

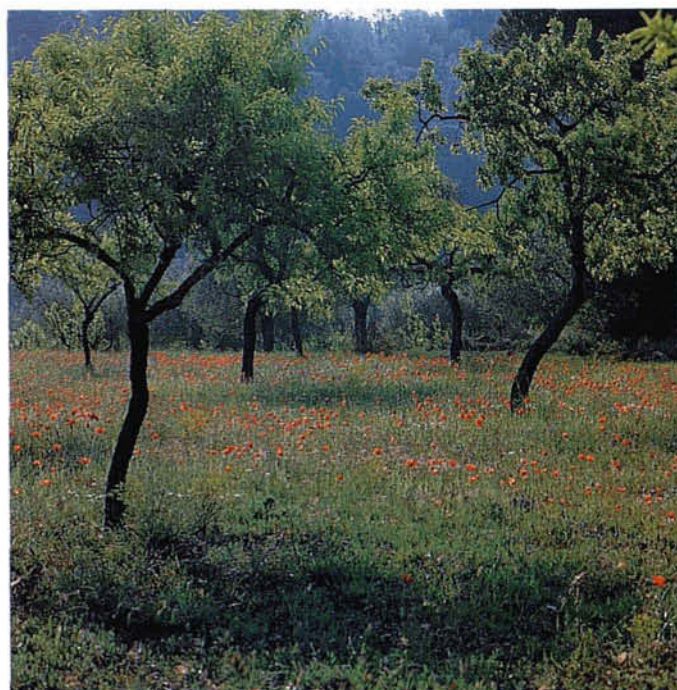


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LONG-DISTANCE FOOTPATHS

A NETWORK OF FOOTPATHS BETWEEN COUNTRIES, MAKING IT POSSIBLE TO WALK FROM ONE TO ANOTHER, IS A WAY OF MEETING OTHER PEOPLE AND LEARNING TO RESPECT AND LOVE THE LAND.

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In the sixteenth century, Catalonia was the first country in Europe to legislate on the right everyone had to use footpaths. A lot of water has flown under the bridge since then, and our footpaths have been threatened by the new conditions arising from the Industrial Revolution. The

network of paths that for centuries provided foot-travellers with a link between one rural nucleus and the next suffered a serious decline as a result of new methods of transport. For one thing, the old paths were "trodden on" by country lanes and roads; and for another, advances in work and trans-

port, along with the depopulation of inland areas, led to miles and miles of footpaths being abandoned and gradually reconquered by nature. In the sixties, at the height of Franco's "desarrollismo", walkers would often suddenly bump into a housing estate barring the way, or else the path would

OUTINGS



PEDRAFORCA



THE LAKE AT BANYOLES



AREO. VALL FERRERA



THE LAKE AT BANYOLES

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simply disappear into a hedge or scrubland. In a country which even in the eighteenth century was characterized by the widespread love of mountain walking, this decline couldn't be allowed to go on much longer. Private individuals, especially in the south of the Principality, and associations like the Friends of Montserrat cleaned and signposted the paths, but there was no organisation to co-ordinate the work.

In France, the Comité National des Sentiers de Grande Randonnée had since the forties been responsible for publicizing and preserving mountain paths. On the occasion of its annual meetings with the Camping Club of France, the active Rambler's Club of Gràcia came into contact with footpath enthusiasts

from the neighbouring country and in 1973 the Catalan Footpath Committee started functioning under the auspices of the Catalan Mountain Federation, which has always worked in collaboration with different rambling, trekking and mountain-climbing associations. To maintain the French initials GR, which literally stand for "long excursion" or "long walk", the expression most favoured at the time was the Catalan "gran recorregut", which has eventually passed into common usage. In 1974, the Catalan GR Footpaths Plan was presented, and the following year work started on marking the first stretch of footpath, the Tivissa-Benifallet sector of the GR-7, between Ribera d'Ebre and Baix Ebre, two pioneer regions in the preservation of the "royal paths".

In 1977, the Catalan Footpath Committee published its first "Topo-Guia", corresponding to the Paüls-Fredes sector of the GR-7. Since then, other guides have appeared in booklet form, with maps, lists of shelters, historical round-ups, medical tips, weather information and food advice, amongst other useful data.

By international regulations, long-distance footpaths have to include natural areas of special interest, monuments and supply points and overnight accommodation. The GRs must allow walkers to learn something about the region they are crossing, and whenever possible they avoid made-up roads. Branches of the main route are often established so that walkers can easily get to other nearby sectors. The PRs



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THE BRIDGE AT BESALU

(short-distance) connect the GRs and allow walkers to discover new routes. The symbols used to mark the Catalan long-distance footpaths, painted where they can be seen from either direction, are the ones used internationally. All keen walkers know the most common, which means "path continues": a white mark over a red mark, each 5 centimetres wide and 15 long, one centimetre apart. When the white line and the red line form a Saint Andrew's cross, it means "wrong way". Other conventional signs indicate "hostel", "refuge", "spring", "panoramic view", "telephone", etc. The basic assumption is that the walker doesn't know the area and isn't an expert Rambler. The long-distance footpaths are a safe way of starting in rambling and avoiding mishaps. In fact, some people never leave

the marked paths; these are what are called, in the jargon, "senderistes", or path-followers.

Of all the Catalan long-distance footpaths, which stretch for over 2,000 kilometres, some of the most striking are the GR-11, which starts from Cape Creus and crosses the Principality from East to West via Núria and Andorra as far as Ospitau de Vielha; the GR-7, which crosses from North to South via Fredes, Montblanc, Solsona and Seu d'Urgell, and the GR-5, the walker's Barcelona by-pass, which connects the natural parks of the Garraf, Sant Llorenç, the Montseny and Montnegre. The GRs of Catalonia North provide a connection with the extensive network of European footpaths, such as the E4, which passes close to Bern and Vienna, or the E3, which leads to Paris, Luxem-

bourg and Prague. Some footpaths in Central Europe have been signposted for more than a century.

The long-distance footpaths are not definitively fixed, but subject to alterations due to new building development, deforestation, fires, etc. A network of footpaths connecting different countries and making it possible to walk from one to another is a great contribution to getting about and to spontaneous encounters with new ideas and people, to the respect and love for one's own country and for other people's countries. Obviously, motorists get to their destination sooner by taking short cuts through the mountain tunnels; walkers have to take the long way round, but they're in no hurry because they enjoy the countryside... so long as they follow the signs! ■