

Cantabria & Asturias



Rolling meadows and cattle pasture, craggy hills, cider-drinking and bagpipes. It might be an advertisement for a composite of Ireland and Wales, but no, it is the flip side of the typical image of Spain. The verdant emerald strip (between Galicia to the west and the Basque Country to the east) formed by Cantabria and Asturias is as beautiful as it is surprising.

The two regions share a spectacular coastline along the Bay of Biscay, alternating between sheer cliffs, tiny coves, small fishing and resort towns, and scores of sandy beaches. Stone villages dot the roads leading inland towards the chain-mail wall of mountains that forms the regions' southern boundary, the Cordillera Cantábrica – beyond which the landscape changes with amazing abruptness to the parched plains of the *meseta* (tableland). The mountains reach their greatest heights and grandeur in the Picos de Europa, a northern spur of the cordillera straddling southeast Asturias, southwest Cantabria and the north of Castilla y León.

It's not just bucolic beauty that attracts people here. From the prehistoric art of Altamira to the medieval splendours of Santillana del Mar, the area is dotted with man-made gems. The big three cities of Santander, Oviedo and Gijón all offer plenty of sightseeing and nocturnal diversions in their restaurants and bars.

The only drawback to 'green Spain' is what makes it green: the rain. Even in August you might endure a week of grey skies and showers, especially inland.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Side up for cider poured in the convivial **sidrerías** (cider houses; p538) of Asturias
- Ignore the pong and savour the tangy **Cabrales cheese** (p535)
- Travel by train along the **Santander–Oviedo coastal corridor** (p895)
- Walk the **Garganta del Cares** (p558) in the Picos de Europa
- Let the medieval town of **Santillana del Mar** (p529) bewitch you with its charms
- Bathe at secluded **Playa del Silencio** (p548)
- Admire the ancient rock paintings at **Cueva de Altamira** (p532) and **Puente Viesgo** (p527)
- Take the plunge and canoe down the rapids of **Río Sella** (p555) near Ribadesella
- Marvel at the pre-Romanesque churches of **Oviedo** (p535)
- Admire a little Modernista madness in the buildings of Gaudí and Co at **Comillas** (p532)



■ AREA: 15,925 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP:
HIGH 22°C, LOW 14°C

■ POP: 1.66 MILLION

CANTABRIA

It is no wonder the Romans had a hard time subduing the Cantabrian tribes. The lushness of the vegetation belies the difficulty of much of Cantabria's terrain. Sliced up by deep mountain valleys dotted with the occasional settlement, the region remained until recently virtually untouched by the modern legions of visitors that flock to Spain each year.

It offers a little of everything for the traveler looking for an escape. Some pretty beaches make summer seaside days quite possible (unreliable weather permitting), while the inland valleys, sprinkled with quiet towns and villages, offer a feast of natural beauty for the eyes, whether you choose to drive the country roads or walk the trails. The rugged ranges culminate in the west in the abrupt mountainous walls of the Picos de Europa.

The capital, Santander, offers a slice of urban life with its bustling bodegas (wine cellars) and handful of sights. The towns of Santillana del Mar and Comillas entice with

their medieval and Modernista trappings. The remarkable cave paintings of the Cueva de Altamira, off limits to the public, can be admired in impressive replica form near the site.

Dotted around the region are more than 400 often beautifully restored country homes (which go by various names, such as *casas rurales* and *posadas*) to stay in. Check out www.turismocantabria.net, www.turismoru.ralcantabria.com or www.cantabrialural.com for listings. For camping grounds across the region, see www.campingsdecantabria.com (in Spanish). A good source of general information on the region is www.culturadecantabria.com (in Spanish).

The Romans, as reported, finally carried the day against the proud Cantabrians and pacified the area by around 19 BC. In more recent centuries, Cantabria was long regarded simply as a coastal extension of Castilla and as its direct gateway to what was confidently known as the Mar de Castilla (Castilian Sea). Cantabria became a separate region under Spain's 1978 constitution.

