



LAND OF VALENCIA

Itineraries in the Els Ports-Maestrat district

The area of Els Ports - Maestrat and the surrounding lands in the communities of Catalonia and Aragón offer visitors a wide range of scenery which deserves leisurely exploration, while you enjoy the peace and quiet of undisturbed nature. Peaks, gorges, rivers, fountains, hermitages and forests are waiting to be discovered at the calm pace of the hiker or the cyclist.

The magnificent opportunities provided by this area for nature excursions are fully covered by the long-distance and short-distance hiker's routes known in Spain as the Senderos de Gran Recorrido (GRs) and Senderos de Pequeño Recorrido (PRs). These are traditional trails signposted by hiking groups and shown in a number of guide books.

A) Long Distance Routes (GRs):
The GR-7 crosses the district and links to various towns such as Fredes, el Boixar, Vallibona, Morella, Ares del Maestre, Benasal and Culla. The section of this route between Morella and Ares del Maestre runs through terrain which is fairly easy to cover. From Morella, it leads to the Nevera dels Regatxols (a nevera is a cave used for storing snow) and climbs to the peak known as the Mola d'Ares. Also recommendable is the section of the GR-7 from Morella to the Coll del Peiró Trenca. From Benasal the GR-7 leads to the Font d'En Segures spa and the Sant Cristòfol hermitage. For further details, the publication "Topo-Guía del sector Fredes-Sant Joan de Penyagolosa" should be consulted (in Spanish).



B) Short-Distance Routes (PRs):
The GR-7 branches off into a series of shorter routes signposted as PRs (plus a Roman numeral, plus an Arabic number for subsections). Of note among these are the routes from Morella to other areas of Els Ports such as the PR-V-116, PR-V-119 or the PR-V-218 to Cincorres, Forcall and Xiva. Signposted routes can be found in other towns like Sant Mateu (PR-V-201 and PR-V-202) or Villafranca del Cid that have an outstanding local hiking route network. Ares, Culla, Catí, Tirig, Albocàsser and Benasal also offer possibilities for this kind of activity.- PR-V: This route runs between the towns of Cantavieja, La Iglesuela del Cid, Villafranca del Cid and Culla. It connects the GR-7 and the GR-8 and continues into the region of Aragón.

In addition to the routes indicated above, Els Ports - Maestrat has a wide range of hiking routes for 3 to 4-day hikes, one-day excursions or shorter walks. For further information, a guidebook in Spanish can be consulted, entitled Els Ports de Morella y Benifassar. Ports de Beceite (Castellón, 1989). In the 11th century, El Cid journeyed throughout these lands. The itinerary he followed during his "journeys in exile" have been reconstructed by Guillermo García in his book Las rutas del Cid (published by Tierra de Fuego, Madrid, 1988).



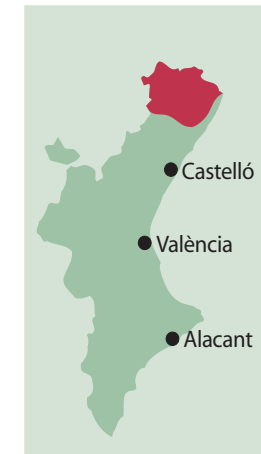
Along the many local roads with very little traffic and the quiet forest trails, cyclists have many possibilities for enjoyment. For well-trained cyclists, conquering the mountain passes of Torre Miró, Las Cabrillas, Santa Agueda or Querol provides magnificent views well worth the effort. Mountain-bikers can follow a number of forest trails in the area: from Vallibona to Castell de Cabres; the ascent to the Muixacre; or crossing the Portell de Morella to the Mare de Déu del Llosar.

All hikers or bikers should consult the guidebooks mentioned above and use detailed maps. The Els Ports district is covered by the following maps at 1:500,000 scale: Aguaviva 29-20 (519) Peñarroya de Tastavins 30-20 (520); Forcall 29-21 (544); Morella 30-21 (545); Ulldescon 31-21 (546); Villafranca del Cid 29-22 (569); Albocácer 30-22 (570); Vinaroz 31-22 (546); Cuevas de Vinromà 30-23 (593) and Alcalá de Chivert 31-23 (594).

Practical Tips

The Els Ports - Maestrat district can be reached via the A-P7 motorway, junction 42, taking the road to Vinaròs. From there take the N-232 to Zaragoza until you reach Morella and then the CV-14 towards Forcall. Another route is the CV-10 leading off the

N-340 in Castellón de la Plana towards Sant Mateu, which leads to the N-232 to Zaragoza. You reach Morella as above and take the CV-14 to Forcall. The CV-10 connects to roads leading to Ares, Benasal, Villafranca and other towns.



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The Els Ports and Maestrat districts offer visitors the chance to enjoy nature at its very best, with verdant forests interrupted by craggy peaks, sharp ravines, a hermitage here and there, and sleepy mountain villages with magical auras that transport us back to the distant past. This impressive and varied scenery provides a habitat for Nature's treasure-horde of animals, including hares, squirrels, partridges and quail, living in unison with the wild boar, the Spanish mountain goat, the golden eagle and the tawny vulture.

Numerous religious and civic monuments reflect the historical importance of these towns and villages in Medieval days. Territories in the Els Ports district, once pertaining to the Crown, and those of the Maestrat, governed by the Master of the Order of the Templars, and later by the Order of Santa María de Montesa, are sprinkled with references to their cultural legacy from the past.

Set in the valley formed by the rivers Bergantes, Caldés and Cantavieja is the town of **Forcall**, looking up to mountain slopes covered with pine trees and holm oaks. The spacious Plaza Mayor, flanked by 16th-century columns, boasts the monumental palace of the Osset-Miró family, constructed in local stone and topped by large wooden eaves in typical Aragonese style. On the opposite side of the plaza is the palace of Les Escaletes, and further inside the tiny streets leaving the square are more solid reminders of days of old at every step. Outside the town, Forcall provides adventurous visitors with scenic viewpoints such as the Roca del Migdia ("the Midday Rock") and the Mola Garumba ("Garumba" Peak), offering spectacular panoramas, or the tranquil fountains of L'Om, La Felipeta and La Vila.

Famous throughout the Land of Valencia is the feast day of San Antonio, "la Santantonada", which is held on the weekend closest to January 17th. Fire is the protagonist of this feast, a symbol of purification that bids adieu to the winter and ushers in the long-awaited spring.

Leaving Forcall to pay a visit to the valley of the river Bergantes, visitors will see various villages such as that of **Villores** on a small hill along the way. It offers all the charm of tiny streets climbing to the summit of the hill, lined with white-washed houses adorned with balconies. On the opposite bank of the Bergantes is **Ortells**, whose quaint streets are dominated by the stern silhouette of the castle-cum-palace of Los Brusca. Further on, the village of **Palanques** sits on an open plain, sending its inhabitants out every day to tend to a host of almond and fruit trees.

Zorita del Maestrazgo is situated in the northernmost mountains of the Els Ports district. Here, traditional mountain mansions with thick, overhanging wooden eaves and shrouded balconies overlook the steep, sometimes staircased, streets. On the outskirts of the town, there is a sanctuary to Our Lady of La Balma sandwiched into a cleft in the mountain face. Way back in the 14th century there was talk of a hermitage here, which attracted pilgrims anxious to pray to the Virgin once said to have been sighted here. The tradition has continued down to our days.

In a valley next to the Tastavins river, surrounded by mountains and forests, is the picturesque pueblo of **Herbés**. Typical houses and civic buildings here are representative of medieval architecture. On a nearby mountain slope is the 17th-century Sanctuary of Our Lady of El Sargar.

From Herbés, the road leads through the lush mountain forests of Turmell. On the northern slopes of these mountains, watered by the river Cérvol, lies **Vallibona**, nestling in a basin full of orchards and gardens.

Then comes the capital of the Els Ports district, proud **Morella**, dominating the horizon for miles around, presenting its Cubist-like houses clinging to its steep slopes, and crowned by a rocky summit bearing the remains of the town castle.

One of the finest examples of religious architecture in the Land of Valencia is the Archpriest's Church of Santa María de Morella. Outside the well-preserved town walls is an aqueduct built in the 13thC. On the road to Forcall one can visit the erstwhile Giner Factory, an example of 19th-century architecture now fully restored. Other sites to see in the area are prehistoric rock-shelter paintings in Morella la Vella, the Roser sanctuary, the picturesque village of Xiva or the forest of Pereroles for a day out in the country.

Throughout the year a number of festivities enliven the town of Morella: the Santantonada in January, the pilgrimage to the Vallivana Sanctuary in May and a festival held every six years in the month of August called the Sexenni, announced by the Anunci held in the previous year. The next Sexeni will be in the year 2000.

Popular dances form part of the peculiar folklore still alive in this district. Perhaps the best known example, owing to its antiquity, its complicated movements and exquisite beauty is the war dance performed in Todolella. This village has grown up on the slope of a hill and is also much photographed owing to its majestic medieval castle commanding the surrounding area. From here, a short stroll amongst pine trees and holm oaks leads to the hermitage of Sant Cristòfol.

Founded long ago by the Moors, the nearby village of **La Mata** has a number of characteristic buildings. Still standing at numerous sites are impressive torres-masías, or towerhouses once belonging to noblemen's estates. Along the nearby Cantavieja river is a scenic spot known as Les Calderetes, where the water slows its pace to fill pools that beckon to brave plungers and attract foot-weary paddlers.

On the westernmost side of the district of Els Ports, nestling in a shallow valley, is the regal settlement of **Olocau del Rey**, with a town centre fitted out with fine examples of popular architecture side by side with ancient public and private edifices. The church of the town patroness, La Virgen del Pópulo, preserves a handsome 13thC Romanesque sculpture known as Our Lady of the Orange.

Towards the south, the villages of **Cinctorres**, **Portell de Morella** and **Castellfort** are set on the highest altitudes in the entire district. In Cinctorres a pleasant excursion can be made along the Rambla de Celumbres, a dry stream bed, or to the Bovalar caves on the mountainside.

Portell de Morella contains the region's richest forests. Bordering on Teruel province is a nature area known as Les Alberedes that entices visitors to tarry for a while in a scenic spot next to an old hermitage, with a fountain and a hostel. Castellfort encircles a hill at 1,200 metres above sea level, and just a short distance away is a well-known hermitage honouring Sant Pere, or St. Peter, one of the oldest in the province.

From Castellfort, the villages of Ares del Maestre and **Villafranca del Cid** - lying in the Alt Maestrat district- are well worth a visit, both for their spectacular scenery and a series of prehistoric rock-shelter paintings to be found here at the Gasulla ravine near Ares. Another nearby ravine, la Valltorta, near **Tirig**, Albocàcer and Les Coves de Vinromà, offers visitors the chance to see one of the most important collections of Levantine rock-shelter paintings. The Museu de la Valltorta (Tirig) has been opened to provide an overview of this attractive cultural legacy from prehistoric times.

In the Baix Maestrat district, the broad, gently-declining mountain slopes connect the hinterlands with the coastal plains. Olive trees are traditional here, and some are actually millennial, raising their gnarled forms to the sky like veritable sculptures. The Museu de l'Oli, in Cervera del Maestre, has exhibits providing an overview of olive growing and oil pressing. Set among olive tree plantations are the towns of **San Rafael del Río**, **Rosell**, **Canet lo Roig**, **Traiguera**, **La Jana**, **Cervera del Maestre**, **Cálig** and **Sant Mateu**. The history of these towns is reflected in their architecture, among which the Royal

Sanctuary of Our Lady of La Salut (Traiguera) is of note.

In a broad, elongated valley running parallel to the coast, separated by the imposing Serra d'Irta, are the towns of **Santa Magdalena de Pulpis** and **Alcalá de Chivert**, the latter with a bell tower visible from miles around. The Serra d'Irta is crowned by two castles whose walls are still standing, from which a marvellous view over the coast can be gained, albeit only by hardy climbers. From Alcalá de Chivert, crossing over the sierra de Les Talaies d'Alcalà, one arrives at **Les Coves de Vinromà**. Further on, dryland crops and the occasional waterwheel mark the road to **La Salzadella**, en route to Sant Mateu.

Sant Mateu is the historical capital of the Maestrat district. This town's heritage is obvious to all on a stroll around the town, which has been listed as a Town of Cultural Interest. Monuments include the Augustine Convent, the Borrull and Villores palaces, the Archpriest's Church, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of the Angels, the Masía del Palomar (Estate house) and Las Fuentes. The history and ethnology, archpriests', palaeontology and medieval prison museums provide visitors with information on the cultural and natural heritage of Valencia.

Moving back up the Cervera valley to Venta de l'Aire one travels southwards to **Catí**, sitting at the foot of the Sierra Nevera. The town centre here has Gothic buildings, and the nearby Mare de Deu de l'Avella health spa merits a visit.

Albocàcer, in turn, offers the repose of its Sant Pau hermitage, its fine honey and artisan olive oil. This handsome town is the gateway to **Culla** and **Benasal**, via **Vilar de Canes** and **La Torre d'En Besora**. The monumental Culla holm oak forest welcomes visitors to this rugged land whose sturdy houses stand at 1,100m above sea level. During the descent back to Benasal, through hazel nut tree orchards, a stop at the rock shelters of Barranc dels Covarjos or the spa of Font d'En Segures is recommended.



- Carreteras
- Itinerario excursionista señalizado
- Pista forestal
- Curso de agua

- 0 - 400 m
- 400 m - 800 m
- 800 m - 1.000 m
- más de 1.000 m

- Cimas
- Zona de escalada
- Cueva / Pinturas rupestres
- Paraje de interés
- Árbol monumental
- Castillo
- Acueducto
- Ermita
- Monumento / Museo
- Pozo de nieve
- Queso
- Turrón
- Aceite
- Miel
- Artesanía textil
- Artesanía de alparagatas
- Alfarería
- Área recreativa
- Área de acampada
- Refugio
- Camping
- Alojamiento rural
- Hotel / pensión
- Restaurante
- Bañero
- Campo de golf
- Oficina de Información Turística
- Centro de Salud 24h.
- Gasolina (sin plomo)
- Puerto de montaña

← A Fortanete

← Linares de Mora

↓ Puertomingalvo

Mas de Barberans



Ulldecona →

Vinaròs / AP-7 →

Vinaròs / AP-7 →

Vinaròs / AP-7 →

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