

The Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí

World
Heritage Site



A little history

As from the 9th century, the land to the south of the Pyrenees became organised into counties that depended on the Frankish kingdom and were part of the “Marca Hispánica” or Hispanic Mark. However, in the 10th century the Catalan counties gradually removed themselves from the Carolingian Empire and eventually achieved political and religious independence.

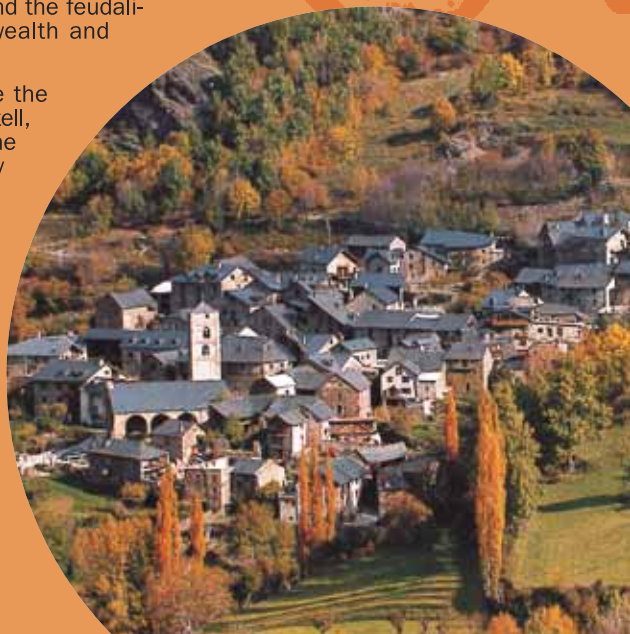
The Vall de Boí, or Boí Valley, formed part of one of these counties: that of Pallars-Ribagorça, belonging to the house of Toulouse until the end of the 9th century. When the county became independent, there started a complex process of political and religious control over the territory, ending up with the original county being divided into three new independent counties: Ribagorça, Pallars Jussà and Pallars Sobirà, as well as creating a new diocese of the bishopric of Roda.

The Vall de Boí was in the midst of this process. In the initial division it had remained in the territory of Ribagorça but, as from 1025, it became part of Pallars Jussà and, for a lot of the 11th century, was immersed in the fights between the two Pallars regions.

At the same time, in the middle of the 10th century, the churches in the valley which had originally belonged to the bishopric of Urgell, became part of the bishopric of Roda. The creation of this new diocese signalled a period of disputes between both bishoprics. The Vall de Boí was also in the middle of this conflict, as shown by the act of consecration which Ramon Guillem, bishop of Roda-Barbastro, ordered to be painted on a column of the church of Sant Climent in Taüll in 1123, as a symbol of the territory's control.

A few years later, in 1140, a pact was signed by both bishoprics. Most of the parishes in the Vall de Boí became part of the Urgell bishopric, with only the church of l'Assumpció in Còll continuing to belong to Roda-Barbastro. At the same time as this re-structuring of the territory, was happening a new social order was also taking shape: feudalism. Peasants were losing their freedom and becoming tied to the land under the rule of feudal lords, who benefited from the fights between counties and the feudalisation process, increasing their wealth and power.

In the Vall de Boí these lords were the Erill family. From the village of Erillcastell, their place of origin, at the end of the 11th century they started to rise quickly in society, taking place in the campaigns to repopulate and re-conquer land under the orders of Alfonso el Batallador (Alfonso the Warrior), King of Aragon. This was at the start of the 12th century, just before the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll were consecrated. The lords of Erill used resources obtained from war booties to promote the building of churches in the Vall de Boí, a way of showing their power and of acquiring social prestige.





Everyday life

The different towns and villages in the Vall de Boí, with their corresponding administrative areas, have been documented since the 11th century. These communities were made up of peasant families who usually settled in high sunny locations, these were easier to defend and to take better advantage of their own and the common land, as well as access pastures higher up the mountains and in the forests.

Their homes were simple structures with one fireplace, often comprising of a single living area shared by people and animals alike. If there was a second floor, it was used for sleeping and storing food and fodder.

Day to day life was ruled by the light of the sun and followed a cyclical conception of time. Work and holidays went hand in hand with the agricultural calendar. A large part of the basic diet was made up of cereals, wine and apples.



The protagonists

Ramon Guillem, the bishop

Originally from the south of France, Ramon Guillem was the prior at Sant Sernin in Toulouse before Alfonso el Batallador (Alfonso the Warrior) appointed him bishop of Roda-Barbastro, from where he carried out his pastoral duties intensively, particularly in terms of consecrating churches.

He was confessor to the King of Aragon and kept in close contact with the lords of Erill.

His trips to France and Italy put him in touch with the best artists of the time.

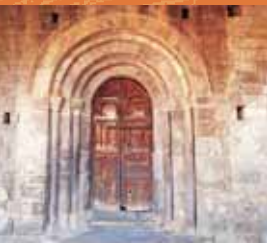
The Erill family, feudal lords

Originally from Erillcastell, their possessions extended along the valleys of Boí, Barravés, Llevata and Sas.

With Alfonso el Batallador (Alfonso the Warrior), they took part in reconquering Barbastro (1101), Tudela, Daroca and Zaragoza (1118) and Calatayud (1120), as well as in repopulating new domains to the west (Alfarràs, Almenar, Fraga, etc.). They promoted a large number of the churches in the Vall de Boí.



The Romanesque heritage of the Vall de Boí



The Vall de Boí's Romanesque heritage is made up of the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll; Sant Joan in Boí, Santa Eulàlia in Erill la Vall, Sant Feliu in Barruera, la Nativitat in Durro, Santa Maria in Cardet, l'Assumpció in Còll and Sant Quirc Hermitage in Durro.

One of their main characteristics is the unity of architectural style. They were all built during the 11th and 12th centuries following models from northern Italy, Lombard Romanesque, characterised by functional buildings, skilled stonework, slim bell-towers and the external decoration of rounded arcading and pilaster strips.

The Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí are the artistic reflection of a society structured around the hierarchies of lords and clergy, in this case personified in the lords of Erill and the bishopric of Roda de Isábena, promoters of the churches in the Vall de Boí. In this medieval society, the Church not only fulfilled a religious function but also played an important social role as a place for the people to meet and seek refuge. In the case of the Vall de Boí, this social function of churches was further underlined by the use of its slim bell-towers for communication and protection.

Of particular note are the murals that used to be found in the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll and Sant Joan in Boí, currently kept at the National Museum of Catalan Art (MNAC) in Barcelona, as well as the carvings produced by the Erill Workshop, particularly the Descent in the church of Santa Eulàlia in Erill la Vall.

Boí's Romanesque architecture is exceptional thanks to the concentration of such a high number of churches in a limited area with the same architectural style, preserved over time with few modifications that have significantly altered their initial design.



Romanesque architecture in Catalonia

Romanesque architecture started around 1000 AD in the north of Italy and spread rapidly throughout Europe. In spite of some local variations, it was the first international art movement with a unified style. In Catalonia, this new artistic style arrived through Abbot Oliba who, in the towns of Ripoll, Cuixá and Vic, was the driving force behind the architectural renovation of the Catalan counties in the 11th century.

Early Romanesque has elements from the classical world, local traditions and Lombard designs brought by itinerant craftsmen. The buildings are practical and austere, their only external decoration being rounded arcading and pilaster strips, with thick walls capable of withstanding the weight of the barrel vaults. There are few windows or doors and the naves are usually separated by columns or pillars joined by semi-circular arches.

In the 12th century improvements in techniques illustrate how the art of stonemasonry had been perfected. Architectural resources diversified and more sculptural elements were added to the decoration. By the 13th century Romanesque shapes had started to exist side by side with the arrival of Gothic architecture, as we can see in the buildings of the "Lleida School".



Techniques and materials

Construction

The churches were built using local materials: stone, limestone, wood and slate. Stone was worked into an ashlar, joined together using limestone mortar to make the walls and vaults. Wooden beams and slates were used for the rooves.

Frescoes

A mix of limestone mortar made with sand, limestone and water was applied to the walls and a preliminary sketch or 'sinopia' was then drawn on top. Finally, with the mortar still fresh, the coloured pigments were applied, diluted with water.

Church paints

Used to paint on wood or to apply the final touches to murals. In this case, the pigments were mixed with egg yolk.

Rediscovering Romanesque

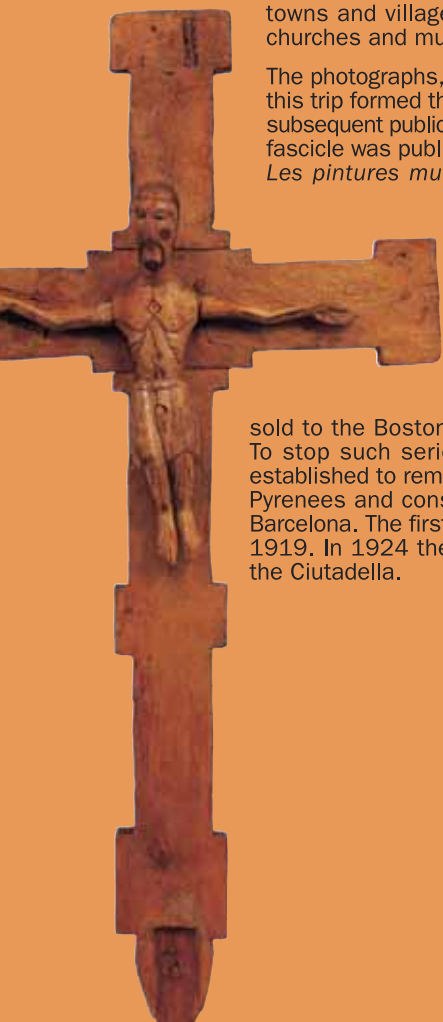
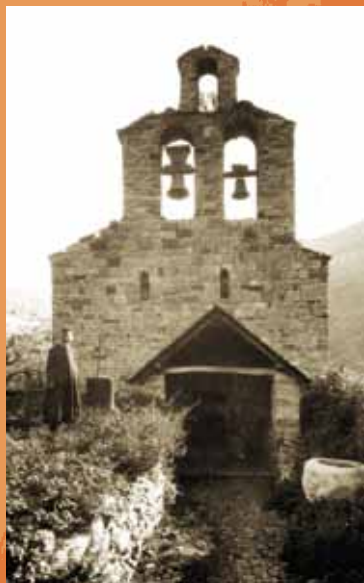
Following trends that had begun throughout Europe with Romanticism, interest in the medieval world in Catalonia started in the 19th century with historical and literary trips and the cultural movement of the 'Renaixença'. The first exhibitions of Romanesque and Gothic art were being held by the end of the 19th century and the first museums and collections started.

the Romanesque heritage in Catalonia, in 1907 the 'Institut d'Estudis Catalans' (Institute of Catalan Studies) organised an *Archaeological-Juridical Mission to the Aragon Border Area*. During the month of September, they travelled around the Vall de Boí, visited its towns and villages and "discovered" the churches and murals conserved there.

The photographs, drawings and plans from this trip formed the basis for the Institute's subsequent publications. In 1911 the fourth fascicle was published of the work entitled *Les pintures murals romàniques* (Romanesque mural paintings), including, among others, the three in the Vall de Boí.

A few years later, in summer 1919, the Museum Board discovered that the frescoes of Santa Maria de Mur (Pallars Jussà) had been acquired and removed, but it could not stop them from being

sold to the Boston Museum as there were no laws to protect heritage. To stop such serious events from happening again, a campaign was established to remove the Romanesque mural paintings from the Catalan Pyrenees and conserve them in the Museum of Art and Archaeology in Barcelona. The first works were removed from the Vall de Boí in December 1919. In 1924 the collections of Romanesque art were inaugurated in the Ciutadella.





Strappo

Strappo is the name given to the technique for removing mural paintings.

First, several layers of cloth are applied to the mural painting, previously soaked in water-soluble organic glue.

When the fabric is dry, it is removed from the wall using a mortise axe and hammer, the painted layer coming off with the cloth.

The cloth is packed and taken to the museum, where the paintings are transferred to a new support. The organic glue is diluted with hot water to separate the cloth from the layer of paint, as if it were an adhesive.

Protection and recognition

The first institutional recognition of the historical and artistic value of the Vall de Boí's heritage was of the churches of Sant Climent and Santa Maria in Taüll in 1931, when these were declared Artistic Historical Monuments. In 1962 this declaration was extended to the churches of Sant Joan in Boí and Santa Eulàlia in Erill la Vall.

In 1992 the Generalitat de Catalunya declared all the Romanesque churches in the Vall de Boí to be an Asset of Cultural Interest, and two years later it started its restoration programme.

On the 30th of November 2000, UNESCO included the "Catalan Romanesque Churches of the Vall de Boí" on its list of World Heritage Sites.

The protagonists



Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1867-1956)

Architect, art historian and politician, he led the scientific expedition to rediscover the Romanesque heritage by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans.

Together with architects Antoni de Falguera and Josep Goday, he published the reference work *L'arquitectura romànica a Catalunya* (Romanesque architecture in Catalonia).

Franco Steffanoni

A restorer from the Bergamo School. With his collaborators Arturo Dalmati and Arturo Cividini, he was in charge of removing the Romanesque paintings from the churches in the Catalan Pyrenees.



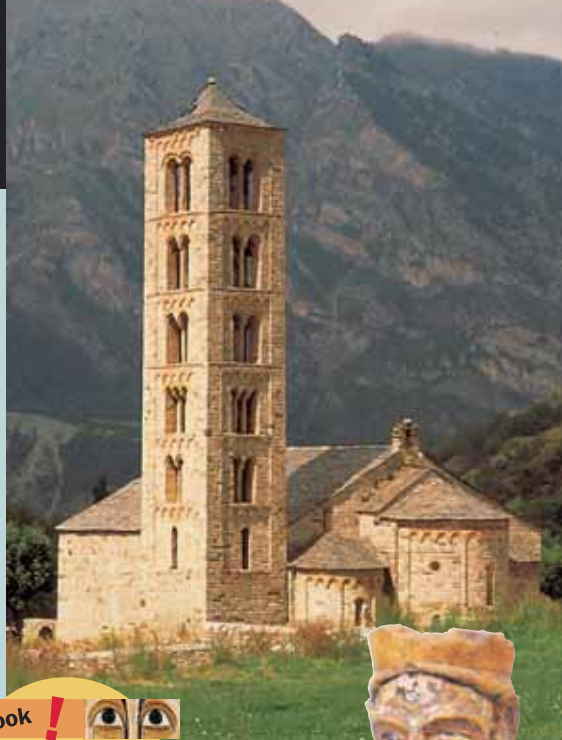
Sant Climent de Taüll



Consecrated on the 10th of December 1123 by Ramon Guillem, bishop of Roda-Barbastro, the church of Sant Climent was built on an earlier church dating from the 11th century. It is a prototype for **basilical plan** Romanesque churches, with three naves separated by columns and covered with a wooden gable roof, the **top** of the church with three apses and a bell-tower.

The **Pantocrator** of Sant Climent has been the most frequently used emblematic image to represent Catalan Romanesque art. The original is kept in the National Museum of Catalan Art but the church contains a copy, together with other fragments from the original painting, of particular note being the scene with Cain and Abel.

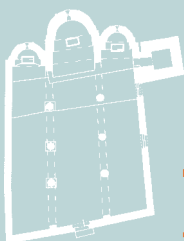
Three Romanesque carvings complete the furnishings inside the church.



Look !



Original mural painting: *Cain killing Abel.*



Chronology

11 th century	12 th century	1919-23	Early 70's	2000-01
First building work	Church consecrated	Paintings removed	First restoration work	Second restoration New paintings discovered

Santa Maria de Taüll



The church of Santa Maria was consecrated on the 11th of December 1123, one day after Sant Climent, showing the extent of the funds provided by the lords of Erill to the Vall de Boí at the beginning of the 12th century.

Located in the middle of the village, this is the only church in the valley that seems to have resulted in houses being built around it.

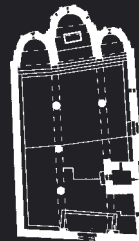
Like those in the rest of the Vall de Boí, most of the mural paintings inside the church were removed and taken to Barcelona between 1919 and 1923. The church currently has a reproduction from the central **apse**, presided over by a scene from the **Epiphany**, with Baby Jesus sitting on the lap of the Virgin Mary and the Three Wise Men offering their gifts.



Look !



External mural painting on the north face of the bell-tower.



Chronology

11 th century	12 th century	18 th century	1919-23	1960	1971
First building work	Church consecrated	Baroque reforms	First paintings removed	Second paintings removed	Last paintings removed and restoration work

Sant Joan de Boí



The church of Sant Joan in Boí has the largest number of architectural elements from the early building work that took place in the Vall de Boí in the 11th century. Of particular note in the

church of Sant Joan, with its basilical layout (like Sant Climent and Santa Maria) are the mural paintings decorating the interior of the naves with scenes such as *The Stoning of Saint Stephen*, *The Minstrels* and *The Bestiary*.

The last restoration aimed, as far as possible, to restore the church to what it must have looked like in the 12th century. With this aim in mind, the interior was darkened and copies were made of all the fragments of frescoes currently conserved at the MNAC.

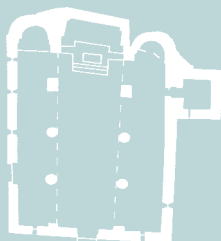
This is where we can best understand the function of these paintings and the original appearance of the churches.



Look !



Copy of medieval wall carvings next to the door on the north façade.



Chronology

11 th century	12 th century	16 th -19 th century	1920-23	1976-78	1997-98
First building work	Bell-tower reformed	Several reforms affecting the original appearance	First painting removed	Second paintings removed and restoration work	Restoration work and frescoes copied

Santa Eulàlia d'Erill la Vall



Santa Eulàlia has one of the best bell-towers in the Vall de Boí. It is slender, square in plan and six storeys high and is decorated in the Lombard Romanesque style with **rounded arcading** and **saw-tooth friezes**.



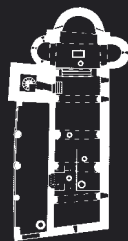
Aligned with the bell-tower of Sant Joan in Boí and that of Sant Climent in Taüll, it was used for communications and as a watchtower over the area.

Inside the church there is a copy of the sculpture of the **Descent from the Cross**, the only whole sculpture remaining from the Erill Workshop. The originals are kept in two museums: the National Museum of Catalan Art in Barcelona and the Episcopal Museum of Vic.

Look !



One of the thieves is poking his tongue out.



Chronology

11 th century	12 th century	60's	1994-97
First building work	Nave extended and the bell-tower and porch were built	Accidental collapse of the vaulted roof and façade and reconstruction work	Archaeological excavations and restoration work



La Nativitat de Durro



The size of this church is testimony to the importance of the village of Durro in the Middle Ages. Particularly of note are the large dimensions of the nave, the bell-tower, carved **portal** and **porch**.

The Romanesque church was renovated on several occasions between the 16th and the 18th century. These transformations provided the church with new areas, such as the two Gothic chapels and the Baroque **sacristy**.

Inside the church is the Romanesque image of Nicodemus that originally formed part of a scene from the Descent from the Cross.



Look !



Lock plate decorated with figures.



Chronology

12 th century	16 th -17 th century	18 th century	1983	1993	2000-02
First building work	Two chapels opened at the side	Chevet of church and porch renovated	Roofs renovated and chapel removed	Bell-tower renovated	Last restoration



Sant Quirc de Durro



The Sant Quirc Hermitage is in a privileged location on the Durro mountain at a height of 1,500 metres. Its setting is not by chance, however, but is a territorial marker, connected to the social area used by the community and to the pagan tradition of "*correr las fallas*", when the local people descend the mountain at night by the light of flaming torches.



Look !

Picture of the martyrdom of the Saints.



This small building is from the 12th century with Baroque additions.

Inside there is harmony between its different artistic styles, with a copy of the Romanesque altar frontal, the Gothic style image of San Quirc and Santa Julita and the Baroque altarpiece.



Chronology

12 th century	17 th -18 th century	1996
First building work	The nave vault and belfry wall were added	Renovation

Sant Feliu de Barruera

The church of Sant Feliu in Barruera contains architectural elements from the two great periods of construction in the Vall de Boí: the 11th and the 12th century.

The different kinds of building work in each century are evident in the two apses conserved at the church: the 11th century apse decorated with **rounded arcading** and **pilaster strips** and with irregular **stonework** that is very different from the **ashlars** from the 12th century apse.

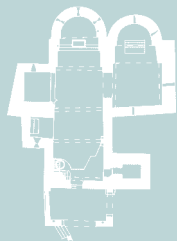
The renovations carried out on the church and its furnishings reveal how the valley's churches were gradually adapted to the tastes and needs of the community that has used them uninterrupted since the 12th century.



Look !



Bull's head on the latch.



Chronology

11 th century	12 th century	17 th -18 th century	70's
First building work	Nave, arm of the base transept and the bell-tower	Two new chapels, bell-tower and door renovated	Baroque elements restored and renovated

Santa Maria de Cardet

The church of Santa Maria in Cardet has one of the most spectacular apses in the Vall de Boí. It was built on the steep mountainside, taking advantage of the slope to construct a small **crypt** inside, the only one of all the churches in the area.

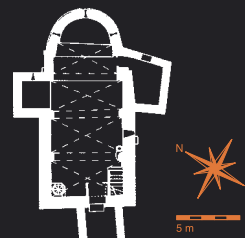
Unlike the rest of the churches in the Vall de Boí, in this case the bell-tower is a **belfry wall**, the result of Baroque renovations to the church.

The last renovation aimed to restore the inside of the church to its appearance at the beginning of the 20th century.



Look !

Carved head under one of the rounded arches in the apse.



Chronology

11 th -12 th century	12 th -13 th century	17 th -18 th century	2005-06
First building work	Sinking of the nave and various reforms	Baroque reforms giving the church its current appearance	Restoration

L'Assumpció de Còll



This church is quite different from the other churches in the Vall de Boí in terms of its building materials, the size of the ashlar and the

decorative work in the **portal**, the most interesting part of the church. Of particular note are the **Chrismon** (Christ monogram) and the carved capitals representing struggles between men and animals.

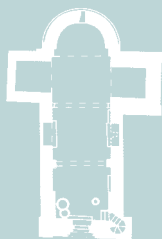
As in the other churches in the valley, guarding the entrance is a wrought iron bolt of Romanesque style, finished in the shape of an animal's head.

Inside the church we can still see the three Romanesque fonts: the baptismal font, the font for holy water and the oil font.

Look !



Carved capital.



Chronology

12 th century		70's	
First building work	Side chapel opened in the north wall	Gothic reforms on the bell-tower	Roof restored

Vocabulary

Altar frontal: Rectangular structure located in front of the altar, generally made of wood and decorated with colours and/or carvings.

Apse: Part of a church, usually semi-circular, where the altar is located.

Ashlar: Cut and polished stone used to build a wall

Barrel vault: Semi-cylindrical structure covering the space between two parallel walls.

Basilical plan: Rectangular perimeter with one or three semi-circular shapes (apses) at one end. Based on the layout of a Roman basilica.

Belfry wall: A bell wall made by raising the façade, with openings for the bells.

Bell-tower: Bell-tower made up of a prism-shaped structure with openings.

Bestiary: Natural history of animals, real or imaginary, with an allegorical meaning. In medieval times, zoomorphic representations were used that often acquired a symbolic or moralistic meaning.

Chevet: End of the nave of the church, where services are held.

Chrismon: Symbol of Christ made up of the first two letters - X (ji), P (ro) – of the Greek name Xrestos.

Crypt: Chapel located under the main altar where relics are usually kept.

Descent from the Cross: Scene representing the moment when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus lower Jesus Christ from the Cross after his death.

Epiphany: Adoration of Jesus by the Wise Men from the East.

Pantocrator: Representation of God the all-powerful, Christ on the throne, blessing with his right hand and holding the Book in his left.

Pilaster strips: Narrow vertical strips that divide the face of a wall, joined at the top by rounded arches

Porch: External area attached to a façade with side openings and covered at the top. It protects the entrance to the church.

Portal: Decorated entrance

Rounded arcading: Small ornamental arches applied to a wall.

Semi-circular arch: a crescent shaped arc

Sacristy: Area used to prepare the mass and also to hold liturgical garments and valuable objects.

Saw-tooth Frieze: Horizontal frieze with v-shaped edging carved into the wall.

Stonework: Way in which the stones are placed to make a wall.

Recommended bibliography

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Practical information

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The Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí is responsible for managing all the valley's Romanesque heritage. Its main functions are to make the churches available to the public, provide guided tours, promote the area's heritage and also to attend to the needs of visitors.

We recommend our guided tour service, using specialists in our heritage.

The churches can also be visited without a guide:

Church opening times:

**Sant Climent de Taüll, Santa Maria de Taüll,
Sant Joan de Boí, Santa Eulàlia d'Erill la Vall,
Sant Feliu de Barruera i la Nativitat de Durro**

Please consult the timetables at the Centre del Romànic.



Not everything is Romanesque

The Vall de Boí also offers visitors a wide range of other options.

The National Park of Aigüestortes and Estany de Sant Maurici, the spa at Caldes de Boí, the Boí Taüll Ski Resort, hiking routes, adventure sports, gastronomy and much more.

To plan your stay in the Vall de Boí, you can get more information on all these options and more at:

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