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fork in the road

For hundreds of years, pilgrims have walked the Way of St James in search of grace – now, the BBC's Andrew Graham-Dixon heads to Spain's rugged north in search of culinary enlightenment

WORDS ANDREW GRAHAM-DIXON | PHOTOGRAPHS MATT MUNRO

Tracks winding their way through the rugged greenery of the Picos de Europa mountains



FOR more than a thousand years the wildly beautiful Spanish north was a fabled and sacred land, a focal point of European Christendom. Over the centuries, millions of Christian pilgrims have traversed the harsh landscape of Asturias and Galicia, driven by a sense of holy mission to Santiago de Compostela and the tomb and shrine of the apostle St James.

El Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St James, has never been one route but a web of interconnecting pathways and mule tracks criss-crossing northern Spain, running through its more mountainous areas and along its jagged coastline – but always with a common destination of Santiago de Compostela. In the past, the most devout pilgrims would choose the most challenging route; mountain tracks were particularly favoured because they were held to literally take the traveller closer to God.

I have come to follow in their footsteps, but with a different purpose: mine is to be no arduous spiritual odyssey, instead a pilgrimage devoted to the pleasures of the northern Spanish kitchen and of the terrain from which its dishes originate. What I am really after, I suppose, is a taste of history: the cuisine of the mountains has changed little over the centuries, so here you walk the ancient pilgrims' trail and also eat much the same food as they would have done.

Locals claim that the territory of Asturias is the one and only true Spain, since it was the only part of the country that resisted

Moorish occupation after the Islamic conquest of the eighth century. The bastion of its long-guarded independence is the mountain range known as Picos de Europa (the Peaks of Europe), a vast natural barrier sheltering the region from the south. Its peaks once guarded Asturias from the forces of Abd al-Rahman and his descendants, powerful invaders from Damascus whose rule stopped short of this inaccessible and remote area. Nowadays, the Picos form one of Europe's most unspoiled natural parks; this was in fact Spain's very first nature reserve, established in 1918 and modelled on Yellowstone National Park.

At the foot of the range, by the little village of Poncebos, I begin a three-hour ascent of the gorge along a narrow scree trail that winds vertiginously up its eastern flank. This takes me to Bulnes, a ramshackle village that was once a simple shepherds' hamlet but now contains a handful of sidrerías (cider houses) set by the banks of the river. At these modest establishments I do the rounds, sampling different dishes (a sidrería crawl) to recuperate from the first stage of my pilgrimage.

First comes *cecina de buey* – thin slices of smoked ox, a little like Italian *bresaola* but with a resinous aftertaste – followed by a hearty dark stew laced with bitter green kale and tender chunks of gamey, almost-black meat – stewed *cabrito* (kid goat), no less. Next is a plate of probably Spain's most famous blue cheese, *cabrales*. To soften its pungent assault, it is served with a dollop of thick mountain honey. The Spanish often

marry cheese to something sweet. 'Miel y queso sabe a beso', as the saying goes: 'Honey and cheese taste like a kiss'.

Having washed down the food with lashings of the local cider – flat, cloudy, with an appley tang and deceptive kick – I walk back down the mountain. On the lower slopes, three elderly gentlemen are sharing a large floppy skin full of red wine. They offer me a slug or two for the road – it's rather like trying to drink from a set of bagpipes. We wander together back towards Poncebos.

To the west is Covadonga, the deathplace of a Visigoth king named Pelagius whose forces, according to legend, once repelled a Moorish army of 40,000. The mountain cave containing his remains, perched directly above a waterfall, is still a popular pilgrimage site for Spanish Catholics. From here, a lift along dizzily winding roads takes me up, and up, to the Lagos de Covadonga, two lakes set in one of the most beautiful plains of the entire range. Thanks to the proximity of the Atlantic, the weather is less settled here than in much of mainland Spain – hence the startling greenness of the grass. On a fine day, this part of the Picos is captivatingly peaceful, a succession of vast open plains, roamed only by sheep and *cabritos*. The skies feel huge; for hours I don't see a soul.

Some 20 miles north of the lakes along narrow and circuitous roads is El Molin de Mingo, said to be one of the best restaurants in Asturias. A converted mill and farmhouse in the foothills of the mountains and surrounded by thick woodland, it feels ►

A hearty bowl of fabada Asturiana, which includes pork, beans and sausage. CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT El Molin de Mingo co-owner Dulce Blanco Díaz enjoying a glass of wine; a traditional mountain hut; sweetcorn drying; a snoozing cat



Lake Enol, one of the Lakes of Covadonga as seen from La Picota, in the Picos De Europa



NORTHERN SPAIN

The beach of Playa del Silencio, just outside Cudillero, is never busy, due to the fact it's not easy to access



‘Locals claim the territory of Asturias is the one and only true Spain’

tucked away from the rest of the world. If not for the rows of expensive cars parked in the paddock next door, it would be impossible to guess that it is a restaurant.

The principles of the place are simple: produce from local organic farms, cooked according to strictly traditional recipes. Historically, the region's food was designed to sustain the working men throughout a hard day's toil. The modern reincarnation is a series of dense, powerful dishes – all the flavours of the Asturian countryside gathered on a plate. Molin's speciality is arguably the finest dish in all Asturian cuisine: a monumentally fortifying bowl of beans, pork, black pudding and sausage known as *fabada Asturiana*.

Most of the great 'poor' cuisines of Europe have a dish based on this combination of ingredients – in France, the *cassoulet* of Carcassonne is the most famous example – but a perfectly prepared *fabada* outdoes them all. Slabs of slow-cooked ham, cubes of pork fat, chunks of smoky aromatic chorizo and crumbling wedges of *morcilla* – Spanish blood sausage – float in a rich soup of white beans flavoured with paprika and saffron. It is overwhelmingly good and quite possibly the most quintessentially macho plate of food available to mankind.

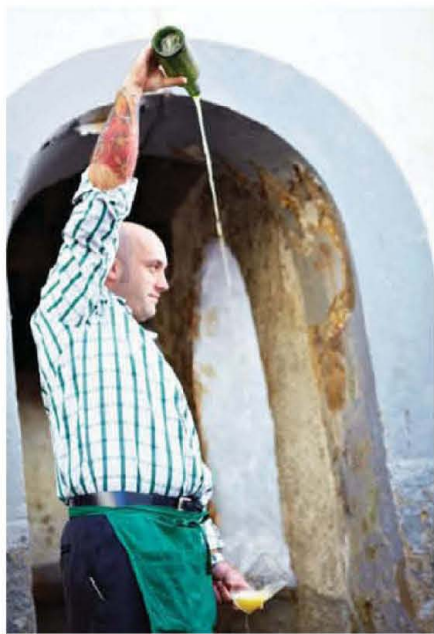
What sets *fabada* apart from all other bean dishes I have tried is the quality of the beans themselves. The local *fabes de la granja* (farm beans) are hard to grow and the best command a premium – so much so that top-quality *fabes* commonly cost more, pound for pound, than steak. 'If you find them in a shop and they cost less than 12 euros a kilo, they are probably not worth having,' Dulce advises, standing over a pan of stew in the restaurant's kitchen.

THE Atlantic fringe of Asturias is a world away from the mountains and pastures of the Picos. This too is a wild, demanding environment, a place where you feel instantly in touch with raw, pure nature. Here, the rhythms of life are dominated by the rhythms of the sea. The small fishing village of Cudillero is literally shaped by the power ▶

Looking over the cascade of red roofs in the fishing village of Cudillero. BELOW El Remo's Lolo Martinez pouring Asturian cider



‘Here, the rhythms of life are dominated by the rhythms of the sea’



of the ocean, with its dense cluster of brightly painted fishermen's cottages piled up on the steep horseshoe of a natural bay. Cudillero looks like an amphitheatre and has the acoustic properties of one, too. There is a narrow street at the upper end of a village called Calle del Sussurro (murmur alley); it is said that a person up here can hear everything that happens in town. ‘If a wife thinks her husband is having an affair, she can stand here and if she listens hard enough she will hear him whispering to his lover!’ laughs Maruja, a doughty octogenarian who has lived in the village all her life. ‘When I was younger, I used to carry the butane gas cylinders for our stove all the way up here from the bay: more than two hundred steps,’ remembers Maruja. ‘No wonder I feel tired now!’

Cudillero has been hit hard by reductions in European fishing quotas. The people here understand that something had to be done, but they give the impression that they are still reeling from the consequences. ‘The seas were nearly exhausted,’ says my young guide, Hugo. ‘Twenty years ago, there were 500 fishermen in work here. Now there are only 130. Once it was all trawling here, now there are no more nets. There is a premium for line-caught fish: hake, monkfish, tuna. It's better for the sea,’ he says. ‘The future for Cudillero lies not just in fishing, but fishing

and tourism. Gradually people are beginning to come. It is such a pretty place and the seafood is fantastic.’

There have been changes to the fabric of the village, as well as the villagers' lives. A new harbour has been carved out a few hundred metres along the coast, which has made space for a host of new bars and restaurants. Cudillero still feels rough around the edges, a place caught between the regrets of the old generation and the hopes of the new. Several of its grander houses, built when a man could still harvest riches from the sea, are boarded up. But there is space for Hugo's optimism, and the food certainly lives up to its billing. Off the main square is a little family-run restaurant, El Remo. An energetic young man, Lolo Martinez, runs the place while his brothers and sisters wait tables and his mother and father, Churre and Manolo, do the cooking. The produce might come from the sea but the approach is the same as in the Asturian mountains: fresh ingredients prepared in a no-nonsense way. I eat steamed clams on the half-shell with a lemon and chunks of perfectly succulent chargrilled baby squid. Tiny scallops, also cooked on the half-shell, are a revelation: sweet and soft, bathed in oil and garlic with flecks of parsley. It's after midnight when the meal finishes, and Churre and Manolo join me for a coffee. ►

Evaristo, a fisherman of Cudillero.
CLOCKWISE, FROM RIGHT
Asturian cider; children jumping
into the sea in Cudillero's
harbour; colourful buildings in
Cudillero's main square; a plate
of scallops at El Remo; fishing
boats in Cudillero harbour





‘Scallops are everywhere: even on the drain covers and fire hydrants’

Manolo, now in his 60s, used to cook and wash up for the crew on a huge Spanish trawler. ‘We would be away for ten days, sometimes two weeks, and in rough seas, the waves were as tall as mountains,’ he remembers. The restaurant is bursting at the seams and business is clearly booming, but a part of Manolo wishes he was still out at sea, cooking for the fishermen in his tiny ship’s galley. ‘When the sea is in your blood, you never forget it,’ he says softly.

The coastal road west from Asturias takes me to the Galician town of Santiago de Compostela. The main town is prosperous and conservative, like many cities where the principal business is religion. Even today, many thousands of Christian pilgrims flock here from all corners of the world, and the town has been shaped as if in expectation of their arrival. Its monasteries – of which there are many – were built with extra dormitories to accommodate the annual

influx of worshippers at the shrine of St James. Several have now been converted into modern, anything-but-monastic hotels. There are still statues, smaller shrines and waymarkers at many of the street corners, arranged almost like signposts pointing the way to the still-venerated tomb of St James himself.

The shops are tailored to matronly Catholic tastes, selling pretty porcelain tea sets and acres of lace. At O Dezaseis, a traditional Galician restaurant with wood-beamed ceilings and exposed plaster walls, they cook scallops in tribute to St James, whose time-honoured symbol is the scallop shell. No-one knows for sure why this is so; the sceptical 16th-century humanist Erasmus believed it was simply because the nearby sea teemed with scallops, making their shells cheap and cheerful souvenirs of a visit to the town. Whatever the origin of the custom, once upon a time, every pilgrim to Santiago de Compostela would leave with a scallop shell affixed, like a badge of honour, to his or her hat. Scallops are still found everywhere in Santiago: modelled in the local jetstone, they are sold as pendants in tourist shops across the city; they even decorate the city’s drain covers and fire hydrants. They are almost as ubiquitous as the famous tarta de Santiago – a formidably sweet almond tart, with a cross dusted on it in icing sugar.

On the outskirts of town is the Fogar do Santiso. It’s not so much a restaurant as a

sequence of shacks and yards, with tables and chairs laid out in haphazard fashion on a patch of stony ground. The food emerges from the humming den of the kitchen almost as soon as it has been ordered. I eat fat rings of crisp deep-fried squid and griddled circles of octopus tentacles – rings of soft white meat fringed by the dark purple bumps of the creature’s suckers – anointed by good oil, tart lemon juice and thick crystals of coarse sea salt. Next comes a mound of spare ribs, drizzled with honey, and a plate with a rainbow of fresh, grilled vegetables, grown in the organic kitchen gardens that tumble improbably down the suburban hillside on which the whole place is so implausibly perched.

The meal cost next to nothing. The thought occurs that if St James were to come back to Earth with the rest of the apostles – poor men, after all – this is probably the kind of inn they would seek out. This humble and unpretentious meal seems like a distillation of my whole journey through Asturias and Galicia. It strikes me that this is a corner of Spain where, at its best, the land and food exist in harmony with one another – a place where the simplest pleasures are always the best. **LP**

BBC FOUR

Art critic **Andrew Graham-Dixon** has presented six BBC series, including studies of the art of Britain, Germany and Spain. His next, *Art in America*, comes to BBC Four this autumn.

A typical tarta de Santiago.
OPPOSITE Walking sticks
adorned with the town's
famous scallop shells;
visitors outside Santiago
de Compostela Cathedral



MAKE IT HAPPEN

NORTHERN SPAIN



Follow in the well-worn footsteps of medieval pilgrims, explore the harsh, wildly beautiful landscapes of Asturias and Galicia, and sample the culinary alchemy of the northern Spanish kitchen



Dominic Jacques and Sophie Lucet outside Santiago de Compostela Cathedral after completing their pilgrimage

ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Direct flights from Stansted to Bilbao are operated by easyJet (from £50; easyjet.com) and Iberia (from £150; iberia.com). There is also a ferry from Portsmouth to Bilbao (from £757 for two with a small car; 24-32 hours; brittanyferries.com).

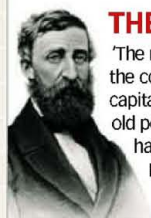
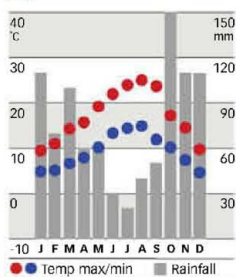
Getting around

The fastest, most flexible way to travel is by hire car from Hertz or easyCar (from £150 per week; hertz.es, easycar.com). ALSA has countrywide bus routes (Madrid to Santander from £30; alsa.es) while trains are best for long hops (Madrid to Santander from £40; renfe.es).

Further reading

Read Lonely Planet's *Spain* guide (£16.99). The Galician Tourist Board website (turgalicia.es) is an encyclopedic visitors' reference.

Climate



THE FINAL WORD

'The nearest beach... was on the coast of Galicia, whose capital is Santiago, though by old poets' reckoning it should have been Atlantis or the Hesperides.' **Henry David Thoreau, 1906**

9 STEPS TO DISCOVERING NORTHERN SPAIN...



1 For kayaking (left), canyoning, climbing courses, speleology (cave study and exploration), hiking and horseriding within the Picos de Europa mountain range, try **SOMO AVENTURA**, located around 27 miles east of Bulnes in La Hermida. It also arranges guided walks from Bulnes (walks from £15 for 2-8 hours; somoaventura.com).

4 Seven miles east of here, eat at the secluded **EL MOLIN DE MINGO**, located in an old mill overlooking mountain panoramas and surrounded by forest, a river and animals. Here, you'll find a small menu of local cheeses, roasted goat, pork, cheesecake and other Asturian specialities served in hearty portions (dishes from £6; 00 34 985 922 263).



7 Around 160 miles west of Cudillero, the **SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA CATHEDRAL** (left) is a frenzy of moss-covered spires and statues that was conceived as a small city of stone (Praza do Obradoiro; catedraldesantiago.es). For a soaring and unforgettable view of the city, take a tour up the cathedral's rooftop (£8; santiagoturismo.com).

2 Some 30 miles west of Bulnes, there are two marked circuit walks from two lakes that make up the **LAKES OF COVADONGA**: the itinerario corto (about an hour) and itinerario largo (or PR-PNPE 2; 2½ hours) take in the lakes, Pedro Pidal Visitors' Centre for information on walks, and an old mine (Centro de Visitantes Pedro Pidal; 10am-6pm; asturiasguide.com).



3 Heading northwest, stay in a former priest's farmhouse, the 19th-century **HOTEL POSADA DEL VALLE**, built on a rocky outcrop with wraparound views of the Picos de Europa, the Ponga mountain range and the limestone massif Sierra del Sueve. Plus, learn the secrets of local cookery at its workshops (from £60, courses from £140; posadadelvalle.com).

6 Cudillero's former lonja, or fish market, now houses a small fishing museum, **LOS PIXUETOS Y LA MAR** (90p; Plaza de la Marina; cudillero.org). Continuing the fishy theme, **SIDRERIA EL REMO** serves up paella fit for an occasion plus the traditional local cider, poured from arm's length (left) to give it some fizz (dishes from £4; sidriaelremo.com).

8 Next to Santiago's cathedral is the **MUSEO DE CATEDRAL** (£4; catedraldesantiago.es), which includes tapestries embroidered from designs by Goya. Meanwhile, weary pilgrims will no doubt welcome a stay next door at the elegant **HOTEL HOSTAL DOS REIS CATALICOS** (from £245; paradores-spain.com/spain/pscompostela.html).

9 Feed your secular soul at the **CIDADE DA CULTURA** (cidadedacultura.org), the partially completed cultural centre designed by American architect Peter Eisenman. For more traditional Galician flavours, with tapas dishes and main courses including tender octopus and razor clams, there's the cavellike **O DEZASEIS** restaurant (mains from £10; dezaseis.com).

THE WAY OF ST JAMES - THE BASICS

According to legend, St James (Santiago in Spanish), one of the 12 apostles, lies buried in Santiago de Compostela. The city came to prominence in the Middle Ages, when it became the destination for one of three Catholic pilgrimages, along with Jerusalem and Rome, through which all sins could be forgiven.

However, after the 13th century, the plague, political unrest and, later, the Reformation and Spanish Civil War meant that the Way of St James became less and less travelled. Since the 1980s, there has been a resurgence of interest in these

three routes as people became fascinated by the combination of heritage, spirituality and landscape, and in 1987 the Camino Francés (French Way) route was declared the first European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe and later named a Unesco World Heritage Centre.

These days, around 150,000 people complete the pilgrimage every year – these numbers almost doubled in 2010, a Holy Year. About 80 per cent of pilgrims arrive by the Camino Francés,



which crosses the hills on the border of Castilla y León then lollops west for the final 96 miles through pea-green countryside. While just under half of pilgrims profess a solely religious purpose in completing the route, the rest view it as a cultural journey.

A web of pilgrimage routes converges in Santiago – a certificate of accomplishment given to pilgrims – you need to walk a minimum of 100km (62 miles); cyclists have to complete 200km (124 miles).

THE WAY OF ST JAMES - THE FACTS

Where should I start?

The most popular route is the 484-mile Camino Francés. The Via de la Plata (the Silver Road) is 621 miles, starting in Seville, and the challenging Northern Way runs along the coast for 513 miles. The Portuguese Road, starting in Porto, is 142 miles.

What level of fitness do I need?

A good level of fitness is advised. The pilgrimage doesn't have to be an endurance test, and many people complete short stretches. For most contemporary pilgrims, the first 15 miles of the Camino Francés, from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France to Roncesvalles in Spain, is one of the most extreme and beautiful sections.

How do I get an official certificate of the pilgrimage?

You have to walk or go on horseback for at least the last 62 miles or cycle for at least the last 124 miles of any of the routes, ending up in Santiago. You can obtain a 'credencial' (pilgrim's passport) at your starting point; this has to be certified along the way.

How long will it take?

To complete an entire route, covering 10-15 miles a day is a reasonable aim, but do factor in rest days.

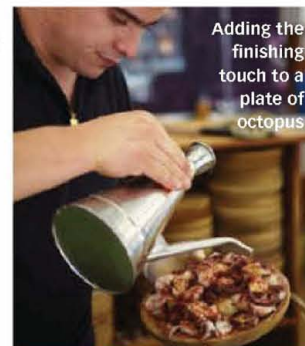
Vital equipment?

- A backpack (40kg maximum).
- Comfortable, broken-in walking boots, plus off-duty shoes.
- A water bottle.

- Sunglasses, sun hat and sunblock.
- First-aid kit.
- Sweat-wicking, anti-blister socks.
- A lightweight raincoat.

The best place for information?

The Confraternity of St James (csj.org.uk) is useful, as is the Peregrination to Santiago site (peregrinossantiago.es). Online forums include caminodesantiago.me.uk. John Brierly's guides include *Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino De Santiago* (£16.99; Findhorn Press). *Walking the Camino De Santiago: From St-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago De Compostela and on to Finisterre* by Benjamin Cole and Bethan Davis (£14; Pili Pala Press) is also excellent.



Adding the finishing touch to a plate of octopus

3 OF THE BEST TOUR OPERATORS

WALKS IN SPAIN offers a luxurious approach, with accommodation ranging from a boutique hotel dating back to the 18th century to Galician palaces and a converted 13th-century monastery in Santiago, with stops to sample cuisine such as Galician speciality pulpo a la gallega – octopus cooked in large copper kettles. Eight-day tours include airport transfers, accommodation, guides, most meals, and minibuses in case you don't feel like walking (from £995; walksinSpain.com).

FOLLOW THE CAMINO

specialises in walking, cycling and horse riding on the Camino de Santiago and can customise tours to individual requirements. They offer self-guided tours on many routes to Santiago, each divided into sections. For example, section one of the French Way, from Saint Jean Pied de Port to Pamplona, takes five days along 69 miles, and costs £280. Prices include half-board accommodation, luggage transfer, notes, maps and the credential pilgrim's passport (followthecamino.com).

EXPLORE offers a range of guided trips along the Camino de Santiago. These include a 12-day tour from Bilbao to Santiago, which involves driving and walking for the first six days and then walking only for the final six days, allowing you to complete the requisite distance for your pilgrim's passport. Packages include flights, guides and most meals, with accommodation mainly in basic, one-star hotels (£1,294; explore.co.uk).



Mountain cows by one of the Lakes of Covadonga in Asturias



*Return home
with a stranger: you



www.spain.info

