



# THE GREAT ROUTE OF PLA DE L'ESTANY

SCIENTIFIC ROUTES IN GIRONA



Diputació de Girona



# Ready to satisfy your infinite curiosity?

These routes through the *comarcas* (similar to counties) of Girona aim to provide an alternative to conventional tourism, offering a proposal that has the added bonus of providing scientific and sustainable knowledge. These routes have been designed based on a specific science-related theme, around which a weekend outing can be planned. There's something to explore in every comarca! Through this guide you will learn, for example, among other things, who Professor Margalef

was; how the cannons on the ships that sank in the Mediterranean are recovered and restored; the chemical process that lurks behind the making of a simple cheese; why wetlands were important to the Greeks and Romans; how long to wait before recorking an oak tree; which animal skull is the most sought-after at the Archaeological Museum of Banyoles; or where the Romans mined gold in Cerdanya. When tourism and science go hand in hand, the result is spectacular.

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**Tota la nit he filat  
vora l'estany de Banyoles,  
al cantar del rossinyol,  
al refilar de les goges.  
Mon fil era d'or,  
d'argent la filosa,  
los boscos veïns  
m'han pres per l'aurora.**

...

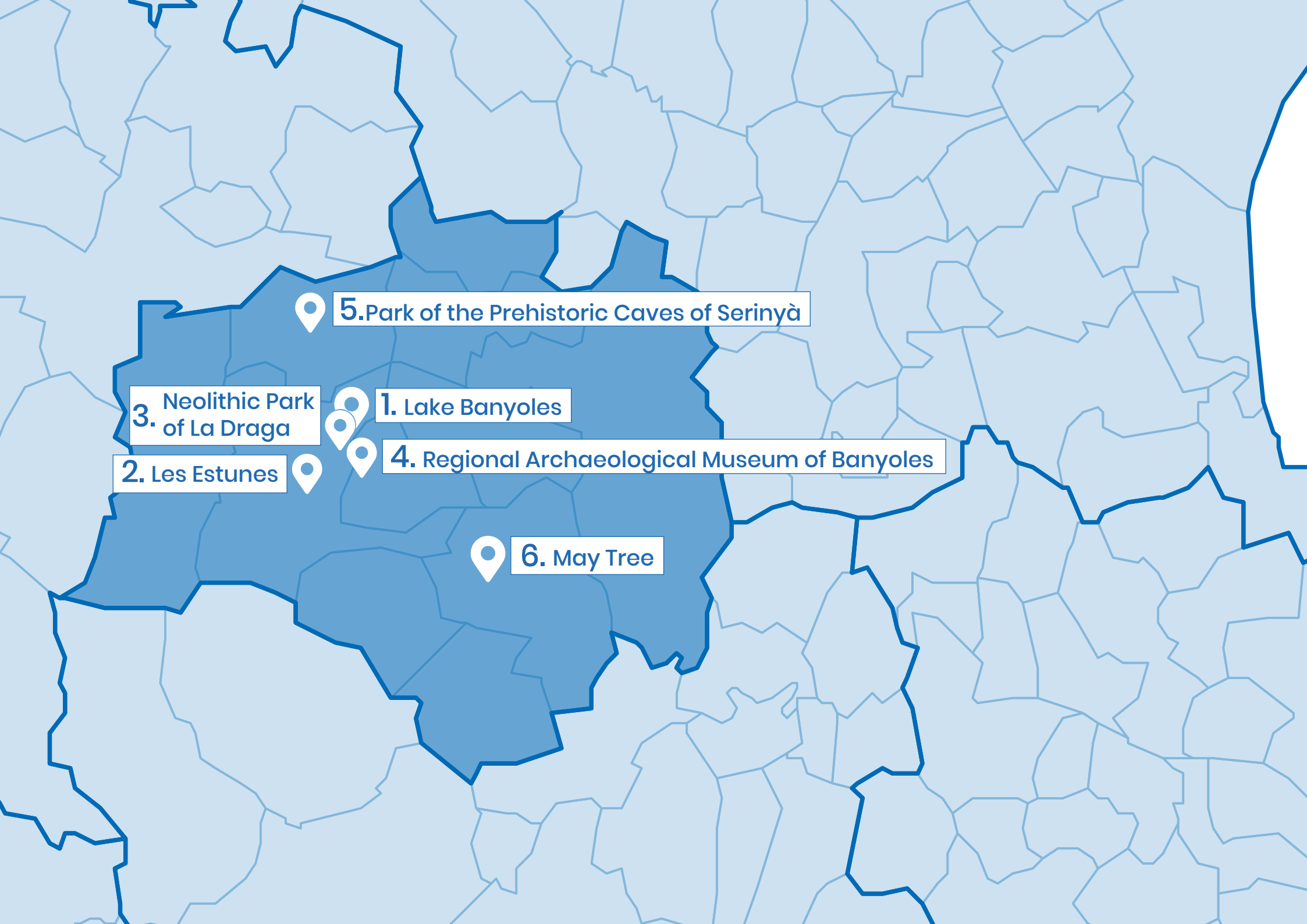
**Com lo fil era daurat,  
les madeixes eren rosses,  
hermosos cabells del sol  
encastats de boira en boira.**

**De les Estunes al fons  
lo teixien quatre aloges,  
llur teler és de cristall,  
d'evori la llançadora.  
Veu's aquí el vel que han teixit  
tot exprés per una boda.**

**Poema Canigó, Jacint  
Verdaguer.1886**

## **THE GREAT ROUTE OF PLA DE L'ESTANY**

The young comarca of Pla de l'Estany, founded in 1988, is the third smallest in Catalonia (262.78 km<sup>2</sup>), after Barcelonès and Garraf. As everyone knows, however, the best things come in small packages. Despite its small size, it offers HUGE treasures for you to discover. A record-setting lake, LARGE cracks caused by earthquakes, trees that touch the sky, prehistoric caves, BIG mammals from the past, unique archaeological sites and a landscape that will take your breath away. Welcome to Pla de l'Estany.



5. Park of the Prehistoric Caves of Serinyà

3. Neolithic Park of La Draga

1. Lake Banyoles

2. Les Estunes

4. Regional Archaeological Museum of Banyoles

6. May Tree

# 1. Lake Banyoles



We begin with the star and hallmark of the region, Lake Banyoles. It is the **BIGGEST** natural lake in Catalonia and its entire water system forms the set of karst lakes with the **LARGEST** area in the Iberian Peninsula. Lake Banyoles isn't just important for its natural value; it's also an element that has defined the culture and society of the area. Its banks contain remains of archaeological sites, such as the Neolithic village of Draga and the Iberian Castle of Porqueres, and at the time, its resources were used for food (fishing) and to manufacture utensils (wicker). It has also been a source of inspiration for writers, poets, painters and many popular legends, such as the Dragon of Banyoles, fairies (called goges here) of the Estunes and the legend of Morgat, which fancifully explained how the lake was formed. The reality is that the water comes from Alta Garrotxa, an area popularly known as the "urinal" of Catalonia. The water from the streams penetrates the chalky material in the area and forms an aquifer (underground river) that, when it reaches Banyoles, encounters a fault of impermeable materials and rises toward the surface, dissolving the gypsum and limestone and creating cavities. These cavities collapse when there is a drought, forming basins - the **DEEPEST** one reaches 130 m. If you look closely, you'll notice that the lake is shaped like an 8, caused by six cavities that collapsed and turned into basins.

Here's a tip for you: although scientifically it makes more sense to call it lake, don't even think of calling it that! If you want to blend in with the locals, always say "estanque [pond] de Banyoles", which is in fact its official name.

The lake can be enjoyed from many locations, but we suggest going to Puig de Sant Martí, an old convent that was demolished during the War of Independence and is surrounded by a field of olive trees. From there you can take in great panoramic views not only of the pond, but of the Pyrenees, to the north in the background, with the Canigó massif, or of the more nearby mountains, such as Virgen del Monte. If you look south, you'll see Baix Empordà and the great forests of Les Gavarres. To the west, the Transversal mountain range.



## 2. Les Estunes



Upon arriving at Les Estunes, you have to do a little mental exercise. This whole area was under water thousands of years ago. Those conditions created large deposits of travertine, known as Banyoles stone, highly valued by sculptors and artisans and seen in many of the houses in the old part of Banyoles. As a consequence of prehistoric earthquakes, LARGE cracks were opened up in these rocks, forming caves and passages that, in some cases, became galleries 30 metres long. This exercise of the imagination complete, you have to return to reality and watch where you step, since the danger exists of falling into one of these cracks. If you want, you can visit one of the galleries on foot. The first part is quite simple; the second, which goes from the opening of the oak (photograph) to the final stretch, is not suitable for people with claustrophobia! Once outside, you can enjoy the forest vegetation, different varieties of oak trees up to 20 metres high that make for a beautiful landscape.

The legend says that Les Estunes was home to women of the water, fairies, called goges or aloges, who were extraordinarily beautiful and refined. In these stone "palaces" they held parties and feasts and, using an invisible thread, wove a net that kept out the curious. Only those who wished never to return to the world of mortals could enter. Just to be clear, nothing that we have written in this paragraph has been scientifically proven. 😊





### 3. Neolithic Park of La Draga

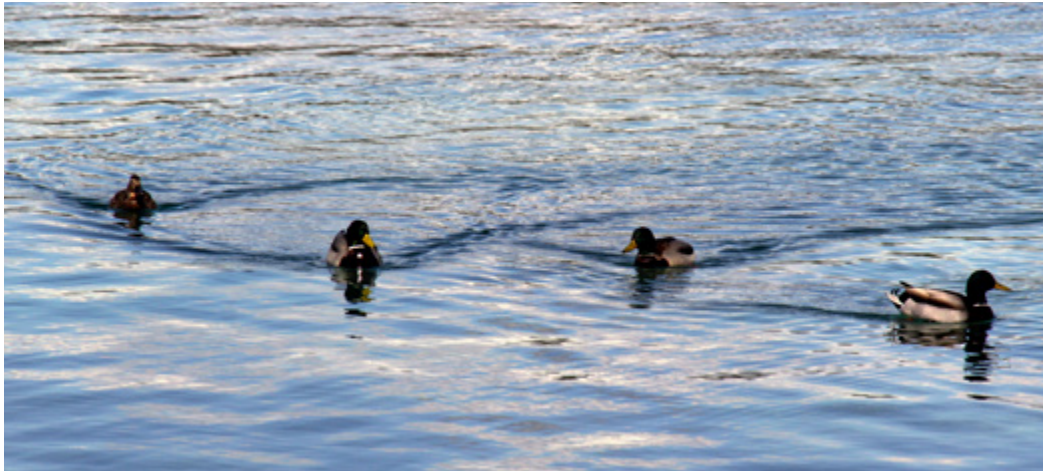


Taking in the lake from the mountain of Sant Martíria is very nice, but you'll no doubt want to see it more closely. If you want to go up to the water's edge, we recommend going to the park of La Draga, the LARGEST green zone in the city. The park has extensive grassy areas with native tree species, such as alders and poplars, and paths to enjoy this great outdoor space. The design of the park, with a drainage system of flooded water basins, was intended to control the lake water when it rises. This system also allows wetland vegetation to grow naturally in suitable areas.

This beautiful space contains the next point on this route, the Neolithic Park of La Draga. It is the only lakeshore settlement on the Spanish mainland, and it's over 7,000 years old. It was discovered in 1990 as a result of landscaping work done in the La Draga Park. Since then, archaeological digs have been carried out both on land and in the underwater area, where the old Neolithic beach was. The huts were located in the lower part of the village, near the lake, while in the highest part, separated from the low part by a palisade, were the granaries, community homes and waste pits. The extraordinarily well-preserved site at La Draga has allowed scientists to study the LARGEST collection of seed and fruit remains from the entire Neolithic period on the Iberian Peninsula (about 400,000 samples). This important find

provided the basis for understanding the agriculture practiced by the inhabitants of the village and what fruits they gathered.

The park currently has an oval barn and two rectangular huts, one at ground level and the other semi-elevated, that seek to reproduce, on a natural scale, the archaeologically known features at this unique site of the ancient Neolithic Cardial culture. To educate the public, a reception bungalow and a classroom have been installed, as well as an archery tunnel. During your visit to the park of La Draga, you can go inside the reconstructed prehistoric huts and learn about the everyday life of Neolithic farmers and ranchers, discovering what they ate, what they hunted, what they cultivated, what utensils and tools they used, and more. Information on the hours of operation is available here.



## 4. Regional Archaeological Museum of Banyoles



The Regional Archaeological Museum of Banyoles, known as Pia Almoina, is one of those museums that is worth visiting just to see the beautiful building. The museum guide explains that we are in a Gothic palace that originally housed a secular charity dedicated to handing out bread and clothing to the village's poor families. In the early 14th century, the seat of the University or Town Council (what is now the Town Hall) was set up here, where it remained until 1928, when it was moved to its current location.

Every room in the museum is of great interest, but to stay with the thread of this OVERSIZED route, we recommend visiting the palaeontology room. There you will find items from LARGE mammals that inhabited Pla de l'Estany, such as large rhinoceroses, ancient elephants, hippos, deer, mastodons, sabre-toothed tigers and large hyenas. One of the star pieces is the skull of a GREAT feline, *Homotherium latidens*, the sabre-toothed tiger of Incarcàl (Crespiano) from 1.3 million years BC. It features enormous canine teeth, a characteristic of this species. The digs at Incarcàl have provided one of the best collections of fauna from that time, long before the first humans occupied the caves in Serinyà.



## 5. Park of the Prehistoric Caves of Serinyà



“This park is the best site in Western Europe to understand how Neanderthals gave way to modern man”. Impressive, right? The guide will explain that because the caves are grottos (shallow cavity in a cliff or in the rocky slope of a mountain), this allowed particles from the outside (dust, organic matter, etc.) to enter and accumulate over time, leading to the BEST Palaeolithic layering in southern Europe. The metres of strata “arrange” the remains from the oldest (bottom) to the most modern (top).

Throughout the Palaeolithic period, it was used as a shelter by animals, by Neanderthal man and by modern man. It’s thought to have been used as a burial site during the Neolithic. We won’t explain the entire history of these fascinating caves. Let’s just say that after visiting them, your opinion of how “primitive” those humans were will surely change.

The remains of LARGE mammals such as mammoths, woolly rhinos, musk oxen and many horses have been found in these caves. In fact, the remains of some animals help us understand the geographical distribution of the animals during the ice age, as they looked for more moderate temperatures in order to survive.

There is also a fine sampling of prehistoric objects such as teeth, collars, cutting tools and more from the Serinyà caves on display in the Regional Archaeological Museum of Banyoles. The Serinyà caves also offer workshops on archery, flint cutting and tooling, and you can even learn to make a fire.

For more information on the hours of operation, see [here](#).



## 6. May Tree



If you're on the highway that connects Girona with Banyoles, we recommend stopping in the town of Cornellà del Terri. Right in the Plaza del Mayo you'll see something that will catch your attention right away. A tree so tall that it towers over the buildings around it. The tree, known as the May tree, is the hub of celebrations for the local festival. Rites involving trees abound in different parts of the world, especially in ancient times, as people venerate the splendour of vegetation and the power of trees as the source of fertility on Earth. On Good Friday, a group of people from the village go looking for the TALLEST tree in the vicinity, which will usually be a poplar or black poplar (trees of the *populus* genus. Trivia: in the September 2006 issue of the journal *Science*, the Joint Genome Institute announced that the genome of a tree had been sequenced for the first time, specifically, the species *Populus trichocarpa*.) Once the tree is chosen, it's cut down, nicely pruned and taken to the square to replace the previous year's tree.

The May tree is on display year-round in the square, but if you're lucky enough to be there on Easter Monday at noon, you'll see how the residents, dressed in traditional Catalan attire, crown the tree with the top of a pine tree and decorate the trunk with animal antlers and horns. Once decorated, they use long ropes to raise it into the place where it will stand until it is replaced by the new May tree the following year. This festival is said to symbolically mark the final arrival of spring and the beginning of a new cycle (the raising of the May tree), with primitive celebrations of the preeminent divinity of fertility and procreation, the goat that impregnates flocks and cattle, whose presence is symbolised by the horns.



