



The Medieval Pyrenees

Catalonia, Roussillon & the Comté de Foix

23 May–1 June 2023 (MJ 737)

10 days • £3,680

Lecturer: Dr Richard Plant

A survey of the extraordinary achievements in Romanesque and Gothic architecture.

Delves deep into the French and Spanish Pyrenees but also takes in low-lying and coastal Catalonia.

Scenically and architecturally stunning.

During the Middle Ages the Pyrenees supported two very distinct ways of life: the fundamentally urban civilisation of the coastal reaches, mercantile in ambition and Mediterranean in outlook, and that unsung, tireless village culture which flourished in the high places and valleys inland.

Here in the remote mountains a rural and essentially feudal Christianity emerged, consecrated in innumerable small Romanesque churches and largely immune to news from elsewhere. The mediator was monasticism, introduced uncertainly at first but becoming in fact a vehicle of political will under the mighty Oliba of Cerdagne.

Oliba's early foundations at Ripoll and Cuxa embody this ambition and are among the seminal essays of Romanesque architecture in Europe. They found a reflection in the parish churches of the High Pyrenees and, moderated by the vernacular of Catalonia, resulted in some of the most serene and beautiful buildings of twelfth-century Europe. Even more remarkably, these churches were largely spared the calamities of the post-Renaissance period, leaving their glorious marble sculpture intact and preserving, albeit often in museums, the finest of their paintings.

These early achievements were enhanced by the arrival of the Cistercians, invited by Count Ramón Berenguer to fill the void left by the expulsion of the Moors from south-western Catalonia, and their monasteries at Poblet and Santes Creus remain even more complete than Fontenay or Fossanova. Neither were the cities neglected: ever more responsive to distant developments, Girona, Barcelona and Lérida were provided with cathedrals of the first rank. Shortly after came that extraordinary flowering of late medieval mercantile culture which transformed the previously neglected market towns of the north, St-Girons, Foix and St-Bertrand-de-Comminges.



Monastery of Poblet, late-18th-century engraving

Itinerary

Day 1: Barcelona, Vic. Fly at c. 10.45am (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Barcelona. Visit the Museum of Catalan Art; a superb collection of medieval painting and sculpture from many of the churches to be visited on the tour. Continue to Vic for the night.

Day 2: Ripoll, San Juan de las Abadesas, Arles-sur-Tech, Collioure. Oliba's astonishing monastery of Sta Maria at Ripoll has one of the greatest libraries of early medieval Europe. San Juan de las Abadesas is a Romanesque church founded in 887 by Count Wilfred the Hairy as a Benedictine nunnery. Cross into France to Arles-sur-Tech, famed for its tranquil cloister and 12th-cent. sculpture. Continue to the pretty seaside town of Collioure for the first of four nights.

Day 3: Serrabonne, Villefranche-de-Conflent, St Michel de Cuxa. Drive in the morning into the foothills of the Canigou Massif. Serrabonne abbey church has a magnificent 12th-cent. carved choral tribune in pink marble. St Jacques at Villefranche-de-Conflent has a fine 12th-cent. portal while St Michel de Cuxa, an important early medieval foundation, was gloriously refurbished by Abbot Oliba during the early 11th cent. Overnight Collioure.

Day 4: Girona, San Pedro de Roda. Back into Spain to visit Girona. The Gothic Cathedral, perhaps the finest in Catalonia, houses important illuminated manuscripts

and tapestries in the chapterhouse. The early Romanesque abbey of San Pedro de Roda has wonderful views of the coast.

Day 5: St Martin de Fenollar, Elne. The Romanesque chapel at Fenollar has tiny spaces that carry the most complete cycle of medieval wall paintings to have survived in French Catalonia. See also the fortified cathedral at Elne and fine Pyrenean marble sculpture at St Genis des Fontaines. Free time in Collioure.

Day 6: Montségur, Foix. Drive in the morning beneath the northern flank of the Pyrenees to Montségur, the great Cathar redoubt and scene of the virtual obliteration of the Albigensian cause. There is an arresting three-towered feudal castle at Foix. Overnight in Tarascon.

Day 7: St-Lizier, St-Bertrand-de-Comminges, Arties, Vielha. The Cathedral of St Lizier has a Romanesque cloister and a 14th-cent. brick tower. St-Bertrand-de-Comminges is aisleless and majestic and perhaps the most accomplished late medieval building in the High Pyrenees. Drive via the secluded Aran Valley to Arties. Walk over the bridge to the 12th-cent. Sta Maria with a fine sculpted north door and baptismal font. Overnight in nearby Vielha.

Day 8: Taüll, Val de Boí. See remote Romanesque churches of the high mountains. Taüll has a superb pair of 12th-cent. churches: Sant Climent, with columnar nave and slender bell-tower, and Sta Maria with a bell-tower

The Medieval Pyrenees
continued

to outdo even that of its great neighbour. Sant Joan de Boi has a small and beautifully proportioned single-apsed church. First of two nights in Lleida.

Day 9: Lleida, Poblet, Santes Creus. Lleida Cathedral is a sprawling complex of Gothic architecture, painting and sculpture. Poblet has a breathtaking Cistercian church containing tombs of the medieval monarchs of Aragón and a magnificent group of conventual buildings. Santes Creus has a slightly later Cistercian abbey with a superbly sculpted cloister and chapter house.

Day 10: Terrassa, Barcelona. Drive to Barcelona via Terrassa, a stunning and largely early medieval precinct arranged around three churches. The mid afternoon flight from Barcelona arrives at Heathrow at c. 4.15pm.

Lecturer

Dr Richard Plant. Architectural historian specialising in the Middle Ages and with a strong interest in the modern. After reading English at Cambridge he obtained an MA in the History of Art and a PhD on English Romanesque and the Holy Roman Empire at the Courtauld. He went on to teach at the Courtauld, as well as at University College and Queen Mary College, London where he taught both medieval and modern architectural history. He was formerly the Deputy Academic Director at Christie's Education. He has published on English and German architecture.

Practicalities

Price – per person. Two sharing: £3,680 or £3,470 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,100 or £3,890 without flights.

Included: air travel (economy class) on scheduled British Airways flights (Airbus 320); travel by private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 1 lunch and 6 dinners, with wine, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips for waiters and drivers; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. Parador de Vic-Sau (parador.es): excellent 4-star *parador*. **Relais des Trois Mas, Collioure** (relaisdestroismas.com): a comfortable 4-star hotel overlooking

the bay. **Le Manoir d'Agnès, Tarascon-sur-Ariège** (manoiragnes.com): 3-star hotel on the edge of town with good restaurant. **Parador de Vielha** (parador.es): a 4-star *parador* in the Arán Valley. **Parador de Lleida** (parador.es): 4-star *parador* occupying a 17th-century convent. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and standing in churches and museums. Uneven ground, irregular paving and steep terrain are standard. There are 4 hotel changes and a lot of driving, at times on minor roads. Average distance by coach per day: 96 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.