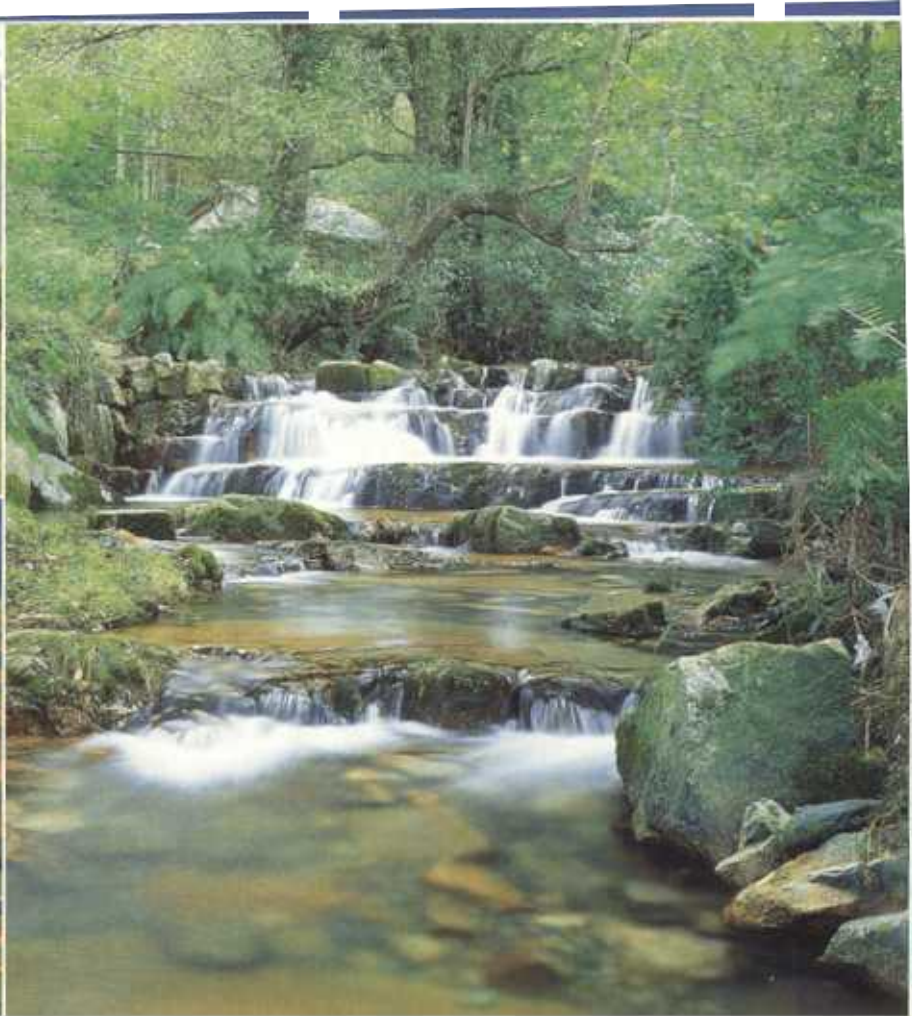


IBERIAN

HIGHLANDS: no, it's not Scotland, it's Spain. Clockwise from right, Asturian mountain cattle above Covadonga; waterfalls in the forests near Luarca; the Navia Valley



are great trawlers, drink draught cider, play the bagpipes and have their own version of Breton pancakes called *frixuelos*. And, like the Galicians of northwestern Spain, they fortify themselves against the rain with hearty stews of pork and beans, and a few garlicky chunks of blood sausage thrown in for good measure.

Highways and byways

Away from the coast, Asturias quickly becomes mountainous, a vertical Normandy, flowing with cream and cider and salmon rivers. On a clear day, it is said, you can pick out the snows gleaming on the Asturian mountaintops from 200km out to sea. For mariners returning from South America in the age of the conquistadors, these lofty summits were their first sight of home. Hence their name: the Picos de Europa.

Behind the Picos hides the rest of Spain, brown and dusty, leaning towards Africa; but Asturias, on the seaward side, is painted in a thousand shades of green, a second Switzerland, with its alpine pastures and echoing cowbells. Yet to think of this massif as an Iberian version of the Bernese Oberland is to do it less than justice, for the Picos are unique, and there is nowhere left in the Alps that is half as wild or unspoilt.

It was here that Christianity made its last stand against the Moors in the eighth century, and finally emerged victorious under King Pelayo. Today, these remote mountains form the core of Spain's biggest national park and, once again, they are a vital stronghold – this time for some of Europe's rarest wild creatures. Packs of wolves and even a handful of brown bears still haunt the Picos, along with chamois, eagles and griffon vultures.

My week began with a 12km walk into the heart of the Picos from Poncebos, the park's northern gateway. Limestone is the key to understanding these high-rise landscapes: limestone that has been shaped and weathered into fantastic steeples and silver-grey pinnacles that go rushing up into the sky. This whole area is riven by deep gorges, but by far the most spectacular is the one formed by the River Cares. The Asturians call it La Garganta – The Throat – and this was the route we followed. In the European super-league of gorges, it is the champion: a lime-

'Green Spain' – la Costa Verde – is as different from the rest of the country as Mallorca is from the Isle of Skye

stone chasm 1,000m deep. From below comes the constant roar of the river cascading from pool to jade-green pool.

High above, among the clouds and around the peaks and ridges, griffon vultures with a three-metre wingspan slowly circle in the updraughts. And somewhere between the sky and the river runs the path. To our left we passed the rocky track to Bulnes, perhaps the most inaccessible village in Europe, with Naranjo de Bulnes (2,519m) – the Spanish Matterhorn – soaring above it. Soon, Bulnes and its 30 or so inhabitants will be connected to the outside world by a mountain railway; until then, the only way in or out of the village is an arduous two-hour hike.

As we toiled on, I could see our route unrolling ahead across steep aprons of scree, diving now and again into short tunnels through the living rock. In places this walk is a real cliffhanger, with dizzy drops along the way; but the path – built 80 years ago – is safe and sound, and two metres wide. So far, the weather »

Asturias travel brief

Getting there: The nearest airport to the Picos de Europa with direct flights from the UK is at Oviedo in Asturias. Iberia (0845 8509000, www.iberia.com) flies from Gatwick, from £150. Alternatively, EasyJet (0870 600 0000, www.easyjet.com) flies from Stansted to Bilbao (about a two-hour drive from the national park) from £70 return. Car hire is available at the airport.

Tour operators: Inntravel's (01653 628811, www.inntravel.

co.uk) Asturian seven-night walk is £689pp half board, including dinners, five picnic lunches, flights, transfers, luggage transport, maps and route notes. Other operators include Waymark (01753 516477, www.waymark.holidays.co.uk), Naturetrek (01962 733051, www.naturetrek.co.uk) and Exodus (020 8675 5550, www.exodus.co.uk).

When to go: Walking is enjoyable from May through to

October, but the summer months are best. September is still warm and less busy and hotels are charging low-season rates.

Maps and guidebooks: *Walking in Spain* (Lonely Planet, £14.99) has a chapter on the Picos, with suggested routes, where to stay and eat, and recommended maps.

More information: Spanish Tourist Office (020 7486 8077, www.tourspain.co.uk).



VIEWS FROM THE EDGE: the fishing village of Llanes; top right, a typical Asturian hamlet in spring; right, the beach near Gijón; below, local farmers



With the walk over, there remained one final rite of passage: to bathe my feet in the cold Atlantic

had been kind; but it was too good to last. A sudden warning clap of thunder reminded me that this is where the rain in Spain mainly falls, and in seconds we were drenched. Luckily, warmth and hot coffee were available in the hamlet of Cain.

A warm welcome

Throughout the week we stayed in *casonas* – comfortable small country houses that provide B&B and an evening meal of traditional home cooking. *Casonas* are a uniquely Asturian invention. In style they range from converted farmhouses to *casas indianas* – handsome, turn-of-the-century mansions built with fortunes made in Latin America. None has more than 20 rooms, and every one is family run.

The *casona* where I stayed in Alevia had been a farmhouse for 500 years, and was the home of Gregorio Sanchez Benito. 'My wife was born here,' he said. 'When she was a girl, the ground floor was still occupied by cows and chickens. That is how we lived in those days.' But a few years ago, in an attempt to reverse the drift from the land, the authorities began to encourage rural tourism, and the old farmhouse became a *casona*. Now, their breakfast – eggs, bacon, freshly squeezed orange juice, jugs of coffee and bread straight from the village bakery, served with home-made blackberry-and-apple jam – has been voted the seventh best in Spain by the national daily *El Pats*.

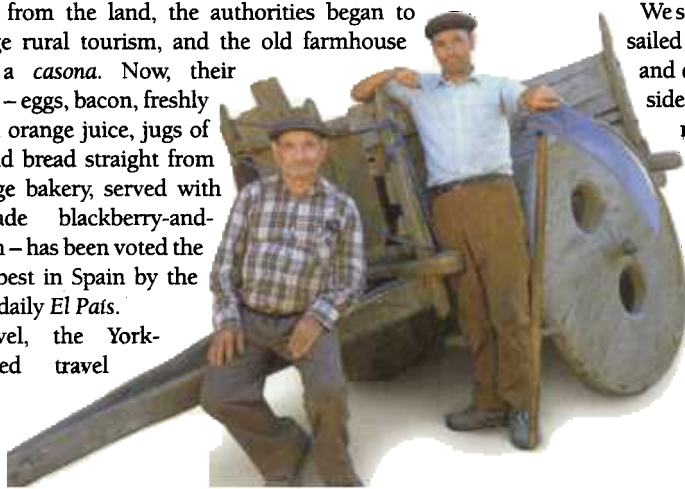
Inntravel, the Yorkshire-based travel

company that arranged my walk, had clearly done its homework, and wherever we stayed, the food was outstanding. Every evening we feasted on hearty suppers that usually began with mountain ham or shellfish soup, and ended with a choice of local cheeses, accompanied by oaky red rioja wines. After that first day's walk through the Cares Gorge, the rest of the week could have been an anticlimax. But our journey to the sea, through a gentler landscape of orchards and farm tracks, was the perfect counterpoint to the bare-boned grandeur of the Picos.

We wandered along winding country roads strewn with sweet chestnuts and fresh-fallen walnuts, with never a car to disturb the peaceful sounds of cowbells and trout streams. We climbed through mushroom-smelling woods to emerge on a heathery ridge where grayling butterflies lay aslant on the sunny paths. Behind us, bracken spilled in deep folds into the valley from which we had just come; and ahead I saw again the cliffs and coves of the Cantabrian coast and the immense blue arc of the Atlantic, but closer now.

We stopped to picnic on the ridge, while a pair of eagles sailed overhead – a thrilling reminder of the wildness and diversity to be found in Spain's timeless countryside. Then it was down through soft meadows and muddy lanes to our last night's lodgings. The walk

was over, but there remained one last rite of passage to complete. The sea was only a mile or so away at Llanes, with its colourful harbour and tall houses graced by glassed-in balconies. So to Llanes I went, to bathe my feet in the cold Atlantic, and celebrate our journey's end in a tapas bar, with a dish of grilled sardines and a glass of sharp Asturian cider. ●



PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, ROBERT HARRISON; ART DIRECTORS AND TRIP: WORLD PICTURES

intimate hotels in Asturias

Take it easy after traversing the great outdoors

Though walking is undoubtedly the best way to see the Asturian landscape, a holiday's not a holiday if it's all hard work. Check into one of the region's small and exclusive hotels or *casonas*, each waiting for you with a hearty meal and a freshly plumped bed.



LA CASONA D'ALEVIA, ALEVIA

This authentic *casona indiana* has been looked after brilliantly – ancient wooden doors remain intact, as do lots of lovely pieces of 16th-century furniture. Luckily, a steep, winding road dissuades other tourists from ascending to this tranquil spot, so you'll have the place to yourself.

How much? Doubles from £42 (00 34 985 414176).



EL BABU, CARAVIA

Much trendier than most *casonas*, the emphasis at Babu is on contemporary design working within an old property (18th-century). It has possibly the best views of any of the hotels featured, since it's perched high on a hilltop overlooking the sea. No pretentious prices, either.

How much? Doubles from £39 (00 34 985 853272).



CASONA DE LA PACA, CUDILLERO

It's hard to miss the deep red facade of Casona de la Paca as you drive through this rustic spot, minutes from the beach. The interior is just as striking – vast mahogany beds, high ceilings and mosaic floors. Grown-ups love this hotel, and kids will always fall for the pool.

How much? Doubles from £40 (00 34 985 591303).



TORRE DE VILLADEMOROS, CADAVEDO-VALDES

Recently restored to its former grand self, this 18th-century house overlooked by a medieval tower is unusual to say the least. The interior is all wooden floors and colourful modern decor; the exterior a piece of real Asturian history.

How much? Doubles from £35 (00 34 985 645264).

All of these hotels may be booked through Rusticae 'Small Hotels with Character' (00 34 902 103 892, www.rusticae.es).