

Travel

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‘Over three days I see only one person being inked in the ship’s tattoo parlour’

Ben Clatworthy sets sail on Virgin’s new Scarlet Lady

GETTY IMAGES

The fishing village of Cudillero



Spain’s sensational north

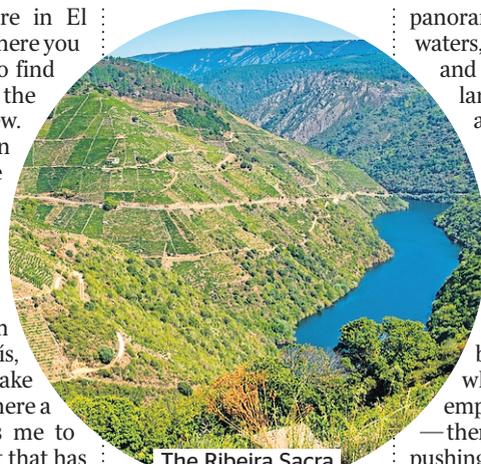
A trip to Asturias and Galicia offers scenic drama, wide, empty beaches and food that should be more celebrated.
By **Helen Ochyra**

Between the Atlantic coast and the Picos de Europa mountains, deepest Asturias is a place that few know. But it is one that rewards those who linger with wildflowers, eucalyptus forests and the dreamy clang of cowbells in a distant field.

I am walking a loop around El Gran Sueño (“the big dream”), my B&B for the next two nights, and have borrowed Carson, a Brittany spaniel belonging to the owners, Dave and Javi, who swapped Brighton in East Sussex for this bucolic life. Carson has spent the morning haring off across meadows and along sheep tracks before returning panting with excitement, as though desperate to tell me of the joys that lie ahead in this part of Spain.

“Sleepy” doesn’t cover it here in El Caspiu. This is the sort of place where you arrive with plans aplenty only to find you can’t rouse yourself from the terrace — and the astounding view. But rouse you must because on your doorstep is one of the country’s most dramatic landscapes, the Picos de Europa, a dense mountain range designated as Spain’s first national park in 1918.

It’s only a 35-minute drive from El Gran Sueño to Cangas de Onís, the park’s entry point. I reach Lake Ercina around lunchtime. From here a short walk up the ridge brings me to Mirador Entrelagos, a high point that has me spinning around, trying to take in a



The Ribeira Sacra wine region

panorama that packs in glittering placid waters, razor-edged snow-capped peaks and bizarrely British-looking grassland. I unwrap my sandwich and sit and stare.

It’s not just the mountains that El Gran Sueño gives easy access to. The coast is also a short drive away, and the next day I make for the Atlantic — and a beach that is undoubtedly one of Spain’s best. Playa de Rodiles is a colossal swathe of golden sands that belongs to those who seek a wind-whipped dune to perch on and an empty expanse to wander. I join them — there are maybe six — in silent reverie, pushing my toes into sand made glossy by the retreating ocean.

The landscape around Lake Ercina



This coastline is known for its excellent seafood, so I leave the beach at lunchtime for Tazones and the seafront terrace of El Rompeolas. I take a seat and pin down the tablecloth with a menu and a glass of local cider — this is *sidra*, and it's taken very seriously indeed. The person pouring (the *escanciador*) is a sure-handed professional who will lift the bottle above their head as the liquid falls into your glass.

Filling up on food now seems wise, so I order the clams and the prawns before moving on to the fish of the day. This is hake (in Asturias it most often is) and has a texture so buttery that it falls apart under my fork. Asturias isn't known for its food — but it should be.

I am heavy-hearted leaving my Asturian home from home the next day, but I'm pushing on westwards, to a seafood lunch in the fishing village of Cudillero. Here terracotta roofs pattern the hillside and converge around the harbour, where restaurants tempt passing tourists with blackboards listing the catch of the day. I take a table on the waterside at La Taberna del Puerto and order grilled langoustines, clams and a dish of chorizo cooked in *sidra*.

I eat quickly because I have an appointment with a beach that has long been on my wish list. Playa de las Catedrales is just across the border in Galicia, and I time my journey to be sure that I am here at the lowest possible tide. It is only as the sea retreats that what appears to be just another sandy swimming spot emerges as one of Spain's most dramatic shorelines. Here cone-shaped arches march in formation, each one framing the next. The name of this beach couldn't be more appropriate — a nod to nature's divine architecture.

Back on the road I steer southwards and on to Casa da Cabaza, a rural B&B in an old farmhouse beside the Embalse de Vila-souto Lake. It is run by Siets and Tariq, who also swapped city life for a slower pace, buying the business in 2016. Two rivers, the Sil and the Miño, converge near by, forming the crux of the Ribeira Sacra wine region, and it is to here that I head first.

I board a boat at the Ponte do Sil and cruise along the river canyon, looking up the steep riverbanks at terraces crafted by human hands over the course of 2,000 years. The Romans started it, but in more recent decades the vines

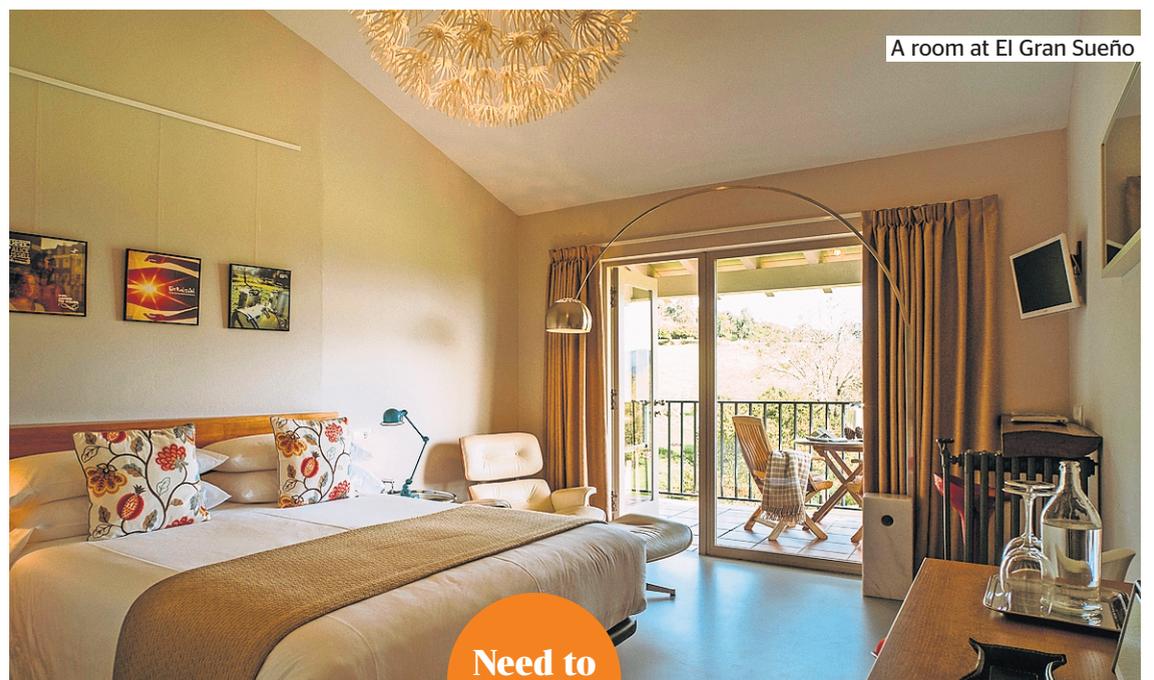
reds, and on quantity over quality. There has been a renaissance in the past 20 years, though, and local grapes such as godello and mencia are flourishing.

From the boat we can see the vines of Adegas Algueira, my venue for lunch and a tasting that spans several grape varieties. The diversity is enticing, and the godello blended with Galicia's albariño matches my octopus beautifully. Wines from here are expensive — those vines are all picked by hand — but worth it.

The rivers make for fertile land, and back at Casa da Cabaza, Siets cooks a dinner of vegetable lasagne made with produce from the garden and tempts me with cheeses from their neighbour, José, along with homebaked sourdough and honey — everything here is hyper-local, and vegetarian too.

On my final day in Galicia I go eastwards and upwards, into the Serra do Courel, a mountain range only slightly lower than the Picos but less well known outside Spain. It is spectacular — and so quiet. I swing the car around hairpin bends on precipitous slopes that reach up through purple heather to a clear blue sky.

After pulling over I find a short, steep path leading upwards amid the peaks. A lung-busting few minutes' walk brings me



A room at El Gran Sueño

Need to know

to Castro da Torre — its series of squat, slate walls all that remains of a Roman village built for goldminers in the 1st century. I sit a while on what I imagine would once have been somebody's front step and watch lizards darting past.

The Courel mountains are home to Galicia's last brown bears, but the wildlife I encounter is somewhat smaller. I follow neon-yellow butterflies through the woods at the River Lor, picking my way along a rocky path to reach a tiny freshwater beach. In Seceda I find lambs

Helen Ochyra was a guest of Further Afield. Three nights' B&B for two with a three-course dinner at El Gran Sueño from £380 and three nights' B&B for two with a tapas dinner at Casa da Cabaza from £220 (furtherafield.com). Fly to Asturias

bleating in a stable — the only sound to pierce the silence of this old village. But it is on the drive back that I have the best wildlife encounter of the week.

Pulling the car around yet another tight corner, I am dreamily contemplating what might be for dinner when a bobbing white bottom catches my attention; as quick as a flash it moves upwards, vaulting up the hillside — a roe deer. It stops and turns back to face me with the same exultant look that Carson had given me just a few days before.

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The best breaks in northern Spain

From hiking the Camino to a tour of the winelands

Gourmet Galicia

You won't go hungry on this nine-day, self-drive food lover's tour of Galicia. Starting in A Coruña (try the *pulpo a feira*), you will visit Santiago de Compostela, where bars offer free tapas; Cambados (home of albariño and Spain's best scallops); Baiona (tuna empanadas); Vigo (lunch at the fish market); and Rias Baixas for a drink. You'll also explore the Caribbean-like Islas Cies, and you should remember this phrase: "*Non me colle nin unha cereixa.*" It means: "I haven't the room for even a cherry." It will come in handy.

Details Five nights' half-board and three nights' B&B from £1,260pp, including flights and car hire (wexas.com)

Cantabrian coast

Turn right off the CA131 opposite the cheese factory in Cobreces and a narrow, wooded lane brings you to Playa de Luaña, a wedge of sheltered sand between two grassy headlands, split by a wide stream. It's as exquisite an example of the Cantabrian coast as you could hope to find, and there's a cracking little hotel here called El Refugio. Run by the Gutierrez family since the late 1960s, it has a fabulous chef, an ambitious cocktail menu and a museum dedicated to the dramatic 1874 shipwreck of the *Suomi*, the remains of which were discovered by the hotel owner, Andrés, in 1984.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £625pp, including ferry crossings, departing on September 9, (brittany-ferries.co.uk)

Hike the Camino

King Alfonso the Chaste of Asturias could be regarded as the father of Spanish tourism. Born in Oviedo in AD760, he is reputed to have been the first pilgrim to visit Spain's first



The Old Town district of Bilbao

tourist attraction, the shrine of St James in Santiago de Compostela. This year is a propitious time to follow in Alfonso's footsteps; 2021 is a jubilee year, so all those completing the pilgrimage receive a plenary indulgence, wiping clean the slate of sin. It's not such a good year for sleeping in the crowded albergues that line the various caminos, so if you're up for a 12-day, 147-mile walk from Salas to the shrine, covering up to 22 miles a day, treat yourself to a hotel every night and luggage transfers.

Details Twelve nights' B&B from £1,040pp, including three dinners (onfootholidays.co.uk). Fly to Santiago de Compostela and take the bus to Salas (alsa.com)

Northern Spain road trip

Most of the treasures of España Verde are on offer on this relaxed two-week road trip from Bilbao to Santiago. There's the art of the Guggenheim and the cuisine of the Basque country, the coastal scenery of Cantabria, hiking in the Picos de Europa, cider in Asturias, and plenty of time to enjoy the wine and seafood of Galicia. Spending two or three nights in each of six regional hotels, you end up in Santiago de Compostela. There will be no indulgence because you drove here, but there will have been plenty en route.

Details Fourteen nights' B&B from £1,100pp, including car hire or ferry crossings if bringing your own vehicle (caminos.co.uk)

Cantabrian coast by bike

This gentle, seven-day family bike trip along the Costa

Cantabrica takes you on country lanes, back roads and traffic-free cycle tracks, riding no more than 14 miles a day on a 58-mile trip from Santander to Ribadesella. The short distances allow plenty of time out of the saddle – maybe swimming at the Playa de Poo, having a surf lesson at Naves, or exploring the fairytale scenery of the Camin Encantau (Enchanted Path) in Llanes. If you can extend by a night, head inland to Arriondas, rent kayaks and paddle the last nine miles of the gorgeous Rio Sella to where it goes tidal at Llovio.

Details Six nights' B&B from £1,517pp, including bike hire, departing in the Easter holidays (skedaddle.com). Fly to Santander

Inn to inn through the Picos

October is the best time to be in the limestone wonderland of the Picos de Europa National Park. Days are still warm, the leaves are turning and, on weekdays at least, you often have the trails to yourself. This seven-night inn-to-inn walking holiday starts in the Posada Casa Lamadrid in Cahecho in Cantabria with views to the west of the summits of the Picos. You'll walk between nine and thirteen miles a day via medieval Potes, the magical Liebana Valley, the meadows of Aliva and, on day seven, the dramatic Cares Gorge.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,250pp, including some lunches and dinners, maps and GPS, luggage transfers and 160 per cent carbon mitigation (pura-aventura.com). Fly to Bilbao or sail with Brittany Ferries

Historic hotel in Santiago de Compostela

The Hostal dos Reis Catolicos is the world's oldest continuously operating hotel. Opened in 1499, next to the cathedral in one of the grandest plazas on earth, it served as hostel and hospital for the pilgrims

coming to the shrine of St James. In 1954 General Franco – a big fan of the Camino de Santiago – included the Hostal in the state-owned Paradores portfolio and it now operates as a five-star hotel. Standard rates for what is effectively a night at the museum start at about £300 B&B, but if you use the Cinco Noches promotion, a couple can have five nights' B&B at any combination of paradores outside peak seasons for a bargain £102 a night. Combine three nights in Santiago with two at the ultramodern Parador Costa da Morte, overlooking the Praia de Lourido. Tip: to unlock availability, book each night separately.

Details Five nights' B&B from £510pp (paradoresofspain.com). Fly to Santiago de Compostela

Basque immersion

You cannot truly explore the Basque country without an insider to guide you through this mysterious, private society. Georgina Howard is that insider. She has lived among the farming community of Navarre's remote Baztan Valley for 20 years. Her guided walking weeks, hiking eight miles or so a day, are part cultural immersion, exploring the festivals, traditions and pagan practices of her neighbours, and part adventure holiday, hiking a thrilling network of mountain paths. Part house party too, with local gastronomy and music. With just five bedrooms on offer, the weeks fill fast.

Details Seven nights' all-inclusive from £1,275pp, departing on September 13 or 29 (pyreaneanexperience.com). Fly to San Sebastian

Wolf watching in Palencia

Wolf-tracking trips often amount to little more than a fleeting glimpse or a paw print in the snow, but Naturetrek claims an 80 per cent success rate on this trip to spot Europe's apex predator. The Iberian wolf is established in 17 localities across Spain, but the northern cluster of the Saja-Besaya and Fuentes Carrionas natural parks and the Picos de Europa National Park offer the best chances of an encounter. That said, you need persistence, patience and stealth – and a commitment to predawn starts and long days in the field. Your base is a trio of farm cottages in the heart of the park.

Details Four nights' full board from £1,095pp, including flights, departing on October 20 or November 18 (naturetrek.co.uk)

Tour the winelands of Rioja and Ribera

Get acquainted with graciano, garnacha, mazueta, malvasia and tempranillo on a short but intensive tour of the winelands of La Rioja and the Ribera del Duero. Over five days your guide will take you to seven wineries, including Casado Morales on the Ebro and Pago de Carraovejas in Peñafiel. You will taste at least 25 wines, take a tapas tour and lunch on *lechazo asado* – the roasted Castilian suckling lamb best paired, as it happens, with a tempranillo from Ribera del Duero. Accommodation is in the boutique winery Finca de los Arandinos and the riverside Convento las Claras in Peñafiel.

Details Four nights' B&B from £1,799pp, including two lunches and one dinner, tours and flights (grapeescapes.net) **Chris Haslam**

The town of Carmona in Cantabria

