeys were the only form of transport, the first colony of summer visitors, most of them from Barcelona, had already established itself at S'Agaró, where it soon took over the best the area had to offer. S'Agaró is basically a large beach, an impressive collection of villas and the Sa Gavina hotel.

The one thing common to Calella, Palamós and S'Agaró is the sea. But a trip inland also has plenty to offer, especially the good, cheap food available at any little village inn. ●