

Lleida - La Seu d'Urgell

The highlights:

- Lleida
- Congost de Mont-rebei
- Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park
- Vall de Boí Romanesques
- Val d'Aran
- La Seu d'Urgell

Section 3: Lleida - La Seu d'Urgell - 357 Km - 5 stages

- From Lleida to la Pobla de Segur. 107 km
- From la Pobla de Segur to Boí - Taüll. 62 km
- From Boí - Taüll to Vielha: 60 km
- From Vielha to Sort: 74 km
- From Sort to la Seu d'Urgell: 54 km



Very close to the heavens

A cathedral that overlooks **Lleida** is our starting point for a journey through vertiginous landscapes that offer us the **best starry skies in Catalonia**. We will also travel to the heart of the Pyrenees, where we will hike between glacier lakes, spectacular waterfalls and mountain towns, before discovering **Romanesque architecture that is a World Heritage Site**. We will enjoy **cheeses and artisanal sausages** and mountain recipes like the traditional **Aranese *olha*** served by a fireplace.



STAGE 1

THE STARRY SKY

The section begins among cathedrals and castles, specifically those of the city of Lleida and its environs. As night falls, the stars and constellations of the Montsec sky will be our roof.

Lleida's monuments

The day starts with a hearty breakfast, featuring *pa amb tomàquet*, with olive oil from **D.O.P Les Garrigues**, cured meats and **pears that come under the Lleida protected designation of origin**, and a walk through **La Seu Vella**, a temple with a magnificent dome and an octagonal bell tower sixty metres high, offering a panoramic view of the city and the surrounding land. Along with the **King's Castle - La Suda**, La Seu is part of a monumental complex that helps us understand the history of the city. This is a land of fields stretching all the way to the horizon, full of fruit orchards and vegetables that will end up in the recipes of many Lleidan dishes. On these fertile plains surrounding Lleida, official City and Town of Character, we visit the **castell de Gardeny**, which in the twelfth century housed the Templar soldiers based in this area. At the castle, there is the option to live the life of a Templar knight for a day.

Congost de Mont-rebei

Our next stop will be **Balaguer**, where we will regain our strength with a *coca de recapte*, made, of course, with peppers and eggplant from the Lleida gardens. The panoramic road between Balaguer and Baronia de Sant Oïsmo is a journey through beautiful

landscapes, with views over the **Segre river** and the magnificent **Camarasa reservoir**. The landscape around the reservoir, overlooking the Montsec mountain range, is conducive to hiking –one stage of the GR-1 passes through it–, observing cave paintings and even flying in a low-altitude balloon or hang glider. These landscapes are a good prelude to what awaits us at the **Congost de Mont-Rebei**. The vertiginous landscape and most famous rock in Catalonia can be explored on foot, through a narrow pass, or in a kayak along the Noguera-Ribagorçana river. We decide to stay on land and walk between stone walls whose height, in some sections, exceeds five hundred metres.

A Starlight Sky

Before the day is over, it's very worthwhile to double back a few miles to **Àger** and see another one of nature's great spectacles: a starry night. The mountains of the **Montsec**, an official **Tourist Destination and Starlight Reserve**, are home to the Centre d'Observació de l'Univers, where young and old alike learn a little bit more about the mysteries of the cosmos. After an intense, exciting day we set off for **La Pobla de Segur**, the end point of the historic **Tren dels Llacs** a journey offering spectacular panoramic views.

STAGE 2

AIGÜESTORTES AND THE BOÍ ROMANESQUE

The landscapes of Catalonia's only national park, with its lakes and mountains, and the architecture of the Romanesque churches of Boí are the focus of a day devoted to nature and culture.

Catalonia's only national park

The memory of constellations passes the time as we travel between La Pobla de Segur and la **Vall de Boí**. Upon reaching Senterada, we see the signs for **Vall Fosca**, another of Catalonia's natural wonders that deserves a detour. The road begins with gradual ascent to the top of the **Coll de la Creu de Perves**, with good views of the Pyrenees. From El Pont de Suert, the road passes between hills to the entrance gate of the **Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park**. At this entrance, there is a park information centre. Catalonia's only national park allows us to enjoy a spectacular natural setting: more than 200 lakes of glacial origin are surrounded by peaks around 3,000 metres high. In spring and summer, gentians and rhododendrons add a splash of colour to the green meadows.

The National Park has two other entrance points. Boí and Espot are the villages that contain the main centres and where it is necessary to go in order to visit the best-known spaces, such as Aigüestortes and the Estany de Sant Maurici pool. The third entrance is via the villages of Sort and Llessui, where there is also a park information centre.

Walking through Aigüestortes

An official **Family Nature and Mountain area**, the Vall de Boí is a paradise for hikers with trails suitable for all levels, from those with a low difficulty ideal for children to more demanding routes for experienced hikers. We choose to climb to **Planell d'Aigüestortes** from Boí in a 4x4 taxi, where we start a gentle excursion that will take us to **Estany Llong**. The path leading up to the Rus hill is the historic road used by the inhabitants of the Vall de Boí to visit Barcelona, before the motorways were built. The same path, although in the

opposite direction and on the back of a donkey, was often travelled by the Catalan bourgeoisie on their way from the city to visit the **hot springs of Caldes de Boí**. After walking we're getting hunger, luckily the Vall de Boí is an ideal place to try hearty Pyrenean cuisine: mushrooms, shepherd's cheese and a meat cooked *a la llosa* are served in the local restaurants.

The **Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park** has three entrances. One of them is at Boí and Espot, the villages which house the main centres, and where it is necessary to go in order to be able to see the best-known places, such as Aigüestortes and the Estany de Sant Maurici. A second entrance is via the villages of Sort and Llessui, where there is a park information centre. The third is that of Pont de Suert and Senet, where there is also a park information centre.

The beauty of Romanesque art

The afternoon will be reserved for the **Romanese heritage of la Vall de Boí, which features on the UNESCO World Heritage list**. A feudal family, the Erills, brought stonecutters to the valley, masters artisans and craftsmen who in a few decades erected eight churches and a chapel. In **Taüll**, official Charming Village, we find the quintessence of this Romanesque art, **Sant Climent and Santa María**, two churches consecrated in 1123, just one day apart. In Sant Climent, video mapping brings the frescoes of the greater apse and sanctuary to life. We stop at **Erill la Vall** to visit the **Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí** and the church of **Santa Eulàlia**, which, with its six-storey Lombard tower, is considered the most slender example in the valley. We continue our journey north to reach another of the great Pyrenean valleys: the Val d'Aran.

STAGE 3

UNIQUE FEATURES OF THE VAL D'ARAN

We enter the Val d'Aran, a Pyrenean territory with its own language and unique architecture, nature and cuisine formed by its geographical orientation.

Val d'Aran

Dawn breaks in **Val d'Aran**. The Atlantic orientation of this valley, with almost a third of its land above 2,000 metres, shapes the climate and typology of its forest species, which are different from those found in other parts of the Pyrenees. We soon find that here, things are noticeably different from what we have seen so far. In Vielha, capital of the Val d'Aran, a poster advertising a craft fair *hèt a man, hèt aciu* (handmade, made here) reminds us that, first of all, here another language is spoken: **Aranese**. The architecture is also unique, with stone villages growing around a church and others hanging from the hillsides of the mountains, with panoramic views of the valley.

Glacial waterfalls

From Vielha we drive along the **Garona River** to one of the most picturesque places in Val d'Aran, **Artiga de Lin**, a series of green meadows, ravines and rivers that form one of the most beautiful and easily accessible valleys in Val d'Aran. From here, a short

walk brings us closer to **Els Uelhs Deth Joeu**, a waterfall fed by the waters of the Aneto glacier. An exceptional phenomenon, the water disappears four kilometres up in the Benasque Valley only to resurface here in all its strength.

Pyrenean fauna

Forests in this part of the Pyrenees are home to marmots and large deer. When autumn comes, the calls of the deer in rut is the soundtrack to these forests. Throughout our walk we know that the animals are there, but they are hard to see, so in the afternoon we choose to visit **Aranpark, in Bossòst**, a town of featuring traditional architecture. In this wildlife park, both young and old alike are amazed at the imposing presence of brown bears, lynxes and grey wolves. To finish the day we go back to Vielha. If the visit happens to be on a Tuesday, we can participate in something that is a real institution in this valley, the **Pintxo Pote**. A bar-hopping route through the old town featuring miniature cuisine.



STAGE 4

WALKING THROUGH THE COLOMÈRS CIRQUE

Our visit to the charming stone villages of the Val d'Aran is the prelude to a hike through one of the most stunning landscapes of the Pyrenees, the Colomèrs cirque.

Villages of the Val d'Aran

We have seen that the Val d'Aran is a place of deep superstitions, fire festivals that are an Intangible Cultural Heritage and artisans who spend hours making ceramics, wrought iron and sausages such as the *fuet*, known here as *langoisa seca*. The day begins with visits to the towns of **Arties**, featuring notable Renaissance houses in its old town, and **Salardú**, where we see one of the aranese Romanesques, Sant Andrèu, a church with an octagonal tower, stunning wall frescoes and its wooden Christ. Arties and Salardú can also be reached via E-BTT, electric mountain bikes. There are other options for getting to know the valley's quirks, such as the nearby villages of **Escunhau**, **Bagergue** and **Tredòs**, but we believe that the landscapes of the area are best experienced slowly and on foot, so we choose to take another easy hike. If you're looking for a little more relaxation, you can opt for a visit to the **Banhs de Tredòs**, the highest-altitude thermal spa in Europe, with a stunning location in the heart of nature.

Hiking in Colomèrs

In his *Journey to the Pyrenees of Lleida*, Camilo José Cela wrote that the legs are the wings of the heart. Walking the trails is one of the best ways to explore the territory, which is why in the afternoon, starting in Salardú, we take a hike to explore a wonder of nature: the largest lake area in the Pyrenees, the **Colomèrs cirque**, located within the **Aigüestortes i Estany de Sant Maurici National Park**. The entire route spans seven glacial lakes, but we're not that ambitious; instead we just climb as far as the shelter. Along the way we pass two lakes, several creeks, bridges and all kinds of rock formations. Once in the shelter, we sit with a coffee in hand to enjoy the views of the Estany de Colomèrs and the surrounding peaks of the mountains it reflects. This is what peace feels like. A couple of short and long circular routes start from the shelter and link the different lakes. We end the day with an aranese *olha*, a hearty and delicious soup typical of the valley's cuisine that helps us recharge our batteries.



STAGE 5

ADVENTURE IN NOGUERA PALLARESA

This day features the thrills of river activities on the Noguera Pallaresa River, and ends with a tasting of cheeses that have won prestigious awards.

Active river tourism

After two days where we have barely used the car, we hit the road again and drive straight to **Llavorsí**, which together with **Sort** (Sports Tourism Destination of Catalonia), **Rialp**, is a Catalan capital of **rafting**. The **Noguera Pallaresa River** was the first on the peninsula where this sport began to be practiced in the 80's. With its class II, III and IV sections, is among the best white waters of Europe. We don't want to miss this unique experience, which is also suitable for children, so we put on our wetsuits, helmets and life jackets, and we hop in the river with the invaluable help of the experienced rafter who steers our inflatable boat. In addition to rafting, this area offers other **adventure sports**, such as hydrospeed, canoeing, canyoning and bungee jumping, among others. If you are looking for a quieter plan, in **Valls d'Àneu**, another official Family Nature and Mountain area, we have several alternative family outings, such as visiting the Ecomuseu d'Esterrí d'Àneu or the Casa de l'Ós Bru dels Pirineus in Isil. At **Vall d'Assua** we can learn about the work of the shepherds and visit the Llessui Ecomuseum.

Good Cheese

After all the excitement, a visit to some craftsmen who produce **mountain cheese** brings our pulse

back down to normal. Our goal is to learn about the production process and taste the delicacies made by certain producers whose cheeses have won prestigious prizes such as the *World Cheese Award*. Before we finish our day in **El Pallars Sobirà**, take a detour of a few kilometres to visit the picturesque town of **Gerri de la Sal**, where we visit its walled old town, an eleventh-century monastery, a medieval bridge and salt marshes with its Royal Alfóli, monuments listed as Goods of National Cultural Interest.

At La Seu d'Urgell

We continue on to **La Seu d'Urgell**, in the Alt Urgell district, located between two rivers and in the shadow of the nearby Serralada del Cadí. The late afternoon sun illuminates **Santa María**, the only fully Romanesque cathedral in Catalonia; we are just in time to visit its fascinating cloister. Here we find the only cheese from Catalonia with a protected designation of origin, a high-quality product made locally. La Seu d'Urgell is considered the Catalan capital of cheese thanks to the importance of the **Artisan Cheese Fair of the Pyrenees**, held in October during the **festival of Sant Ermengol**



FIND OUT +

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

THE TREN DELS LLACS

Opened in 1951, the railway connecting Lleida and La Pobla de Segur was part of a trans-Pyrenean project that intended to link the city of Lleida with Saint Giron, across the border. But the entire route was never completed. Today we can make this nostalgic journey to La Pobla de Segur thanks to two diesel-powered locomotives from the 60's known as "ye-yés". Along the way there are four reservoirs, 41 mountain tunnels and 31 bridges, always with views of the Noguera Pallaresa River Mont-roig and Montsec mountain ranges. The trip in the **Tren dels Llacs** takes an hour and fifty minutes.

DINOSAURS IN CATALONIA

Long before the feudal lords built their castles in the hills of Lleida or the Greeks and Romans built their cities on the shores of the Mediterranean, the Pyrenees were inhabited by the **dinosaurs**. Footprints, bones, fossilized eggs and other remains have been found in several districts of the provinces of Lleida and Barcelona, helping paleontologists learn to understand what life must have been like at the end of the Cretaceous period in what is today Catalonia. In **Isona** and **Conca de Dellà** you can visit **Cretaci Park**, consisting of a museum centre and several fields in which works are ongoing. The **Orígens Geopark** encompasses the parts of the province of Lleida of exceptional geological value. It is part of the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network. In the **Epicentre**, the visitors' centre of Pallars Jussà explains the importance of the Geopark, in terms both of natural and cultural heritage, and on the first floor they have an interesting exhibition called the Earth and Geology of the Dinosaurs. Another interesting option is **Dinosfera**, in the town of **Coll de Nargó**.

THERAPEUTIC WATERS

At an altitude of 1,500 metres, the Vall de Boí has several **healing mineral springs** with temperatures ranging from 4 to 56 degrees. The Romans already appreciated the therapeutic virtues of these lands in the first and second centuries, as did the lords of Erill, who ruled these lands a thousand years later, but the first Bath House as such was not built until the seventeenth century. Today, the historic **Balneari de Caldes de Boí** has 37 thermal springs with waters that naturally feature chlorine, sulphates and calcium bicarbonate. It also has two hotels that open from spring to autumn, and a well-known bottling plant for mineral water. It is the spa house with the widest variety of waters, a fact that has earned it a place in the Guinness book of world records.



THE MAGIC OF WINTER

Lleida is synonymous with **skiing**, and there are many options available to practice this sport in the province. The Vall de Boí has the **Boí Taüll Resort**, which boasts the highest-altitude ski area in the Pyrenees, and the Val d'Aran has the iconic **Baqueira-Beret**. But there are also more modest resorts where visitors can enjoy **downhill skiing** and **cross-country skiing**. The list is long and varied: **Espot Esquí, Port Ainé, Tavascan, Port del Comte, Virós-Vallferrera, Aransa, Lles de Cerdanya, Sant Joan de l'Erm and Tuixent-la Vansa**. Many of these areas also have options to focus on other snow sports, such as dog sledding or snow shoeing.

PYRENEAN CULTURES

It's happened in many riding regions, and Catalonia is no exception: major roads reached the Pyrenean valleys much later than the rest of the territory. Their steep terrain always kept the inhabitants slightly separated from the world, which accentuated unique social and cultural characteristics that persist today. In the province of Lleida, there are several interesting museums for exploring this cultural heritage, such as the **Espai Raier** in **La Pobla de Segur**, dedicated to the ancient river transport systems for moving wood along the Noguera Pallaresa River. **Esterri d'Àneu** is the backbone of the **Valls d'Àneu Ecomuseums**, a new museum concept that brings us closer to the Pallars lifestyle of the turn of the century through a series of interactive exhibits. In **Vilamòs**, you can visit the **Joaniquet Museum**, a traditional house from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, that recreates life in the Val d'Aran during this era.

At **Boí, Taüll, Erill la Vall, Barruera, Durro, El Pont de Suert, Llesp, Casós, Vilaller** and **Senet**, in the *comarca* (local district) of L'Alta Ribagorça; **Arties** and **Les**, in the Val d'Aran; **Isil** and **Alins**, in El Pallars Sobirà, and **La Pobla de Segur**, in El Pallars Jussà, it is possible to see the "*falles*" (burning torches) of the Catalan Pyrenees. This is a traditional festival which has been recognised by UNESCO as part of humanity's Intangible Cultural Heritage. Over several days, at around the time of the summer solstice, which may vary from village to village, festivities are held which are crowned by the "*falles*". In this ceremony, torches are set alight and logs are carried down the mountainside, and to the village, by local young people. Once there, a bonfire is lit and the celebrations are accompanied by music and traditional dancing.



ARANESSE ROMANESQUES

There are thirty-three **Romanesque churches in the Val d'Aran**, one for each village in the valley. Of all these, there are five that experts consider most interesting. The first is in Vielha, Sant Miquèu, built in the thirteenth century when the Romanesque period began to use elements from the style that would follow, the Gothic period. The second church is located in Bossòst, Era Mair de Diu dera Purificacion, erected in the twelfth century at the height of the feudal lords' dispute over control of region. Again in Bossòst, of course, are seven Romanesque oratories which the parishioners built to protect themselves against the plague. On the way to Port de la Bonaigua we pass near neighbouring towns with impressive Romanesque heritage: Arties, Salardú and Unha. The church of Santa Maria d'Arties is a Good of National Cultural Interest and features a spectacular scene of the Final Judgement. The last two churches on the route, Sant Andrèu de Salardú and Santa Eulària d'Unha, also stand out thanks to their murals.

NATURAL PARKS

Other than the natural area of **Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici**, designated as a national park structure, two natural parks spread over the western part of the Catalan Pyrenees. The **Alt Pirineu Natural Park** is a space of superlative size; its 80,000 hectares make it the largest natural park in Catalonia. Within its borders we also encounter another record-breaking number, the **Pica d'Estats**, which is the tallest mountain in Catalonia with 3,143 metres. The park is home to some endangered species such as the wood grouse, the brown bear and the native Pallaresa lizard, which are not easy to spot. The **Alt Pirineu** (High Pyrenees) Natural Park forms part of the **Pyrenean Park of the Three Nations**. It is one of four natural parks that are located in Andorra, Catalonia and France; the others are the Regional Natural Park of the Ariège Pyrenees, the Communal Natural Park of the Valls del Comapedrosa and the Vall de Sorteny Natural Park. Its neighbour is the **Cadí-Moixeró Natural Park**, which protects the two mountain ranges that are linked by the Tancalaporta pass. This is the best place in Catalonia to observe wallcreepers as well as other birds from the mountainous and sub-alpine forests of the Pyrenees, such as the black woodpecker, featured in the park's logo, or Tengmalm's owl.



THE CALL OF THE DEER

Nature lovers, and especially those interested in wildlife, have an obligatory date in the Pyrenees in autumn: this is with the **bellowing of the deer**, which is a curious ceremony of sound that takes place in the idyllic settings of the Pyrenees and Pre-Pyrenees of Lleida. Areas such as the **Alt Pirineu** and **Cadí-Moixeró** natural parks, the **Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici National Park**, and especially the **Boumort National Reserve**, play host to this wonder of the animal kingdom between mid-September and mid-October. This is a period in which the males fight with each other to win the favour of the females, marking their territory, and bellowing constantly. It is a tremendous experience to discover, at first hand, how these animals behave as they seek to reproduce and ensure the continuity of their lineage amongst the females of the group: marking pine trees with their antlers, digging up the ground to leave their mark, fighting fiercely with clashing antlers, and staging these unusual concerts, which go on from dusk until well into the night. In this area, there are specialised companies and rural houses that organize **guided trips** to maximise the enjoyment of this experience and which enable visitors to observe this activity in all its splendour, while interfering as little as possible in what is a vital moment for this animal species.