

The *Enxeneta*

By Jonathan Dykes

My name is Montse, I'm nineteen years old, and I'm from Barcelona, which is the capital of Catalonia. I live in a flat with my mother and father, my grandmother, and my brother, Jordi, who is sixteen years old. We live in a district called Gracia, which is in the north of the city, but not too far from the centre. Gracia has a lot of narrow streets, lots of shops and bars, and a few large squares. A long time ago Gracia was a separate village, but it is now part of the city.

All my family come from Gracia and we have always lived here. My grandmother was also born here. Not in the same house, but in the same street where we live.

My grandmother's name is Montse as well. Montse is the short way of saying Montserrat. It's a very popular girls' name in Catalonia. There is an island in the Caribbean Sea called Montserrat, but the name comes from a mountain in the south of Catalonia that is a very special place. The mountain of Montserrat looks very strange. If you translate the name into English it means 'sawn mountain' and if you see a picture of the mountain, you will understand why.

There is a very old monastery on Montserrat that is very famous. Inside the monastery there is a small, but famous statue of the virgin Mary that is made from wood. It's a very famous because it is black. Lots of people go to the monastery to see the statue. I have been twice. Once before my accident and once afterwards.

I am going to tell you about my accident, but before I do, I need to tell you about the Catalan tradition we call '*Castellers*'.

A '*castell*' is a castle, or tower, that is made by people standing on the shoulders of other people. The people who build these towers are called '*Castellers*'.

This is a very old tradition in Catalonia. No-one knows exactly when the tradition started but people say the first competitions between teams of *Castellers* was more than two hundred years ago.

The towers are made in different ways. Sometimes there are just one or two people on each level, but sometimes there are three, four or five people on each level. The towers can be seven, eight, nine or even ten levels high. So they can be very high. Often more than twelve metres.

The people at the bottom of the tower are always the strongest men in the team. They have to be very strong as they have to support the weight of all the other people in the tower. The next level is also made of strong men, but they are not as heavy as the men at the bottom. The next level is also made of men who are not as heavy as the ones below them, and the size and the weight of the people in each level gets smaller and lighter as the tower goes up.

All the people in the tower have to wear special shirts and trousers and waist bands that are made of strong material. The men at the bottom level wear shoes, but all the other people in the team have bare feet. Bare feet help the *Castellers* climb and stand on the shoulders of the people below them.

When everyone is ready, the team leader gives a signal and the team's band begin to play traditional *Casteller* music. As the band plays, the *Castellers* start to climb onto the shoulders of their team mates, one level at a time. When the men in the second level have climbed onto the shoulders of the first level and the tower looks strong, the team leader tells the next level to begin to climb. Slowly, one level at a time, the tower goes higher and higher into the sky. Of course sometimes the towers fall down, but the *Castellers* don't usually hurt themselves as there is always a lot of people around the bottom of the tower waiting to catch them. This crowd of people is called the *pinya* and it is very important. The people in the *pinya* also help make the tower strong. Sometimes there is a second level on top of the *pinya* to help keep the tower strong. This is called a *folre*.

The top three levels of the tower are always made by small children, who could be boys or girls. The *Enxaneta* is the name of the child at the very top of the tower. When the *Enxaneta* reaches the top, he or she puts one hand in the air and this is the signal that the tower is finished. With everyone cheering and clapping, the *Enxaneta* then begins to climb down the tower, followed by the children on the next level, and level by level the tower comes down.

Climbing down is just as difficult as climbing up and sometimes the towers fall down at this point. That is what happened to me.

When I was seven years old, I was the *Enxaneta* of the Gracia team of *Castellers*. My father was a *Casteller* when he was young, and he taught me how to climb. I was a bit nervous the first time I was the *Enxaneta*, but I didn't fall down and our team won the competition. After that I never felt nervous again. I climbed up and down so quickly, the team leader called me his little monkey.

Then one day I was climbing down the tower and I was nearly at the bottom when two of the boys in the tower fell on top of me. I don't remember what happened next, but my father took me to hospital and the doctors discovered I had two broken bones in my neck. After that I had to wear a special neck brace for nearly three months.

I'm fine now. The truth is I was lucky. Some people who break their neck have to spend the rest of their lives in a wheelchair.

When I was better I really wanted to be the *Enxaneta* again but my mother said no, it was too dangerous. My father said I was just unlucky, but he didn't want to argue with my mother.

So now I just watch my team and cheer and clap when I see the *Enxaneta* put her hand in the air.

If you would like to watch some *Castellers*, here is a good video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1HWyUIZ5kk>

In 2010 UNESCO added the *Castells* to the list of Humanities Cultural Heritage.

L'*Enxaneta* is also the name of the first mini satellite that the Catalan government launched in 2021.