

Barcelona-Tarragona

The highlights:

- Barcelona
- Montserrat
- El Penedès
- Barcelona Coast and Sitges
- Cistercian Route (Monastery of Santes Creus)
- Tarragona

Section 1: Barcelona-Tarragona - 462 km – 6 stages

- Barcelona city
- From Barcelona to Montserrat: 64 km
- From Montserrat to Solsona: 79 km
- From Solsona to Sant Sadurní d'Anoia: 151 km
- From Sant Sadurní d'Anoia to Sant Salvador: 74 km
- From Sant Salvador to Tarragona: 84 km



Vineyards with a taste of the sea

Barcelona, the great Mediterranean city, will be the starting point for this journey to **Roman Tarragona**. Along the way, we will encounter **Montserrat**, the most iconic mountain in Catalonia, with vineyards like beautiful gardens with views of the sea and precious agricultural heritage, built one stone at a time. There will be time to taste delicious wines and meet some friendly giants. All this to the soundtrack of a musical genius, cellist **Pau Casals**.



STAGE 1

BARCELONA, CITY OF ART

The streets of **Picasso's** youth reveal an intimate version of Barcelona, featuring charming small businesses. A city that has always been linked to art, in all its forms.

By bicycle

The hotel's rooftop, where my breakfast is ready for me, offers a 360-degree view of Barcelona, from the seaside city to the mountains. I have the beach at my feet, with the **Sagrada Familia** in the background alongside the modern buildings of the Olympic Village and the Torre Glòries, architectural icons of the Catalan capital's skyline. The sky is clear, as it is more than 300 days a year; an invitation to cycle through the city streets. The route chosen lets me pedal an unusual bamboo bike past several excellent graffiti art murals.

Following in Picasso's footsteps

I am taking a little leap through time into the bohemian Barcelona of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city where young Picasso wandered the streets. I walk past important places from his life, such as the school where he studied, **Carrer Avinyó** and the brewery where he had his first solo exhibition. The artist's work has given me an appetite: taking advantage of the fact

that the route ends at the Picasso museum, located in the **El Born** neighbourhood, I continue a gastronomic tour of the neighbourhood's iconic taverns. An excellent option to continue the afternoon is strolling through shops, some of which are centuries old, selling handmade goods such as jewellery, fashion, cosmetics, handicrafts, and nougat.

The Gothic Quarter

I return to the sea views, climbing to the **Mirador de Colón** lookout via the elevator installed inside the monument's column. Once I am back on the street, I round out my visit with a tasting of four Catalan wines: Alella, Pla de Bages, Catalunya and Penedès. As the first street lights flicker on, the night tour of **Ciutat Vella** and the **Gothic quarter** begin, visiting Santa María del Pi, the Cathedral and charming plazas like Sant Felip Neri, a place that speaks to the working man's Barcelona and still has wounds from the tragic Civil War on some of its walls.

STAGE 2

THE BEAUTY OF MODERNISM

The day begins with some of the most beautiful modernist buildings in Europe and ends at Montserrat, Catalonia's most iconic mountain.

A stroll through the Eixample

I head out early to stroll down the city's seafront and enjoy the sunrise again. To understand Barcelona's urban planning a little better, we can go on a private tour with an architect through the **Eixample**, the urban expansion that connected the old town with the Vila de Gracia, forming a checked pattern that looks as though it were drawn with a ruler. The neighbourhood is home to a large proportion of the city's heritage-listed buildings, including important **modernist works** such as the Casa de les Punxes, La Pedrera, the Casa Amatller and the **Casa Batlló**.

Colonia Güell

I climb to **Montjuïc** to say goodbye to Barcelona from the heights of its hillside, a spot where you can see the stunning Botanical Gardens, and museums such as the Joan Miró Foundation, the National Museum of Art in Catalonia and the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion.

I set off for Santa Coloma de Cervelló to visit the **crypt of Colonia Güell**, a spectacular work from Gaudí's **naturalist period**. While the crypt is one of

the architect's seven World Heritage-listed buildings, it is also the least well-known work on that prestigious list.

To Montserrat

Our journey continues north, as we seek to explore the industrial modernist heritage of **Terrassa**, one of the official Cities and Towns with Character, featuring the Freixa farmhouse with its parabolic arches, and we take a tour of the city's most outstanding gardens and Visigoth churches. This is an exceptional European heritage site where we can explore centuries of art history.

The next stop is **Monistrol de Montserrat**, where I take the rack railway to the mountain of Montserrat. This is one of the most iconic and beautiful landscapes of Catalonia, full of powerful symbolism thanks to its monastery and sanctuary dedicated to the **Virgen de Montserrat, the patron saint of Catalonia**, popularly known as **La Moreneta**. The mountain woods are impressive, so I decide to stay overnight in the monastery's lodgings.



STAGE 3

WAKING UP IN MONSERRAT

Sunrise in Montserrat and walking the mountain in the early hours of the day is one of the most beautiful experiences of this section of the Grand Tour in Catalonia. The route continues towards Bages, a land of unique dry stone constructions.

A beautiful sunrise

I slept well in Montserrat. At the start of the morning I take a quick tour around the natural park of Montserrat, along paths that encourage peaceful walks and meditation while the first rays of sunlight paint the peaks of the most iconic rocks red, such as the **Cavall Bernat**, the Serrat del Moro and La Palomera. If the visit coincides with the performance schedule of the **Escolania**, one of the oldest music schools in Europe, it is worth entering the basilica to listen to how they sing the **Virolai**, a song also known as *Rosa d'abril* and dedicated to La Moreneta.

Mató and back on the road

After visiting the shops around the sanctuary square and buying some traditional **mató**, a cottage cheese that is delicious with honey, I descend the mountain in the Aeri, a cable car that overlooks the Llobregat valley. Now it's time to get back in the car and cross the **Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac Natural Park**. Although I'm tempted by the option of heading to Sant Fruitós de Bages for a tandem jump, free falling from 4,000 metres high, I decide to

postpone it for when I come back with friends and can share the adventure.

Bages

I spend the afternoon on several visits: the **Tines of the Vall del Montcau**, huge dry stone constructions in which wine was made at the foot of the vineyard when the Bages district was one of Catalonia's leading producers; the town of **Mura**, an **official Charming Village** which retains a spectacular medieval centre in the midst of its cobbled streets and an interesting mill with more than a thousand years of history; and the nearby **Sant Benet de Bages monastery**, a well-preserved medieval monastery where I can learn how the monks lived between the walls of the church, the cloister and their cells. The complex has incorporated a innovative modern culinary research centre, the **Alícia Foundation**, which promotes the benefits of healthy eating; three restaurants and a grocery store selling organic products.

I continue onward to the outskirts of Solsona in the Lleida province, where I have booked a night at an old farmhouse in the **Vall de Lord**.



STAGE 4

HEADING TO PENEDÈS

The landscape of Solsonés greets me with a misty morning. After visiting one of the Cities with Character, the route takes us to Penedès, where wine and Cava are made under two historic denominations of origin.

Vall de Lord

Although Vall de Lord is about twenty miles north of Solsona, this quick detour from our route is worth it. At dawn, the morning mists emerge from the **Llosa del Cavall reservoir**, whose landscape is great for adventure sports such as climbing, canyoning, paragliding and mountain biking. The play of light filtering through the mist fills my camera roll with striking images. When the sun is warm enough, I rent a kayak to roam those bright turquoise waters. With one last glance at the landscape from one of the bridges across the reservoir, I take the beautiful road that follows the Cardener river gorge to **Solsona**.

Giants in Solsona

During the guided tour of this city, with its strong Baroque heritage, I see strange things like the collection of huge figures in the Giant's Quarter, huge creatures that parade through the streets during the festive days. The **Miracle Sanctuary** is barely twelve kilometres from **Solsona**, City with Character, and its Baroque altar is reason enough to consider a visit. The journey continues southward, entering the province of Barcelona again, with various options for stops, such as **Cardona** with its castle and salt mines, the **Poble Vell de Súria**, which

rises on the left bank of the Cardener River and was a major community on the salt trade route; or **Manresa**, City with Character, with its strong modernist heritage.

The Garden of Penedès

The heart of **Penedès**, a land with a long wine making tradition, is my next destination. Its vineyard is nestled between Montserrat and the Mediterranean Sea, a landscape marked by gentle undulations of the land and large flatlands, reflecting the waves of the sea that gives it character. In **Sant Sadurní d'Anoia** I visit the Cava Interpretation Centre, where I discover the history, protagonists, and architecture of this iconic drink through the different rooms. The sprawling Penedès vineyard must have garden fairies, I note in my travel diary after spending part of the afternoon visiting some of the sights of the **Miravinya Route**, five vantage points with magnificent views over a vine-covered landscape of the Alt Penedès dotted with dry stone walls and huts. I end the day with a vertical tasting in one of Penedès' legendary wineries, where I learn to appreciate the subtle differences that the passage of time imparts to wine.

STAGE 5

THE SEA OF PAU CASALS

The day takes me to the waterfront vineyards, one of the landscapes that inspired and shaped the life of Pau Casals, the world-renowned musician who has delighted generations with his performance of the *Cant dels Ocells*.

Catania's of Vilafranca

Yesterday was all about the history of Cava, now it's time for the Vinseum in **Vilafranca del Penedès**, a museum dedicated to the production of wine in Catalonia, located in an old mansion opposite the basilica of Santa Maria. It is not easy to decide between the great experiences on offer at the Penedès wineries, with different themed visits, activities, and tastings. I opt for a wine and cheese pairing, which offers me the nuanced range of these wines born so close to the sea. Before leaving Vilafranca del Penedès, I go to a sweet shop and buy a few boxes of **catanias**, a **traditional dessert** made from toasted, caramelised and chocolate-covered almonds.

The elegance of Sitges

On the way to the coast, driving along the Wine Road, I stop at the **Olèrdola castle**, a monumental outpost with excellent views of the Penedès plane and Garraf. **Sitges**, on the official list of Marine Districts and Villages, is one of the most beautiful towns on the Catalan coast. From the promenade, I climb the stairs to the Sant Bartolomeu i Santa Tecla church, located on a small hill that offers panoramic

views of Sitges beaches. A walk through the historic town centre with its fresh, whitewashed streets takes me to the **Maricel Museum**, with its remarkable art collection. As I leave, I make sure to try one of the most unusual wines made in Catalonia, a sweet wine made with **malvasía grapes** that is still in production thanks to the Fundación del Hospital San Juan Bautista.

The sound of music

On the road that skirts the Foix reservoir I cross into a different province, Tarragona, but I remain in the land of the **Penedès D.O.** I arrive in Sant Salvador, one of **El Vendrell's** maritime districts, home to what was once the summer home of cellist **Pau Casals** and is now a museum. Through personal objects, I experience the life of this iconic musician and the environment in which he created his work. Pau Casals argued that this house was the expression and synthesis of his life as a Catalan and an artist. I think about the emotion the musician must have felt, the same one I feel now, every time he came back from a trip and ran through the door, straight out into the sea.



STAGE 6

SILENCE, PEACE AND THE ESSENCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE

Santes Creus is one of the most important historic buildings in Catalonia. Starting in the lands of the Cistercians, secondary roads connect gems such as Montferri and Altafulla to end the day and the route at Part Alta, Tarragona.

Cistercian lands

I start the morning on the banks of the river Gaià, at the doorstep of **Santes Creus**, one of the great Catalan monasteries. Unlike the two other monasteries on the Cistercian Route, now once again inhabited, Santes Creus was abandoned after the Mendizábal disentailment. It was the resting place chosen by two Catalan kings, and inside you can see the impressive royal sepulchres and a remarkable set of stained glass windows.

In the nearby town of Cabra del Camp, I enjoy the guided **Nordic walk through vineyards** and grain fields. The gentle breeze that makes the crops sway and the pleasant temperature invites introspection, an intimate moment that connects me to the joys of the Mediterranean landscape. The activity ends with the tasting of a DO Tarragona wine and DOP Siurana olive oil.

Back to the sea

Beautiful country roads surrounded by vineyards take me to **Montferri**. In a small watchtower stands a shrine by Josep Maria Jujol, who worked with Gaudí. The base of the sanctuary is shaped like a

boat that faces the mountains of Montserrat, whose rock formations inspired its shape. I approach the coast again, passing **Altafulla**, a town with a lovely historical centre, known as Vila Closa, and a seaside district, Les Botigues, that still retains the seafaring character of yesteryear. When I arrive in **Tarragona**, I walk through the **Part Alta** neighbourhood and into **Casa Castellarnau**, a precious example of bourgeois architecture nestled among the noble houses we find on Cavallers Street.

The good life in Tarragona

On the doorstep of the **Cathedral**, I wait for the guide who will take me through the different spaces: nave, cloister and a climb to the bell tower, a visit with more intrigue, betrayals, struggles, pacts and secrets than the best TV series. At night, with all its Roman heritage illuminated, I grab a seat in a restaurant with just over half a dozen tables and the open kitchen, where I let myself be guided by young chefs who are very committed to cooking with local products, which means no shortage of natural wines and excellent fish straight from the Tarragona fish market.



FIND OUT +

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

BARCELONA, A FESTIVAL DESTINATION

Barcelona hosts more than 160 festivals throughout the year, showcasing the latest artistic trends in film, dance, literature, design, art... Highlights include the popular, world-renowned festival of electronic music, Sonar, and Primavera Sound, which brings you the best indie sounds. The yearly calendar of music festivals includes many more interesting suggestions, including the Barcelona Obertura Spring Festival, in March, with its concerts by leading performers from Spain and abroad, held at Barcelona's three concert halls and other iconic venues. In June and July, the city hosts the Jardins de Pedralbes Festival, which features a varied repertoire of open-air concerts. And Barcelona's summer culturefest, the Grec, brings you theatre, dance, music and street performances. The International Comic Fair is the world's second most important event dedicated to comics and cartoons, and an absolute must for fans of the genre. And if you like manga, you can visit the Barcelona Manga Fair, which ranks second in Europe. There's also the Loop Festival, which is dedicated to video art. The 48H Open House Barcelona is the city's most important date with architecture: more than 200 buildings open their doors over one weekend. The Barcelona-D'A Film Festival showcases the best in contemporary independent world cinema. And if you're into music, the In-Edit Festival is the go-to event showcasing music documentaries. This is just a selection but there's so much more to choose from: take your pick and enjoy!

CARDONA AND THE SALT MOUNTAIN

The **Castle of Cardona** crowns the promontory on which this community is based, whose golden years were during the Middle Ages thanks to the salt trade. Although the precious mineral was being mined as early as the Neolithic period, it was the Cardona Population Charter, which sets out the perpetual right to mine salt, which ultimately allowed wealth to flood its streets. The mines again became very important in the early twentieth century, and were still in operation until 1990. Following their closure, a cultural park was set up to protect the former mining operation. Today, you can discover the Castle of Cardona and the **Salt Mountain Cultural Park** through two guided tours and two theatrical tours: "The true story of the Minyona Tower" and "Alchemy Project": the secret of the Liber Salis. On the first, we will discover the most important spaces of the old city castle, including the church of Sant Vicent and the legends that have emerged between its walls. On the visit to the mine we are accompanied by two scientist explorers following in the footsteps of a fifteenth-

century alchemist. It's very exciting to follow in the miners' footsteps and enter the galleries, 86 metres deep. Interestingly, Cardona was the location for some of the main scenes from Orson Welles' film *Chimes at Midnight*.

LA SEGARRA, LAND OF CASTLES

The historical importance of La Segarra is reflected in the archaeological and monumental remains that are conserved in many parts of the *comarca* (local district). Through them, it is possible to embark on a journey through the history of this territory, from prehistoric times through to the Art Nouveau architecture of the twentieth century, via the Roman period and the Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque architectural styles. Cervera, Guissona and Sant Guim de Freixenet are just some of the municipalities in La Segarra in which you can discover the most significant of these elements.

However, it is the large number of castles, towers, strongholds and fortified villages in La Segarra that have led to this *comarca* often being referred to as the "*Land of Castles*". In fact, this is where we find the famous Route of the Castles of the River Sió, which runs along the banks of the river that gives it its name. This is a gentle route, and one full of history, which runs through the dry landscapes of La Segarra. It is suitable for all types of family excursions, whether undertaken by car, on foot, or by mountain bike.

Depending on the time of year, a range of different colours dye the landscapes of this *comarca*. These range from plains bearing cereal crops to areas of medium-height mountains. It is a territory where many typically Mediterranean crops grow, including olives and almonds. This makes the landscape of La Segarra truly unique. When spring arrives, it is difficult to forget the image offered by the spectacular contrast between the almond blossom and the green fields of cereals, all of which encourages us to enjoy nature and the feeling of tranquillity that it exudes.

CERVERA, THE LAND OF CULTURE AND FIRE

Located in inland Catalonia, **Cervera** offers visitors a trip through its history. Walking through the historic centre of the capital of La Segarra, we find buildings and elements that tell us a lot about its splendid past. They present an amalgam of styles that arouse the interest and curiosity. This is an ideal town to let yourself get lost in, while contemplating the **14th century walls**, visiting the Baroque-style **Paeria** (Town Hall), or walking through its emblematic streets. These include the Carrer Major (main street), with its **lordly houses**, the Carreró de les Bruixes (witches' alley) and the Plaça Major (main square). The latter hosts the main events that are held in the town. The most spectacular of these is the **Aquelarre de Cervera** (Witches' Sabbat), which is

a festival that highlights the town's connection with the witches of the Middle Ages. The **Medieval Passió de Cervera** is another great event, with more than 500 years of history. It is an enactment of the Passion of Christ which invites visitors to return to medieval times.

Thanks to its neoclassical style, which includes some Baroque elements, and its auditorium, the **University of Cervera** remains one of the town's most spectacular buildings and is a must-see. The municipal territory also contains a total of **16 churches** of different architectural styles. These range from the Romanesque hermitage of Sant Pere Gros and church of Sant Miquel de Tudela, to the neoclassical church of Sant Magí, via the Gothic-style church of Santa Maria.

CIUDADELA IBÉRICA DE CALAFELL

In 1983, archaeologists Joan Santacana and Joan Sanmartí began excavations of the **Ciudadella Ibérica de Calafell**, a settlement founded in the early sixth century BC. It is thought to have been the fortified settlement of a warlord of the Cossetans tribe, the Iberians who lived in Camp de Tarragona. Between 1992 and 1994, the village was rebuilt using experimental archaeology techniques and an educational museum approach, following the example of the Ekertop site on the Swedish island of Öland. During the visit, we can climb the towers and walls or enter the houses, silos and workshops to see reproductions of everyday objects and find out what a day was like in the life of an Iberian community. The fortress forms part of the Iberian Route, a cultural tourism project promoted and coordinated by the Archeology Museum of Catalonia.

DRY STONE - THE ROUTE OF CAPONA

There was a time when rough and wise hands were in charge of rural constructions, fitting one stone to the next with mastery, studying weights and measurements carefully because no bonding material was used. The **dry stone huts** were used to protect the peasant farmers from the rain and keep tools and livestock safe and dry. In the middle of the Cistercian Route, in the town of Pla de Santa Maria, we can follow the Route of Capona, featuring excellent examples of this heritage surrounded by cultivated fields, primarily vineyards. This is an almost flat path, just over two kilometres long, that you can walk or cycle. As well as huts, we will see barriers and buildings used to store rainwater. In 2018, UNESCO inscribed the architecture and culture of dry stone on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list.



CISTERCIAN ROUTE

The districts of Alt Camp, Conca de Barberà and Urgell reveal a landscape of fertile soil that caught the eye of Cistercian monks. In each of these districts they built a monastery: Santes Creus, Poblet and Vallbona de les Monges. The **Cistercian Route** links the three on a circular path that follows the GR175, which can be covered in several stages by hiking (105 kilometres) or mountain biking (108 kilometres).

Santes Creus was a centre of power and major influence for the Crown of Aragon. Pere the Great and Jaume II, along with his wife Blanca de Anjou, wanted to be buried in **Santes Creus**, in two Gothic mausoleums by the main altar. On guided tours we can learn about the medieval legends associated with this monastery on the banks of the river Gaià.

Poblet, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is located in a stunning setting, at the foot of the Prades mountains, with Poblet forest and its thermal springs within walking distance. The type of landscape that inspires Mediterranean garden, with an abundance of vineyards, grain fields and olive orchards.

Vallbona de les Monges is the only one of the three monasteries that is surrounded by an urban centre; this was a concession by the Abbess to circumvent the Council of Trent's ban on women's monasteries in isolated places. Alongside Poblet, these are the two monasteries that are still inhabited today.

VALLS: CALÇOTADES AND CASTELLS

The **calçot** is a variety of sweet, white spring onions traditionally grown in Catalonia. Although the season was originally confined to the winter months, the popularisation of this product has meant that it now can be eaten from November until the arrival of spring, and even well into April. The traditional way to cook **calçots** is by roasting them in an open fire, prepared with the shoots resulting from pruning the vines. When the outside is blackened, the **calçots** are wrapped in newspaper for a few minutes to finish cooking and keep them warm. A **calçot** is eaten with your hands, peeling the outer layer with your fingers and dipping them in romesco sauce. A hearty grilled meat is then usually served. The **calçot** of Valls is subject to a Protected Geographical Indication. On the last Sunday in January, the **Festa de la Calçotada** is held in the town. The events revolves around the **calçots** eating contest, where the current record holder ate more than three hundred units.

Valls is also one of the capitals of the **castells**, and there are plans to open a **Castell Museum of Catalonia**. It has been designed by the architect Dani Freixas, winner of the National Architecture Award, and within its nearly 3,000 square metres we will be able to learn, through the most advanced audiovisual technologies, about the complexity of the construction of these human towers that rise up to ten stories in height, and the profound joy the members of the groups experience during the festival days. If you have the opportunity to attend a day in one of the plazas castelleras, it will certainly be one of the most exciting experiences you can enjoy in Catalonia.