
Discovering El Vallès Occidental

1. Getting to know El Vallès Occidental

El Vallès is the historical name of the territory lying between the river Llobregat and the El Montseny massif from west to east, and between the pre-coastal (Prelitoral) and coastal (Litoral) mountain ranges from north to south. The western part of this area – roughly between the river Llobregat and the Caldes creek – is the area which, since the territorial division of Catalonia in 1936, has been known as the county of El Vallès Occidental.

The county lies in the central part of the Metropolitan Region of Barcelona and is bordered by the counties of El Vallès Oriental, to the north east, El Barcelonès to the south-east, El Baix Llobregat to the south-west and El Bages to the north-west.

In administrative terms, the county is made up of 23 municipalities, two of which have the status of capitals: Sabadell and Terrassa. Conveniently, the headquarters of the county council (Consell Comarcal) is located midway between the two. This is the administrative body which manages the county and was set up in 1987.

The county covers an area of 583.2 km², which represents 1.8% of the total surface area of Catalonia. Having said that, this relatively small area of land is home to 836,077 inhabitants as of 2006 (almost 12% of the Catalan population and almost 2% of the Spanish population) and after El Barcelonès it is the most heavily populated county in Catalonia.

Mountains and plains

From an orographical perspective, the county can be divided into three very distinct zones, running from north to south: the mountainous region of the pre-coastal mountain range which makes up the northern third of the county; an undulating plain in the central part of the county, which takes up around half the whole surface area; and once again a relatively small mountainous area which makes up part of the coastal mountain range.

The Pre-Coastal Mountain Range

The pre-coastal mountain range separates El Vallès Occidental from El Bages and the high plateau of El Moianès. It reaches an altitude of 1,104 metres at La Mola de Sant Llorenç del Munt, the highest point in the county as well as being one of the most emblematic points in El Vallès landscape. Another important summit in the massif of Sant Llorenç del Munt is El Montcau (1,056 m), on the border with the county of Bages.

Apart from this massif, the pre-coastal mountain range that lies within the county also encompasses part of the L'Obac mountain range (Castellsapera, 932 m), El Puig de la Creu in Castellar del Vallès (671 m) and the Gallifa ridge (951 m), amongst other medium-sized mountain ranges.

In geological terms, a large part of the pre-coastal mountain range in the county is made up of compact calcareous conglomerates with reddish clay and sandstone, frequently giving the mountains a rounded formation which some people have named the 'Montserrat relief'.

Coastal or Marina Mountain Range

To the south of the county, the plain comes into contact with the coastal or Marina mountain range. In this case, the mountains are lower and cover a smaller area than the pre-coastal range, formed predominantly of granite with fragments or topsoil of slate and schist, whose gentle, worn shapes have been eroded by the damp Mediterranean climate. In Sant Cugat del Vallès, Cerdanyola del Vallès and part of Montcada i Reixac we find the Collserola range which provides a natural border with the county of El Barcelonès, reaching an altitude of 512 m at Tibidabo, which falls within the municipality of Barcelona. After the El Besòs valley in Montcada – the lowest point in the county at –35 m – the land rises once again into a mountain system in the La Vallença sector which borders the north of El Barcelonès.

The Pre-Coastal Depression

The central part of the county forms part of the pre-coastal depression, which is a tertiary depression skirted by faults which separate it from the surrounding mountains.

This section is an undulating plain formed of soft, clayey materials, gouged out by the various water courses coming down from the surrounding mountains. The space between the different water river basins is formed by long ridges (the Galliners mountain range, the Sant Iscle mountain range), with gentle, rounded slopes.

Rivers and streams

The hydrographical network of El Vallès Occidental is characterised by its low volume, extreme irregularity and torrential nature, with significant uprisings in spring and autumn.

The main water courses originate in the county's mountainous regions and form part of two hydrographical basins which divide the county in half: the El Besòs basin and the El Llobregat basin. In the middle of the plain there are also a whole series of small streams which are in turn tributaries of either the river Ripoll, Caldes creek, Arenes creek or the river Llobregat in the more westerly part of the county.

- The river Ripoll originates in Sant Llorenç Savall and flows out at Montcada, passing through Castellar del Vallès, Sabadell, Barberà and Ripollet.

- The river Besòs only passes through a corner of the county (Montcada i Reixac).
- The Caldes creek flows into the river Besòs (Palau-solità i Plegamans).

Alluvial terraces

The erosive action of rivers and streams over the years has formed deep valleys where we can find the river beds today. The result is alluvial terraces which are ideal for agriculture. As these terraces move into the plain, they lose their relative altitude as they leave their respective mountainous valleys. This is the case, for example, of the river Ripoll, the highest alluvial terrace, which lies between Castellar del Vallès and Sabadell, 60 metres above the current course of the river. This altitude decreases as the river approaches its outflow, coming down to a height of 20 metres above sea level at Ripollet before it disappears around Montcada.

Landscape, flora and fauna

The vegetation that grows spontaneously over most of the county is made up of holm oaks and laurustinus (evergreen viburnum), which naturally covers the whole lower plain and a large part of the mountainous region. Human activities, however, have significantly changed the appearance of the plain, which is now mainly occupied by large towns and crop fields.

There are now only a few patches of woods left on hills that are not suitable for farming – woodland which is now dominated by Aleppo pines with just a few clumps of holm oaks – and the sunken edges of the streams running across the depression where riverside vegetation dominates.

Farming and forestry sector

The environmental importance of fields and woodlands in a county as anthropized as El Vallès Occidental is obvious, in terms of both the biological heritage they contain and their value as environmental corridors and open spaces that structure the territory, differentiating and giving character to the different villages and towns.

Apart from the forestry sectors on the plain, the most widespread woods can be found in the mountainous parts of the county. The blanket of vegetation that covers these areas is mainly made up of holm oaks and forests of Aleppo pine in the lower areas.

In the case of the mountain ridges of Sant Llorenç del Munt and L'Obac, meanwhile, we can find oaks and Scots pines in the high, shady, humid areas. The county's woods are a refuge for birds such as jays, woodpigeons, serins, goshawks and tawny owls, as well as mammals such as squirrels, dormice, genets and wild boar, and reptiles such as the large psammotromus. In the autumn, a veritable army of mushroom-pickers invades the woods in search of the prized rovellons (milk-cap mushrooms) in the pine woods and carlets *Hygrophorus russula* and llenegues *Hygrophorus* sp. mushrooms under the holm oaks.

Riverside woods

In the riverside woods along the water courses, the vegetation is lush and exuberant, made up of fast-growing trees such as deciduous elms and poplars. Under their protective shade grow typical water-loving species such as sedge and horse-tail. The riverside fauna includes birds which nest in the dense vegetation such as robins and wrens – especially in winter – and orioles and nightingales in summer. The most characteristic species in this environment are amphibians: frogs, tree frogs, salamanders and different species of toad. There are numerous invertebrates here too, as their larvae often go through an aquatic phase. The proliferation over the last few years of water treatment plants along river basins has given rise to a certain amount of environmental recovery in the county's rivers. Today, rivers that had deteriorated very badly from industrial activities in previous decades, such as the river Ripoll, are now once again home to fish and typical wetland birds (mallards, grey herons, etc.).

The fields

A wide range of species can be found in the fields and hedgerows alongside the roads, featuring very well-known and highly appreciated plants. This vegetation provides shelter and food for a large number of animals. In winter, the fields become home to large flocks of birds such as thrushes and lapwings, which come to spend the winter here before flying off in spring to northern Europe to breed. The most common reptiles are the ocellated lizard, the Montpellier snake – which can reach a very large size – and the common lizard. Mammals include foxes, badgers and bats.

In some parts of the plain, between the fields and woods – where the woods have been burnt or cut down – you can generally find scrubland. This consists of sparse, dry thickets featuring sun-loving shrubs which have adapted to the aridity: gorse, rosemary, rockroses. This is where mammals such as rabbits, wood mice and common shrews live, along with reptiles such as the ladder snake and the southern smooth snake, and birds such as warblers.

Climate

The climate of El Vallès Occidental is mild, typical of Mediterranean countries. Specifically, it has a Mediterranean climate with a low and medium altitude maritime influence.

Temperatures

- The average annual temperature is 15 °C.
- For nine months of the year the average monthly temperature is over 10°.
- The average temperature of the coldest month (January) is 7°.
- From June to September the average temperature is higher than 20°.

Rainfall

- Annual rainfall is around 600 mm, but there is a big difference depending on the altitude and latitude of localities, with significant inter-annual differences.
- Most rain falls in the spring and, especially, the autumn months.
- In winter and above all in summer it is extremely dry.
- The rainfall at the end of the summer and during the autumn is generally torrential and often results in rivers and streams breaking their banks, such as the catastrophic floods of 1962 –see photo– and 1971.
- On the massif of Sant Llorenç del Munt and L'Obac mountain range the climate is humid Mediterranean and on occasions it can even snow. Rainfall over the year tends to exceed 800 mm. At the summit of La Mola in Sant Llorenç del Munt the average annual temperature is around 10° and from November to May the monthly average does not exceed this figure, the January average being 4 °C.

2. Living and working in El Vallès Occidental

Evolution of the population

The first population estimates date back to the Middle Ages, specifically the 14th century, when it was calculated that the county had around 6,000 inhabitants, a level that would be maintained, with some fluctuations, until the 16th and 17th centuries.

Thanks to improvements in agricultural working conditions, a clear period of demographic growth began in the 18th century, reaching a population of 15,000 by the end of the century.

With the industrialisation of the county during the 19th century this growth continued: by 1857 there were already more than 50,000 inhabitants and Sabadell and Terrassa had become consolidated as the two county capitals, with populations of 14,000 and 11,000 respectively. This growth was now unstoppable and accelerated even further: by 1900 the county had 70,000 inhabitants and by 1950 this figure had reached 170,000.

From the second half of the 20th century, growth was extraordinarily intense. Sabadell and Terrassa had exceeded 100,000 inhabitants each by the 1960s. Over a thirty-year period, the county of El Vallès Occidental would grow by 430,000 inhabitants, reaching 598,324 by 1981. It is evident that this level of growth – which in percentage terms was more than double the average figure for Catalonia – could only be sustained by immigration.

Throughout this period, people from all over Catalonia and Spain were moving to the county, especially from Andalusia and Extremadura. In the 1980s, demographic growth slowed down, although it didn't stop: 649,699 inhabitants in 1991. The Nineties followed the same pattern (731,844 inhabitants in 2001), and does not look like changing any time soon (836,077 inhabitants in 2006), with growth very much higher than the average figure for Catalonia and Spain. Sabadell and Terrassa surpassed 200,000 inhabitants for the first time in their history in 2006, but the most significant growth in the last few years in percentage terms has been in the smaller municipalities around the two cities, which are undergoing a process of demographic and territorial rebalancing.

The most recent demographic growth in the county is mainly explained by natural population growth, with the arrival of people from Barcelona and its metropolitan area seeking a better standard of living, and from new flows of immigrants.

Population distribution

Today, the county of El Vallès Occidental is essentially urban, with a high population density (1,398 inhabitants per km² as opposed to 218 inhabitants per km² in Catalonia as a whole), although there are huge contrasts in the more inland regions, with some municipalities having the highest population densities in Catalonia, such as Badia del Vallès, with 15,811 inhabitants per km² and, at the other extreme, rural towns in the pre-coastal mountain range, such as Gallifa, with just 12.8 inhabitants per km².

In this respect, it is worth differentiating the towns in the central part of the plain and southern section of the county from the towns in the northern section.

The former are characterised by high population densities as a result of the tremendous demographic growth in highly urbanised and industrialised towns, with a high number of industrial and commercial estates positioned around the major road networks.

The latter, in the more mountainous regions (pre-coastal mountain range), are more rural or residential in nature and there is a high percentage of low-density residential estates.

Town	Surface area (km ²)	Altitude (m)	Population (1900)	Population (1950)	Population (1996)	Population (2006)
Badia del Vallès *	0,90	118	----	----	17.058	14.123
Barberà del Vallès	8,37	146	780	3.328	25.484	28.633
Castellar del Vallès	44,70	331	3.511	3.929	15.845	21.335
Castellbisbal	31,00	149	1.420	1.436	6.271	11.272
Cerdanyola del Vallès	30,00	82	928	4.007	50.503	57.959
Gallifa	16,37	502	223	168	150	216
Matadepera	25,40	423	560	728	6.082	8.169
Montcada i Reixac	23,50	38	1.710	8.656	27.068	32.153
Palau-solità i Plegamans	14,93	140	952	1.507	9.689	13.310
Polinyà	8,80	158	382	442	3.956	6.764

Rellinars	17,80	322	348	269	326	653
Ripollet	4,39	79	1.501	3.736	28.903	35.427
Rubí	32,30	123	4.400	6.953	54.085	70.006
Sabadell	37,80	190	23.294	59.494	185.798	200.545
Sant Cugat del Vallès	48,20	124	2.120	6.992	47.210	73.774
Sant Llorenç Savall	41,10	466	1.406	1.352	2.037	2.271
Sant Quirze del Vallès	14,10	188	752	1.493	10.342	17.138
Santa Perpètua de Mogoda	15,80	74	1.742	2.552	18.124	21.644
Sentmenat	28,80	241	1.256	1.829	5.253	7.209
Terrassa	70,20	286	20.360	58.880	163.862	199.817
Ullastrell	7,36	342	641	715	961	1.529
Vacarisses	40,70	382	808	404	1.711	5.094
Viladecavalls	20,12	274	743	622	4.882	7.036
EL VALLÈS OCCIDENTAL	583,20	----	69.837	169.492	685.600	836.077

(*) Badia del Vallès was created in 1994 and includes the town of the same name, inaugurated in 1975 in the municipalities of Barberà del Vallès and Cerdanyola del Vallès.

At a functional level, the county is structured around three urban systems, determined to a great extent by the road networks and the main cities. The first of these systems is based around Sabadell and encompasses the eastern sector of the county; the second is the catchment area of the other county capital, Terrassa, in the western sector of the county, and the last is the area to the south of the county made up of Sant Cugat, Cerdanyola, Ripollet and Montcada, with a much more direct influence from the city of Barcelona.

An industry and service-based economy

As well as its demographic importance, El Vallès Occidental also plays a very important role in the country's economy: the county is responsible for 11% of the Catalan GDP and 3% of the Spanish GDP. During the last few years, the economy in El Vallès Occidental has grown along similar lines to the GDP recorded for Catalonia as a whole (cumulative growth during the 2001-2004 period was 9.5%, slightly lower than the Catalan economy over the same period, which was 10.8%).

The El Vallès economy of recent times shows two noticeable trends. On the one hand, there has been a fast and intensive process of transferring economic activities and labour from industry to services, which has meant that the county has gone from being essentially industrial to service-based. A rapid tertiarisation of the economy has taken place, which reflects the evolutionary progress of the most advanced societies and countries. Despite this, industry still plays an important role in the county.

SERVICES

In the breakdown of the county's GDP, services represented 55.4% (lower than the Catalan average, which was 63.1%).

INDUSTRY

Industry represented 35.8% (higher than the Catalan average of 27%).

CONSTRUCTION

Construction represented 8.7% (similar to the Catalan average of 8.2%).

PRIMARY SECTOR

Finally the primary sector produced a negligible 0.1% (less than the Catalan average of 1.7%).

A dynamic economy

The current strengths of El Vallès Occidental economy are its excellent geographical location within Catalonia, Spain and the Mediterranean Arc; its population growth, which increases the active population in the county; a young and well-educated population; a significant network of small and medium-sized enterprises which are very deep rooted in the area; a flexible, energetic business fabric; and a tradition of enterprise and a highly dynamic entrepreneurial spirit which have historically and still is one of the driving forces behind the country's economy.

There is also a high degree of diversification and sectoral specialisation in the economy, especially in terms of industry; a notable vocation for exporting, and finally a first-class university system which guarantees that the county generates high-level, added-value innovation and knowledge, driving forward an economy that is increasingly geared towards cutting edge knowledge and technology.

The primary sector

The tremendous demographic growth in the second half of the 20th century meant that the territory was occupied by new industrial areas and districts and newly-created residential urbanisations, services and new roads, which meant that agricultural activities were gradually abandoned.

Today, less than 10% of the land in the county is farmed. Most of this land is used for cereal crops (barley, corn and oats). To a smaller extent, though producing higher revenue, is horticulture which, in fact, represents 24.5% of the county's primary sector GDP. This sub-sector produces potatoes, vegetables and pulses, notable amongst which is the mongeta del ganxet (white haricot beans), which has its own designation of origin. The most important sector in livestock breeding is pig farming, representing 20.3% of the county's agricultural GDP.

With the aim of promoting agricultural activities close to major cities, some municipalities, an example being Sabadell, have set up Agricultural Parks.

Industry

Traditionally, textile production has been the most widespread industry in the county – particularly wool – until industrial diversification started taking place after the 1960s; and at a later stage industrial zones dedicated to new technology plants started to be established.

El Vallès Occidental is the leading county in textile production in Catalonia, and Sabadell is the leading centre for wool and cotton finishes in Spain, followed very closely by Terrassa (wool, knitwear, cotton, garment production). This sector, despite having once been the dominant one, now only represents 9.1% of the county's industrial GDP. There is also a significant number of major metallurgy companies in the county.

Iron and steel is produced in Cerdanyola del Vallès; electrical material in Terrassa, Sabadell, Sant Quirze del Vallès, Montcada i Reixac, Rubí and Barberà del Vallès; mechanical equipment in Ripollet and Montcada i Reixac, which also has a flourishing automotive industry, and general metallurgy in Terrassa and Sabadell, Barberà del Vallès, Sant Cugat del Vallès and Rubí.

- The metallurgy and metal products sector represents 14.3% of the industrial GDP.
- The chemical sector represents 14.3% of the industrial GDP.
- Electrical, electronic and optical equipment sector represents 11.2% of the industrial GDP.
- The importance of industry to the county is reflected by the 114 industrial estates distributed around it, forming the largest concentration of industry in Catalonia, along with the county of El Baix Llobregat.

Services

- The tertiary sector has a dominant position in the county's economy.
- Real-estate and business services represent 25.9% of the service sector's GDP.
- Public administrations, healthcare and education represent 23.0% of the service sector's GDP.
- Trade and repairs represent 22.1% of the service sector's GDP.
- Transport and communications represent 10.3% of the service sector's GDP.
- The hotel and restaurant sector represents 8.1% of the service sector's GDP.
- These figures, on a county scale, are very similar to the Catalan average.

Tourism

Type of establishment	Number	Beds
Hotels	35	3.659
Rural tourism	2	14
Summer camps	3	217
Restaurants	191	-
Bar-restaurants	817	-

The county has tremendous tourism and leisure potential as it offers a huge range of options thanks to its significant natural and cultural resources as well as its economic structure, with a highly consolidated industrial and business sector which has led to burgeoning business tourism. The county's excellent geographical position makes it a stopping-off point for many people on their way through Catalonia or on visits to Barcelona.

The Cuina Vallès collective promotes high standards of cuisine and the regional products produced in the county.

The county of innovation and knowledge

First class range of educational establishments

El Vallès Occidental has become a county that specialises strongly in the fields of research, innovation and knowledge. In this respect, there is a very wide range of university education available in the county. The most notable of these is the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès). The campus occupies 260 hectares and is a major university organisation offering every faculty and school in the sectors of humanities, science and technology, as well as a range of complementary services commensurate with the most advanced universities in Europe. It also has a slightly smaller campus in Sabadell where it offers business science studies and computer systems courses.

Meanwhile, the city of Terrassa has a campus belonging to the Polytechnic University of Catalonia which specialises in engineering and technical degrees. Terrassa is also home to the El Vallès office of the Theatre Institute. Finally, Sant Cugat del Vallès is home to the El Vallès School of Architecture.

In Sant Cugat del Vallès there is also a High Performance Sports Centre (CAR), which is regarded as one of the most important sports education centres in Europe. The CAR supports the highest scientific and technical standards for high-level sport and is responsible for training professional sportspeople.

With regard to other educational establishments, the county has 323 primary schools, 130 secondary schools and 20 vocational training centres.

Working with new technologies

The El Vallès Technology Park (PTV) is a business park conceived especially for hosting companies and institutions that work in the field of new technologies. The aims of the PTV include generating synergies between companies and institutions thanks to the complementarity of their activities, physical proximity and personal knowledge; encouraging companies to establish themselves around sources of knowledge, and providing a launch platform for new business projects with technological content. This is where the new ALBA Synchrotron Laboratory will be located, one of the most important scientific research infrastructures in southern Europe, which is expected to be fully operational by 2010.

Infrastructures

The map on page 5 shows the network of rail and road infrastructures in the county of Vallès Occidental. In addition, there is an airport at Sabadell next to the C-58 motorway. This is mainly used for flight training, though it is also used for private, advertising and photographic flights.

The privileged position of the Vallès Occidental was a decisive factor when it came to establishing the headquarters in Catalonia of the fire brigade (Cerdanyola del Vallès) and the police force of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia - Mossos d'Esquadra (Sabadell -Terrassa) respectively.

In terms of health facilities, the county boasts 470 medical centres or clinics and 14 hospitals, the main ones being the General Hospital of Catalonia in Sant Cugat del Vallès, the Terrassa Hospital, the Mútua in Terrassa and the Parc Taulí de Sabadell.

3. Walking in the Vallès Occidental

Despite its highly industrial background and population density, El Vallès Occidental has managed to preserve a series of natural areas which form a unique landscape with a fascinating architectural and cultural heritage.

A host of hidden corners and new experiences are waiting to be discovered by visitors – very close to home yet a long way from bustling city life.

The natural parks of Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac and Collserola are the two largest natural areas in the county. But apart from the natural parks, it is worth highlighting other places where nature and the landscape are kept as an additional resource.

Natural Park of Sant Llorenç del Munt i l'Obac

This natural area, covering more than 13,000 hectares and made up of crests and rifts of conglomerate rock and Mediterranean woods of holm oaks and pines, is home to an important natural and architectural heritage. The municipalities of Castellar del Vallès, Matadepera, Rellinars, Sant Llorenç Savall, Terrassa and Vacarisses are all points of entry to the massif.

The summit of La Mola (1,104 metres), with the Benedictine monastery of Sant Llorenç del Munt, and the summit of El Montcau (1,057 metres), are two of the most classic excursions for hiking enthusiasts. Having said that, there are numerous paths available to take you on a journey through Nature and all its charms.

There are also rock-climbing routes in the Natural Park, although this activity is regulated and limited to certain areas and times of the year.

One of the most characteristic features of the massif are its caves, where you can practice potholing; the most well-known and accessible to the general public are the Simanya and Drac caves.

History has also had an influence on this area, and there are numerous traces of different eras. From prehistoric times through to the present day, the human being has left his imprint on the environment: from chapels (Sant Jaume de Vallverd, Santa Maria de les Arenes, Santa Agnès) to castles (La Torrota de Vacarisses) to masies –farmhouses- (El Marquet de les Roques, Can Pobla, Casa Nova de l'Obac, etc.).

Park of Collserola

More than 8,000 hectares make up the Park of Collserola, the second largest natural area in the county, which can be accessed from Cerdanyola, Montcada i Reixac and Sant Cugat del Vallès. There are numerous paths and tracks here for hiking, mountain biking and horse-riding.

There are plenty of options for walkers, such as the route from Sant Cugat via El Pi d'En Xandri, Torre Negra and the chapel of Sant Adjectori to Tibidabo, with spectacular views over Barcelona, a climb up El Puig Madrona or a visit to the recreational area at Can Coll.

Cycling is another great leisure option in this natural park: biking from Sant Cugat to Cerdanyola through the woods, or crossing the Valley of Sant Iscle to Barcelona, are two of the more traditional itineraries for discovering the park. Another way of taking advantage of the surroundings is on horseback.

The Gallifa ridge

The little town of Gallifa, which stands at the northernmost end of the county, is a really unique setting: its farmhouses, the castle and the crop fields have remained the same today under the ridges of Sant Sadurní.

There are numerous excursion options in this area, either on foot or by mountain bike: visiting El Gorg Negre, climbing up to the castle, or visiting the church of Sant Pere i Sant Feliu in the town centre, as well as the chapels of Sant Sadurní and El Grau are just some of the more interesting attractions.

The Galliners mountain range

This protected area in the municipality of Sant Quirze, on the plain of El Vallès, is an extremely important biological corridor and constitutes a typically Mediterranean landscape predominated by pine, holm oak and oak woods. The highest point of the mountain range is the lookout point of the Tower of Guaita or El Pujol Blanc, giving panoramic views of the plain, Collserola, Sant Llorenç del Munt, Montserrat and El Montseny.

The River Ripoll Valley

The river Ripoll is a natural artery running through the territory. A series of architectural structures can be found along its banks, making it an extra-municipal recreational area where the riverside woods are the main scenic element. The river runs through the municipalities of Barberà del Vallès, Castellar del Vallès, Montcada i Reixac, Ripollet, Sabadell and Sant Llorenç Savall. The northernmost part of the route features tracks that are only suitable for hikers, but as you get lower down the course of the river towards the plain it becomes suitable for cyclists. There are numerous tourist attractions to be found along the route such as windmills (L'Agell, En Santo, Mornau), farmhouses (Can Deu, Can Pagès, Sabater Vell), pools (En Fitó, El Diable, Vilaterçana) and springs.

Walks and bicycle rides

The Vallès Natural paths

Vallès Natural is a network of 260 kilometres of paths that cross all the municipalities in the county. These paths offer numerous different options for itineraries and routes through the natural environment. All the paths can be followed on foot and in some cases they are also suitable for cycling or horses. The network complements the range of itineraries in the natural parks and brings these natural areas within closer reach of the towns.

GR and PR footpaths

El Vallès Occidental is crossed by various GR (long-distance) and PR (short-distance) footpaths for hikers which complement the network of nature itineraries and routes. The GR 5 crosses the whole northern part of the county and forms a section of the legendary Matagalls-Montserrat crossing, entering the Natural Park of Sant Llorenç del Munt i L'Obac. The GR 6 is the classic route across El Vallès and connects Barcelona and Montserrat via the Natural Park of Collserola. An offshoot of this particular route is the GR 96. The GR 92 crosses the Collserola Park from east to west as far as the Marina mountain range. This transversal route is complemented by the GR 97, which also crosses the county transversally, linking the cities of Terrassa, Sabadell and Granollers. Finally, the GR 173 is a north-to-south route which connects the county's two natural parks across the El Vallès plain. The PR (short-distance) footpaths round off the wide range of paths and tracks that bring us closer to Nature.

Historical and cultural heritage

Humans settled many, many years ago in El Vallès Occidental; in fact, historically the county has always been characterised as place of transit – and settlement on many occasions – for the different civilisations which at one time or another came to the Iberian peninsula.

Megalithic remains

You can find Neolithic remains in Simanya Cave in Sant Llorenç del Munt; on the Plain of Bruguera in Castellar del Vallès; at Can Feu in Sabadell; at Torre Negra in Sant Cugat del Vallès, and at the Madurell brickyard in Sant Quirze del Vallès. From the Megalithic era there is the Pedra Llarga menhir in Palau-solità i Plegamans and a dolmen on the Cavallera mountain range in Sentmenat.

The Iberians on the El Vallès plain

The Iberian tribe of the Laietans settled on the El Vallès plain and turned it into one of the most heavily populated areas in Catalonia. The Iberians left us numerous settlements which they established in hilly areas. A good example of this, which can still be visited, is the hamlet of Ca n'Oliver in Cerdanyola del Vallès.

The legacy of the Romans

The Romans arrived in the county some two thousand years ago, as witnessed by the remains discovered in several different towns such as Arraona (Sabadell), Egara (Terrassa), Castrum Octavianum (Sant Cugat del Vallès) and El Pont del Diable at Castellbisbal.

The Visigoth era

The Roman Empire was followed by Christianity, with a parenthesis in the 8th century for the Muslim invasion. There are traces of the Visigoth era in Sant Pau de Riu-sec (Sabadell) and Santa Maria de Santiga (Santa Perpètua de Mogoda), amongst others. The most notable vestige, however, is Sant Pere de Terrassa, which bears witness to the old bishopric of Ègara, built in the 5th century BC. Inside the enclosed, gardened enclave stands a remarkable collection of three churches, Sant Pere, Santa Maria and Sant Miquel d'Ègara, which were built in the 7th century though subsequently extended and modified during the Romanesque period. The collection was declared a Historic and Artistic Monument in 1931.

Romanesque

By the medieval era, in the 11th and 12th centuries, demographic recovery sparked off the construction of the many churches that have survived until the present day. This was the golden era of Romanesque art. In this respect, we should highlight the Benedictine monastery of Sant Cugat del Vallès, with its spectacular Romanesque cloister; the grandiose church that shows the transition to Gothic, and the fortified construction surrounding the old enclave.

From this period it is also worth mentioning the old monastery of Sant Llorenç del Munt which crowns the summit of La Mola, with its notable Romanesque church, and the church of Santa Maria in Barberà del Vallès, which still houses some interesting murals from that era.

Other examples of the Romanesque legacy can be found in Sant Pere de Reixac, Santa Maria de Palau-solità, Sant Esteve (Ripollet), Sant Salvador (Polinyà), Sant Feliu de Vilamilans (Sant Quirze del Vallès), Sant Pere i Sant Feliu (Gallifa), Sant Iscle de les Feixes (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Sant Pere de Rubí, Santa Maria de Taudell (Viladecavalls), and Sant Pere i Sant Fermí (Rellinars), amongst many others. There are also several castles dating from the medieval era, including those of Sentmenat, Barberà, Plegamans, Castellar or Clasquerí, Vallparadis (Terrassa), and Torre Negra (Sant Cugat del Vallès), all of which are a valuable part of our heritage.

14th – 16th centuries: textile artistry and agricultural prosperity

The lower middle ages, with the trials and tribulations of epidemics, wars and plagues, would bear witness, especially after the 14th century, to the development of textile craftsmanship in Terrassa and Sabadell with the creation of guilds of paraires (wool workers) and the transformation of the former cereal mills into drapery mills, the prelude to modern industrialisation. The 16th century was also a period of great prosperity for Catalan agriculture, which was reflected by the construction of huge farmhouses, many of which still exist today. The masia of Can Deu and the Duran house in Sabadell are good examples.

Industrialisation

The expansion of the vineyards, especially in the 18th century, led to the accumulation of capital which sparked off trade and the start of the process of industrialisation which would be consolidated in the 19th century. It was during this century that the county would experience its tremendous economic impetus, spearheading industrialisation in Catalonia and Spain, and in this particular case it was a process of industrialisation that specialised in textiles and was based mainly around the cities of Sabadell and Terrassa.

During the second half of the 19th century, the two cities managed to concentrate some 75% of the wool industry in Catalonia; in 1877 they obtained the designation of 'city' and developed their own, very active, social, political and cultural lives, inhabited at that time by three-quarters of the county's population. This was around the time that the railway first arrived in the county.

Industrialisation also encouraged the development of a service sector. Around this time, credit and savings institutions started appearing, including the banks and savings banks of Sabadell and Terrassa.

This first period of industrialisation in the county has left us with a rich architectural heritage, especially in the two county capitals. In this respect, Terrassa is home to some of the former residences of the wealthy bourgeoisie, such as Masia Freixa, a masterpiece of Modernism; public buildings such as the City Hall and the University of Technical Engineering; old factories such as Aymerich, Amat i Jover (the present Science and Technical Museum); the Independència Market; the basilica of Sant Esperit, and the former convent of Sant Francesc.

With regard to Sabadell, often called the 'Catalan Manchester', there is an interesting legacy of its industrial tradition in the form of factory architecture: the vapors (steam-driven factories), whose structures, though abandoned, still remain, in some cases having retained their chimneys. Other notable buildings include the City Hall, the former headquarters of the Piarist educational order; the Modernist headquarters of the Caixa d'Estalvis de Sabadell; the former Industrial School, the current cultural centre of Caixa d'Estalvis; the Casa Turull, constructed in 1819 and now the site of the Art Museum; the church of Concepció; the Central Market and the water tower Torre de l'Aigua (1918), which has now become a symbol of the city, amongst others.

Examples in other municipalities include the Modernist cooperative winery at Sant Cugat, designed by architect Cèsar Martinell in 1921, and the Palau Tolrà in Castellar del Vallès (the present Town Hall). In Castellar del Vallès it is also worth highlighting the church of Sant Esteve, a Neo-Gothic work from 1885, known as the 'cathedral of El Vallès'.

Recent history

The county's most recent history is marked by the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1939 and the harsh post-war period with the repression of the dictatorship. A new period of industrial growth in the 1960s would result in the mass arrival of immigrants from other parts of Spain. The tremendous economic and urban development between 1960 and 1975 took place without any proper structure and a sad lack of facilities and services. After the economic crisis of 1973, there were further successive crises in the textile industry, followed by the industrial conversion of the county which went straight into a process of economic tertiarisation.

With the arrival of democracy, the long-awaited services also materialised (schools, health centres, cultural centres, etc.), together with new transport infrastructures and the urban renewal and transformation of towns and cities. Modern architecture opened up new areas of urban growth, an example of this being the Eix Macià in Sabadell.

Popular culture

- The festival calendar of El Vallès starts with parades on the eve of King's day (6 January) which are held in nearly every town.
- On the festival of Sant Antoni Abat there are horse and carriage processions in many towns.
- Taking part in Carnival celebrations has become extremely popular in most towns and cities.
- Most of the main town festivals in the county take place between May and September.
- The autumn is marked by castanyades (chestnut festivals).
- In winter, Christmas festivities begin with the typical nativity scenes.

There are all kinds of festive events throughout the year, whether for festive or religious reasons, generally associated with a local chapel or church: Sant Medir in Sant Cugat, La Salut in Sabadell, Sant Pere de Reixac in Montcada i Reixac, Castellar Vell in Castellar del Vallès, Sant Muç in Rubí, Sant Iscle in Cerdanyola del Vallès, etc.

Trade fairs and exhibitions

The close bond between traditions and economic dynamism in the county is demonstrated by the large number of trade fairs and exhibitions held throughout the year in various towns.

This is also evident in the gastronomic fairs held between April and June in Castellar del Vallès, Ripollet, Cerdanyola del Vallès, Montcada i Reixac and Sant Quirze del Vallès.

Traditional culture

The county's popular culture is rich in demonstrations of folklore. There are numerous groups with deeply traditional roots which play an active role in the cultural life of most El Vallès towns, with performances by choirs, coble bands, Sardana dancers, stick dancers and graller players, teams of giants, etc. The esbarts (associations which perform traditional regional dances) include the traditional dance of El Vallès in their repertoires – the Gitanes dance – which can still be seen today in several villages. Also known as the Plaça dance, it used to be held during the Carnival period only but today is generally danced at different times of the year (town saint's days, cultural get-togethers, etc.). In this respect, the Esbart Dansaire in Rubí does a fantastic job of cataloguing the most attractive and interesting elements of Catalan folklore, which it has also disseminated at an international level.

Despite there being no long-standing human-tower building tradition in the county, in 1979 the first public presentation of the human-tower building team Minyons de Terrassa took place. Its progress has been unprecedented in the world of the castellers (human-tower building teams), to the extent that in a very short space of time it has managed to achieve the most difficult formations, forming part of the top division of castellers in the country. Over the years, new castellers have emerged in the county, such as the Castellers of Sabadell, the Castellers of Terrassa, the Castellers of Rubí, the Castellers of Sant Cugat, the Castellers of Cerdanyola and the Vailets of Ripollet.

Clubs and associations

There is a rich cultural and associative life in the county (more than 3,800 registered associations, many of which are of a cultural nature). Notable associations in Sabadell include the Academy of Fine Arts, the association of Amics de l'Òpera (Friends of the Opera) and La Faràndula. There is also the association of Amics de les Arts (Friends of Arts) in Terrassa.

A cultural benchmark

Almost all the towns in the county have their own cultural centre, club or association for holding cultural events. The Principal, Faràndula and Sol theatres in Sabadell; the Cultural Centre and Alegria Theatre in Terrassa; the Cultural Centre in Sant Cugat, the Ateneu in Cerdanyola and the Sala in Rubí are the largest and most well known of these.

Some of the most well-known cultural programmes are the opera season in Sabadell and the dance season in Terrassa, the Terrassa International Jazz Festival, the Cerdanyola International Blues Festival, and the summer festival Festival d'Estiu 30 nits in Sabadell, amongst others

The county boasts a high number of cultural facilities: a total of 32 public libraries, 11 libraries belonging to higher education institutions, 21 specialist libraries, 18 archives and numerous art galleries all over the county.

Added to this are a number of cinemas, most in the form of multiplexes (two in Terrassa, two in Sabadell, two in Sant Cugat del Vallès, and one each in Cerdanyola del Vallès and Barberà del Vallès). The county also offers the opportunity to visit a large number of museums featuring very diverse subject matter.

Sports

It is also worth highlighting the considerable sporting and cultural input of the various long-standing rambling and hiking groups in the county, such as the Unió Excursionista of Sabadell, the Centre Excursionista of Terrassa, the Club Muntanyenc of Sant Cugat and the Centre Excursionista of Castellar.

The tremendous vitality of local people and their interest in sporting activities has resulted in a range of excellent sports facilities in the county. The most important of these is the High Performance Sports Centre (CAR) in Sant Cugat del Vallès.

There are several renowned sports clubs in the county, such as the Sabadell Swimming Club, the Sabadell Sports Centre (a football club which played for several years in the Spanish First Division), the Terrassa Football Club and the Terrassa grass hockey teams, the Atlètic de Terrassa Hockey Club and the Egara Hockey Club.

In Cerdanyola del Vallès and Sentmenat there is a deep-rooted tradition of skate hockey and in the rest of the county football and basketball are the most popular sports. The county has four golf courses: Matadepera (La Mola Golf Club), Sant Cugat del Vallès (Sant Cugat Golf Club), Rubí (Golf Sant Joan) and Terrassa (El Prat Royal Golf Club). The county's long-standing love of sports means that there is a consolidated programme of every kind of sporting activity all kinds all year round.