

CHARTERHOUSE OF ESCALADEI

THE CHARTERHOUSE, OR CARTHUSIAN MONASTERY, OF SANTA MARIA OF ESCALADEI STANDS IN THE SHELTERED VALL DE L'OLIVER, UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THE WALLS OF LIMESTONE CONGLOMERATE, IN ONE OF THE MOST OUTSTANDING LANDSCAPES OF THE SERRA DE MONTSANT NATURAL PARK. THE CHARTERHOUSE IS SURROUNDED BY A SERIES OF STRUCTURES OF GREAT HISTORIC INTEREST, SO WHY NOT TAKE THIS CIRCULAR WALK TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW THE MONKS LIVED AND THE CHANGES THEY MADE IN THE LANDSCAPE. WITH A LITTLE EFFORT OF THE IMAGINATION YOU CAN PICTURE YOURSELF AS ONE OF THE PROCESSION OF MONKS TAKING THEIR WEEKLY WALK, AS REQUIRED BY THE RULE OF SAINT BRUNO. THE ROUTE BEGINS OUTSIDE THE MONASTERY. TAKE THE FARM TRACK THAT BEGINS TO THE LEFT OF THE BUILDINGS.



Miniature of Saint Bruno with his companions in the charterhouse, taken from the book *Les très riches heures du duc de Berry*.



The monastery of Escaladei as it was left after the anticlerical assault of 1835.

1

Charterhouse of Santa Maria of Escaladei

This, the first of the Carthusian order's monasteries in the Iberian peninsula, was founded in 1194 at the behest of king Alfons I, the Chaste, at the height of the period when the lands of the old Moorish province of Siurana, reconquered in 1153, were being repopulated. The monastery, the mother house of all the Carthusian monasteries that were founded in the Iberian peninsula, was a centre for culture, art and spirituality. Hundreds of monks, all through its history, devoted themselves to prayer, spiritual reading and manual work, in the strictest of evangelical poverty as laid down in the rule of Saint Bruno. Escaladei's historical and spiritual greatness took physical form in the architecture



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of its buildings, of great beauty and artistic richness. However, it suffered the consequences of the decrees confiscating church property issued by the Liberal governments of the first half of the 19th century and popular anticlerical movements. As a result of these events, the monks were forced to leave, the artistic patrimony was scattered or lost, as were documents from the splendid library, and the monastery was destroyed. Today only ruins remain to tell of the past. The stone outer walls, now decayed and ruined by the passage of time, protected the monastery; on the right the bare rock was enough to ensure its isolation. Behind the monastery buildings, take the path to the left. After the first bend, continue along the same path, leaving the fork to the left.

2

The crags of the Serra de Montsant

Towering over the ruins of the charterhouse are the cliffs of limestone conglomerate that no doubt captivated the Carthusian monks, as they do today's walkers. When you reach the crest you can see the cliffs stretching away from you to the left towards Vilella Alta. The Ladder of God (Scala Dei) by which angels ascended to heaven can easily be imagined in this landscape. Everything leads us to think that the dream recounted by the shepherd to the royal envoys who were looking for a site for the charterhouse had its source in the steps that help walkers ascend the cliffs. In the midst of the crags close to here can be found the famous "Grau de l'Escltxa", with steps cut into the rock that are attributed to the Carthusians, as well as a small cavity at their foot which is traditionally known as the



18th-century engraving of the legendary vision of king Alfons I which prompted the foundation of Escaladei.

Pica d'Aigua Beneida (holy water stoup). The vegetation that has colonised the rocks includes herbaceous plants that are very interesting for their aromatic and medicinal properties. The monks collected them and used them in their pharmaceutical preparations.

3

The dry-stone terrace walls



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From here you can also see, on the left, the new vineyards. After following the path for a little you will come to a slope with dry-stone terrace walls. Terraced cultivation spread widely in the period of growth in wine production (19th century). The distillation of alcohol from the strong Priorat wines still further enriched the monastery. Part of this production went to the



The trade-mark of Chartreuse, the liqueur made by the Carthusians since the early 17th century, on the basis of a formula known as the "elixir of long life".

© CHARTREUSE DIFFUSION

Grande Chartreuse, close to Grenoble, which distilled and distributed its famous liqueurs for medicinal purposes. The arrival of phylloxera, a pest that killed all the autochthonous vines at the turn of the 20th century, was a great blow for the Priorat district. A few metres further on, on the right hand side, a path branches off indicated by marker stones that leads to a shady nook that stands over the bottom the valley. On the way, you can enjoy a panoramic view of the monastery and the surrounding lands.

4

La Pietat

The ruins of La Pietat that can be seen today are surrounded by ancient trees that no doubt owe their origin to the Carthusians. They are "chaste trees", also known as "monk's pepper", planted by the monks both to take advantage of their fruit, similar to pine nuts, and to enjoy the contemplation of their beauty as the "Judea", or tree of love, which



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in spring bears an intense pink blossom that captivates all who see it. The horse-chestnuts and planes cover this spot with shade on hot summer days. Above, a splendid cypress welcomes you and shows that this was a place where people were received. La Pietat was where monks who had been sick would go to rest and receive treatment. It seems that the place was transformed in the 17th century by order of the prior, thanks to a donation from the bishop of La Seu d'Urgell, Andreu Capella, who was a former member of the community. The place is known as the "Bishop's Chapel".



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After the seizure of church lands the building entered private hands and became a farmhouse, which incorporated a small shrine. During the Spanish Civil War the building was used as a field hospital. Unfortunately it is now in very poor condition, but you can still enjoy this place that preserves many traces of its splendid past. Continue the walk by taking the



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path that leads away from the left of the building. The first ten metres are very steep; take care not to slip, particularly if the ground is wet. You immediately come to a round cistern that collects the waters of the ravine, beside which is an ancient cypress that deserves to be admired. On the left a broad path leads back to the farm track.



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5

Old lime kiln

To the left of the path you will see a half-ruined construction, all that remains of one of the many lime kilns the monastery owned. Through an opening you can see



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the inside of the kiln and the dry-stone vault that roofed it. This kiln was used to heat limestone to break it down into quicklime. Limestone is one of the predominant rocks in the Montsant. The chemical reaction that turns it into quicklime requires a great deal of heat, which was provided by huge bundles of firewood that would raise the temperature to 600°C. Quicklime was used to make slaked lime to prepare mortar for building work. It was also used in soap-making. Slaked lime mixed with sand or fine gravel formed the mortar used in construction. Many of the monastery's structural walls were built using this technique. Just opposite the building, on the right of the farm track, a path offers a short-cut to the place that provided the monastery with abundant water. The path crosses a pine grove and comes out onto a broader way. Continue until you reach a farm track again. Crossing the farm track, continue along the path that runs alongside the rectangular cistern that acts as a water supply for the extinction of forest fires. Behind the vines, surrounded by fruit trees, you will come to the spring known as Font Pregona.

6

Font Pregona

According to tradition this spring never runs dry. It now supplies the village of Escaladei and in former times it was the secret of the survival of the Carthusians on this most arid slope of the Montsant. It seems that in the earliest years of the monastery's existence this spring belonged to the village of Montalt. It is said that the charterhouse paid the dowry for the village maidens so that they would marry outside the village, leaving it depopulated so that there would be no disturbance of the silence that was imposed by the rule of Saint Bruno. Eventually the site passed into the hands of the monastery.

If you raise your eyes after taking a gulp of fresh water, you will be treated to a view of the Racó de Missa, from whose rocky walls it is said that the chanting of the monks in the church of Santa Maria d'Escaladei could be heard to echo in the days when the monastery was full of life. Now return to the path below La Pregona, which is the route of the GR-171 long-distance footpath. Formerly this was probably the Carthusians' Way, which linked the monastery with all the villages on the slopes of the Montsant. It was the line of communication between the monastery and neighbouring places and it was connected with other paths that led to the other properties the monks had close to the villages. To begin the journey back to the monastery, cross back over the farm track and take the same path as the one by which you came. This time, continue along the main route without taking any side paths.



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7

Coves Roges

The slope that follows the bottom of the Font Pregona ravine affords an impressive aerial view of the ruins of Escaladei. Such is the image of grandeur the place still retains that it is not hard to imagine the monastery's historical and architectural importance in its days of splendour.



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You can descend the steep downward slope on foot to reach the Coves Roges, a large outcrop of red sandstone. The first Carthusians used this outcrop as a quarry to build the first phase of the monastery in the 12th century: the first twelve cells and the common monastic area. You can see the difference between the rocks in their natural state, showing signs of alveolar erosion, and those which were used to extract building stone, finished in prism-shaped cavities with rectangular surfaces. For the 16th-century rebuilding work, white stone brought by cart from the quarry at Sant Vicenç de Castellet, near Manresa, was used. The destruction the monastery suffered in the 19th century and subsequent abandonment have meant that in many places the old red walls from the monastery's Romanesque period can once again be seen.

8

Font del Mantral and the Bassa Llarga

Following the farm track again you will come once more to the bottom of the Font Pregona ravine, in which there is sometimes running water. After a short while you will come to the rear of the monastery. At this point, the sound of water will once again surprise you. It emerges from a small stone building and it is known as the Font del Mantral. In fact it is a well that collects the water from the sides of the Font Pregona ravine. A complex water system made up of a series of cisterns and channels distributed running water to all the cells and to the Charterhouse's various common areas. A system of dykes carried the water needed for the *Conreria*, more than a kilometre away, and to the vegetable gardens.



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You can still see the Bassa Llarga, or long cistern, in very good condition close to the spring and below the protective walls of the western corner of the Bassa de les Tortugues ("tortoise cistern"). Tradition has it that here the monks bred these animals, whose meat they would use to make a restorative soup for the frailest monks.



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9

The Conreria of Escaladei



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To complete your visit we recommend you go to see what remains of what was one of the most significant parts of any Carthusian monastery: the *Conreria*, or outstation. It is a kilometre away and is reached via the tarmacked road that leads to the monument. Located at the mouth of the valley, the outstation controlled access to the conventual buildings of the charterhouse and also served as a unit of agricultural production. It was built at the same period as the monastery. On the large square stood the procurator's house, occupied by the father procurator and the lay brothers. Nearby can still be seen the church of Santa Maria de la Mercè, which was used to hold religious services for the monks and the labourers in the service of the monastery. It was originally a single-aisled Romanesque chapel with an apse and a belfry, but it was rebuilt in the 16th century.





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The remainder was a group of working buildings: storehouses, stables, cellars, olive-oil press, etc., and some accommodation for agricultural workers and labourers. At the present day, Escaladei forms part of the municipality of La Morera de Montsant. It still symbolises the viticultural heart of the Priorat district thanks to the activities of a number of growers who continued to produce internationally-famed wines throughout the 20th century.



Seal of the Charterhouse of Escaladei. Beginning of the 17th century.

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-  Historic buildings
-  Information
-  Panoramic view
-  Car park

CARTHUSIANS' WAY TO MORERA DE MONTSANT

- Length: 1 hour from point 6
- Difficulty: easy
- Recommendations: If having reached the Morera de Montsant you want to continue along the Camí dels Cartoixans (Carthusians' Way), in the village you must join the path signposted for "Parc Natural", which ends at Albarca. This route takes approximately 3 hours and the degree of difficulty is moderate. Arrangements should be made to return by vehicle, or else allow double this time if you want to return on foot. It is advisable to avoid the hot summer sun, carry water and wear suitable footwear for mountain walking.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES FROM POINT 6 (FONT PREGONA)

MAS DE SANT ANTÒNI TO THE FOOT OF THE GRAU DE L'ESCLETXA

- Length: 20 minutes from point 6
- Difficulty: easy
- Recommendations: If you want to continue by climbing the Grau de l'Escletxa to the Serra Major, please be aware that it is a difficult, mountainous route and that it will take an hour and 30 minutes there and back. It is advisable to avoid the hot summer sun, carry water and wear suitable footwear for mountain walking.

ROUTES FROM POINT 1 AT 9

• Terrain: Route along farm roads and mountain footpaths.

- Distance: 4.8 km
- Approximate height difference: 200 m
- Time taken: 1 hour 30 minutes (not counting pauses)
- Difficulty: easy
- Recommendations: Care should be taken between points 4 and 5 and between points 7 and 8, where there are stretches that may be slippery, particularly when wet.

1 MONASTERY OF ESCALADEI

- Length: 5 minutes from point 8
- Difficulty: easy

2 PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CRAGS OF THE MONTSANT

- Length: 5 minutes from the monastery
- Difficulty: easy

3 DRY-STONE TERRACES

- Length: 2 minutes from point 2
- Difficulty: easy

4 LA PIETAT

- Length: 20 minutes from point 3
- Difficulty: easy

5 LIME KILN

- Length: 5 minutes from point 4
- Difficulty: easy

6 FONT PREGONA

- Length: 18 minutes from point 5
- Difficulty: easy

7 COVES ROGES

- Length: 15 minutes from point 6
- Difficulty: easy

8 FONT DEL MANITRAL AND BASSA LLARGA

- Length: 10 minutes from point 7
- Difficulty: easy

9 CONRERIA OF ESCALADEI

- Length: 10 minutes from point 9
- Difficulty: easy



Matapoll (Cat.) (*Daphne gnidium*)

A bush growing to a little over a metre high, outstanding for its abundant foliage, its white flowers and its green-coloured fruit that turns to deep red as it matures. It commonly grows near thickets of Kermes oaks such as those surrounding the monastery of Escaladei.

Bonelli's eagle (*Hieraetus fasciatus*)

One of the largest birds in the country. This bird of prey is no stranger to the Montsant mountain range and can quite often be seen soaring over the monastery. It nests amongst the crags from where it swoops in search of prey.

Snub-nosed viper (*Vipera latasti*)

The viper is the country's only poisonous snake although its venom is not highly toxic. It can be identified by its short, thick body, triangular head and short, thin tail. It grows no longer than 60 centimetres. Despite the fact that conditions in Montsant are propitious, the viper is ever more rarely seen as a consequence of persecution by humans.

Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

One of our fauna's larger mammals and one of the most frequently represented in folklore and tales, its fame possibly attributable to its penchant for preying on farmhouse chickens. Active at dusk and at night, it feeds on birds and small mammals, as well as insects, snails and berries.

Red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*)

One of the most commonly seen birds in meadows, arable land and rocky terrain. It can often be observed in family groups, whereupon they become vulnerable to birds of prey. The partridge has disappeared from many places due to hunting and declining cultivation.



THE NATURAL SURROUNDINGS

The Carthusian monastery of Escaladei is set amidst the extremely beautiful Montsant mountain range with its spectacular craggy outcrops. Formed by limestone conglomerates, the cliffs have been sculpted into their present remarkable shapes by erosion, and local folklore has endowed them with highly evocative names. At an altitude of 1,163 metres, the Roca Corbatera forms the roof of the mountain range. At its foot, the monastery is surrounded by vineyards and typical Mediterranean vegetation that forms the habitat for many species of fauna. In 2002, the Parliament of Catalonia gave the area's ecological value official recognition by declaring it the Serra del Montsant Natural Park.

Kermes oak (*Quercus coccifera*)

A low-growing bush with leaves very similar to the Evergreen oak, but dryer and pricklier, with spiny leaf-blades that make it especially resistant to hot Mediterranean summers. It grows into a thicket.

Spike lavender (*Lavandula spica*)

This well-known aromatic plant grows well in the monastery's rocky surroundings. Famed for its pretty purple flowers and strongly-scented essential oil, it is much used in perfume. Notable amongst the virtues of this small bush of the Labiatae family are its digestive and antispasmodic qualities.

Common thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*)

An aromatic plant that is well known in the Mediterranean region. It grows well in Escaladei's rocky surroundings. Its lilac flowers blossom between March and June. Much used in cooking, especially in soups and stews.



Rubbish
Do not leave, or bury, any rubbish. It can harm both people and animals as well as polluting the environment and marring the landscape. Take all rubbish with you and dispose of it properly in the containers provided or in those of the next village you encounter.

Noise
Insofar as possible avoid making strident noises such as those produced by shouting and radios or other similar equipment. In the open air noise is highly perceptible and travels a very long way.

Vehicle access
Vehicle access is permitted only on forest tracks open to the public. Observe the signs.

Plants and flowers
The plant life deserves our respect and we have a responsibility and duty to preserve it. If you are looking for mushrooms, do not cause damage to the woods by using tools or scraping the soil.

Dogs
If you have brought a dog with you, it is your responsibility to ensure that it is always under your control and does not cause a nuisance to other people, frighten wild animals, or harm the environment by digging in the soil and thereby damaging plants. Dogs are not allowed in the monastery. Dogs' owners are responsible for any damage they may cause.

Recommended picnic sites
In Escaladei there is a picnic area next to the children's play ground in the village. In La Morera de Montsant there are two picnic areas: one as you leave towards Cornudella de Montsant and the other as you enter the Natural Park from the Grau de la Grallera.

Camping
Camping is prohibited.

CODE OF CONDUCT IN THE COUNTRYSIDE

The monastery's surroundings form part of the Montsant Natural Park and are highly suited for excursions to discover more about our natural and cultural heritage. You must follow the tracks and paths and please remember that the activities permitted within the Natural Park are regulated. Flying, climbing and group activities are subject to specific regulations. Please respect private property; the mountains and woods have owners but the maintenance and improvement of this heritage is everyone's responsibility. It is important that, during your visit, you observe the following regulations.

Monuments
Climbing on the walls of the monument and on the dry stone walls is prohibited. Any resulting damage to them could be dangerous. As you can see from your visit, the charterhouse has suffered severe aggression in the past and it is now our task to preserve what remains. We shall not, perhaps, be able to return it to its former splendour, but we can lend it dignity with our respect, interest and care. For your safety some areas that may be dangerous are fenced off or marked "no entry". Do not enter. Please do not touch restored items or elements intended to assist visitors appreciate their visit, which everyone has a right to enjoy. Please observe the opening times. Find out the information you need about the running of the monument before your visit.

Fire
It is absolutely forbidden to make, or start, fires. A moment's carelessness could destroy what nature has taken hundreds of years to create.

CHARTERHOUSE OF ESCALADEI

GUIDED TOURS FOR GROUPS

Tours with specialised guides are provided for groups and schools.
Information: Tel. 977 827 006
Reservations: Tel. 695186 873

OPENING TIMES

Tuesday to Sunday:
From 1 October until 31 May: from 10 a.m. until 1.30 p.m. and from 3 p.m. until 5.30 p.m.
From 1 June until 30 September: from 10 a.m. until 1.30 p.m. and from 4 p.m. until 7.30 p.m.
The ticket office closes 30 minutes before closing time and entrance is no longer permitted.

SERVICES FOR VISITORS TO THE MONASTERY

WC
Audiovisuals
Shop
Guided tours (weekends and public holidays or by prior arrangement on weekdays).

CLOSED

• Mondays (except public holidays)
• 1 and 6 January, 25 and 26 December.

FREE ADMITTANCE

• Every Tuesday
• 23 April (Saint George's Day)
• 18 May (International Museum Day)
• 11 September (Catalonia's National Day)
• 24 September (local festival)
• European Heritage Days.

INFORMATION

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