



## Montserrat Rack Railway

The Tren de Montserrat, as the rack railway between Monistrol and Montserrat was known, has been in existence since the 19th century. It was originally built to meet the need for improved access for worshippers and pilgrims to the Montserrat sanctuary. The traditional way up Montserrat mountain had been on foot or horseback along the Collbató or Santa Cecília paths, from 1698 onwards turned into a road. It was not until the second half of the 19th century that an alternative and much quicker access way was inaugurated. This was the wide gauge line operated by Ferrocarrils del Nord to Monistrol-Montserrat station. From there, the company built a road (1858-59) that reached the monastery by dint of a stiff 14-kilometre climb following the line of the old bridle path. This made it possible for a stagecoach service to do the journey in three and a half hours, stopping to give respite to horses and travelers alike at the Font dels Monjos.

The lack of a permanent means of transport and an increase in the number of visitors led Joaquim Carrera, engineer and admirer of both Montserrat and Swiss mountain trains, to persuade local businessman Josep M. González to build a rack railway that would link Monistrol station with the monastery. In 1881 the company Ferrocarriles de Montaña a Grandes Pendientes was constituted for the purpose. The rack railway was inaugurated on 6 October 1892, and it soon became the most popular railway in Catalonia, taking its place among the country's most prized traditions. Its popularity was enhanced by the many processions - some 200 per year in its heyday - that used it on their way up to Montserrat. The train was an improvement on the stagecoaches of the day in several respects: it could carry more passengers, more frequently, and in a shorter time. It cut the journey time between Monistrol station and the monastery to a mere one hour five minutes.

But the greatest novelty for the time was that the rack railway and its link with the Ferrocarrils del Nord meant that the return journey between Barcelona and Montserrat could be accomplished in a single day. The railway also had a dynamising effect on the economy of the surrounding area. In Monistrol an entire district -Viserta- prospered and grew in its shadow. The twenties were the rack railway's golden age. But it was not until 1947, during celebrations for the enthronement of the Mare de Deu, that it was to carry its highest number of passengers: a total of almost 274,000. Throughout the first half of the rack railway's life it was being constantly expanded. However, in 1931 the operating company suffered its first financial setback, which also left its mark on the railway line. In the years that followed including the period of the war, the railway had its ups and downs until a serious accident on 25 July 1953 signaled the start of its decline. The line was eventually closed for good on 12 May 1957.



## The dream of the new rack railway

The old Montserrat rack railway made its last journey in 1957, but the dream of seeing it back in action one day was never lost. During the 1980s this desire, coupled with the increase in visitors and consequent congestion of vehicles in the natural park area, led the Generalitat's Transport Authority and the FGC to commission various studies and alternatives with a view to resolving the problem. This culminated in 1991 with the drawing up of a project that would form the basis of the current railway. The project was presented in 1999 and then updated and adapted in 2000 following two serious inundations in June of that year.

In July 2001 work began on the new rack railway, which already had five trains earmarked for the service. Finally, on 11 June 2003, the new rack railway was opened. With this the dream of recovering this means of transport, kept alive since its closure back in 1957, came true at last. The Montserrat rack railway, the second in Catalonia (after the Vall de Núria), with its state-of-the-art facilities and technology, is light years away from that first steam train, which chugged its way up to the monastery in 1892.