

GIRONA PYRENEES

# AUTUMN JOURNEY FROM THE PYRENEES TO THE SEA

KRIS UBACH

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# CERDANYA

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# Cerdanya

After the summer filled its towns with life, its mountains with hikers, and its many Romanesque churches with visitors, the autumn seems rather quiet in Cerdanya. In this period of calm between the summer holidays and the first snows of the season, the region is more peaceful than usual, its trees tinged with autumn colours and with mild temperatures that still tempt you to spend many hours outdoors.

It is one of the most fascinating times to explore these landscapes and to try the seasonal gastronomy that here is rich in wild mushrooms, organic meat and *trinxat*, the hearty local speciality made of pork, potatoes and cabbage, the perfect dish for these cooler temperatures.

Today I am going to **Llívia** (a town that became a Spanish enclave surrounded by France due to a 17th-century administrative loophole) to try an exciting activity that is new for me: a Segway tour. OK, to clarify, I have visited a few cities on one of these ingenious electric vehicles before, but this will be the first time I have used one to do a mountain route.

My instructor on this adventure is Rafa Vadillo, from Altitud Extrem, a veteran master ice climber who decided to specialise in this type of 'electric' route to fill these warmer times of year with fun activities.

"Segways were invented to provide mobility for people with certain difficulties walking, but in the end they became popular as leisure vehicles", says Rafa while he puts his helmet on, "Look here, in the base there is a gyroscope, a computer and some motors that keep the Segway upright at all times. You only need to get on and lean your body in the direction you want to go in".

I take a few test runs and everything is fine: I bend my knees a little, let my weight fall forward and this amazing invention starts to move; if I lean to the right, the machine turns slightly in that direction. Perfect, it all seems pretty straightforward. Now we can get started.

Covering the first asphalted metres as we leave Llívia is very easy, but as we get onto the bumpy and sloping dirt track, that all changes. Luckily, Rafa keeps an eye on my safety the whole time and these Segways —with thicker tyres than the urban versions— are prepared for all terrains. We go round a wooded area and I'm already getting the hang of it. We climb up a pine-covered hillside and cross a couple of country hamlets, continuing on through lush riverside vegetation the colour of fire. The bumps and potholes are trickier than they first seem and, although we are going slowly, these small challenges add a shot of adrenaline to the ride. Finally, we tackle the slope up to Llívia Castle and from the top we gaze down at the ochres, oranges and reds that have taken over the valley as far as the eye can see.

Without saying goodbye to Vadillo just yet, as he will be coming with me on my next adventure, I get ready to spend the afternoon on another electric vehicle, this



**“Segways were invented to provide mobility for people with certain difficulties walking, but in the end they became popular as leisure vehicles.”**

time a bicycle. The expert in this area at Altitud Extrem is Adam Grifoll, who arrives full of enthusiasm about the route he has planned for today.

“Autumn is in its full splendour”, says my instructor, “It’s going to be a perfect afternoon. We’ll start here, in Llívia, and cycle up to this mountain pass”, says Adam, pointing out a peak that seems unreachable to me right now. OK, let’s go...

First I listen to the few simple instructions needed to understand how to use an e-bike, which is really just a bicycle with a transmission system that boosts the power generated by the pedals. To do this, electric bicycles have a motor, a battery and a device that allows you to set the power level you need.

“If you don’t pedal, the motor does not kick in”, Adam explains, “you are the one moving the bike and you decide as you

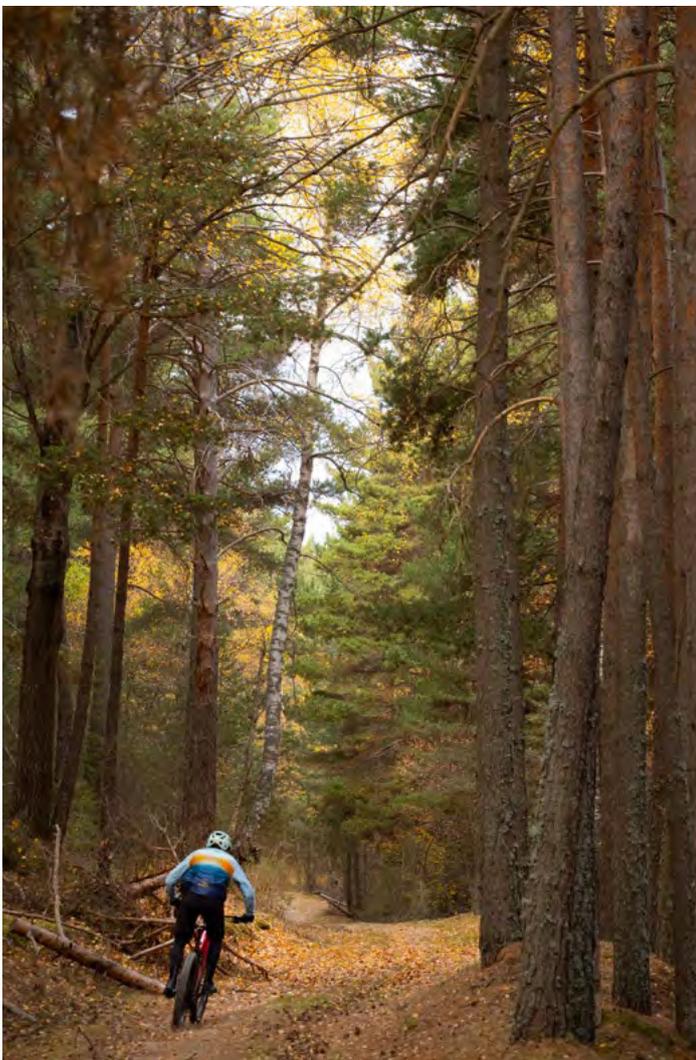
go whether you need assistance and how much”.

After the explanations we begin to cycle in the direction of **Puigcerdà**, but very quickly we turn off and start climbing uphill. I didn’t need it on the flat, but with the first uphill I try the assistance in *Eco* mode (the lowest level) which gives me an extra push and really helps me ascend. Suddenly I feel reinforced and climb at a rate that under normal conditions I could not even dream of... I feel like a competition cyclist attacking Tourmalet, but obviously not reaching even close to the level of effort these athletes expend. We leave the asphalt behind and get down to business, launching onto a steep slope of loosely packed earth. We cycle on among deciduous trees dyed ochre by autumn and interspersed with large deep green pines; the intense colours are mesmerising.

The ride up to the pass that had seemed impossible earlier has certainly made us sweat, but I am sure that without the extra help I wouldn't have made it this far. We peer over a ledge and Cerdanya looks back at us from below. This wide valley with its many viewpoints is colourful even

when draped in mist, with the horses now down from the high mountain and in the meadows waiting for the first snows that will completely change the appearance and rhythm of the region. Hopefully, autumn and its explosion of colours will last a little longer this year.





## Sustainable natural parks

There are eight natural parks on the Costa Brava and in the Girona Pyrenees, five of them certified by the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism and one in the process of becoming certified.

### The Headwaters of the Rivers Ter and Freser Natural Park

This nature reserve is known for its mountain-pine forests and abundant high-mountain fauna, which includes golden eagles, marmots and capercaillie. It is listed in the inventory of spaces of geological interest in Catalonia (IEIGC).

### Garrotxa Volcanic Zone Natural Park

This park boasts over 40 volcanic cones and more than 20 basaltic lava flows. The lush green foliage is provided by the numerous beech woods, holm oak and oak woods, and mixed forests that carpet the zone. Its gorges are a popular summer destination.

### Cap de Creus Natural Park

The *tramuntana* north wind has shaped these landscapes, carving out a unique space halfway between the land and sea. Its coastline is dotted with tiny coves and nooks only accessible by swimming or kayak.

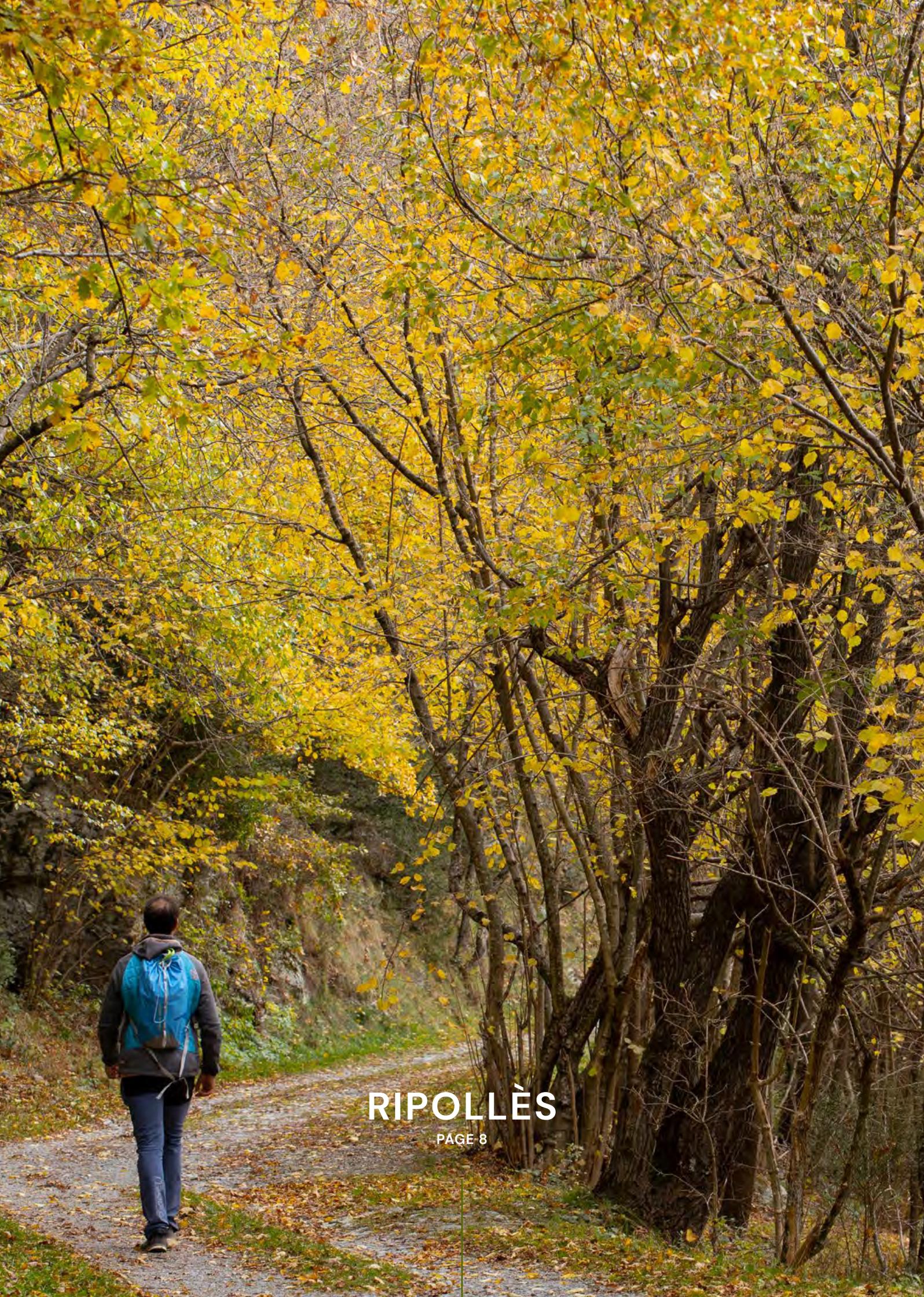
### Montgrí, Medes Islands and Baix Ter Natural Park

This landscape of water, islets, wetlands and sandy areas is home to numerous Mediterranean species, including the highly endangered red coral (*Corallium rubrum*).

### Montseny Natural Park

This UNESCO Biosphere Reserve located between Barcelona and Girona is proud of being home to the only vertebrate endemic to Catalonia: the Montseny brook newt (*Calotriton arnoldi*).





# RIPOLLÈS

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# Ripollès

Ripollès region is home to many of the peaks that drew the first Catalan scientific expeditions in the 20th century to scale **Puigmal** (2,910 m) and **Costabona** (2,465 m) and to try skiing the slopes of **Vall de Núria** and **Vallter** long before there were ski resorts installed there. For all those impressive feats of the past, the base of operations was (and still is today) either **Setcases** or **Ribes de Freser**, towns we always pass through almost without stopping in our hurry to get to the mountains as soon as possible. However, this time I have decided to stay in Ribes de Freser...

My guide on this new adventure is Oriol Mestre, from Pura Vall, a small local guide company that strives to offer unique, ethical and sustainable experiences in the region, which is so vital for preserving this Pyrenean environment. I meet up with my guide in the centre of Ribes de Freser and watch as Oriol arrives loaded up with his backpack.

"Look", says Mestre, pointing to a sharp rocky outcrop projecting over the last houses in the town, "that's a granophyre, a volcanic formation from the Paleozoic era; it's the only one we have in all of Catalonia. And guess what? The Roca de la Creu via ferrata climbing route follows the edges, and that's what we are doing today".

Rather taken aback by this adventurous find, so vertical and so close to the town, I follow Oriol between the houses of Ribes de Freser heading towards these strange

reddish spires that were once inside the vent of a volcano. In less than 10 minutes, and in one of the easiest approaches in my experience of via ferrata routes, we arrive at the start of the itinerary and put on our helmets, harnesses, lanyard and energy absorber. I pay attention to the explanations and safety instructions Oriol gives me: "The route is about 150 metres long with an altitude gain of 60 metres and is rated as K2-K3 on the Hüsler difficulty scale, which ranges from K1 (easy) to K6 (extremely difficult)", he explains.

Although the Roca de la Creu via ferrata shouldn't present any major difficulties, I feel that it is essential to take a guide and a safety rope just in case any problems arise. Let's go! The route kicks off with a vertical climb right away and we are always clipped onto the lifeline as we go. The upper-body strength and adrenaline needed

**"The upper-body strength and adrenaline needed in some sections is rewarded when you arrive at one of the ledges where you can rest"**



in some sections is rewarded when you arrive at one of the ledges where you can rest and admire the view over the rooftops and all those ochre-coloured autumnal forests along the course of the Freser river all the way to where it joins the Ter river. After climbing successive stone blocks with the help of steps and some flanking that makes us sweat a little more than usual, we reach our final reward in just under an hour: the view from the top of the jagged rocks is breathtaking. It is a totally different and surprising perspective of the Ribes de Freser we usually see from the river. When we finish the via ferrata route we are still buzzing, so we decide to keep going along the equipped trail that leads up to **Segura Castle**. From there, sitting in silence, we admire the forests in their colourful autumn finery. "This is the best time of year to come here", Oriol tells me, "because in summer it's too hot, there are too many people and you miss this explosion of colour throughout the landscape during these months just before winter arrives".

Another day in Ribes de Freser and I'm meeting an expert guide who knows these mountains well, Yasser El Bejjaji, a colleague of Oriol at Pura Vall and someone I consider a friend after we hiked up to the sources of the Ter river in Vallter 2000 last spring. This time Yasser has offered to show me one of those spots close to Ribes which, far from the more famous and visited Núria valley, has become a carnival of colours in autumn, and even more importantly there are no crowds. We begin our route at the Romanesque church of Sant Jaume de Queralbs, with its fascinating bestiary carved into the capitals in the porch, and

we hike into the **Headwaters of the Rivers Ter and Freser Natural Park**. The route is simple and fairly flat, but what is most important is not the distance walked but the interpretation of the landscape that Yasser shares with me at each step.

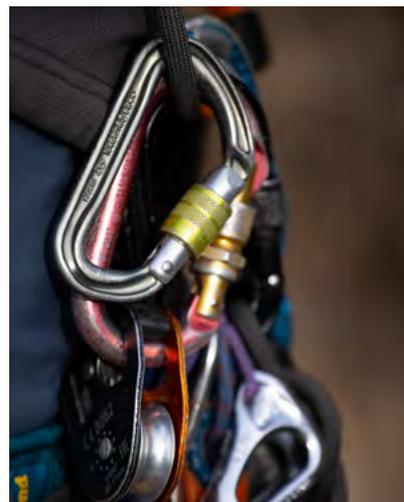
"This path leads to the **Estret del Forn** area, crossing first through arable fields. Look! Those over there are hayfields, meadows where grass is grown and later cut to feed cattle". We walk through trees whose leaves are intense shades of gold at this time of year and into the leafy **Estremera valley** following the Tosa river. Yasser keeps a close eye on the riverbank and I soon realise why when a little later he manages to find a brightly coloured sala-



mander to show me. We continue walking through these aquatic landscapes and in front of some caves up in the sheer limestone rocks we manage to catch a glimpse of bats. We arrive at the canyon in Estret del Forn with its vertical walls, then make a half-turn and take an alternative path back which, apparently, only local people know about. It is a narrow, shady and spectacular trail that winds through thick vegetation filled with wild mushrooms of all types which, incidentally, are the culinary speciality of this region. We decide to leave these delicacies to be collected by local *boletaires* (mushroom pickers) and we head back to Ribes de Freser. With wild mushrooms in mind, we decide to look for a good restaurant where they serve them chargrilled with garlic, parsley and a drizzle of olive oil. What better end to our hike?

**“This is the best time to come here because in summer it’s too hot, there are too many people and you miss this explosion of colour throughout the landscape during these months just before winter arrives”**





## In autumn...

...the Girona Pyrenees **ski resorts** of La Molina, Vall de Núria and Vallter 2000 keep their ski lifts open so that hikers of all ages can access the high mountains.

...it's worth trying some wild mushroom **cuisine**, the star gastronomic product of the season in places such as Cerdanya, Garrotxa and Ripollès. Stews such as rabbit with mushrooms or the exquisite *fricandó* with veal with mushrooms (very typical in Catalonia) or sautéed mushrooms (porcini, bloody milk cap, chanterelle...) with garlic and parsley are not to be missed. In the autumn months several towns and villages in the Pyrenees hold wild mushroom festivals and fairs.

...the **forests** are at their best for hiking, horse riding and mountain biking in. The Costa Brava and Girona Pyrenees are home to many deciduous woods that offer a very photogenic explosion of colours; some particularly spectacular areas can be found around the towns of Alp and Llivia, in Cerdanya; Santa Pau in Garrotxa; Ribes de Freser, Vallfogona del Ripollès and Setcases in Ripollès and the Albera zone on the Costa Brava.





# GARROTXA

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# Garrotxa

The autumn destination par excellence. Garrotxa, and more specifically its beech forests, is usually an excellent choice when it comes to photographing colourful leaves. If you don't investigate too much, you will end up visiting the most famous of the Catalan forests, La Fageda d'en Jordà, but the truth is that beyond this grove immortalised by the poet Joan Maragall, there are many other places in the region where you can see trees in shades ranging from pale gold to dark crimson.

To explore some of these lesser-known natural areas I have arranged to meet a couple of expert walkers with some of the best knowledge of all of Garrotxa's roads, paths, forest trails, lanes and tracks. Anna Plana and Sergi Romero are the authors of a hiking guide called *La volta a peu a la Garrotxa (Walking Tour Around Garrotxa)*, published by Editorial Llibres de Batet) for which they set about exploring —conscientiously, with a GPS and backpack at the ready— every walkable part of Garrotxa's territory. I meet the couple in Sant Feliu de Pallerols where they arrive dressed head to toe like people preparing to walk the Way of St James; I immediately realise that I am with two very serious walkers.

"In fact, we met on the French Way of St James. We said hello to each other at a hostel and never said goodbye", says Anna, "After reaching Santiago de Compostela we did many other routes together: the

Northern Way, the Portuguese Way, the GR long-distance hiking trails... until we decided to create our own particular circular route around the region of Garrotxa."

We start walking in **Sant Feliu de Pallerols** and our plan is to reach **Les Preses**, which in the book *La volta a peu a la Garrotxa* is stage 4. Just outside the town, the path climbs up a sharp slope towards the sanctuary of Mare de Déu de la Salut. The path is steep and rocky in some sections, but there is some shade, several drinking fountains and the autumn canopy of ochre beech trees above our heads which makes up for the effort. We climb and climb until we reach the sanctuary two hours later, our reward is a far-reaching view over the **Serralada de Finestres** mountains. From up here I can see the mountains of **Puig-sacalm** and even **Canigó!**





"This is the top of *La volta a peu a la Garrotxa*", Sergi tells me, "from the 200 kilometres and 10+1 stages of the route, here, at 1,060 metres above sea level, we are at the highest point". Afterwards we have a coffee in the sanctuary's restaurant and set off on the next part of the route in the knowledge that ahead lies more or less flat or downhill terrain. We walk down crossing the **Collsacabra** sierra, pass through the very picturesque **La Vall d'en Bas** and cross uniquely beautiful towns such as **Els Hostalets d'en Bas** and **Sant Esteve d'en Bas**. When we reach Les Preses 19.88 kilometres later, we can smell the aroma of charcoal grills wafting out of the restaurants. After enjoying a delicious wild mushroom *fricandó*, I bid farewell to Anna and Sergi wishing them "happy travels" and I head back towards Alta Garrotxa by car.

**"In fact, we met on the French Way of St James. We said hello to each other at a hostel and never said goodbye"**

In the town of **Montagut** I am meeting local photographer Esteve Serra, an expert in all of **Alta Garrotxa's** best spots (and author of the photographic book *AltRa Garrotxa*) who is one of the architects of a unique stargazing experience that takes place in a very special spot in the region. A few years ago Esteve and astronomer Kilian Vindel launched this nocturnal activity that combines education and astronomical observation with an astrophotography workshop. "We chose the very remote 12th-century chapel of Sant Andreu de Guitariu", explains Esteve as he loads his gear into the 4x4, "because up there the conditions are perfect for stargazing and because it's a truly magical place... but we also organise private activities in some rural houses in the area. In Alta Garrotxa the nights are spectacular".

The chapel is half an hour's drive up a bumpy unpaved road; when we reach the top we admire the stunning views bathed in soft twilight. This place most definitely has a lot of ancestral magic. Inside the chapel, nowadays deconsecrated and furnished with only a few chairs, a screen and a reflector, astronomers Kilian Vindel and Gilbert Buscató are waiting to give us a talk on cosmology which teaches me many things about outer space such as, for example, our neighbouring galaxy Andromeda is approaching us at a speed of 100 kilometres per second.

After the talk and some very welcome refreshments, we head out into the night. Gilbert has already set up two top-of-the-range telescopes that allow us to take a fascinating voyage around the universe: we begin with our solar system, finding Jupiter and four of its moons and Saturn with its rings, and then we travel to other solar systems with their own surrounding planets. Finally, we visit Andromeda two and a half million light-years away, so we are seeing it as it was when Earth was ruled by the apes. If someone had told me that today, in Garrotxa, I would be taking a trip to Andromeda, I wouldn't have believed them, but here we are. It has been a wonderful time travel adventure.

I'll be back; back with Anna, Sergi, Kilian, Gilbert and Esteve, because I still have a lot more to discover in Garrotxa... and this outer universe never ends.





**“After dry summers,  
early autumns”**

Popular saying



# COSTA BRAVA

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# Costa Brava

The Pyrenean setting I leave behind boasts many vertical landscapes. This week I cycled up several hills in Cerdanya, I did a via ferrata climbing route in Ripollès and, finally, I walked through autumn-tinged beech forests in the ever-photogenic Garrotxa. So, now it's time to tackle a couple of challenges on the Costa Brava and I'm delighted to learn that vertical environments will once again be taking centre stage.

I have arranged to meet my guide Arnau Recasens, from Aventura Girona, among the boats, docks and marshlands in the port of **Sant Feliu de Guíxols**, although today our activity has nothing to do with sailing. We are going to do the incredibly picturesque Cala del Molí via ferrata climbing route, which is about 480 metres long and hangs perpendicular to the sea, hugging the characteristic jagged rock formations of the Costa Brava.

Just like the via ferrata I did in Ribes de Freser, the one at **Cala del Molí** is very easy to access, a short walk from the car, making it a very popular destination in the summer months when tourists flock to this beautiful coastline. "Autumn is most definitely the best time of year to come here", Arnau admits, "to start with, in summer it gets very hot here, there are lots of people and bear in mind that even though we are close to the sea, we will be hanging on rock faces that are exposed to sun for much of the day. In spring the weather is milder, but access is limited because birds are nesting here; in fact, a whole section of the route is closed for several weeks. And, finally, winter is also a good time to come, but if the *tramuntana* wind is blowing it can get pretty chilly", he explains with a smile. I'm glad that I chose autumn then, because despite

being November, the sun is shining today and we can do the route in short sleeves.

The first section is not especially challenging and we move along horizontally, making sure we are always firmly connected to the lifeline. This is one of the few via ferratas in the world that is beside the sea and the views from the rock face offer me a totally new perspective of this coast that



**“This is one of the few via ferratas in the world that is beside the sea and the views from the rock face offer me a totally new perspective of this coast that takes my breath away.”**

takes my breath away. We climb around a pinnacle and a few metres below our feet the sea crashes against the rocks, spraying seafoam into the air. Above our heads seagulls glide and cormorants dry their wings in the sun atop rocky islets that jut out from the sea. It's a stunning and challenging route in some parts where skill, balance or arm strength are required to pass between the rocks or a formation that sticks out too much or cross a Tibetan bridge. The first section is rated level K2, but the second is a K4 (on the Hüsler K1-K6 scale), making me very glad that I came with a guide. Without his expertise, I might have got stuck at one of the particularly tricky passes, and it wouldn't be the first time this has happened. When we return to the car two and a half hours later, I am exhausted, but above all fascinated by what I have just experienced. I have discovered a completely new, exciting and vertiginous side to the Costa Brava that I must confess I am addicted to already.

Another autumn day on the Costa Brava takes me to **Terradelles**, a little inland town that was once part of the county of Besalú and now belongs to the region of **Pla de l'Estany**; its transitional landscapes between the plains of Empordà and the hills of Garrotxa were baptised *Terraprim* (easy to cultivate sandy land) by writer Josep Pla. In the heart of Pla's *Terraprim* is the farm of Rudi Stolz, a German who moved to Catalonia 30 years ago and one day decided to dedicate his life to horses. That's why he set up Panorama Trails and why today he has 30 animals with which he organises routes of various days' duration from the Costa Brava to the Pyrenees.

My horse-riding guide today is Corinna Stritzke, who also moved here from Germany and who today is going to accompany me on a ride of several hours through the Pla de l'Estany countryside. “This is Curro”, says Corinna as she introduces me to a magnificent white horse, “and this brown one is Fabuloso, who will be your



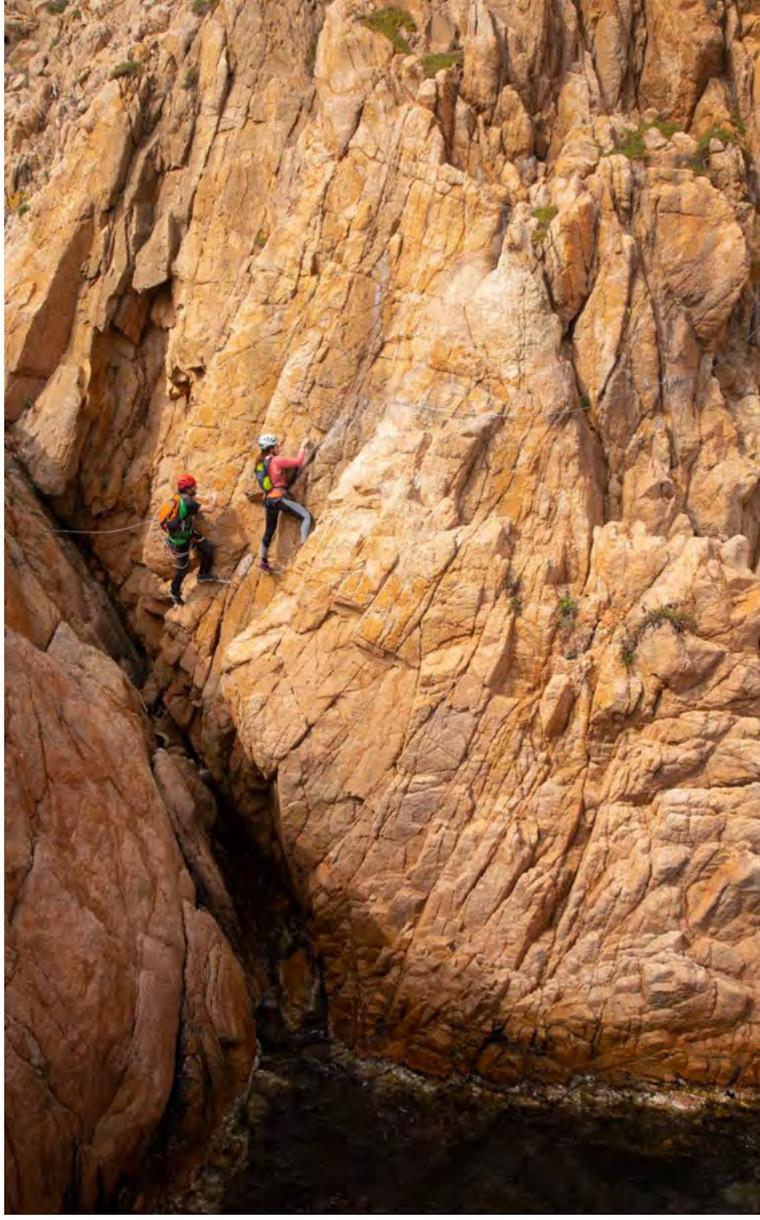
companion today". I greet my steed by stroking his withers and he responds with a snort; I think we'll get along well.

All kitted out in our respective equipment, riding hat and boots for me, saddle for the horses, and we're off! It's been years since I last rode a horse, but I learnt as a child and you never forget, so this ride through the fields to **Sant Marçal de Quarantella** is not at all difficult for me. You need to hang on to the horse's mane going uphill and put your weight into the stirrups and lean backward on steep slopes, but the rest of the ride is simple. Corinna tells me that in autumn they usually do a route they call the "Mediterranean Trail": "It's a 5-day trail (with 6 nights)", she explains, "We set off from here in Pla de l'Estany, following the Fluvià river to the **Gulf of Roses**, then we head down to **L'Escala**, cross the **Montgrí** mountains to the **Cape of Begur** and then

return to the stables across the inland area of Empordà. It is a wonderful trip in which we cross rivers, ride along beaches and among rice paddies and pass through incredibly picturesque medieval villages. Mind you, you do need a certain level of riding skill to do it".

I really like what I hear and promise to get my skills up to speed again. Next time I don't plan to miss out on the fascinating adventure of spending a whole week in the saddle, and I am certain that I will ask for Fabuloso as my companion again.





**“Amb la tardor vindré per la vora del riu,  
pels camps ben plens de boira  
i amb galls que matinegen,  
quan tot és tan llunyà, del llit estant,  
que a penes ens allibera del no-res  
un horitzó de pluja”.**

Miquel Martí i Pol. *Amb la tardor vindré*

**“With the autumn I will come along the banks of the river, through  
the fog-filled fields and with roosters that rise early, when  
everything is so far, from my bed, that a rainy horizon barely frees  
us from nothingness”.**



# Practical guide

## CERDANYA



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## RIPOLLÈS



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## GARROTXA



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This publication is based on the author's personal experience. Both the accommodation and the activities detailed are just a small sample of the wide range of sports and nature activities that can be enjoyed on the Costa Brava and in the Girona Pyrenees.

For further information about these and other autumn ideas, see:





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# About the author

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**Text and all photos.**

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GIRONA PYRENEES

# AUTUMN JOURNEY FROM THE PYRENEES TO THE SEA

KRIS UBACH



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Pirineu de Girona

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