

FROM CAMBRILS TO CALAFELL

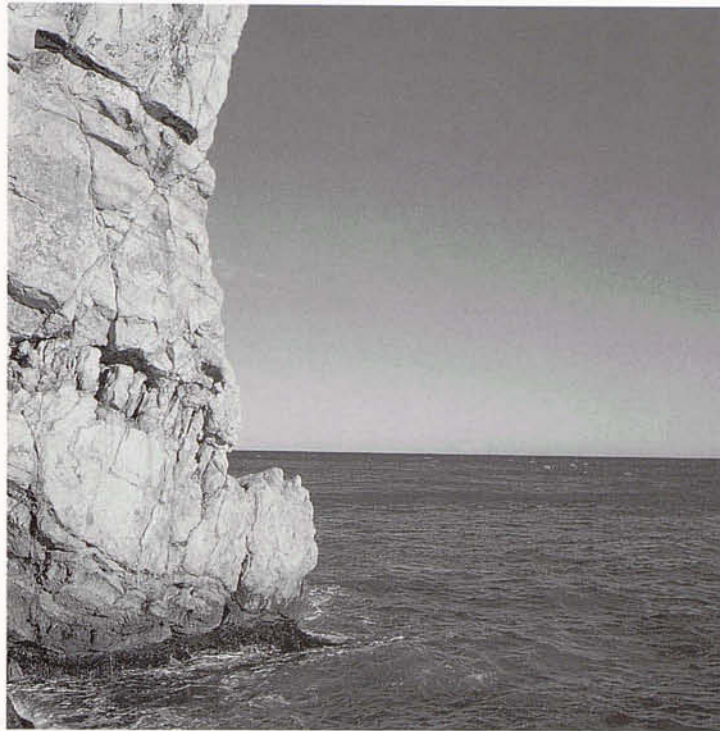


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JOSEP BARGALLÓ VALLS AUTHOR





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Rain is scarce here. In fact, this stretch of coast —some thirty kilometres south-west of Tarragona and another thirty to the north-west— has always suffered from lack of water. Neither is it too windy, though when the *mestral* blows —supposedly responsible for a particular character that tends towards imaginative genius and stubborn individuality— it does so with a vengeance. But the sun is plentiful. The climate here is what they call mild and Mediterranean, like the landscape: long, wide beaches framed by fantastic rock-faces, with pinewoods, bamboos, dunes and marshes. They say it does you good.

The Roman legions, the imperial officials and the high priests of the official religion were the first outsiders to settle here. They came down the *Via Augusta* from the north and stopped here to build the capital of *Tarraconensis*, one of their vast provinces. As you take a walk round Tarragona, the ancient city reveals endless evidence of the Roman presence: the city walls, the necropolis, the circus —now being restored—, the forum, the praetorium and all sorts of smaller remains to be found scattered round the city. Apparently, the construction of an underground in Tarragona would be as difficult as in Rome itself. In fact, every time someone digs up a street—to replant the trees or lay new gas mains— or an old building is demolished to make way for a

new one, work is temporarily held up by some archaeological find —large or small, it makes no difference. The city's imperial past has left other remains scattered over the whole area. We come across them along the length of the coast, following the *Via Augusta*: the *Arc de Berà*, beside the present-day main road; the *Morc villa*, in Torredembarra; the *Munts villa*, in Altafulla, the *Mèdol needle*, in Tamarit and the *torre dels Escipions*, at the gates of the city.

In time, the Romans had to leave in a bit of a hurry. Others came, the country was resettled and went through wars, victories and defeats —more defeats than victories— joys and sorrows. Then, towards the fifties and sixties of this century, the latest avalanche of visitors arrived: people who came to spend their holidays here. Germans, English, Belgians, Scandinavians, French, Dutch, Italians..., at the head of which, at least, in the locals' hazy memories, were the mythical Swedish blondes, symbol of a permissiveness which was forbidden in that dark age. The age of those first midnight swims, with no more than a towel awaiting the return of a damp body, of damp bodies, and of morality in uniform, an oddly shaped hat and a long cape, ostensibly on the lookout for nighttime smugglers, also mythical, and just as real, historically, as those Swedes —or the German, English or Dutch blondes...— the age of the first bikinis.

And, faster than we would have liked, the coastal towns grew, built on hills set back from the sea; especially the parts closest to the sea, built more recently, when the African pirates no longer posed a threat. These towns changed considerably, without, however, abandoning their way of life.

Starting from the bottom, Cambrils is still, and possibly more than ever, a port in which one can eat very well, as Francesc Eiximenis, a monk and writer on local topics, commented in the fourteenth century. Salou, a cosmopolitan town in summer and a centre of weekend nightlife, still remembers that Wednesday morning at the beginning of the thirteenth century, when Jaume I, with the wind behind him, set sail to conquer the island of Majorca. Tamarit, small and sheltered, remembers the painters Ramon Casas and Miquel Utrillo, with one foot in Paris and the other in Barcelona, who rediscovered the town at the beginning of this century. The noble, historic streets of Altafulla, with their medieval flavour, still echo with tales of witches and wizards. As in Torredembarra, stories of the "Indians" also flourish: those peasants, fishermen, shopkeepers and sailors who went to America to seek their fortune, came back wealthy, and ended up as patrons of the arts, giving their name to many world-famous works, as in the case of the Güells and the architect Antoni Gaudí. Or the beaches of El Vendrell —Sant Salvador and Coma-ru-



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ga— with the tranquility of the house where Pau Casals, the most universal of the town's sons, lived right at the water's edge: a recommended visit on a misty day, when the summer visitors have abandoned the seashore and, from the master's cello, one still seems to hear the soft, far-away music of the *Cant dels Ocells*. And at the end of our journey, as the road climbs up towards the north, the Calafell of the novels of Carlos Barral, Juan Marsé and Gabriel García Márquez, full of bars, from which local intellectuals—with the approval of the old fishermen and not particularly discreet-

ly— admire young people of not always recognizable sex; ghostlike before the water, stands the old sanatorium, beaten but proud.

From the Romans to the Swedes, from Cambrils to Calafell, snatches of beaches and cliffs from one little part of our country. Of men and women who still hang on to their own traditions, their own particular way of speaking and their characteristic mouth-watering cuisine. A stretch of coast to be enjoyed, without any rush, with the tranquility of one who knows the rain will come sooner or later, that after the *mestral* the fine weather will return,

that all who pass leave their footprints. With time enough to live the sands, the deep, inviting sea, with its rocky bed, the surviving dunes, with their closely guarded secrets. With the spirit awake enough to agree that, seen from the sea, that part of Tarragona nearest the port, in spite of the industrial chaos—the petrochemical disaster—, looks rather like Marseilles. In fact, the sea is the Mediterranean. From out to sea, all coasts look alike. Like these seagulls that seem to sip its waters, at the edge of the beach or greedily following the nets of the little fishing boats. As you know, rain is scarce here. ●