

A Journey to Cortsavi in 1848

A Dutch painter, Charles-Louis Hora-Siccama journeyed through Vallespir in 1848 and made a number of paintings during his stay.

He did not keep a diary, but if he had, this is what he might have written (based on contemporary accounts):

7 August 1848

The good Doctor Pujade suggested that I went with him on a visit today, to a sick person in the mountains. Claret, a peasant living at Vilalta has been injured by a mule's kick and he needs a visit from the doctor. It seems that the cabalistic spells of the local sorcerer, the *saludador*, haven't been successful !

Vilalta is situated 5 leagues from Banyas d'Arles [ie. Amelie-les-Bains as it is now, since it was re-christened in 1840 after Queen Amelie, the wife of Louis-Philippe]. This large house is on the southern foothills of Canigou, high above Cortsavi, below the tower at Batere.

At dawn we saddled our horses, and after having crossed the river Tech at a ford, thanks to the directions given by Marti Xauvet, we passed through the beautiful apple orchards which surround Arles, and started up the country track to Cortsavi. Walking down the hill, there are women bent under the load of faggots of dead wood, destined for the oven of the bakery in Arles.

The track rises rapidly above the valley, over-looking the ravine of La Fou (a narrow precipice of a terrifying depth) and soon allows us to see a country-side more and more vast.

Under the shoes of our horses a hare scampers off, and we hear the noisy take-off of a red partridge. Despite the early hour, the tracks which run through the forest are already quite busy. We come across the mule caravans loaded with charcoal and we can see the smoke of the charcoal-makers here and there on the slopes.

Arriving on the grassy plateau we can see laid out before us the village of Cortsavi. The 'Cortal de l'Eloi' marks the top of this part of our climb. It's here that the infamous band of 'trabucayres' bandits were captured three years ago (5 May 1845), when the *mas* was surrounded by the infantry, the gendarmerie and the customs and excise men.

On the open ground many herds of sheep are feeding on the pasture, under the watchful eye of a shepherd wearing a 'capuchon' hood. The dogs howl, coming in front of us and frightening the horses. Their necks are circled by iron collars, bristling with spikes against the attacks of wolves, which are still dangerous in these parts.

Farther off, high in the distance there are the first signs of the mines of Batere. Coming down the hill are the yoked teams of oxen which bump along, transporting enormous amounts of iron ore to feed the forges.

We set off again, climbing higher and higher, until finally we are at Vilalta. This is an ancient 'seigneurie' dwelling, proudly sitting on a magnificent site looking down on Corsavy from the north.

While my companion goes to give medical attention to the unfortunate Claret, I can go on to the terrace to admire the views displayed on all sides. To the east is the deep hollow of the Riu Ferrer, leading down to the river Tech and eventually to the sea. To the west the hills lead to the plateau of Pla Guillem and the peaks of Les Set Homes and Les Esquerdes de Rotja, the haunts of bears and izards.. To the south, below me, is the hamlet of Leca, and on the far horizon the vast panorama of the chain of the Pyrenees, from Pilous de Bellmaig in the East, to Mont Falgas in the west. The clarity of the air allows me to see all the details of the mountains, with more detail than even Count Cassini's maps (drawn to 1/86400 scale) could show.

Towards the north the horizon is closed off by Batere and the giant Canigou. Above me I can see the black entrances to the galleries of the mines of 'Les Indis'. In the depths of the earth the workers wrestle out the ore by hammer-blows, and cram it into the wicker baskets. Bent under their load they carry it as far as the mine entrance before returning to the dreadful darkness to carry on their hard labour, for the sum of 3 francs per day.

The Tower of Batere, to the north, was the perfect observatory for communicating with the area of the Conflent and the Rousillon plain to the north. Below me, beyond the hollow of the Riu Ferrer, the signal tower of Cortsavi, clearly visible, plays the same role for the Vallespir. The carelessness of mankind threatens these relics of a glorious past. In our age it seems no-one is bothered to reinforce the half-ruined remains, and I can foresee a day soon when they will remain only a modest sketch in the memory of man, all these high sentinels of Catalunya.

Now the doctor, having comforted his patient, has applied some splints. He leaves some instructions with the peasants of Vilalta to help the healing of the injury. We mount up on our strong horses, to take the track back down.

The track descends in sharp bends towards the Riu Ferrer, and when we reach the river we go back up it a short way, on its left bank. The gorge resounds like a drum, the monotonous clanging made by the powerful hammer of the forge as we pass by. Crossing the river by the Pont d'en Clot, we continue on to reach Cortsavi. There we stop to have an 'espartina' country meal at the Hotel Sarrat, which is well known by the people who come to the Vallespir for the spas. We enjoy a succulent country ham washed down with an exquisite local white wine. Thick slices of brownish bread spread with different jams, as varied as they are delicious. What a treat!

It remains only to descend down to the river Tech and then trot along towards the thermal baths [at Amelie]. As we proceed I thank the good docteur Pujade. I tell him of the love that I have for this peaceful countryside of Vallespir, which I have discovered bit by bit, thanks to his advice and friendly help. Each day has been filled with new treasures and good friends. God bless them. 'Déu vos guard'.