

WILD WATERS FOR SEU D'URGELL '93



On 4th October last, the inauguration of the wild water canal, which will be used for the Olympic canoeing slalom events.

The wild water canoe slalom is back in the Games, twenty years after its first and only appearance in Munich. The setting for the event will be Seu d'Urgell in the Pyrenees.

By Nuria Escur

Among the artificially laid stone channels, you almost expect to see a new Maria Goretti or a cloaked Bernadette appear at any moment, for the landscape of La Seu resembles nothing so much as a crib, with its silver paper river and lumps of moss. A miniature landscape in which everything has its place and its function and where, notably, the official wild water canoe slalom events will take place in 1992 after twenty years of absence from the Olympic scene. A country in miniature, the capital of Alt Urgell, with its 10,000 inhabitants at the very healthy altitude of 700 metres.

Jose explains to us that this part of the Pyrenees was the best retirement spot he could have wanted. One day, he arrived here, entered the cathedral cloisters and began to speak with the capitals: "I couldn't help it, the place contained a special life, and the medieval figures just stared at me. Mythology exercises a matchless power over people like me. The only horrible thing is the 'Racionero cloisters', which are a mockery." He means the controversial cloisters where Racionero decided to install capitals with the heads of Churchill, Hitler, John XXIII and Charlie Chaplin, an undertaking deemed irreverent and taxing to the powers of interpretation.

Up to now, La Seu was able to welcome admirers of the purest Romanesque-Lombard style in search of the most remarkable Italianate Romanesque remains in Catalonia. Gastronomes too were among its visitors, in pursuit of trout from the river Segre, “rovellons” (a type of mushroom) and meats “a la llosa”. Finally, it drew lovers of Fiesta Mayor-type dances such as the traditional Ball Cerdà. That was about it. Now, however, it will see the streets thronged with foreign pilgrims eager to reach the Parque del Segre, now the preserve of chestnut trees, flower gardens, little bridges and the odd Kafkaesque rat. Our mystic traveller will not be satisfied with the classic night in the Parador and the lingering stroll beneath the porches of the Carrer dels Cononges, even though the Parador is in an old convent and the street still contains the house of the old family of Papa Luna. Instead, he will be looking for the secular spirit of the place, in Olympic dress and with a purple track-suit, rushing towards the competition stretch to exchange his pilgrim scallops for a canoe.

smooth as glass, reflects so perfectly a slab of cloud and an image of a white mosque that the slogan “Aqui construïm la Seu del 93” (here, we are building La Seu of 93) seems to ring true, as the essentially touristic nature of the plays appears to give way to a solid and enduring geographical charisma.

The Segre and Valira rivers provide this idyllic setting for wild water canoeing. Every year, international-level events are held and, perched uncomfortably and precariously on the round stones, you regain a truly visceral sense of nature and would give your eye teeth to be a good mountaineer, a mountain-dweller or an expert at paragliding or badminton. Not for nothing has Seu d’urgell become the capital of Nordic skiing, thanks to the pistes of Sant Joan de l’Erm, Tuixent-La Vansa or Lles.

The only thing that disconcerts is the artificial and prophylactic appearance of the Olympic zone, shaped like an “L”, with its feeding channel, its roller ski track and



La Seu d’Urgell, a large town hidden away in the Pyrenees.

BUT WHERE DOES THIS TRADITION OF CANOEING IN ALT URGELL COME FROM?

Twenty years ago, under the name ‘Kayak La Seu d’Urgell’, one of the first wild water canoeing clubs in Catalonia and in Spain in general was set up here. With the institution of the “Setmana Internacional de Canoe-Kayak”, a now deeply rooted tradition came into being. These days, you could say that the Cadi Canoe-Kayak is a club entirely devoted to slalom.

To climb up between Andorra, la Cerdanya and el Pallars Sobirà and drink a mint tea on the “escales dels gitanos” (gypsies’ stairways) while the tourists go by examining practically with a magnifying glass the new canoeing facilities, could be a surprising and chilly adventure with which to start the year. In front of the river, the flat water course, 650 metres as



its mini hydraulic power station. All perfect in hospital white, with its antiseptic image and a whiff of chloroform and juniper.

Far off, old houses on the verge of ruin. A stark contrast for a town which is undergoing one of its greatest transformations in recent times. With the recovery of the river zone, a face-lift and the creation of facilities, the Seu d'Urgell is embarking on a large-scale project,

Jose - the man who was talking to the capitals, you remember? - explains to us how the Colegio de la Salle was partially converted into an Olympic village. He explains it clearly, in his way: "One hundred million they have spent here to house 300 athletes. No question of them doing as much for us!" But deep down, Jose is pleased to see the to-ing and fro-ing of travellers looking for the Parque del Segre. He knows how lucky he is to live in such natural surroundings, and strongly recommends the spot to all the country's pensioners.

A region where sport competes with history and superb examples of Romanesque art.



When, on 4th October 1990, the symbolic release of water into the channels of the Parque del Segre took place, the media photographers mingled with locals eager to capture the event on film.

The crib was in place and between the dusky yellow of the cranes and the white caps of the athletes, the effect was more one of a kaleidoscopic jig-saw than of a formal inauguration. And between the spongy froth of the water and the artificial eddies, you could just glimpse the strained faces of the canoeists.

The channels, full of artificial obstacles, fissures and difficult passages, were a veritable labyrinth strewn with traps to test the skill of the very boldest. The budgeted 850 million were floating about right there. The Mayor, Joan Ganyet, could breathe easily. Jose had stayed at home.

The day ended with a few insidious questions and a toast, then everyone went home. Because the cold in the Seu does



not allow for much open-air revelling, and because the character of the local citizenry tends to prefer an intimate gathering by the fireside to get-togethers with the neighbours.

Finally, the Seu d'Urgell will have become something more than the spiritual home of Romanesque aesthetics and the Diocesan museum. But it is plain that for many, the Olympics will be no substitute for the charm of a Taüll mural, a statue of the Virgin or an intricate example of the goldsmith's art.

N. E.

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