

el Periòdic **dc. 17**

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This is a trend that new clientele much more in demand in «slow tourism»

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From 16 to 23 August in the Conflent region (Pyrenees) classes at the Catalan Summer University (Universitat Catalana d'Estiu) will be held. Since 1968, the university has been organising its conferences at the Lycée Charles Renouvier and hosting over a thousand participants (students, teachers and members of the public).

Conflent is a historical Catalan comarca of Northern Catalonia, now part of the French department of Pyrénées-Orientales. The Canigou (Catalan: Canigó) mountain dominates Conflent.

Conflent-Canigò is a real natural treasure that is associated with many ancient legends.

We speak to Nadine Romieu, director of the Intercommunity Tourist Office (OTI) Conflent-Canigò.

-Why is the Canigou massif called the emblem of the Eastern Pyrenees and a sacred mountain for Catalans? What is the history of this place?

-It is the emblem of the Eastern Pyrenees classified as the Grand Site of France since July 2012, and the Grand Site of Occitania since 2017. The Canigou is an exceptional natural site that offers hikers an impressive spectacle over the plain of Roussillon.

This is the first high peak of the Eastern Pyrenees chain, it is visible from Languedoc, Arieja and the province of Girona. It is also a symbol of the identity of the Pyrenean landscape.

In addition, there are traditions around the Canigou (the «meeting» of Sant Joan on June 23). This famous «meeting» takes place the weekend before Sant Joan. On this occasion, thousands of guardians of the «Flame of Canigó» gather no matter what the weather is - rainy, windy, snowy or hot. One single goal inspires this spontaneous collective: to climb the famous peak of Canigou and get the sacred flame. It is also a great celebration of friendship. There are no young or old, no actors, no spectators. There are only keepers of traditions living together in one country and enjoying these meetings.

It is curious that the first certified ascent of Canigou, which Pere III of Aragon made, was recorded in 1285. However, the monarch did not make it to the top.

And if you want to take more advantage, you can go by the famous Yellow Train from Villefranche-de-Conflent and relax in the hot springs in Vernet-les-Bains, Molig or the Banys de Sant Tomàs.

-What would you recommend that tourists visit first? What sports activities do you offer in summer and winter?

-Conflent is rich in heritage. Three villages are part of the Most Beautiful Villages in France.



LUIS URBINA

Evol is a medieval town with a «mountainous character,» with schist walls and slate roofs, dominated by an old feudal castle from the 13th century and equipped with a Romanesque church.

Eus is an atypical stone village, suitable for artists. It is the ideal place for a family walk where you can enjoy an impressive view of the Canigó.

Villefranche-de-Conflent is a medieval city that the famous Vauban fortified. UNESCO listed the city as a World Heritage Site. It is a must-see in Conflent for all lovers of Vauban's work and heritage. The town is charming with its cobbled streets.

The territory also includes thousand-year-old Romanesque abbeys: the abbey of Saint-Martin of Canigou and the abbey of Saint-Michel-de-Cuixà.

Conflent has a wide range of sports activities: hiking, cycling, rock climbing, canyoning, via ferrata. In winter, you can go canyoning in the warm waters of Thuès-entre-valls, sledding or snowshoeing in Mantet.

-Do you think that ecotourism is a trend in recent years?

-This is a trend that new clientele much more in demand in «slow tourism», nature and open spaces are feeling and confirming. But it is also

a clientele that is looking for more quality. The pandemic has changed the habits and practices of tourists, which are likely to continue.

-Can you tell us about the tourists who visit the Conflent Canigou destination?

-The clientele that visits the Conflent is mainly made up of families, customers of the spas of Molitg-les-Bains or Vernet-les-Bains and hikers. Catalans from Spain are the first international visitors.

-What, in your opinion, is the most beautiful excursion to Conflent?

-There are about 85 signposted routes in El Conflent, the most beautiful and famous of which are the ascent to the summit of Canigou, the gorges of Carança, the ascent to the summit of Madres, the Cascade des anglais and Saint-Vincent.

-Do you have a strategic plant to attract tourists, including international tourists?

-The Tourist Office of Conflent Canigou has different well-oriented means of communication. Fairs dedicated to outdoor activities, a regional and international press action plan (mainly Catalan and English). We value our wealth of natural and cultural heritage.

The Tourist Office participates in the promotions of the departmental tourism development agency and the regional tourism committee.

-How would you like to develop the tourist infrastructure? Do you have an investment plan?

-The Tourist Office does not intervene directly in the territory's infrastructure. However, we conduct important work to improve the quality of the offer.

-Do you organise any cultural events? What is planned for this year?

-We organise a festive and family day at the end of June. The aim is to discover the natural, heritage and gastronomic riches of the territory with many free activities for young and old (excursions, castles, giants, sardines, culinary entertainment, shows and boat races).

In addition, from May to November we offer activities to discover cultural sites. We organise minibus excursions that include a visit to a monument or a noteworthy village and the discovery of an agricultural farm with a tasting of local products.

On November 26 and 27, 2022 The Sant Andreu Fair will take place in Vinça. During an entire weekend, tourists will be able to discover Catalan traditions such as

the sardanas, the castellers and the correfocs (fire show). Local products will also be valued in the producers' market.

Other events value Catalan traditions such as the Festival of Giants in Villefranche-de-Conflent for Easter, and the Festival of Sant Joan in Vernet-les-bains on June 21, 22 and 23.

-Please tell us about the famous Canigó championship: 34 kilometres and 2180 metres are proposed for everyone or is there an easier race?

-The Canigó Championship is the most important sporting event in the territory. The Canigó Championship is part of the history of Conflent, as it owes its origins to the brave inhabitants of Vernet-les-Bains who went in search of blocks of ice in the Canigou, which they brought with them to refresh SPA clients who frequented luxury hotels.

Today, every first Sunday in August, this famous race gathers runners with loads (8 kg) to pay tribute to the old ice carriers with or without load.

Participating in the Canigó Championship is an unforgettable experience. The most famous race is the classic race: 34km/2200m of positive and negative gradient, limited to 800 participants.

In recent years, two other tests have been offered to open the sporting event to as many people as possible: the «Mattes rouges» race: 19km / 1250m of positive and negative gradient, limited to 200 participants and the «Goa» race: 11.5km / limited to 100 participants.

The records that the competitors in the classic race hold are as follows: Male: 2 h 58; Female: 3 h 41; Men with load: 4 h 04; Female with a load of 8 kg: 5 h 14.

-Gastronomic tourism in the Pyrenees: what can the Conflent Canigou destination offer tourists?

-The territory has many local products and Catalan specialties catalanes (*Calçots, Panellets, Coscoll, Ouillade, Boles de Picolat, Cargolade, Bunyetes, Coques, Rosquillas*).

To taste good Catalan products, you must go to the weekly markets or the producers' markets in the Rotja valley (every Thursday in the summer) or have lunch in one of the home-cooked restaurants offered by Conflent.

-The Catalan Summer University will take place from August 16 to 23. Is it open to everyone? What are the conditions to participate? How many people will participate?

-The Catalan Summer University is open to everyone. There is a wide range of courses, seminars, fun or high-level meetings, workshops, conferences, debates, films, cinema, songs, and concerts. It is the occasion for the population of Prada to welcome people from all the Catalan Countries and organise free concerts in Catalan in the evenings in the great Plaça de la República. ≡