

Tarragona - Lleida

The highlights:

- Roman Tarragona
- Reus
- Delta de l'Ebre Natural Park
- Modernist cellars.
- El Priorat
- Cistercian Route (Poblet Monastery and Vallbona de les Monges)
- Lleida

Section 2: Tarragona-Lleida - 418 km – 7 stages

- From Tarragona to Cambrils. 35 km
- From Cambrils to Deltebre. 70 km
- From Deltebre to Horta de Sant Joan. 67 km
- From Horta to Sant Joan a Falset. 67 km
- From Falset to Montblanc. 86 km
- From Montblanc to l'Espluga de Francolí. 15 km
- From l'Espluga to Francolí a Lleida. 78 km



In search of history

The twenty-first century, a Roman emperor and a gladiator walk the streets of **Tarragona**. A visit to the architectural spaces of **ancient Tarraco** marks the start of a journey that will take us to the banks of the **Ebre**, the **great river** of the peninsula as we follow its course to the delta, one of the most bio-diverse sites in the country. We will pedal along a rail road converted to a green route and follow in the footsteps of **Picasso** and **Gaudí**. The **legends of Montsant** and the excellent **wines of Priorat** will be the opening acts for the monastic silence of the **Cistercian Route** and **Lleida**, the capital of Terra Ferma.



STAGE 1

THE ROMAN LEGACY

Tarragona's Roman heritage connects us to one of the most important civilizations in human history, modernism and vermouth welcome us in Reus and in Cambrils we taste seafood cuisine.

Dawn in Tarraco

We see the sunrise in Tarragona, a World Heritage city, from the wrought-iron railing known as the **Balcó del Mediterrani**, one of those perfect sunsets, with the sun on the horizon over the sea, which the Romans once saw as they occupied the stands of the amphitheatre at our feet; the same warm light that led the poet Florus to describe Tarraco as the “city of eternal spring”. Our guide tells us that the stone of the **Mèdol quarry** on the outskirts of the city was used to construct buildings such as the circus, the praetorium and the walls we are now visiting.

Vermouth in Reus

We travel to the nearby town of **Reus**, **Gaudí's birthplace**, to arrive just in time for a traditional **vermouth**. They tell us the story of this fermented beverage, transporting us to the days when it was exported to half the world and Reus was, along with Paris and London, one of three cities setting the price of spirits. Leading producers offer guided tours, some of which are dramatised, and product tastings. The days of splendour that the Vermouth

brought to the city resulted in numerous commissions from prominent modernist architects. The **Modernist Route** covers 26 major buildings, including the **Casa Navàs**, the **Casa Rull**, the **Casa Gasull** and the **Pere Mata Institute**, works by Lluís Domènech i Montaner, and the **Casa Anguera** by Pere Caselles.

Seafood cuisine in Cambrils

The unique climate of this diverse coastline, with beaches ranging from fine sand to beautiful rocky shores with turquoise water, invites you to spend the afternoon sailing in a catamaran from the **Cambrils Estació Nàutica** water sports centre. From the sea, we see the skyline of **Salou**, a destination featuring excellent beaches and the dizzying roller coasters of **PortAventura World**, which we promise to ride when we're back with the little ones in the family. Since we're in Cambrils, the culinary capital of the Costa Daurada, we can't leave without trying the delicious **suquet de romesco**, one of the pillars of the local seafood cuisine.



STAGE 2

IN TERRES DE L'EBRE

We enter in Terres de l'Ebre, a territory declared a Biosphere Reserve due to its valuable natural spaces, its human heritage and its commitment to sustainability.

Swimming with tuna

The first stop of the day is in **L'Ametlla de Mar**, a town on the list of **Marine Districts and Villages**. Its well-preserved seafaring charm can be seen on a quiet stroll through the lively port and its intimate and varied coves: urban, white sand, rocky, next to lush forests or cobblestones. But today we're ready for adventure, we pull on a wetsuit for an intriguing activity: swimming among huge specimens of **Mediterranean bluefin tuna**. We arrive at the pools after a short trip from the coast, during which they give us the basic instructions. It's a breathtaking experience to see the tuna come out of the deep and swim by us. The activity ends with a tasting of this highly prized fish, which was already used as a source of protein by the Roman legionnaires.

Camí de Ronda

From the same town, as we head south, there is a beautiful stretch of the **Camí de Ronda** that we will

follow to see some of the best-preserved corners of the Catalan coast. The easy route follows the GR-92 and gives us access to beautiful coves of red rock and crystal clear water. We continue to the nearby village of **El Perelló**, where we dress in bee-keepers' clothes to enter the complex world of beehives where high-quality honey is produced, and learn to make **honey-based pastries**.

Oyster Tasting

A boat awaits at the port of **L'Ampolla** to sail through **Fangar Bay** and sample the very freshest mussels and oysters, straight from the mussel farms where they are grown. We choose to stay the night in an old hut, the traditional house of the rice paddies, refurbished to host guests. In the evening with a glass of the white Grenache wine that grows so well in **Terra Alta** and flooded rice paddies reflecting the sky, we enjoy one of the best sunsets we've seen yet.



STAGE 3

THE NATURAL WORLD OF THE DELTA DE L'EBRE

We start the day listening to the birdsong of the Delta de l'Ebre, one of the most important wetlands in Europe, then continue to Tortosa and ended the day in search of Picasso.

Birdwatching

There are many options and activities for learning about the delta, boating on the river or sea, pedalling on quiet country roads or learning about rice cultivation. We choose to approach the wildlife of this unique natural space, which means we rise at dawn because we've planned an outing to **watch birds in the Delta de l'Ebre**, and they are much more active in the early hours of the day. With the help of binoculars and a telescope, given to us by our naturalist guide, we observe species such as the Western marsh harrier, the glossy ibis, the grebe, the little grebe and a flock of colourful flamingos. To better understand the delta and the fragility of this valuable natural space that has been declared a **Biosphere Reserve** –more than 300 bird species nest in or pass through it –we enter **MonNatura Delta**, an interpretive centre focused on its nature, traditional ways of life and resources.

A stroll through Tortosa

The area surrounding the Delta de l'Ebre has other attractive visits to offer. This is a territory with very old examples of human presence, including **cave**

paintings forming part of the **Mediterranean World Heritage** and **thousand-year-old olive trees**, both located between **Ulldecona** and **La Sénia**. Located near the sea, **Sant Carles de la Ràpita** offers a wide range of water sports and the natural beaches of the delta are an invitation to rest and relax. However, we choose to follow the road to the monumental **Tortosa**, part of the **Cities and Towns with Character**; the castle, cathedral and remnants of **Jewish Quarter** certainly earn it that designation. At the modernist Municipal Market there are typical Terres de l'Ebre products available for purchase, and bars where you can taste them. We leave with a bag of traditional **angel hair pastissets**.

Looking for Picasso

In the final hours of the day we near **Horta de Sant Joan**, the town with which **Picasso** fell in love. "Everything I know I've learned in Horta," the painter would say. Watching sunset over the Roques de Benet, one of the best-known formations of Els Ports, a natural park ideal for hiking, we can understand what led Picasso to make that claim.



STAGE 4

PEDALLING THE GREENWAY

The views of the Els Ports Natural Park accompany us on our cycling tour along the Val de Zafán Greenway, as we visit the Cathedrals of Wine and kayak on the waters of the River Ebre.

Greenway

From Horta de Sant Joan we enter the **Val de Zafán Greenway**, a very flat cycling route that takes us to Sant Carles de la Ràpita on the original route, or to the delta if we connect to the GR-99 in Tortosa. This version of the route gives us the chance to enjoy the changing landscape of the Terres de l'Ebre, from the **Els Ports Natural Park mountain range** in the north, passing by the banks of the river Canaletes and its spectacular viaducts, to the plains of the delta and the coast. The ease with which the hired bicycles can be collected at an agreed point leads us to decide to pedal along one of the paths of the Greenway, towards **Bot**. When we get to this small town we stop at an old German-built railbus that has been converted into a bar.

Cathedrals of Wine

The road connecting the two large **Cathedrals of Wine** we visit in Terres de l'Ebre, the modernist bodegas of **Gandesa** and **Pinell de Brai**, runs along the ravine separating the Pàndols and Cavalls mountain ranges. The beauty of the landscape can't let us forget that these mountains were the setting for the most famous battle of the Spanish Civil War.

To explore the subject further, we can visit the interpretive centre dedicated to the **Battle of the Ebre** in Corbera d'Ebre, named **115 days** which is open all year round.

River Kayaking

Since arriving at Terres de l'Ebre the river Ebre has kept us company; now it's time to get in the water and travel a stretch of it in a kayak. The sound of the paddle and birdsong form the soundtrack to a quiet journey that takes us to the spectacular village of **Miravet**, with its houses and Templar castle hanging over the river. In addition to visiting the castle, we can also take part in a pottery workshop to explore its pottery tradition. After our boating trip, we set off for Priorat. Between the towns of Móra d'Ebre and Móra la Nova we make a short detour, barely ten minutes, to the Iberian settlement of **Castellet de Banyoles**, where you can see the meandering Ebre and the **orchards of the Ribera d'Ebre**. The view is especially beautiful during the trees **flowering season**. The explosion of colour begins in early February with the almond trees and extends to April with cherry and peach trees.

STAGE 5

A GLASS OF WINE IN PRIORAT

Small country roads take us through the villages of the Priorat district, whose land, as beautiful as it is rugged, produces some of Catalonia's finest wines.

The Priorat vineyard

We've entered the **district of Priorat**, home to the famous wines of the **D.O. Montsant** and the **D.O.Q. Priorat**, driving on a road overlooking Montsant. The first light of day tints the crest of the rocky massif red. There are many activities available in Priorat to discover the thrilling world of wine and its production. We have decided to start with the historical side and stop at the **Falset-Marçà cooperative**, another of modernist cellar like those visited the previous day. As we wait for the guide to start the visit, Blai, a "worker", introduces himself and gives us a funny explanation of the wine making process. From Falset we embark on a journey along one of the most spectacular roads in the districts of the **Costa Daurada** with views of the terraces of the Priorat vineyard and the villages of **Gratallops, La Vilella Alta** and **La Vilella Baixa**, among others. We save some villages that deserve their own visit and require a short detour from the route for the next trip, such as **Porrera, Torroja del Priorat** or **Cabacés**.

The lands of Montsant

At the foot of the Montsant, before we reach **Poboleda**, another of the beautiful towns of Priorat, we find **Escaladei**. The peninsula's first monastery, named after the Priorat district, tells us about the

former monks and hermits of what is now the **Montsant Natural Park**, a mountain range full of symbolism and beloved by climbers from all over the world. In the accommodation they told us about an excursion from **La Morera de Montsant**, ascending to **Montsant** via the Barrots path, a short hiking route that runs from Morera de Montsant to **Balcó del Priorat**, a natural terrace formed from the rock with panoramic views over the district. We save this for the next trip because we want to enjoy the afternoon in **Siurana, a Charming Village**, with its little hamlet on the cliff's edge and a stunning view of the reservoir. As the tour guide talks about the Saracens who came to the town, on the mountain opposite climbers test themselves against some of the world's most prestigious climbing routes.

To Montblanc

The route continues to **Montblanc** via **Prades**, another Charming Village. Surrounded by a precious natural environment, the town is also known as the **Villa Roja** because of the characteristic red stone colour of many of its buildings. By taking a short detour, just seven kilometres from Prades, we can visit **Capafonts**, where they offer the chance to spend a few hours as a shepherd learn how to make cheese.



STAGE 6

POBLET AND THE PRADES MOUNTAINS

The echoes of the legend of Sant Jordi guide our steps as we walk along the walls of Montblanc before experiencing the famous peace of the Poblet monastery. The day is completed by visiting our cave-dwelling ancestors at L'Espluga de Francolí.

An excellent breakfast

The day kicks off in **Montblanc** with a generous breakfast served in a wine cellar.

Pa amb tomàquet and extra virgin olive oil, black and white botifarra sausage, dried llonganissa sausage, cheeses, olives, nuts and a little wine are a safe bet to start the day off right. Montblanc is a town with a prominent walled complex where we can still see towers and doorways in good condition. Each year in April, the **Legend of Sant Jordi** is re-enacted as part of the **Medieval Week** events.

The Poblet monastery

One of the stretches of the **Cistercian Route**, an itinerary connecting the monasteries of Santes Creus, Poblet and Vallbona de les Monges, leads from Montblanc to Poblet. Since it is only ten kilometres, we decided to take a walk and enjoy the landscape of the **Prades Mountains**. On reaching the **Cistercian monastery of Poblet**, an official World Heritage Site, one of the monks tells us that

the landscape, in addition to its silence, truly shines in the autumn, when the land offers up the best potatoes, chestnuts and mushrooms.

L'Espluga de Francolí

We continue on towards **L'Espluga de Francolí** to visit the **Museum of Rural Life**, where we learn about the values and hard work of the people in the countryside. This is a very moving visit thanks to the familiarity of many of the objects on display there, objects that represent ways of life our grandparents carried on and that have now disappeared. Without leaving the village, we continue to investigate the history of our ancestors but this time we take a much bigger leap through time, entering the **Font Major cave** to experience the geological and prehistoric past of the Tarragona area. If you're looking for a bit more adventure, there is also the chance to go on a tour of the caves. From L'Espluga de Francolí we continue our journey to enter the Lleida districts.



STAGE 7

ON TO LLEIDA

We arrive in Lleida province to visit the medieval village of Guimerà, enter the cloister of Vallbona de les Monges and walk through the Ivars i Vila-sana pond. The route ends with views from the Seu de Lleida.

A quiet village

We begin the morning by taking a short detour to visit **Guimerà**, an excellent example of a rural medieval site. In the early hours of the day we get the chance to walking alone through the streets of a village that is one of the most postcard-perfect communities in Lleida province.

Vallbona de les Monges

We don't have much more company at the next stop, just the few nuns who still inhabit the **Vallbona de les Monges** monastery. They explain to us during the visit that the fact that it is surrounded by the village, unlike the other two with whom it shares the Cistercian Route, is a result of the concessions that the Abbess had to make to overcome the ban imposed by the Council of Trent on female monasteries in isolated locations. After seeing the main spaces, such as the cloister and the souvenir

shop where the nuns sell their reproductions of the monastery's ancient pottery, we follow the route to the **Ivars i Vila-sana pond** past **Belianes, Arbeca** and **Les Borges Blanques**, where they produce the excellent olive oils of **D.O.P Les Garrigues**.

Arrival in Lleida

In the **Ivars i Vila-sana pond** we have booked one of the special activities they offer, tagging different bird species. Walking around the perimeter of the aquifer, on a path that's just over 2.5 kilometres long, we see a space that once dried up and is now vitally important to birds. We arrive at **Lleida** when the afternoon begins to fade, just in time for a tour of the **Seu Vella** and the **King's Castle - La Suda**. For dinner, we opt for the most traditional way of eating the famous Lleida snails, roasted "a la llauna", on a metal sheet with handles placed directly over the embers.



FIND OUT +

IF YOU HAVE TIME, YOU CAN ALSO VISIT ...

TARRACO VIVA

The historic re-enactment festival in Tarragona was created in 1999, with the sole intention of supporting the city's bid for World Heritage status. After more than two decades, they still spend two weeks each May teaching visitors about the classical world in general and the Roman empire in particular. There are annual performances, such as gladiator fights in the amphitheatre and concerts with traditional instruments, the rest are designed around the specific theme that **Tarraco Viva** selects each year. During those days when the city once again becomes Tarraco, one of the major cities of the Roman Empire, we have seen stories of emperors, reproductions of the polychromy of the Augustus de Prima Porta or the Ara Pacis, the functioning of the senate or that of the legions. The festival includes interactive activities such as little Roman cooking workshops or the possibility of being a gladiator for a day.

SANTA TECA AT THE CASTELL D'ESCORNALBOU

Eduard Toda, a Catalan diplomat, archaeologist and Egyptologist, was responsible for the refurbishment of the **Castell Monestir d'Escornalbou**, where he lived. Once a year, in mid-July, Escornalbou hosts the **Santa Teca regional heritage and food festival**. Promoting sustainable, seasonal and local products, for two days they offer an agenda full of cultural offerings, lots of authentic music and gastronomy, with producers of craft beers, natural wines, cheeses and renowned chefs from the province. Past editions have included theatre, literature, photography, storytelling, an acrobatic performance and moving descriptions of the starry sky with a glass of wine in hand. One of the main aims of this event is to raise awareness among visitors about cuisine that respects the local territory.

PORTAVENTURA WORLD

The **PortAventura World** adventure park has been growing since its inception in 1995. It features six themed areas: **Mediterranean, Polynesia, China, Mexico, Far West and SésamoAventura**, aimed at the youngest members of the family. Some of the most sought-after attractions are the **Shambhala**, a large roller coaster that reaches speeds of more than 130 kilometres per hour; **Furius Baco**, another coaster dedicated to the world of wine; and **Angkor**, a Cambodian-inspired water adventure that takes you on a boat that goes into the



jungle, where different wild animals are ready for a water gun fight. A big naval battle brings the exciting adventure to an end. Another hallmark of the park is the high quality of its shows, whose programming is renewed annually, including performances and themed days around holidays like Halloween and Christmas. The entertainment is complemented by **Ferrari Land** and the **Caribe Aquatic Park**. In the Cavallino Rampante area, recommended for the whole family, we can become drivers thanks to an advanced simulator, test our skills as mechanics at a pit stop or feel the power of Formula 1 acceleration reaching 180 kilometres per hour in just five seconds.

ROCK ART

The people of the Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras left us with an important artistic legacy: rock paintings in caves, shelters and exposed rocks. The **rock art of the Mediterranean Basin on the Iberian Peninsula** was declared a **UNESCO World Heritage Site** in 1998. In the **Prades mountains** there are more than forty rock art sites, one third of the total in Catalonia, almost twenty of which are in the **Capçanes** municipality, and important paintings are also found in **Ulldesona** and **El Cògul**. These are examples of Levantine art, made by to hunter-gatherers, and schematic art, in this case by farmers and breeders of livestock. 2019 marks two hundred years since the discovery of the first cave with rock art in Catalonia, the Portell de les Lletres, in the Prades Mountains. In **Montblanc** we can visit the CIAR (Centre d'Interpretación de l'Art Rupestre), an important centre for education about and conservation of the paintings found in the Prades Mountains.

FOREST BATHING IN ELS PORTS

There are many benefits of **forest bathing**, a practice born in Japan almost four decades ago. After a walk of just two hours, it can lower blood pressure and glucose levels, stabilise the autonomic nerve zone, reduce levels of cortisol, the stress indicator, and increase the presence of NK cells ("natural killers"). The phytoncides released by the trees help us breathe better and the levels of haemoglobin are reduced in the part of the brain related to more stressful activities and increased in the part related to emotions, empathy and pleasure. In **Els Ports Natural Park** we can enjoy this guided activity, consciously walking through mature forests, past certain large trees that are included on the official list of **Monumental Trees of Catalonia**. During the walk we also learn about the importance of these forests as allies against climate change.

FONT MAJOR CAVE. ADVENTURE ROUTE

The cave tours are guided and run for an hour. Through audiovisuals and recreations with figures, they explain how our ancestors lived. 3,950 metres of the cave have been uncovered, most of which is beneath **L'Espluga de Francolí** town centre. If you're less interested in the historical element, you can opt for the **Adventure Route**. Dressed in a neoprene suit, helmet and visor, we walk along the underground river, sometimes with water up to our waists, until we reach the Pou de la Biela room, where we pass a kind of siphon before turning around. The route takes about three hours and the temperature inside the cave is quite stable, between 14 and 16 degrees.

VIMBODÍ MUSEUM OF GLASS

Glass manufacturing was a very important activity for this small town until the 1950s. In the museum's upper rooms, they tell us about the history of glass and show pieces for everyday use that were donated by **Vimbodí** residents themselves. The most interesting part of the museum is the Paco Ramos workshop, where this craftsman demos handblown hot glass, made without moulds. Paco heats, blows, twists, cools and reheats the glass in the furnace, as he goes through the whole process and describes the temperatures he works at to shape these delicate pieces.

THE GENIUSES LANDSCAPE

Two world-renowned painters, a musician and an architect were born or spent long periods in the Tarragona regions: Joan Miró, Pablo Picasso, Pau Casals and Antoni Gaudí. Joan Miró went to *Mont-roig* to cure himself of typhoid fever. The family farmhouse (*mas* in Catalan) he occupied became his summer refuge for 65 years. In *Mas Miró* you can see part of the vital anecdote of the painter, who went so far as to affirm that all his work was conceived in *Mont-roig*. The colours of his works were those of the town: the red of the *Mare de Déu de la Roca* hermitage, the blue of the sky, the yellow of its flowers and the green of the carob trees. *Horta de Sant Joan* will always be linked to the name of Pablo Picasso, who also came to the town seeking to recover from an illness. In *Horta de Sant Joan*, he did not only recover but also turned the landscapes of *Terra Alta* into the protagonists of his cubist works such as in the paintings *La bassa d'Horta* or the *La Fàbrica d'Horta d'Ebre*. "Everything I know I have learned in Horta," said the artist from this town who today dedicates the *Centre Picasso* to his memory.



El Vendrell is another town linked tightly to a different genius, where it is possible to visit the house where Pau Casals was born in 1876; one of the most important cellists of all time. In the nearby maritime district of *Sant Salvador*, he built *La Vil·la Casals*, a house that in his own words was the 'expression of his life as a Catalan and an artist'. Currently, it is a museum dedicated to his work and person. Reus, the capital of *Baix Camp*, was also the birthplace of the internationally renowned artist Antoni Gaudí, who spent the first sixteen years of his life in the city. Although he never built in the city where he was born, Reus dedicates an interactive interpretation centre to him, the Gaudí Centre. In this one, among other things, one can learn that the hypostyle hall of Park Güell hides a system for collecting rainwater, or that the famous Cross of Gaudí was inspired by the pinecones of the cypress trees. Reus has also twenty-six modernist buildings, that are works of renowned architects like Lluís Domènech i Montaner or Pere Caselles i Tarrats.

LLEIDA AND TERRES DE L'EBRE IN FLOWER

The spectacular colours of the blossom on the fruit trees of the *comarques* (local districts) of Lleida and Terres de l'Ebre are an invitation to enjoy magnificent visits, whether organised or undertaken alone, to extensive fields and orchards in flower. Such trips can also be combined with other leisure, gastronomic and cultural activities.

The flowering of the sweet fruit and almond trees has become a scenic show of the highest order. It allows visitors who travel to the *comarques* of Lleida and Terres de l'Ebre between the months of February and April to enjoy a unique sensory experience in which the colours (white, yellow, green and pink), textures, and aromas of the fruit trees are beautifully combined.

More and more municipalities are offering interesting proposals related to this product. For example, the Ajuntament (local council) of Aitona, which has been one of the leading promoters of blossom tourism in the territory of Lleida, takes pride of place on account of its "*Fruiturisme*" (Fruit Tourism) campaign and the "Sponsor a fruit tree" initiative, which seeks to encourage the consumption of quality fruit such as nectarines, peaches and flat peaches.

Or in the Ribera d'Ebre, where you can enjoy this natural spectacle with activities such as car rides, or cycling and hiking tours around the municipalities of Flix, Tivissa, La Serra d'Almos or Ginestar, among others.

In addition to this cultural and scenic framework, the flowering of the fruit trees also comes at what is a very special time for the rural population. It rewards the effort, investment and care for fields made by a sector that forms a vital part of both the local economy and society.