

Cantabria & Asturias

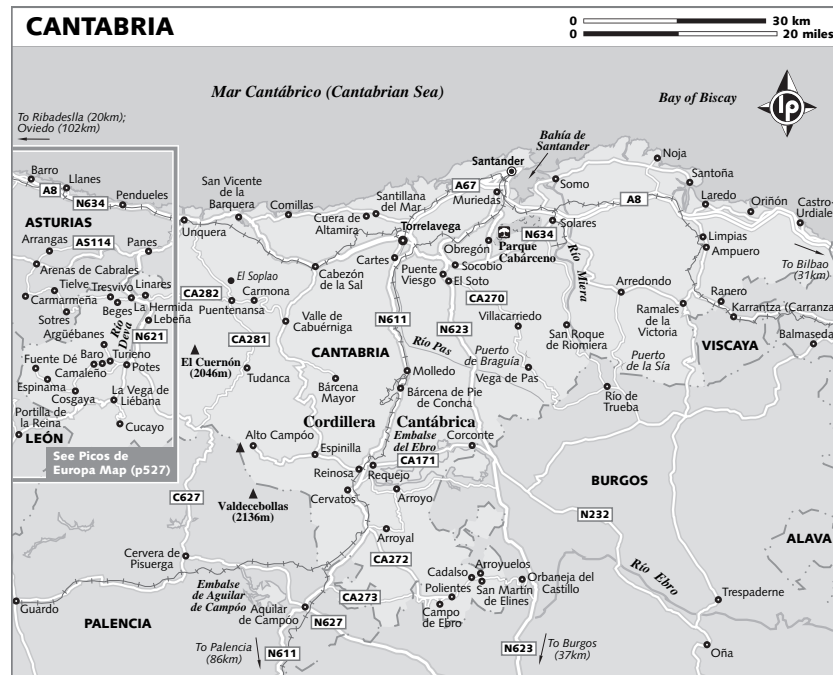


Rolling meadows and cattle pasture, craggy hills, cider-drinking and bagpipes. It might be an advertisement for a composite of Ireland and Wales, but no, it is the flip side of the typical image of Spain. The verdant emerald strip (between Galicia to the west and the Basque Country to the east) formed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



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 remains largely untouched by the modern legions of visitors that flock to Spain each year.

It offers a little of everything for the traveller looking for an escape. Some pretty beaches make summer seaside days quite possible (unreliable weather permitting), while the inland valleys, dotted with quiet towns and villages and *casas rurales* (country homes) to stay in (check out www.turismocantabria.net or www.cantabriarural.com), 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.

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.

SANTANDER

pop 183,950
Most of modern Santander, with its bustling centre, clanking port and shapeless suburbs, stands in drab contrast to its pretty beaches, particularly the old-world elegance of El Sardinero. A huge fire raged through the city in 1941, but what's left of the 'old' centre is a lively source of entertainment for the palate and liver, and has an atmosphere well

HIGHLIGHTS

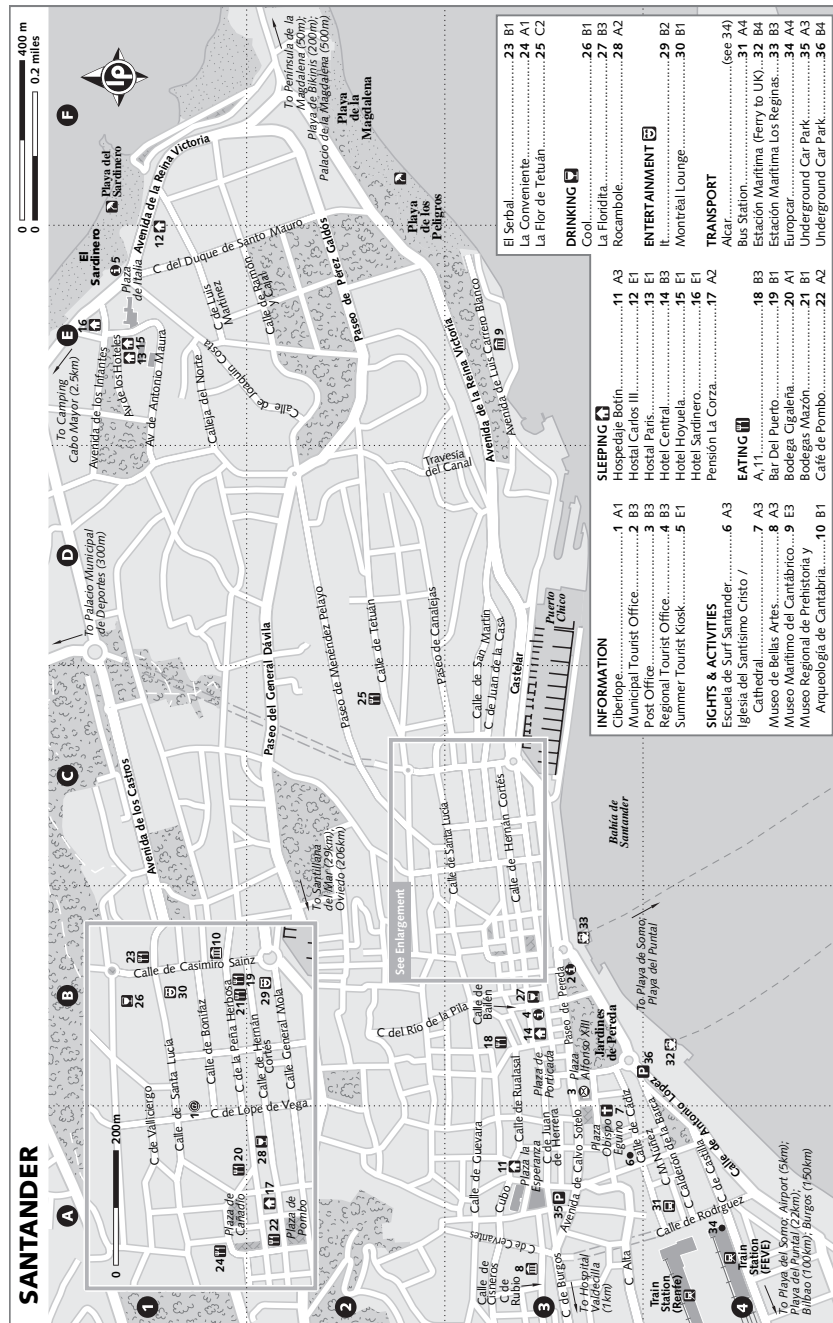
- Sidle up for cider poured in the convivial *sidrerías* (cider houses) of Asturias (p516)
- Ignore the pong and savour the tangy **Cabrales cheese** (see the boxed text, p534)
- Travel by train along the Santander–Oviedo coastal corridor
- Walk the **Garganta del Cares** (Cares Gorge; p533) in the Picos de Europa
- Let the medieval town of **Santillana del Mar** (p507) bewitch you with its charms
- Bathe at secluded **Playa del Silencio** (p524)
- Admire the ancient rock paintings at **Cueva de Altamira** (Altamira Cave; p509) and **Puente Viesgo** (p505)
- Take the plunge and canoe down the rapids of **Rio Sella** (p530) near Ribadesella
- Marvel at the pre-Romanesque churches of **Oviedo** (p512)
- Admire a little Modernista madness in the buildings of Gaudí and Co at **Comillas** (p509)



■ AREA: 15,925 SQ KM

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

■ POP: 1.64 MILLION



worth stopping to savour. All up, however, Santander is a good deal more staid than its resort cousin, San Sebastián (p465).

History

When the Romans landed here in 21 BC, they named the place Portus Victoriae (Victory Harbour) and, indeed, within two years they had vanquished the Cantabrian tribes that had given them such strife.

From that time Santander, as the city became known, led a modestly successful existence. Its heyday came rather late, when King Alfonso XIII made a habit of spending summer here in the 1900s. The locals were so pleased they gave him the Península de la Magdalena and built him a little palace there. Everyone who wanted to see and be seen converged on Santander, giving rise to a *belle époque* building boom – most evident around El Sardinero.

Orientation

The city stretches along the northern side of the handsome Bahía de Santander out to the Península de la Magdalena. North of the peninsula, Playa del Sardinero, the main beach, faces the open sea.

The ferry, train and bus stations are all within 100m of each other in the southwest part of the central district. A 10-minute walk northeast brings you to the heart of older Santander, then it's a half-hour stroll to the beaches. Most of the cheaper places to stay and many good restaurants and bars are in a compact area taking in the bus and train stations and the old quarter.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Ciberlope (Calle de Lope de Vega 14; per hr €2.20; 10.30am-midnight Mon-Fri, 11.30am-midnight Sat, 5pm-midnight Sun)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Valdecilla (% 942 20 25 20; Avenida de Valdecilla)

MONEY

Banks cluster in the newer part of central Santander around Avenida de Calvo Sotelo.

POST

Post office (Plaza Alfonso XIII; 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (% 942 20 30 00; www.ayto-santander.es in Spanish; Jardines de Pereda; 9am-9pm daily Jul & Aug, 8.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat Sep-Jun) A branch office in El Sardinero, opposite Plaza Italia, operates in summer.

Regional tourist office (% 901 11 11 12, 942 31 07 08; www.turismodecantabria.com in Spanish; Calle de Hernán Cortés 4; 9am-9pm Jul-Sep, 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Oct-Jun) Located inside the Mercado del Este.

Sights

The **cathedral** (Plaza del Obispo Equino; % 10am-1pm & 4.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Sat & Sun) is composed of two 13th-century Gothic churches, one above the other. The upper church, off which is a 14th-century cloister, was extensively rebuilt after the 1941 fire. In the lower **Iglesia del Santísimo Cristo** (Calle Somorrostro; 8am-1pm & 5-8pm) glass panels reveal excavated bits of Roman Santander under the floor. Displayed nearby are silver vessels containing the skulls of the early Christian martyrs San Emeterio and San Celedonio, Santander's patron saints. The care of these holy relics, found on this site, prompted the construction of the monastery that previously stood here.

Under one roof, the **Museo Regional de Prehistoria y Arqueología de Cantabria** (% 942 20 71 09; Calle de Casimiro Sainz 4; admission free; 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) brings together collections of prehistoric finds across the region, including some elements from the Cueva de Altamira. Among the highlights are copies of cave paintings and some Roman stellas, accompanied by interpretations of their texts.

Make a giant leap closer to our times with a visit to the **Museo de Bellas Artes** (% 942 20 31 20; Calle de Rubio 3; admission free; 10.15am-1pm & 5.30-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat), a sometimes fusty but eclectic art collection spanning the 16th to 20th centuries. Much of what's on show is secondary Spanish art (from about 1920 on the 1st floor, 1860-1920 on the 2nd floor and earlier stuff, mixed in with a few Flemish, Italian and French works, on the 3rd floor). You'll find the odd curio, such as Goya's portrait of King Fernando VII.

If seafaring is your thing, visit the **Museo Marítimo del Cantábrico** (% 942 27 49 62; www.museosdecantabria.com; Calle San Martín de Bajamar s/n; adult/senior, student & child 4-12yr €6/4; 10am-9.30pm Tue-Sun May-Sep, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr), near the bay beaches. The four-floor museum covers all facets of navigation in Cantabria, and includes an aquarium. The displays range from marine

biology to maritime history, which is perhaps the most interesting, dealing for example with Portus Victoriae (Victory Port), the Roman port town from which Santander later grew. The stuffed swordfish and starfish in bottles are perhaps less captivating, but the 60-tonne whale skeleton is a star attraction.

Architecture buffs will want to swing by the city's **Palacio Municipal de Deportes** (Calle del Alcalde Vega Lamera s/n), a sports pavilion with room for 6000 spectators that looks like something out of *Lost in Space*. The stainless-steel and glass coating has almost the air of something NASA might have cooked up. Designed by José Manuel Palau and Julián Franco and opened in 2003, locals think of it as a shiny beached whale.

The **Península de la Magdalena** (↷ 8am-8.30pm Oct-May, 8am-10pm Jun-Sep) parklands, crowned by the Palacio de la Magdalena, the former royal palace, are perfect for a stroll and popular with picnickers. Kids will enjoy the sea lions and the little train that choo-choos around the headland.

Activities

BEACHES & BOAT TRIPS

The beaches on the **Bahía de Santander** are more protected than Playa del Sardinero. The latter is a hike from the city centre, so catch bus 1, 2 or 3 from outside the post office. Playa del Puntal, a finger of sand jutting out from the eastern side of the bay roughly opposite Playa de la Magdalena, is idyllic on calm days (but beware the currents). Boats sail there every 30 minutes

between 10am and 8pm June to late September, from the Estación Marítima Los Reginas (€3.10 return). From the same boat station there are one-hour bay tours (€7) daily in summer (on weekends April to June) and a year-round passenger ferry to Somo (with another sandy beach), just beyond Playa del Puntal.

SURFING

Surfers emerge in force along El Sardinero when the waves are right. Playa de Somo, across the bay, can also be good. Three or four shops on Calle de Cádiz and Calle Méndez Núñez sell boards, wetsuits and other surfing gear. The **Escuela de Surf Santander** (☎ 669 48 80 15; www.escueladesurfsantander.com in Spanish; Calle de Cádiz 19) is a surf school (€50 for two hours' private tuition) with boards for rent (€6).

Walking Tour

The tour begins within the stately Plaza Porticada (1), which is surrounded by 64 porticoes. Proceed down past the post office to the cathedral (2; p501). Below it, amid a traffic circle, a poignant sculpture (3) recalls the devastation of the 1941 fire. To the east spread the lovely Jardines de Pereda (4), named after the Cantabrian

WALK FACTS

Start Plaza Porticada
Finish Palacio del Embarcadero
Distance 1.9km
Duration 45 minutes



writer José María de Pereda, whose seminal work, *Escenas Montañesas*, is illustrated in bronze and stone here. Opposite the park you'll see the 1950s Banco de Santander (5) building, one of the country's major financial institutions. Going through its grand archway you enter the old quarter. Proceed through the delightful Plaza de Pombo (6), turning north (left) at the far end to reach the lively Plaza de Cañadio (7), brimming with bars. Follow Calle de Daoiz y Velarde east, grabbing a few tapas along the way. At the end, you'll find the Museo Regional de Prehistoria y Arqueología de Cantabria (8; p501). Afterwards, head down to the Puerto Chico (Little Port), the marina. Beside it, standing on stilts in the bay, is the Real Club Marítimo (9), the surprisingly austere yacht club. Those boys you see diving into the bay after coins are actually another bit of public sculpture, Los Raqueros (10). Stroll the bay-front promenade west, noting on your right the row of opulent buildings with their glassed-in galleries, fruits of early-20th-century boom times. Finally, catch the ferry at the Palacio del Embarcadero (11), itself a gem, over to Somo for a seafood lunch.

Festivals & Events

Santander's big summer fiesta is the **Semana Grande**, a week of fun around 25 July. Right through summer, the Palacio de la Magdalena hosts the **Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo** (www.uimp.es in Spanish), a global get-together for specialists in all sorts of disciplines. The **Festival Internacional de Santander** is a sweeping musical review in August that covers everything from jazz to chamber music.

Sleeping

Loads of budget spots can be found around the train and bus stations. Down by fashionable Playa del Sardinero, the cheaper places tend to close during the low season. The pick of the middle and top-range digs are also down that way.

BUDGET

Camping Cabo Mayor (☎ 942 39 15 42; www.cabomayor.com; Avenida del Faro s/n; sites per 2 adults with tent & car €18.75; p s) This place is out towards the Cabo Mayor lighthouse, beyond Playa del Sardinero. Take bus 9 from Jardines de Pereda. Within easy reach of the beach, this 500-site camping ground provides a supermarket and laundry facilities. It's about a 300m walk to the beach.

Hospedaje Botín (☎ 942 21 00 94; www.hospedajebotin.com in Spanish; Calle de Isabel II No 1; s/d €40/52) The homy Botín has some spacious rooms with showers and galerías (glassed-in balconies).

Pensión La Corza (☎ 942 21 29 50; Calle de Hernán Cortés 25; r with washbasin/bathroom €42/55) The best deal around, La Corza is on pleasant Plaza de Pombo, with high-ceilinged, handsomely furnished rooms up on the 3rd floor, some with balconies overlooking the square.

MIDRANGE

Hostal Carlos III (☎ /fax 942 27 16 16; Avenida de la Reina Victoria 135; s/d €53/71; ↷ Easter-Oct) Frosted-glass fixtures and painted mouldings adorn this vintage (and somewhat worn), turreted structure. Some rooms are in the ugly front building but you will be rewarded with sea views.

Hotel Central (☎ 942 22 24 00; www.elcentral.com; Calle General Mola 5; s/d €82.40/127.35; a) A century-old hotel, the Central is what its name suggests, smack in the heart of the city. Rooms are spacious and originally decorated (eg steel blues in the colour scheme in some). Singles are smallish. Top-floor terrace rooms (€135) with unbeatable bay views are worth the extra.

Hostal Paris (☎ 942 27 23 50; www.hparis.net; Avenida de los Hoteles 6; s/d €86/112; p) This charmer in white (in bad need of a lick of paint!) boasts rooms dominated by the same colour theme. Otherwise they are quite different one from the other, but the overall effect is a lingering sensation of the late 19th century. Parquet floors, spare but elegant furnishings and, in some cases, nice architectural touches, such as the setting of the sleeping area in an alcove, make this an attractive choice.

Hotel Sardinero (☎ 942 27 11 00; www.gruposardinero.com; Plaza de Italia, El Sardinero 1; d €133.75-149.80) This grand old seaside hotel evokes the area's golden age. Rooms are a trifle small but pleasingly furnished, with high ceilings. Try for those with sea views. Single rates (€69.55) are available outside of August.

TOP END

Hotel Hoyuela (☎ 942 282628; www.gruposardinero.com; Avenida del Faro s/n; sites per 2 adults with tent & car €18.75; p s) Although new, the Hoyuela emanates the classic sense of Santander's golden seaside age and elegance. The cream décor and soft carpet make for soothing rooms. Downstairs is an equally elegant restaurant, and you're not far from the beach. Prices drop to as little €75 in the low season.

Eating

You can sit down for a few snacks in a tapas bar, quaff hearty local food in no-nonsense bodegas or opt for slightly upper-market dining in any number of restaurants. Santander's waterfront promenades brim with cafés.

BUDGET

Bodega Cigaleña (‰ 942 21 30 62; Calle de Daoiz y Velarde 19; pinchos from €2; ʘ Mon-Sat) A lovely and classic bar for tapas, wine and laughter, this is one of the best and most popular of its ilk in the old town.

Café de Pombo (‰ 942 22 32 24; Calle de Hernán Cortés 21) On the square of the same name, this is one of the city's most pleasant and elegant lingering breakfast stops.

Bodegas Mazón (‰ 942 21 57 52; Calle de Hernán Cortés 57; raciones €4-12; ʘ Thu-Tue) This cavernous wine cellar serves up varied *raciones* (large tapas) at a long timber bar. The selections are chalked on great lumbering vats and behind you are piled huge barrels of wine and sherry. Proceed out the back for a sit-down meal.

A,11 (‰ 942 07 43 62; Calle del Arrabal 11; tapas & raciones €4-12; ʘ Mon-Sat) Gourmet sophistication and big city-style bright lights have landed here, a respectful distance from the classic bodegas but packed to screaming point with locals after something a little different.

MIDRANGE

La Flor de Tetuán (‰ 942 21 83 53; Calle de Tetuán 25; meal €30-40; ʘ Mon-Sat) Anything from a salad filled with crayfish to a slab of catch of the day lightly grilled, this is a simple seafood delight.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Conveniente (‰ 942 21 28 87; Calle Gómez Orea 9; raciones €5-12; ʘ dinner only Mon-Sat) This cavernous bodega (wine cellar) has high stone walls, wooden pillars and beams, and more wine bottles than you may ever have seen in one place. Squeeze into the tram-like enclosure at the front or line up (locals queue with unlimited patience) for a seat out back (or just snack at the bar). A piano man tinkles on a raised gallery but the noisy bonhomie tends to leave him little hope of being heard. You might go for a cheese *tabla* (platter) or other classic *raciones* (large tapas). For something lighter, order *bocadillos*, little hot rolls with tasty fillings.

Most items are sold by weight and this is the best of a series of four seafood eateries on this strip.

Bar Del Puerto (‰ 942 21 30 01; Calle de Hernán Cortés 63; meal €35-45; ʘ daily Jun-Sep, Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun Oct-Apr) With its grand windows looking out over the waterfront of the Puerto Chico, this is the perfect spot for damn near perfect seafood. Your choice of critter will have a huge influence on the fiscal outlay.

TOP END

El Serbal (‰ 942 22 25 15; Calle de Andrés del Río 7; meal €40-50; ʘ Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun, closed Feb) Probably the best restaurant in town, this elegantly understated place (beneath a brick high-rise apartment block) offers the experience of modern, imaginative twists on essential typical northern Spanish food. Exquisitely prepared fish dishes star.

Drinking & Entertainment

Plaza de Cañadio is home to several *bares de copas*, where you can enjoy an outdoor beer in the evening. Calle de Santa Lucía, along with Calle del Río de la Pila and its immediate neighbourhood also team with bars of all descriptions. Most stay open until between 3am and 4am.

La Floridita (‰ 942 22 33 09; Calle de Bailén 4) A tropically themed nightclub attracting a broad age group, Floridita has a green luminous bar, big cocktails and wi-fi if you happen to have brought your laptop along.

Cool (Calle de San Emeterio 3) Despite the beyond-capacity crowds, this small hash-infused club stays pretty relaxed, with everyone getting their dose of funky music and sweet fumes.

Rocambole (‰ 942 36 49 61; Calle de Hernán Cortés 37; ʘ 10pm-5am) The action often goes on till dawn at this dimly lit, basement rock-music bar. It closes at 6am on Saturday and Sunday morning.

If you're after clubs, a couple of inner-city options that are similar to one another and attract a fairly young crowd are **It** (Calle del General Mola s/n; ʘ 1am-6.30am Thu-Sat) and the **grungier Montréal Lounge** (Calle de Santa Lucía; ʘ 1am-6.30am Thu-Sat).

Getting There & Away

AIR

The airport is about 5km south of town at Parayas. A handful of daily flights serve Madrid and Barcelona. Ryanair has flights here from London Stansted, Liverpool, Frankfurt (Hahn) and Rome (Ciampino).

BOAT

From Plymouth in the UK, **BrittanyFerries** (‰ UK 08703 665333, Spain 942 36 06 11; www.brittanyferries.co.uk) runs a twice-weekly car ferry to Santander (20½ hours) from mid-March to mid-November. Two people with a car pay return fares of up to UK€966, depending on the season, for a standard interior cabin.

BUS

From the **bus station** (‰ 942 21 19 95; www.santanadereabus.com), **Continental-Auto** runs at least six buses daily to/from Madrid (€24 to €32, five to 5½ hours), plus five or six to/from Burgos (€9.45 to €10, 2½ to 3½ hours). ALSA runs frequent buses to Bilbao (€6.05, 1½ hours) and at least six to San Sebastián (€11.70, three hours), Irún and the French border. ALSA also runs to Oviedo (€11.80 to €20.40, three hours), with most buses stopping in Llanes, but has only two daily to Arriondas and Ribadesella.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Heading west, take the A67 for Torrelavega for a quick getaway. The N623 to Burgos – a pretty route – is the main road south. All traffic heads out of the city along the south side of the train station.

Europcar (‰ 942 21 78 17) is inside the FEVE train station. Next door, local crowd **Alcar** (‰ 942 21 47 06) rents Fiat Pandas for €43 a day.

TRAIN

There are two train stations. Renfe has three trains daily to/from Madrid (€35.90 to €47.90, 5½ to 8¼ hours) via Palencia and Avila. Six trains also run daily to/from Reinosa, two of which continue on to Valladolid.

FEVE (‰ 942 20 95 22; www.feve.es in Spanish), next door, operates two trains daily to/from San Vicente de la Barquera, Llanes and Oviedo (€12.25, 4¾ hours) and three to/from Bilbao (€6.75, 2½ to three hours).

Getting Around

Santander buses cost €1 per ride. Purchase a 10-ride ticket for €5.30 at tobacco stands throughout the city.

AROUND SANTANDER

Puerto Viesgo & Around

pop 2350

The valley town of Puerto Viesgo, 25km south of Santander on the N623 towards Burgos, lies at the foot of the conical Monte Castillo.

About 1.5km up this mountain stretch the impressive **Cuevas del Castillo** (‰ 942 59 84 25; adult/child each cave €3/1.50; ʘ 10am-7.30pm May-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Wed-Sun Oct-Apr). The two caves on view here, El Castillo and La Moneda, contain a series of prehistoric wall paintings of various animals that are just as breathtaking as those at Cueva de Altamira (p509), but these are the genuine article rather than copies. In between the art, there's a labyrinth of stalactites and stalagmites in an astounding array of shapes. El Castillo has more paintings.

Visits to the caves are by guided tour only (in Spanish), departing every half-hour; the last tour is given an hour before closing. In summer it's mandatory to book a day ahead.

The town also has some local fame for the medicinal qualities of its baths and its salmon and trout farms. To pamper yourself, visit or stay at the **Gran Hotel Balneario** (‰ 942 59 80 61; www.balneariodepuenteviesgo.com; Calle de Manuel Pérez Mazo s/n; s/d €136.50/166; ʘ baths 8am-9pm; p a i), where you can indulge in all sorts of treatments, from a simple paddle in baths for an hour or two (€10 to €12) to mixed sessions of anything from shiatsu to specific treatments for backache or physiotherapy. Rooms are furnished in classic style, and many have balconies from which you can enjoy the verdant country views.

Seven buses run to Puente Viesgo from Santander Monday to Friday (€1.90, 35 to 45 minutes), with fewer on weekends.

Those with a vehicle should head northeast of Puente Viesgo about 3km to admire one of the region's finest Romanesque churches, the 12th-century **Colegiata de Santa Cruz de Castañeda** in the village of Socobio. It is one of the finest in Cantabria, and displays elements of later periods too. About a 1km walk away is the **Palacio de Alvear**, a 16th-century tower with surrounding buildings in a pleasant park.

Parque de la Naturaleza Cabárceno

This open-air zoo (‰ 902 210112; www.parquede cabarceno.com in Spanish; adult/child Mar-Oct €12/8.50, Nov-Feb €9/6; ʘ 9.30am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-6pm Oct-Mar) is a curious experiment. On the site of former open-cut mines, a zoological park has been created to give a free-range home to everything from buffaloes to watussis (a big-horned African quadruped). In 2005 an elephant was born in captivity here. To get here, drive south from Santander about 20km to Obregón, from where you can enter the park.

EASTERN CANTABRIA

The 95km stretch of coast between Santander and Bilbao offers jaded citizens of both cities several seaside bolt holes. Some, such as Noja, are little more than beaches fronted by rows of holiday flats. The pick of the bunch is undoubtedly Castro Urdiales, 35km short of Bilbao.

Santoña

The fishing port of Santoña is dominated by two forts, Fuerte de San Martín and, further north, the abandoned Fuerte de San Carlos. You can take a pleasant walk around both, or plonk yourself on sandy Playa de San Martín. Otherwise, head north along the C141 to Playa Berria, a magnificent sweep of sand on the open Mar Cantábrico. Down here, one of the best sleeping options is Hotel Juan de la Cosa (☎ 942 66 12 38; www.hoteljuandelacosa.com in Spanish; Playa de Berria 14; s/d €83.50/106). It's a bit of a brutish-looking building, but inside the blue-hued rooms are generally spacious. From the 2nd floor up you have nice views of the beach.

Seven or more buses a day run to/from Santander (€3.40, 50 to 65 minutes), and a regular passenger ferry (9am to 8pm May to September) crosses the estuary to the western end of Laredo beach (€1.50). Hourly buses link Santoña with Playa Berria.

Playa de Oriñón

One of the nicer beaches along this coast is at Oriñón, 14km east of Laredo. Popular on summer weekends, the broad sandy strip is set deep behind protective headlands, making the water calm and comparatively warm. In contrast, you'll find a chilly sea and some surfable waves on the windward side of the western headland. The settlement itself is made up of drab holiday flats. Up to 10 buses a day head from Castro Urdiales to Oriñón (30 minutes).

Castro Urdiales

pop 13,380

The haughty Gothic jumble that is the Iglesia de Santa María de la Asunción (17 10am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Jul & Aug, 4-6pm Sep-Jun) stands out above the harbour and the tangle of narrow lanes that make up the medieval centre of Castro Urdiales. It could be a seaside set for *The Name of the Rose*. The church shares its little headland with the ruins of what was for centuries the town's defensive bastion, now supporting a lighthouse. Of the two beaches, the westerly Playa de Ostende is the more attractive.

Find out about other beaches in the area at the tourist office (☎ 942 87 15 12; Avenida de la Constitución 1; 17 9am-9pm Jul-mid-Sep, 9am-2pm & 5-7pm mid-Sep-Jun), by the fishing port in the heart of the town.

Several places to stay are scattered about the old centre, of which Hostal La Mar (☎ 942 87 05 24; Calle de la Mar 27; s/d €32/50) is one of the better ones (and prices haven't budged in years!). It is one block from the waterfront and has crisp, functional if unexciting rooms, some of which look onto the narrow pedestrian street.

Traditional fare, such as *sopa de pescado* (fish soup) and *pudin de cabracho* (seafood pâté), abounds in *mesones* (old-style eateries) and *tabernas* (taverns) along Calle de la Mar, Calle Ardigales and in front of the fishing boats at Plaza del Ayuntamiento.

ALSA (☎ 902 422242; Calle Leonardo Rucabado 2) runs up to 10 buses daily to/from Santander (€5, one hour). Bizkaibus has buses to/from Bilbao (€2.20, one hour) every half-hour, making various stops in town, including at Bar La Ronda, on the corner of Calle La Ronda and Calle de Benito Pérez Galdós.

Eastern Valleys

Short on specific sights but rich in unspoiled rural splendour, the little-visited valleys of eastern Cantabria are ripe for exploration. Plenty of routes suggest themselves: what follows is an example only.

From El Soto, on the N623 just south of Puente Viego, take the CA270 southeast towards Vega de Pas. The town is of minimal interest, but the drive is something. The views from the Puerto de la Braguia pass in particular are stunning. From Vega de Pas continue southeast, briefly crossing into Castilla y León, before turning north again at Río de Trueba, then following Río Miera down through San Roque de Riomiera towards Santander.

Another option from Río de Trueba is to take the BU571 road up over the Puerto de la Sia pass towards Arredondo. This road is full of switchbacks, a couple of mountain passes and isolated farmhouses.

SOUTHERN CANTABRIA

Wonderful views of high peaks and deep river valleys flanked by patchwork quilts of green await the traveller penetrating the Cantabrian interior. Every imaginable shade of green seems to have been employed to set this stage, strewn with warm stone villages and held together by a network of narrow country roads.

Reinosa (pop 10,520), the main town in southern Cantabria, is dreary, with little to stop for, except perhaps to look at the mansions around the central Plaza de España. But the Colegiata de San Pedro in Cervatos, 5km south, is one of Cantabria's finest Romanesque churches.

Inquire at Reinosa's tourist office (☎ 942 75 52 15; Avenida del Puente de Carlos III 23) for information on *senderos* (walking routes) if a little rambling in the area appeals to you.

If you get stuck in Reinosa, you'll find a half-dozen sleeping options. Hostal Sema (☎ 942 75 00 47; Calle de Julióbriga 14; d €30, s/d without bathroom €15/25) is conveniently close to the train and bus stations, with basic rooms. For a little more comfort, try Hotel San Roque (☎ 942 75 47 88; www.hotelsanroque.net in Spanish; Avenida de Cantabria 3; s/d €50/62), whose 18 rooms have parquet floors and, in some, timber ceiling beams. The attic rooms have skylights.

Three regional trains a day (€4.75, 1½ hours) and two or three more expensive long-distance trains head to/from Santander. Up to 11 buses (€5.15, up to 1½ hours) head to/from Santander.

Along Río Ebro

Río Ebro (from whence 'Iberia' stems) rises about 6km west of Reinosa, fills the Embalse del Ebro reservoir and then meanders south and east into Castilla y León. You can follow the river's course along minor roads out of Reinosa.

Head first along the CA171 towards Corconte, then turn right at Requejo to cross over to the reservoir. Follow the southern shore towards Arroyo (you'll pass the ruins of Roman Julióbriga). Just before Arroyo, turn right (south). Along this exceedingly narrow route, you encounter the Monasterio de Montes Claros, dating from the 9th century. Next, descend to Arroyal and finally hit a T-junction where the CA272 meets the CA273. About 13km east is Polientes, where you'll find banks, a petrol station and four places to stay. Along or just off the road, several medieval chapels hewn from the rock can be visited. The best example, the Iglesia de Santa María de Valverde, is actually about 10km west of the T-junction. Eastwards, there are chapels at Campo de Ebro and, beyond Polientes, Cadalso and Arroyuelos.

Across the Ebro from Arroyuelos, San Martín de Elines has a fine Romanesque church and marks the end of the line for a daily bus

from Reinosa via Polientes. With your own transport you can push on for Orbaneja del Castillo (p229) in Castilla y León.

WESTERN CANTABRIA

Santillana del Mar

pop 3820

They say this is the city of the three lies, since it is neither holy (santi), flat (llana), nor on the sea (del mar)! Some good-looking liar! This medieval jewel is in such a perfect state of preservation, with its brick cobbled streets and tanned stone and brick buildings huddling in a muddle of centuries of history, that it seems too good to be true. Surely it's just a film set! Well, no. People still live here, passing their precious houses down from generation to generation.

You could easily pass by on the motorway and never be the wiser to its existence. Strict town planning rules were first introduced back in 1575, and today they include the stipulation that only residents or guests in hotels with garages may bring in their vehicles. Other hotel guests may drive to unload luggage and must then return to the car park at the town entrance.

Santillana is a bijou in its own right, but makes the obvious overnight base for visiting the nearby Cueva de Altamira too.

Banks, a post office, telephones and a bookshop all cluster on or near the handsome Plaza Mayor. You'll find an informative tourist office (☎ 942 81 88 12; Calle Jesús Otero 20; 17 9am-9pm Jul-Sep, 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Oct-Jun) at the main car park. You can also get information on the town at www.santillana-del-mar.com.

SIGHTS

A stroll along the cobbled main street past solemn nobles' houses from the 15th to 18th centuries leads you to the lovely 12th-century Romanesque Colegiata de Santa Juliana (admission €3; 17 10am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm daily Jun-Sep, 10am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-May). The drawcard in this former monastery is the cloister, a formidable storehouse of Romanesque handiwork, with the capitals of its columns carved into a huge variety of figures. The sepulchre of Santa Juliana, a 3rd-century Christian martyr from Turkey (and the real source of the name Santillana), stands in the centre of the church. The monastery and town grew up around the saint's relics, which arrived here after her death.

ART PREHISTORY

When archaeologists stumbled across them in 1879, they dismissed the vivid rock paintings in the Cueva de Altamira (opposite) as a hoax. They were just too good, too fresh, too sophisticated to be the handiwork of primitive people tens of thousands of years ago. Wrong. It has been proved beyond doubt that these works are the real McCoy, and so precious that the Unesco World Heritage site has been closed to the public (a replica has been created nearby).

Around 50 similar sites have been found around Cantabria, and others in neighbouring Asturias, but few can be visited. The region's mild climate and limestone caves provided a convenient habitat for Palaeolithic settlers, when ice still covered much of the earth's surface. Ensclosed in this environment, some of these early inhabitants felt the need to express themselves using the materials at hand.

The most spectacular images, covering the ceiling of the Cueva de Altamira, are thought to be the work of a single artist, done 14,500 years ago. Most of the thousands of paintings found at Altamira and elsewhere (some dating as far back as 20,000 years ago) are stylised depictions of animals, usually deer, bison, boars and bulls, rendered in red, black and ochre tones. Other motifs also appear. At the Cuevas del Castillo (p505) there are 53 negative handprints (produced by what was surely the world's first air-brush), and a series of crimson discs that one theory (among many) suggests could have been used as a lunar calendar. The **Museo de Altamira** (http://museodealtamira.mcu.es/otros_destinos.html) website details other caves that can be visited in Cantabria.

Admission to the Colegiata includes entry to the **Museo Diocesano** (% 942 84 03 17; Calle Cruce; h 10am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm daily Jun-Sep, 10am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-May) at the other end of town. The former Dominican monastery contains a fascinating collection of 'popular' polychrome wooden statuary, some of it quite bizarre.

Santillana also hosts an eclectic bunch of museums, cultural foundations and exhibitions. The **Museo El Solar** (% 942 84 02 73; Calle Jesús Otero 1; adult/senior & student/under 13yr €3.60/2.40/free; h 10am-9pm Apr-Sep, 10.30am-8pm Oct-Mar) houses an exhibition on the Inquisition, displaying more than 70 charming instruments of torture used in its unremitting battle against heresy, while the **Fundación Santillana** (% 942 81 82 03; Plaza Mayor; admission free) and the **Palacio Caja Cantabria** (% 942 81 81 71; Calle Santo Domingo 8; adult/child €2.50/free; h 11am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sun) stage temporary exhibitions from around the world. The 14th-century **Torre del Merino** (% 942 81 82 89; Plaza de Ramón Pelayo; adult/senior & student/under 13yr €3.50/3/free; h 10am-9pm Apr-Sep, 10am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar) is a medieval tower also used for temporary exhibitions.

SLEEPING

There are dozens of places to stay, an inordinate number of them in atmospheric historic buildings converted for your comfort and pleasure. They are scattered about the old part of town and along the roads towards the Cueva de Altamira and Santander. A half-dozen lodg-

ings around Campo Revolgo park, across the main road from the old town, are mostly in remodelled stone farmhouses or stables. Some close from about November to February.

Budget

Camping Santillana (% 942 81 82 50; sites per 2 people, car & tent €22; p s) Just west of Santillana del Mar on the Comillas road, this camping ground has good facilities, including bungalows, supermarket, kids' playground, tennis court and restaurant.

Posada Santa Juliana (% 942 84 01 06; Calle Carrera 19; d €55) A short walk in from the main road, this charming *casona* (medieval house) has smallish but tastefully restored rooms. Inquire at Los Nobles restaurant opposite.

Midrange

Hotel Siglo XVIII (% 942 84 02 10; Calle de Revolgo 38; s/d €42/70; h closed mid-Dec-Feb; p s) This has to be one of the better deals in Santillana. Surrounded by a garden, this stone mansion, although quite new (so with no history value), is nevertheless faithful to the town's style. Rooms are inviting, with antique furniture, and access to a pool at these prices is a bonus.

La Casa del Organista (% 942 84 03 52; www.casadelorganista.com in Spanish; Camino de Los Hornos 4; s/d €58/85; p) Rooms at this elegant 18th-century house, long home to the Colegiata church's organist, are particularly attractive, with wood-rail balconies, plush rugs, antique

furniture and plenty of exposed heavy beams and stonework. Some rooms look across fields towards the Colegiata.

Los Infantes (% 942 81 81 00; www.gruposofininfantes.com in Spanish; Avenida L'Dorat 1; s/d €86.70/114.50; h closed Dec-Mar; p) Another fine 18th-century pile, this place on the main road offers sober but comfortable rooms, some with iron bed heads. It has its own restaurant and bar too.

Top End

Casa del Marqués (% 942 81 88 88; www.turismosantillanadelmar.com in Spanish; Calle del Cantón 26; s/d €175.50/195.80; h closed mid-Dec-Feb; p a i) Feel like the lord or lady of the manor in this 15th-century Gothic mansion, once home to the Marquis of Santillana. Exposed timber beams, thick stone walls and cool terracotta floors contribute to the atmosphere of the rooms, all of which are quite different from one another. It has a beautiful garden restaurant over the road.

EATING

Santillana has a lot of humdrum eateries catering to the passing tourist trade, and you should be able to get a full meal at most for around €20 to €25. There are some better options, however.

La Villa (% 942 81 83 64; Plaza de la Gándara s/n; meal €25; h Thu-Tue) Wander through the great timber doors into the courtyard. To your left is a bar with benches, to the right and upstairs proceed to the dining area, brought together as though under a big top of heavy, dark timber beams. The meat dishes, such as the *solomillo con salsa de queso* (sirloin in cheese sauce; €13.50) are its strong suit.

Casa Uzquiza (% 942 84 03 56; Calle del Escultor Jesús Otero 5; meal €25-35; h Tue-Sun, closed Feb) This upstairs restaurant with the red and blue walls and somewhat harsh lighting offers many of the usual local suspects, such as *cocido montañés* (bean, cabbage, meat and sausage stew), and then some surprises with an elegant touch, such as *lomo de bacalao en pil-pil de erizo* (soft steamed cod drenched in a thick yellow sea urchin sauce). The lemon tart is to die for.

Restaurante Gran Duque (% 942 84 03 86; www.grandduque.com in Spanish; Calle del Escultor Jesús Otero 5; meal €30-35; h Tue-Sun) The food is high-quality local fare and what sets it apart is the setting, a grand stone house with noble trappings and nice decorative touches such as the exposed brick and beams. There is a reasonable balance of surf or turf options, but the latter are better.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Autobuses La Cantábrica (% 942 72 08 22) has buses four times a day Monday to Friday, with three on Saturday and Sunday, from Santander to Santillana (€2.05 & 35 minutes), and on to Comillas and San Vicente de la Barquera. They stop on Avenida de Santonio Sandí, opposite the medical centre.

Museo & Cueva de Altamira

The country's finest prehistoric art, in the Cueva de Altamira, 2km southwest of Santillana del Mar, is now off-limits to all but the scientific community.

Since 2001, however, the **Museo Altamira** (% 942 81 80 05; <http://museodealtamira.mcu.es>; adult/student/senior & under 18yr €2.40/1.20/free, Sun & from 2.30pm Sat free; h 9.30am-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-3pm Sun & holidays Jun-Sep, 9.30am-5pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-3pm Sun & holidays Oct-May; p w) has allowed all comers to view the inspired, 14,500-year-old depictions of bison, horses and other beasts (or rather, their replicas) in this full-size, dazzling re-creation of the cave's most interesting chamber, the Sala de Policromos (Polychrome Hall). The viewing is enhanced by the museum's excellent interactive exhibits on prehistoric humanity and cave art around the world, from Altamira to Australia.

Visits to the replica cave, called the Neocueva, are guided; you are assigned a tour time with your ticket. Tours are in Spanish only. During Easter and from July to September it's worth purchasing tickets in advance at branches of **Banco Santander** (% 902 242424; www.bancosantander.es in Spanish), or by phoning or visiting its website (click on Venta de Entradas). Those without vehicles must walk or take a taxi the 2km from Santillana del Mar.

Comillas

pop 2500
Take the CA131 16km from Santillana through verdant countryside to reach Comillas. You first sight the town's fine, golden beach, but there is much more: a pleasant, cobbled old village centre and, separated from it by verdant valleys, hilltops crowned by some of the most original buildings in Cantabria.

The **tourist office** (% 942 72 07 68; Calle de Aldea 6; h 10.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm daily Jul & Aug, 10.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Wed-Mon Sep-Jun) has local information, and a **branch** (Plaza de Joaquín del Piélagos; h 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) behind the town hall.

SIGHTS

Antoni Gaudí left few reminders of his genius beyond Catalonia, but of those that he did, the 1885 **Capricho de Gaudí** (Gaudí's Caprice) in Comillas is easily the most flamboyant, if modest in stature. The brick building, originally a summer house for the Marqués de Comillas and now an expensive restaurant, is liberally striped with ceramic bands of alternating sunflowers and green leaves.

The Capricho was one of several buildings commissioned for Comillas from leading Catalan Modernista architects by the first Marqués de Comillas, who was born here as plain Antonio López, made a fortune in Cuba and returned to beautify his home town. In the same hillside parklands stand the wonderful neo-Gothic **Palacio de Sobrellano** (admission €3; 10am-9pm May-Sep, 10.30am-2pm & 4-7.30pm Oct-Apr) and **Capilla Panteón de los Marqueses de Comillas** (admission €3; 10am-9pm May-Sep, 10.30am-2pm & 4-7.30pm Oct-Apr), both designed by Joan Martorell. With the *palacio* (palace), Martorell truly managed to out-Gothic real Gothic. Visits to both buildings are by guided tour.

Martorell also had a hand in the **Universidad Pontificia** (no longer, however, a pontifical university) on the hill opposite, but it was Lluís Domènech i Montaner, another Catalan Modernista, who contributed the medieval flavour to this elaborate building, a former seminary, whose grounds you can stroll.

Comillas's compact medieval centre is full of its own little pleasures. **Plaza de la Constitución** is its focal point, a sloping, cobbled square flanked by the town hall, the Iglesia de San Cristóbal and old sandstone houses with flower-bedecked balconies.

Comillas boasts a teeny fishing port and fine beach, just a 10-minute walk from Plaza de la Constitución.

SLEEPING

Camping Comillas (942 72 00 74; www.campingcomillas.com in Spanish; sites per 2 people, car & tent €18; Jun-Sep) A simple grassy spot run by a friendly fellow on the eastern edge of town, the camping ground spreads to a clifftop area overlooking part of the beach in July and August (minimum stay in that part five days).

Pensión La Aldea (942 72 10 46; La Aldea 5; d without bathroom €35) This homy guesthouse offers simple rooms with hardwood floors, and there's a little *comedor* (eatery) downstairs. It

runs a second, slightly fancier place over on Calle de Díaz de la Campa.

Hostal Esmeralda (942 72 00 97; www.hostalesmeralda.com in Spanish; Calle de Antonio López 7; s/d €60/80) A short distance east of the town centre, this handsomely restored *hostal* (budget hotel) in a fine, stone building partly covered in ivy contains large, old-fashioned rooms.

Casal del Castro (942 72 00 36; hccastro@infonegocio.com; Calle San Jerónimo s/n; s/d €64/91) A quick stroll round the corner from the Esmeralda, this period-furnished 17th-century mansion is one of the best choices. Some rooms are in a less-inspiring modern extension, but some of them benefit from views clear across town to the Universidad Pontificia.

EATING & DRINKING

The obvious place for morning coffee is the Plaza de la Rabia, behind the cathedral. A couple of simple seafood restaurants line the waterfront.

Restaurante Gurea (942 72 24 46; Calle Ignacio Fernández de Castro 11; meal €30-40; Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun) In a back street behind Hostel Esmeralda, this elegant restaurant dishes up a mix of Basque and *montañés* (Cantabrian-style mountain) fare. Try the delicate *carpaccio de buey al aroma de trufa* (beef carpaccio seasoned with truffle; €14.90), or the tasting menu at €27.

El Capricho de Gaudí (942 72 03 65; meal €35-40; Mon-Sat, lunch only Sun) You can't visit Gaudí's Capricho, but you can eat there! Of course, the dining area is curved (no straight lines for Gaudí) and has a modestly elegant air. It serves up such substantial dishes as *lomo de venado a la pimienta negra con setas y pure de manzana* (deer loin in black pepper with mushrooms and apple puree; €18). It also has a *menú del día* (daily set menu) for €20.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Comillas is served by the same buses as Santillana del Mar (€3.15, 55 minutes from Santander). The main stop is on Calle del Marqués de Comillas, near the driveway to the Capricho de Gaudí.

Around Comillas

Out of several beaches around Comillas, the long, sandy **Playa de Oyambre**, 5km west, is decidedly superior. There are two year-round camping grounds behind the beach.

A little further west, the wilder, less crowded and clothing-optional **Playa de Merón** and its

continuation **Playa del Rosal** stretch 3km to the estuary at San Vicente de la Barquera. Heed the warning signs about currents here.

San Vicente de la Barquera

pop 4520

Just 10km further west from Comillas, follow the CA131 through the green and humid estuary land of the Parque Natural de Oyambre. As you approach from a height, you see how a broad swathe of sea water has cut a gash through the coast at San Vicente de la Barquera. The main estuary is spanned by the long, low-slung 15th-century Puente de la Maza bridge. On its east side, out of view of the main road, runs a long, golden strand. The town huddles between the bridge and another narrow inlet on the west side.

San Vicente was an important fishing port throughout the Middle Ages and later became one of the so-called Cuatro Villas de la Costa – converted by Carlos III into the province of Cantabria in 1779.

The tourist office (942 71 07 97; www.sanvicentedelabarquera.org; Avenida del Generalísimo 20; 10am-1.30pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) doubles as an agent for *casas rurales* in the area.

The old part of town is topped by a castle (adult/child €1.20/0.60; 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun) and some remnants of the old city walls, but its outstanding monument is the largely 13th-century **Iglesia de Santa María de los Ángeles**, further inland. Although Gothic, it sports a pair of impressive Romanesque doorways. In one of the chapels, the lifelike statue of 16th-century Inquisitor Antonio del Corro (reclining on one elbow, reading) is deemed to be the best piece of Renaissance funerary art in the country.

The friendly **Pensión Liébana** (942 71 02 11; Calle Ronda 2; s/d €39/42), up some steps from Plaza de José Antonio, features cosy stone-walled rooms, some with skylights.

Just after crossing the bridge and before you hit the central Plaza de José Antonio, **Hotel Luzón** (942 71 00 50; www.hotel luzon.net; Calle de Miramar 1; s/d €41/77) is a stately looking stone-fronted home possessing an air of older times with its high ceilings and quiet drawing rooms. Rooms are a little fusty but most have a sense of space and many have broad views over town and water.

El Pescador (942 71 00 05; Calle Antonio Gurrely s/n; meals €20; Wed-Mon) is the liveliest of seafood restaurants with tables overlooking

the estuary. Stand around in the good-natured bar area knocking back tapas with the manager, José Ignacio, or make your way out the back to the dining area overlooking the main estuary.

San Vicente bus station, by the Puente de la Maza, is served by up to seven daily ALSA services on the Gijón-San Sebastián route (€4.15, 1¼ hours from Santander; €8.30, two hours from Oviedo). Autobuses Palomera also stops here en route between Santander and Potes (€2, 1½ hours to/from Potes). Two FEVE trains stop in San Vicente daily en route between Santander (€3.90, 1½ hours) and Oviedo.

Western Valleys

Generally ignored by holiday-makers, who concentrate their attention on the Picos de Europa further west, the valleys of Río Saja and, next west, Río Nansa, make a soft contrast to the craggy majesty of the Picos.

A beautiful drive if you are starting from the Picos de Europa is the CA282, which snakes up high and eastwards from La Hermita on Río Deva. The village of Puentenansa forms a crossroads. Fifteen kilometres north (turn east at Rábago and climb 7km) is El Soplao (902 820282; www.elsoplao.com; adult/senior, student & child €9/6; 10am-2pm & 3-5pm), a 12km stretch of caves full of stalactites and stalagmites and until 1979 a lead and zinc mine. The Cantabrian government and speleological club are slowly opening the caves up to the public – the first chamber was opened in 2005 and visits take one hour.

The CA281 south from Puentenansa follows Río Nansa upstream: along the way, a short detour east leads to the attractive hamlet of Tudana, dominated by the white, 18th-century *casona* (mansion). The CA281 eventually meets the CL627, on which you can head south to Cervera de Pisuerga (see Montaña Palentina, p212) or turn northwest back to the Picos.

Proceeding east from Puentenansa takes you through Carmona, with many fine stone mansions. When you reach the village of Valle de Cabuerniga and Río Saja, head south towards Reinos. The views are magnificent. The hamlet of Bárcena Mayor, about 9km east of the main road, is a popular spot with a couple of *casas rurales* to stay in and great *mesones*, where you should try the *cocido montañés*.

ASTURIAS

'*Ser español es un orgullo*'; the saying goes, '*ser asturiano es un título*'. If being Spanish is a matter of pride, to be Asturian is a title, or so some of the locals would have you think.

Asturias' beauty lies in its stunning countryside. Much of the Picos de Europa are on Asturian territory, and fishing villages such as Llanes and Cudillero make great bases for exploring the lovely coast, otherwise dotted with picture-postcard coves (it is said there are more than 600 beaches on the Asturian coast) and inlets. For the architecture buff, Asturias is the land of the pre-Romanesque – modest but unique survivors of early medieval building and decoration. The region's pretty capital, Oviedo, is an interesting enough town, with its old centre and elegant squares.

Bucolically green though much of it is, Asturias also has its gritty industrial side. The Oviedo-Gijón-Avilés triangle is the heart of industrial Asturias.

Like neighbouring Galicia, Asturias was exclusively Celtic territory before the arrival of the Romans. It's also the sole patch of Spain never conquered by the Muslims. Ever since King Pelayo warded them off in the Battle of Covadonga in AD 722 and laid the foundations of Christian Spain's 800-year comeback, Asturians have thought of themselves – or have been perceived to think of themselves – as a cut above the rest of the peninsula's inhabit-

ants. Asturias, they say, is the real Spain; the rest is simply *tierra de la reconquista* (reconquered land).

The Reconquista's southwards progress left Asturias increasingly a backwater. As a concession, Juan I of Castilla y León made Asturias a *principado* (principality) in 1388, and to this day the heir to the Spanish throne holds the title Príncipe de Asturias (just as Prince Charlie is the Prince of Wales). Annual awards handed out by the prince to personalities of distinction are Spain's equivalent of the Nobel prizes.

Traditional Asturian food is simple peasant fare. Best known is the *fabada asturiana*, a hearty bean dish jazzed up with meat and sausage. The region is also renowned for its earthy cheeses, many of which are produced in the Picos de Europa (see the boxed text, p534).

Asturias' regional tourism office maintains an excellent website, www.infoasturias.com, which is well worth exploring before or during your visit. Another useful site is www.vivirasturias.com (in Spanish).

OVIEDO

pop 212,170 / elevation 232m

The elegant parks and modern shopping streets of Asturias' capital are agreeably offset by what remains of the *casco antiguo* (old town). Out on the periphery, the hum and heave of factories is a strong reminder that Oviedo is a key producer of textiles, metal goods, sugar and chocolate.

IN A PRE-ROMANESQUE WORLD OF THEIR OWN

More or less cut off from the rest of Christian Europe by the Muslim invasion, the tough and tiny kingdom that emerged in 8th-century Asturias gave rise to a unique style of art and architecture in Europe.

The 14 buildings, mostly churches (and collectively a World Heritage site), that survive from the two centuries of the Asturian kingdom take some inspiration from other sources, but have no real siblings. Typical of all are the straight lines of their profiles and floor plans – no apses or cylinders here – although their semicircular arches are obvious forerunners of the style that would later triumph in northern Spain and across much of Europe – Romanesque. Another precursor to the Romanesque style is the complete vaulting of the nave.

Roman and Visigothic elements are visible. In many cases the bases and capitals of columns, with their Corinthian or floral motifs, were simply cannibalised from earlier structures. Another adaptation, which owes something to developments in Muslim Spain, was the use of lattice windows. They appear purely as a design effect, since their Eastern progenitors were inspired by the desire to maintain privacy from the outside world – hardly an issue in a church.

Some of the best representatives of the pre-Romanesque style are found in or near Oviedo. The **Iglesia de San Julián de los Prados** (adult/child €1.20/0.60, Mon free; 10am–12.30pm Mon, 10am–12.30pm & 4–5.30pm Tue–Fri, 9.30am–noon & 3.30–5pm Sat May–Sep, shorter hr Oct–Apr) in Oviedo, just above the road to Gijón, is the largest remaining pre-Romanesque church, and one of the oldest, built under Alfonso II. It is flanked by two porches – another Asturian touch – and the inside is covered with frescoes. The **Iglesia de Santa María de Bendones** (closed), southeast of Oviedo, is unique for its extra-wide nave, a result of Roman influence. On the slopes of Monte Naranco, 3km northwest of central Oviedo, the tall, narrow **Palacio de Santa María del Naranco** (closed for renovation) and the **Iglesia de San Miguel de Lillo** (adult/child to both €2/1, Mon free; 9.30am–1pm Sun & Mon, 9.30am–1pm & 3.30–7pm Tue–Sat Apr–Sep, shorter hr Oct–Mar) were built by Ramiro I (842–50), Alfonso II's successor, and mark an advance in Asturian art. An outstanding feature of the decoration in the former is the *sogueado*, the sculptural motif imitating rope used in its columns.

History

When Asturian king Alfonso II El Casto (the Chaste; AD 791–842) defeated a Muslim detachment that practically razed Oviedo, he was sufficiently impressed by the site to rebuild and expand it, and move his court there from Pravia. It stayed until 910 when it was moved to León. The university opened around 1600, and industry took off in the 19th century. A miners' revolt (1934) and a nasty siege in the first months of the Spanish Civil War led to the destruction of much of the old town.

Orientation

From the train station, Oviedo's main drag, Calle de Uría, leads southeast to the Campo de San Francisco, a park, and the old town. The ALSA bus station is east of the train station on Calle de Pepe Cosmen. A collection of restaurants, cafés and bars awaits in the old town.

Information

EMERGENCY

Policía Nacional (Calle de General Yagüe)

INTERNET ACCESS

Le@ser (Calle de San Francisco 9; per hr €3; 10.30am–12.30am Mon–Fri, 10.30am–12.30am Sat & Sun) Check email here.

MEDICAL SERVICES

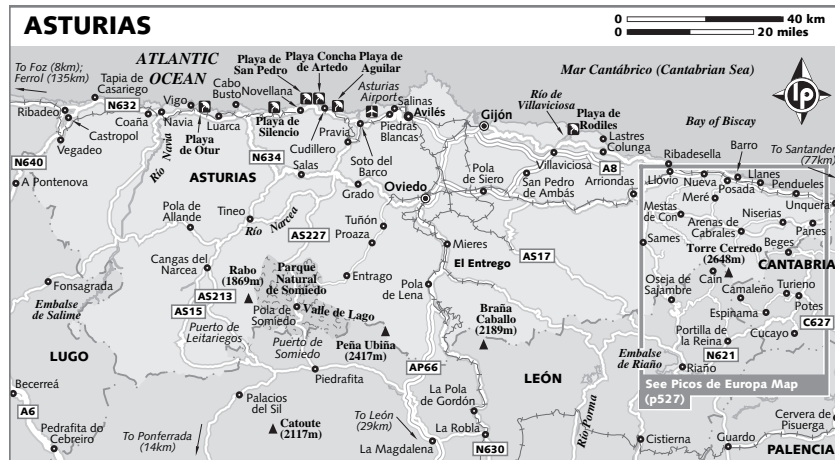
Farmacia Nestares (☎ 985 22 39 25; Calle de Uría 36; 9am–midnight)
Hospital Central de Asturias (☎ 985 10 61 00; Avenida de Julián Clavería)

POST

Main post office (Calle de Alonso Quintanilla 1; 10.30am–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–2pm Sat)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Oficina Municipal de Turismo (☎ 985 22 75 86; www.oviedo.es; Calle Marqués de Santa Cruz; 10.30am–2pm & 4.30–7.30pm) In a kiosk off Campo de San Francisco.
Regional tourist office (☎ 985 21 33 85; www.infoasturias.com; Calle de Cimadevilla 4; 10am–8pm late Jun–late Sep, 10am–7pm early Oct–early Jun)





Sights

CATEDRAL DE SAN SALVADOR

In a sense, the mainly Gothic edifice you see today forms the outer casing of a many-layered history in stone of Spanish Christianity. Its origins lie in the Cámara Santa, a chapel built by Alfonso II to house holy relics. The chapel is now the inner sanctuary of the cathedral (9% 985 20 31 17; admission incl Cámara Santa, Museo Diocesano & cloister adult/child 10-15yr/under 10yr €3/1/free; h 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 4-6pm Sat mid-May-Sep, 10am-1pm & 4-6pm or 7pm Mon-Sat Oct-mid-May), which was chiefly built between the 14th and 16th centuries.

The Cámara Santa contains some key symbols of medieval Spanish Christianity. Alfonso II presented the Cruz de los Ángeles (Cross of the Angels) to Oviedo in 808, and it's still the city's emblem. A century later Alfonso III donated the Cruz de la Victoria (Cross of Victory), which in turn became the sign of Asturias.

These and other items can be viewed from the Sala Apostolar, whose remarkable sculptures of the apostles are the work of Maestro Mateo, creator of the Pórtico de la Gloria in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Turning to leave, you'll see three heads sculpted out of a single block of stone above the doorway. This strikingly simple work depicts, from left to right, the Virgin Mary, Christ and St John on Calvary.

The cloister is pure 14th-century Gothic, rare enough in Asturias, and just off it the *sala capitular* (chapter house) contains some well-restored Flemish-Gothic choir stalls. The Museo Diocesano houses some interesting ecclesiastical artefacts.

One vestige of the original 9th-century structure is a Romanesque tower on the south side, best approached via the Tránsito de Santa Barbara.

AROUND THE CATHEDRAL

Plaza de Alfonso II El Casto and neighbouring Plaza de Porlier are fronted by elegant palaces dating from the 17th and 18th centuries. The nearby Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias (9% 985 21 30 61; www.museobbaa.com in Spanish; Calle de Santa Ana 1; admission free; h 11am-2.30pm & 5-9pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2.30pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm Tue-Fri, 11.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Sat, 11.30am-2.30pm Sun Sep-Jun), itself housed in two buildings dating each to the 17th and 18th centuries, rewards a visit: its collection includes paintings by Goya, Murillo and other Spanish greats, and plenty by

Asturians, such as Evaristo Valle, plus a roomful of El Grecos. Behind the cathedral, the 16th-century Benedictine Monasterio de San Vicente houses the Museo Arqueológico (closed indefinitely for restorations).

PLAZAS

Indulge in a little exploration of the old town's nooks and crannies. Plaza de la Constitución occupies a barely perceptible rise close to the heart of old Oviedo, capped at one end by the Iglesia de San Isidoro, and fronted by an eclectic collection of old shops, cafés and the 17th-century *ayuntamiento* (city hall). To the south, past the Mercado El Fontán food market, arcaded Plaza Fontán is equipped with a couple of *sidrerías* (cider houses) and the passages leading under the houses to surrounding streets.

Other little squares include Plaza de Trascorales, Plaza de Riego and Plaza del Paraguas. The last got its name from its inverted-umbrella design, which once accommodated an open-air market. Today it sports a big umbrella to protect visitors from the elements.

Festivals & Events

Oviedo's biggest fiesta is that of San Mateo, celebrated in the third week of September and climaxing around 21 September.

Sleeping

BUDGET

The busy shopping boulevard, Calle de Uria, from the train station to the old town is a gallery of inexpensive, and in some cases very pleasant, lodgings.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Libretto (9% 985 20 20 04; www.librettohotel.com; Calle Marqués de Santa Cruz 12; s/d €105.90/117.70; p i) Music lovers will appreciate this opera-inspired hotel in a modernist-style building facing the Campo de San Francisco. The 15 sleekly furnished double rooms, dominated by creams and off whites, include DVD/CD players, wi-fi, and a nice touch for the wet north – an umbrella. You can choose from a menu of pillows, use an in-house laptop in the room and take breakfast there too. You might only want to emerge for a quick session in its fitness centre.

Hostal Arcos (☎ 985 21 47 73; Calle de Magdalena 3; d €45) The only lodging in the old town is a modern brick building with nine simple, clean rooms (that have TV and heating) and is ideally located within stumbling distance of some of Oviedo's best watering holes. Outside August lone travellers usually get a discount.

Hotel Belmonte (☎ 985 24 10 20; calogon@teleline.es; Calle de Uria 31; s/d €35/46) A quick stroll from the train station, this charming 3rd-floor (there's a lift) lodging offers cosy rooms with timber floors and an at-home feel. Cheaper rooms with shared bathroom are also available.

MIDRANGE

Casa Camila (☎ 985 11 48 22; www.casacamila.com; Calle de Fitoria 29; s/d €74.90/96.30; p) This family-run hotel has just seven rooms (one single and one great double with private terrace and hydro-massage bath for €128.40) and is a charmer. It is a few kilometres outside of town and offers wonderful views over the city. Rooms are spacious, with an old-world rustic flavour.

Hotel Ciudad de Oviedo (☎ 985 22 22 24; www.hotelclarin.es in Spanish; Calle de Gascona 21; s/d €77/99.50; p) A typical, midrange business-folk hotel, this spot is well placed for the *sidrerías* of the same street, from which you can roll downhill to bed. Speaking of beds, they're big and firm, in rooms that are neutrally decorated.

TOP END

Hotel de la Reconquista (☎ 985 24 11 00; www.hoteldelareconquista.com; Calle de Gil de Jaz 16; s/d €187.25/230, ste €749; p a i) The city's top lodgings started life as an 18th-century hospice. Rooms come in different shapes and sizes, with timber furniture, floor-to-ceiling windows and gentle ochre and white colour schemes. You can opt for one of the suites, too.

Eating

BUDGET

Oviedo's *sidrería* rules include getting good grub at reasonable prices. Most of those on Calle de la Gascona serve *raciones* from €6 to €15.

Tierra Astur (☎ 985 21 56 79; Calle de la Gascona 1; meal €15-20) A particularly atmospheric *sidrería*/restaurant, Tierra Astur is famed for its grilled meats and prize-winning cider. Folks queue for tables, or give up and settle for tapas at the bar. Some just buy typical local products in the shop area to the right and go home. Platters of Asturian sausage, cheese or ham are a good starter option.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Los Tres Caracoles (☎ 985 20 77 89; Calle de Jovellanos 25; meal €35; h Mon-Sat, closed Jan) A bright, original addition to the already healthy local eating scene, the Three Snails offers pleasingly presented permutations of Asturian cuisine under 1950s lighting. Sit at the bar, perch on a high stool at high tables for two or three or head out back. Choose from a curious mix of dishes (which you can take in 'mini' versions), which might range from *berenjena rellena de boletus confitados* (aubergine stuffed with crystallised mushrooms) to *tempura de verduras y langostino con salsa de soja y miel* (vegetable and king prawn tempura in a soya and honey sauce).

MIDRANGE

Restaurante El Raitán (☎ 985 21 42 18; Plaza Trascorales 6; meal €30-35; h Tue-Sun) Dark timber dominates several labyrinthine dining areas. The menu is extensive, with tonnes of starters and a good range of fish and meat options. The *solomillo* (sirloin medallions) are melt-in-the-mouth tender and the salads enormous.

Casa Conrado (☎ 985 22 39 19; Calle de Argüelles 1; meal €35-40; h Mon-Sat, closed Aug) A classic, where black-jacketed waiters will deliver carefully assembled Asturian dishes to your table. Try the *crema de mariscos* (cream of seafood; €8.80) and for a switch from fish, the *solomillo de carne roja con foie fresco de pato y salsa de oporto* (sirloin with fresh duck foie and port sauce; €21).

TOP END

La Puerta Nueva (☎ 985 22 52 27; Calle de Leopoldo Alas 2; meal €40-50; h Mon-Sat) A gourmet experience, mixing northern with Mediterranean cooking in a homy, welcoming atmosphere. The best option is to tackle the tasting menu. Market supplies determine to a large extent what appears on the menu.

Drinking & Entertainment

The narrow pedestrian streets of the old town are thronged with people having a great time inside and outside dozens of bars on weekends. The main axis is Calle de Mon (and its extension Calle Oscura, the aptly named 'Dark Street'). Not much happens during the week, but from Thursday to Saturday night

bars swing into action, some staying open as late as 5.30am.

You could start the night drinking no-frills Asturian-style, indulging in some frothy cider-slurping in the *sidrerías*. Calle de la Gascona is the classic street lined with lively, no-nonsense cider houses, among them **La Pumarada** (Calle de la Gascona 8) and **Villaviciosa** (Calle de la Gascona 7). But you will soon start finding them all over town.

El Quinto de la Tarde (Plaza de Riego) With its red-dominated bull-theme décor, this is a good place to start the evening over a glass or two of wine. It shuts by 1.30am.

Bar Campa (Plaza del Sol 3) Another good place to start the night, this is a straightforward beer bar that fills with boisterous locals.

Divino Bhar (Calle Oscura 27) This is the place for Latin themes and a broad dance space, busy from midnight to 5.30am on weekends.

La Factoria (Calle del Postigo Alto) Has similar hours to Divino Bhar, but this square, bare stone basement bar is jammed so tight that the DJ's efforts seem pointless (if he's hoping to encourage dancing).

Morgana Le Fay (Calle de Cimadevilla 15) A long bar with multicoloured lighting and mainstream dance tunes (it even has a doorman, although this ain't a club).

Ca Beleño (Calle de Martínez Vigil 4) This is a well-established venue for Celtic music, whether of Asturian, Galician or Irish extraction. It hosts occasional jam sessions.

Getting There & Away

AIR

The Aeropuerto de Asturias is at Santiago del Monte, 47km northwest of Oviedo and 40km west of Gijón. There are flights to Madrid, Barcelona and several other Spanish destinations, along with services to London Stansted with EasyJet, and Paris and Brussels with Iberia.

BUS

From the **ALSA bus station** (☎ 902 499949; Calle de Pepe Cosmen), direct services head up the motorway to Gijón (€1.85, 25 to 30 minutes) every 10 or 15 minutes from 6.45am to 10.45pm.

Other daily buses head to/from Galicia, Cantabria and elsewhere. At least nine go to León (€7.56, 1½ to two hours), 11 to Madrid (€28.10 to €44, five to 5½ hours), up to 11 to Santander (€11.80 to €20.40, 2¼ to three hours) and five to Santiago de Compostela

(€22.90 to €40.15, 4¼ to 7½ hours). Buses to Cangas de Onís (p530) and Covadonga (p531) also run from Oviedo.

TRAIN

One train station serves both rail companies, Renfe and FEVE, the latter located on the upper level. For Gijón, it's best to use the Renfe *cercanías* (local trains that serve large cities; €2.15, 35 minutes), which run until after 10pm.

FEVE (☎ 985 29 76 56) runs four daily trains to/from Arriondas (€3.90, 1½ hours), Ribadesella (€5.05, two hours) and Llanes (€6.45, 2½ hours), with two continuing to Santander (€12.25, 4¼ hours) and one to Bilbao. West-bound, FEVE trains link up with trains from Gijón at Pravia, with three daily runs to Cudillero (€2.40, 1¼ hours) and Lluarca (€5.60, 2¼ hours). Two of these continue to Tapia de Casariego, Ribadeo and Ferrol (€17.95, 6½ hours).

Getting Around

Buses run regularly between the ALSA bus station and the Aeropuerto de Asturias (€5.60, 45 minutes).

AROUND OVIEDO

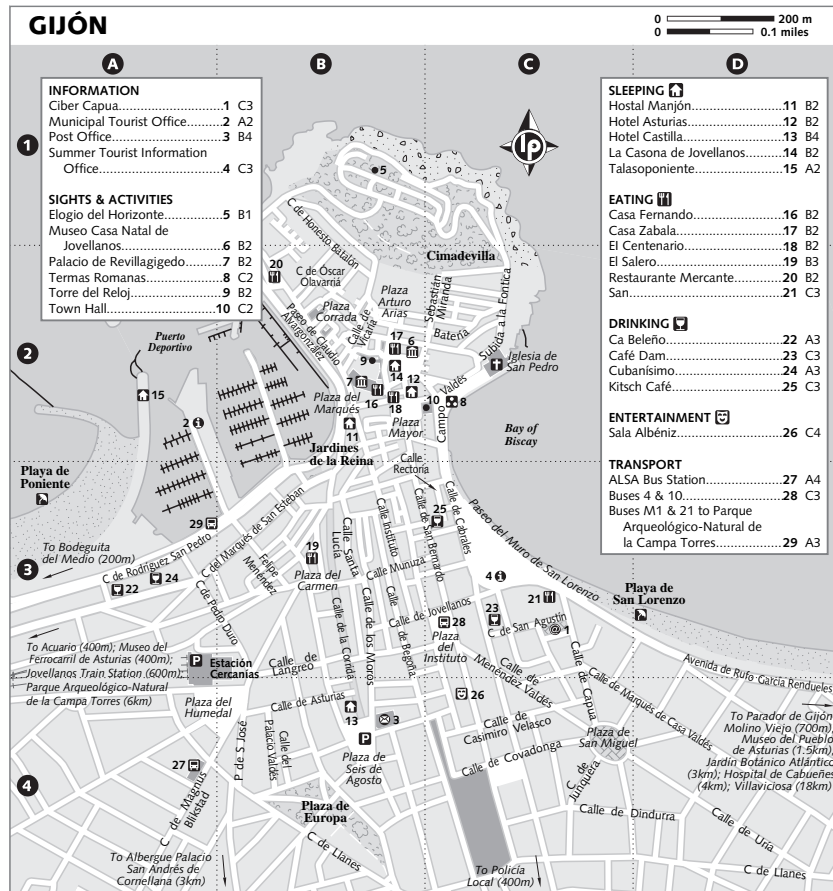
El Entrego

Asturias has a proud mining history, an industry that promoted the arrival of the railways and opened the region up to the rest of the country. You can plunge into that history at the Museo de la Minería y de la Industria (☎ 985 66 31 33; www.mumi.es in Spanish; San Vicente; adult/child €4/2; h 10am-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Jun). The displays, life-sized models of machinery and replica of a mine shaft bring to life the tough story of mining in Asturias. Renfe and FEVE trains from Oviedo call in at El Entrego.

GIJÓN

pop 273,930

Bigger, busier and gutsier than Oviedo, Gijón (*khi-hon*) produces iron, steel and chemicals, and is the main loading terminal for Asturian coal. But Gijón is emerging like a phoenix from its industrial setting, having given itself a face-lift with pedestrianised city-centre streets, parks and seafront walks. The place is something of a minor party town too, and in summer puts on a vast entertainment programme.



Information

In addition to the tourist office mentioned here, information booths open at Playa de San Lorenzo and elsewhere in town over the summer months.

Ciber Capua (Calle de Capua 4; per hr €1.80; h 11am-1am) Check email here.

Hospital de Cabueñes (☎ 985 18 50 00) Four kilometres east of the city centre.

Municipal tourist office (☎ 985 34 17 71, 902 93 19 93; www.infogijon.com; Espigón Central de Fomento; h 9am-8pm) On a pier of the Puerto Deportivo (marina).

Policía Local (☎ 985 18 11 00; Calle San José 2) South of the centre of town.

Post office (Plaza de Seis de Agosto; h 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat)

www.gijonasturias.com This website is worth a look.

Sights & Activities

The ancient core of Gijón is concentrated on the headland known as Cimadevilla. At the top of this, what was once a fortified military zone has been converted into an attractive park. At the edge of the promontory stands the **Elogio del Horizonte**, a monumental concrete sculpture by Basque artist Eduardo Chillida that has become a symbol of the city. Wrapped around the landward side is an enticing web of narrow lanes and small squares.

Plaza de Jovellanos is dominated by the home of 18th-century Enlightenment politician Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, now housing the **Museo Casa Natal de Jovellanos** (☎ 985 18 51 52; www.jovellanos.net in Spanish), devoted mainly to Asturian art and Jovellanos himself.

To the east, underneath Campo Valdés, are the town's **Termas Romanas** (Roman Baths; ☎ 985 18 51 51; adult/senior & student €2.35/1.35), built in the 1st to 4th centuries AD.

West of the baths spreads the harmonious **Plaza Mayor**, with porticoes on three sides and the *casa consistorial* (town hall) on the fourth. Further west, the impressive 18th-century **Palacio de Revillagigedo** (☎ 985 34 69 21; Plaza de Marqués 2) is now a lively cultural centre, hosting modern art exhibitions and the occasional play or concert. The **Torre del Reloj** (Clock Tower; ☎ 985 18 13 29; Calle de Recoletas 5), just behind it, houses a six-floor exhibition on Gijón's history, with a viewing platform at the top.

The **Museo del Ferrocarril de Asturias** (☎ 985 30 85 75; Calle de Dionisio Fernández Nespral Aza s/n; adult/senior & student €2.35/1.35), housed in Gijón's old Renfe train station, just a few minutes' walk west of the city centre, explores the role of railways in Asturian history, with 50 locomotives and carriages, and plenty of choo-choo paraphernalia.

On Playa de Poniente, a little further on from the Museo del Ferrocarril, is the city's new **Acuario** (☎ 958 18 52 20; www.acuariodegijon.com; adult/child €10/5; h 10am-10pm Sep-Jun, 10am-midnight Jul & Aug). This singular aquarium incorporates an Asturian freshwater river environment with trout and salmon and a total of 4000 specimens in 12 separate underwater environments, from the Bay of Biscay to the tropics. Large plastic bubbles have been inserted into the seabed so that you can get a sea-snail's-eye view of proceedings.

The **Museo del Pueblo de Asturias** (☎ 985 18 29 60; Paseo del Dr Fleming 877, La Huelga; adult/senior & student €2.35/1.35), on a large woodland site 2km east of

ALL-IN-ONE CARD

The Gijón Card (€15, valid for three days) gives you entry to all museums and attractions in the city and discounts on others throughout Asturias, free use of town buses and discounts on a whole range of restaurants and *sidrerías* (cider houses). If you make use of the latter, it could work as a money-saver.

the city centre, is a regional ethnographic museum with several traditional buildings, one containing the **Museo de la Gaita**, with bagpipes from Asturias and elsewhere. Take bus 10 from Plaza del Instituto to the Grupo Cultura Covadonga stop, about 400m from the museum.

Parque Arqueológico-Natural de la Campa Torres (☎ 985 30 16 82; adult/senior & student €2.35/1.35), on the Cabo Torres headland 6km northwest of the city centre, is Gijón's birthplace – a Roman and pre-Roman site where you can examine remains of dwellings and cisterns. Take bus M1 or 21 from in front of the marina.

The **Jardín Botánico Atlántico** (Atlantic Botanical Garden; ☎ 985 13 07 13; www.botanicoatlantico.com; adult/senior & student €5.30/2.50; h 10am-9pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep, 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-May), 3km east of the city centre, provides an excellent introduction to Cantabrian flora. The grand finale is the Jardín de la Isla, a landscaped park laced with pools and streams, based on the plans of 19th-century industrialist Florencio Valdés. Take bus 4 from Plaza del Instituto.

For swimming, **Playa de San Lorenzo** is a surprisingly good, clean city beach, but rather thin when the tide comes in. Playa de Poniente, west of the Puerto Deportivo, has imported sand and is much broader.

Festivals & Events

Throughout the summer, Gijón finds some excuse for a fiesta almost every week, from the **Semana Negra** (Black Week) arts festival in early July, focusing on detective novels, to the **Fiesta de la Sidra Natural** (Natural Cider Festival) in late August. Varied musical programmes and plenty of partying accompany all these events. The biggest week of all is **Semana Grande** (early to mid-August).

Since 2003 the city has hosted the **Crossroad Festival** rock fest that lasts several days in late August.

GIJÓN MUSEUMS

All Gijón museums are closed on Monday. Opening hours on other days vary by place and season, but the typical timetable is 10am to 1pm (or 11am to 2pm) and 5pm to 7pm or 9pm (depending on the season) Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 2pm and 5pm to 7pm Sunday. Tourist offices have lists of current hours. Most museums are free, except where otherwise stated. There's no charge for any on Sunday. A single ticket to the three paying museums costs adult/senior & student €3.90/1.90.

Sleeping BUDGET

Albergue Palacio San Andrés de Cornellana (☎ 985 16 06 73; www.alberguegijon.com in Spanish; dm under 26yr/26yr & over €10.85/13; j) This large youth hostel in a late-17th-century palace is quite a way out, in the Contruceas neighbourhood, but it's a quick ride on bus 12.

Hostal Manjón (☎ 985 35 23 78; Plaza del Marqués 1; s/d €35/47) Though basic and in a rather ugly high-rise (1st floor), it is in a good spot, with some rooms overlooking the marina and others facing Palacio de Revillagigedo.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Castilla (☎ 985 34 62 00; http://welcome.to/hcastil lagijon; Calle de la Corrida 50; s/d €54/80; j) Standing beside the lively Plaza Seis de Agosto, the Castilla is a little dated but cosy, with friendly service and good-sized rooms on seven floors with carpet, TV and heating.

Hotel Asturias (☎ 985 35 06 00; www.unionhotelera.com; Plaza Mayor 11; s/d €58.85/82.40) Touched with elegance, Asturias' spacious rooms, with parquet floors, overlook Cimadevilla's main square.

La Casona de Jovellanos (☎ 985 34 20 24; www.lacasonadejovellanos.com in Spanish; Plaza de Jovellanos 1; s/d €62/81.30; p) This antique-furnished 16th-century house (with a lively *chigre*, or Asturian eatery, downstairs) is one of only two hotels in the old heart of town and on one of Cimadevilla's nicest squares.

TOP END

Parador de Gijón Molino Viejo (☎ 985 37 05 11; www.parador.es; Parque de Isabel la Católica s/n; s/d €115.60/144.50; p a) In a building that spreads out discreetly at one end of the city's most pleasing parks, this is, for the moment, about the nicest top-end digs. Rooms are modern and comfortable but those with park views cost another €20.

In 2007, a new hotel and spa centre, Talasoponiente, is due for completion on the waterfront and will likely become *the* place to stay and play in Gijón.

Eating

The newer part of the city centre offers many options, but the most atmospheric area is Cimadevilla.

BUDGET

Casa Fernando (☎ 985 34 59 13; Plaza del Marqués 5) and **El Centenario** (☎ 985 34 35 61; Plaza Mayor 7) are two typical seafood joints in Cimadevilla.

Among more exotic local specialities are *oricios* (sea urchins) and *centollos* (spider crabs). *Raciones* go for around €5 to €15, cider for €2.50 per bottle. More *sidrerías* are found a bit further up in Cimadevilla and indeed all over town.

MIDRANGE

El Salero (☎ 985 17 04 43; Calle del Horno 3; meal €20-25) A trendy little eatery, the 'Saltshaker' offers ethnic décor and a series of tempting, modest dishes, ranging from bulging salads to rice dishes and varied *raciones*.

Restaurante Mercante (☎ 985 35 02 44; Cuesta del Cholo 2; meal €25-35) For views of the port while you munch on your fish and seafood, this is a great spot. On warm days, grab a table on the cobbled terrace, otherwise head upstairs. It's a bit of a knockabout place, full of atmosphere and always packed. It does a huge *parrillada de pescado* (mixed fish grill; €38 for two).

San (☎ 984 19 00 16; Paseo del Muro 6; meal €30) Sick of hearty Asturian fare? This is a rare chance to make an Asian getaway with a pretty reasonable Japanese menu. The sushi, maki and sashimi are nicely presented. Tempura and other options (some decidedly un-Japanese) complete the picture in this blue-tinted restaurant.

Casa Zabala (☎ 985 34 17 31; Calle del Vizconde de Campo Grande 2; meal €30-40; T Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun) A fine eatery, nestled in among the many estimable *sidrerías* around Cimadevilla, Casa Zabala is good for seafood and fish of a more sophisticated ilk than you generally encounter hereabouts. The old-time looks have been maintained, and it's not everywhere you'll be served mullet in a *txacoli* (Basque white wine) sauce.

Drinking

Gijón can be a lively place after dark. New closing regulations mean that normal bars must shut by 1.30am Sunday to Thursday and 3.30am on weekends. Those licensed to have bands and DJs (and many fall into this category) can remain open until 3.30am during the week and 5.30am on weekends. Clubs disgorge their punters at 7.30am. The folks here really are deprived!

The *sidrerías* in Cimadevilla and around town are a fun way to start the night (and inject some food), and further up in Cimadevilla, a youthful music-bar scene flourishes in spots around Plaza Corrada and down Calle Vicaría.

Kitsch Café (Calle Rectoría 8; T 11am-1.30am Sun-Thu, 5pm-3.30am Fri & Sat) provides a suitably low-lit ambience before clubbing, while **Café Dam** (www.cafedam.net in Spanish; Calle de San Agustín 14; T 7pm-2.30am Sun-Thu, 7pm-5.30am Fri & Sat) is a great den for live music and DJs.

A more mature crowd descends upon the string of back-to-back bars and clubs along Calle de Rodríguez San Pedro – ranging from salsa dens **Cubanísimo** (☎ 985 17 25 17; 35 Calle de Rodríguez San Pedro) and **La Bodeguita del Medio** (☎ 985 35 21 46; 43 Calle de Rodríguez San Pedro) to **Ca Beleño** (☎ 984 29 22 53; 39 Calle de Rodríguez San Pedro), with jazz and Celtic sounds.

Entertainment

The tourist office will print off a list of bars and clubs if you ask nicely.

Sala Albéniz (☎ 985 35 65 13; www.sala-albeniz.com in Spanish; Calle de San Bernardo 62; cover €6-10; T 1am-7.30am Fri & Sat, 6.30pm-2am Sun) This large nightclub is a venue for touring bands. Otherwise, Friday night is house night, as is Saturday from 4am on, after the live music is over.

Getting There & Away BUS

Buses fan out across Asturias and beyond from the ALSA bus station (☎ 985 34 27 11; Calle de Magnus Blikstad). Hourly buses run to Villaviciosa (€2.30, 45 minutes) and up to eight daily to Ribadesella (€5.25 to €6.15, 1½ to 1¾ hours). A similar number go to Llanes (€7.45, 1¾ to two hours) en route to Santander and San Sebastián. Westwards, up to eight go to Cudillero (€4.30, one hour and 10 minutes) and Luarca (€8.25, 1½ hours).

TRAIN

The main train station is Estación Cercanías (Plaza del Humedal), though it isn't only used by suburban trains. The other station, Jovellanos, is 600m west. See p517 for trains between Oviedo and Gijón.

FEVE (☎ 985 34 24 15), using Estación Cercanías only, runs *cercanías* to/from Cudillero (€2.20, 1½ hours) hourly on weekdays, half as often on weekends. Others run as far as Ferrol (€18.80, 6½ hours).

EAST COAST

Mostly Spanish holiday-makers seek out a summer spot on the beaches and coves along the coast east of Gijón, backed by the Picos de Europa, which rise as little as 15km inland.

Villaviciosa & Around

pop 15,390

Apart from the Iglesia de Santa María, a late-Romanesque structure, Villaviciosa's pretty centre is mostly a child of the 18th century. Calle García Caveda, the main street in the old town, is lined with noble houses.

The surrounding area is sprinkled with often diminutive and ancient churches. One that shouldn't be missed is the pre-Romanesque Iglesia de San Salvador de Valdediós (☎ 985 89 23 24; admission €1; T 11am-1pm & 4.30-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 11.15am-1pm Tue-Fri, 4-5.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar), about 9km southwest, off the road to Pola de Siero. It was built in AD 893 as part of a palace complex for Alfonso III El Magno in what Asturias dubbed 'God's Valley', but archaeologists have failed to find any remnant beyond this simple church. Next door is the Romanesque Iglesia y Monasterio de Santa María de the Cistercian persuasion, open for guided tours. Oviedo-bound buses from Villaviciosa can drop you at San Pedro de Ambás, from where it's a 2km walk to the site.

Another fine Romanesque church is the Iglesia de San Juan de Amandi, 1.5km south of Villaviciosa in Amandi.

In Villaviciosa itself, which you could easily leave off your itinerary, there are 13 hotels and *pensiones*. One of the more attractive is the Hotel Casa España (☎ 985 89 20 30; www.hcasaeapana.com in Spanish; Plaza de Carlos I 3; s/d €56.70/70.60), with old-style rooms in the prettiest point of the town.

La Casona de Amandi (☎ 985 89 01 30; d €119.85-139; T), a 19th-century farmhouse in Amandi, is a treat. Rooms, all of which ooze their own character and vary in size, contain Isabelline furnishings.

Facing the sea on the western side of the Ria de Villaviciosa is the minute port village of Tazones, 11km north of Villaviciosa along the AS256 and then the VV5. Carlos I supposedly first landed in Spain here in 1517. It's a popular spot with a cluster of seafood restaurants and three places to stay, including the twin portside hotel-restaurants Hotel Imperial (☎ 985 89 71 16) and Hotel El Pescador (☎ 985 89 70 77). In either a simple double will cost up to €55 in August. The best restaurant is the portside Restaurante Rompeolas (☎ 985 89 70 13; Calle de San Miguel 21; meal €30-40). Opening times in all spots outside the high summer period can be dodgy.

The eastern side of the estuary is covered by the broad golden sands of the Playa de Rodiles. Surfers might catch a wave here in late

summer. **Camping La Ensenada** (☎ 985 99 61 56; sites per 2 people, car & tent €12), open year-round at Playa de Rodiles, is a beachfront camping ground that has laundry facilities and a restaurant.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

ALSA provides up to 11 buses daily to/from Oviedo (€3.30, 35 minutes to one hour) and Ribadesella (€3, 35 to 55 minutes), as well as an hourly service to/from Gijón (€2.30, 30 to 45 minutes). From early July to early September a 12.45pm bus runs to Playa de Rodiles, returning six hours later.

Lastres

Apart from a few sandy beaches, the only worthwhile stop along the 40km stretch between Villaviciosa and Ribadesella is the precarious cliffside fishing village of Lastres, a scruffier version of Cudillero (see p524), with a couple of 16th-century churches thrown in.

Ribadesella

pop 6360

Unless you've booked in advance, stay away from here on the first weekend after 2 August, when the place goes mad for the **Río Sella canoe festival** (see p530). Otherwise, Ribadesella is a low-key resort. Its two halves, split by the Sella's estuary, are joined by a long, low bridge. The western half has a good, expansive beach, Playa de Santa Marina, while the older part of town and fishing harbour are on the eastern side.

The **tourist office** (☎ 985 86 00 38; www.ribadesella.com in Spanish; h 10am-10pm Jul & Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun) is at the eastern end of the Sella bridge.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

To see some real cave paintings (as opposed to the copies at Altamira in Cantabria), plan on visiting the **Cueva de Tito Bustillo** (☎ 985 86 11 20; adult/senior, student & child €4/2; h 10am-5.15pm Wed-Sun Apr-late Sep). The cave drawings here, mostly of horses, are roughly 14,000 years old.

The site is a short distance south of the western end of the Sella bridge. Groups enter the cave every 25 minutes. The hour-long 1.5km tour includes some slippery stretches, and is not recommended for children under 11. There's a limit of 360 visitors daily, so turn up early in August, or book ahead by phone or at <http://tematico.princast.es/cultura/yacimientos/entradas.php>.

Several companies can set you up with canoe trips on Río Sella (p530), hire bikes, take you canyoning and so on. **Turaventura** (☎ 985 86 02 67; www.turaventura.com in Spanish; Calle Manuel Caso de la Villa 50) is one company that has been around for a few years.

SLEEPING

Albergue Roberto Frassinelli (☎ 985 86 11 05; www.albergueribadesella.com; Calle de Ricardo Canga; per person under/over 29yr with hostelling card €13.50/15.50; j) Housed in a grand *palacio de indiano* (mansion built by a returnee from the Americas), this REAJ hostel backs onto Playa de Santa Marina. It has two-, four- and six-bed rooms.

Hotel Covadonga (☎ 985 86 01 10; Calle Manuel Caso de la Villa 9; r with shared/private bathroom €55/68) About 100m back from the port in the older part of town, the Covadonga is like a step back in time, a little dusty but full of character and generally booked in August. Downstairs is a boisterous *sidrería*.

Hotel Villa Rosario (☎ 985 86 00 90; www.hotelvillosario.com; Calle Dionisio Ruiz Sánchez 6; s/d €144.45/169; p a i) This magnificently restored waterfront *palacio de indiano*, an early-20th-century nouveau-riche caprice, is an ideal honeymoon hideaway. All rooms are doubles, with some especially spacious ones (€202), decorated with great taste.

EATING

For food, the busy waterfront *sidrerías* on the eastern side of the river are a good bet.

Casa Gaspar (☎ 985 86 06 76; Calle de López Muñiz 6; meal €15-20) If waves of fish leave you nauseous, you could opt for tapas and cider in copious quantities at Casa Gaspar, in the heart of the old town. On summer nights especially it gets rollicking busy.

Casa Tista (☎ 985 86 09 54; meal €30-35; h Wed-Mon) Want a local tip? For the best in straightforward, fresh fish (grilled or lightly baked) or seafood (sold by weight) head for Casa Tista, 5km east of Ribadesella along the AS263, just after the hamlet of Toriello. Sit inside or under the leafy pergola.

Casa Abelardo (☎ 985 86 08 39; Calle de Manuel Caso de la Villa 20; meal €35) A cut above the rest is this relatively new kid on the block serving up a scrumptious *sopa de marisco* (seafood soup; €8) followed by delicately prepared *pixin al horno* (a local white fish baked to perfection; €21).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** (☎ 985 86 13 03; Avenida Palacio Valdés) is about 300m south of the bridge. There are regular services to/from Arriondas (€1.40, 25 minutes), Oviedo (€6.25, 65 minutes to 2½ hours) and Gijón, and eastwards to/from Llanes (€2.10, 30 to 40 minutes), San Vicente de la Barquera and Santander. In July and August a couple of daily buses run to/from Cangas de Onís.

FEVE trains run at least thrice daily to/from Llanes and Oviedo, and two to/from Santander.

Ribadesella to Llanes

Several little beaches and coves await discovery between Ribadesella and Llanes by those with transport and time. About 10km short of Llanes, Playa de San Antolín is a vast, unprotected beach where you might pick up the odd wave.

Three kilometres further on is the village-cum-understated holiday resort of Barro. Its main beach is a bit bigger than the average cove and not too crowded. A little exploration here will turn up all sorts of pretty white-sand inlets. Stay at **Hostal La Playa** (☎ 985 40 07 66; d €70; p), just behind the beach.

Llanes

pop 13,350

Inhabited since ancient times, Llanes was for a long period an independent-minded town and whaling port with its own charter awarded by Alfonso IX of León in 1206. Today, with a small medieval core and bustling harbour, it's one of northern Spain's more popular holiday destinations – a handy base for some very pretty beaches and with the Picos de Europa close at hand.

The **tourist office** (☎ 985 40 01 64; www.llanes.com; Calle Alfonso IX s/n; h 10am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun mid-Jun–mid-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jun) is in La Torre, a tower left over from Llanes' 13th-century defences.

Of the three town beaches, Playa de Toró to the east is easily the best. Westwards along a 2.5km cliff-top path, the Paseo de San Pedro leads to the village of Poo.

The **Basílica** (Plaza de Cristo Rey), the town's main and mostly Gothic church, was begun in 1240 and is worth a quick inspection if you find it open.

Strewn alongside the far end of the pier like a set of children's blocks are the Cubes of

Memory, painter Agustín Ibarrola's playful public artwork using the port's breakwater as his canvas.

SLEEPING

In the June to mid-September period, booking, especially at weekends, is virtually essential, as Llanes fills to the brim.

Pensión La Guía (☎ 985 40 25 77; www.pensionlaguia.com; Plaza de Parres Sobrón 1; d €60) Just west of the river, this 300-year-old house has plenty of charm, with glassed-in balconies overlooking the plaza. The structure is a web of dark timber beams and terracotta floors, although the rooms themselves are plainer.

Hotel Sablon's (☎ 985 40 07 87; www.hotelsablon.com in Spanish; Playa del Sablón 1; s/d with beach views & breakfast €102.70/119.85) This is a modest, low-level modern hotel overlooking the smaller of the town beaches. Rooms are clean-cut with terracotta floors and the best have views straight over the inlet. The hotel's seafood restaurant has a terrace also overlooking the beach.

EATING

Plenty of lively *marisquerías* (seafood eateries) and *sidrerías* line Calles Mayor and de Manuel Cué, so stoking up on sea critters and washing them down with cascades of cider is an easy task.

El Bodegón (☎ 985 40 01 85; Calle Mayor 14; tapas each €3.60-7; h Fri-Wed) A rollicking good-fun place for cider and chips (and more), El Bodegón is very social if you crowd onto one of the outdoor benches on the terrace out the back.

Restaurante Siete Puertas (☎ 985 40 27 51; Calle de Manuel Cué 7; mains €35-45; h daily Jun-Sep, Sat & Sun Oct-May) For more of a gourmet approach to your grub, try the 'Seven Doors', where a cornucopia of *parrillada de pescado* for two will cost you €56. If pigging out is not your deal, the restaurant's *merluza rellena de mariscos* (hake stuffed with seafood) is marginally less filling.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** (Calle La Bolera) is east of the river. Five to seven ALSA buses stop in Llanes between Gijón (€7.45, 1¾ hours) and Santander (€5.55, two hours). Regular services also run to/from Oviedo (€8.25, 1¼ to 2¼ hours).

Three or four FEVE trains come here daily from Oviedo and Ribadesella, two of them continuing to Santander.

East of Llanes

The 350m-long **Playa La Ballota** is a particularly attractive beach a few kilometres east of Llanes, hemmed in by green cliffs and accessible by dirt track; part of it is for nudists. **Playa de la Franca**, further towards Cantabria, is also nice and has a summer camping ground.

WEST COAST Cudillero

pop 1850

Cudillero is the most picturesque fishing village on the Asturian coast, and it knows it. The houses, painted varying pastel shades, cascade down to a tiny port on a narrow inlet. Despite its touristy feel, Cudillero is cute and remains reasonably relaxed, even in mid-August when almost every room in town is occupied. For a good map of area beaches, stop by the **tourist information office** (☎ 985 59 13 77; www.cudillero.org; 10am-9pm daily Jul & Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Sep-Jun) by the port, which is also the only place to park.

The main activity is watching the fishing boats come in (between 5pm and 8pm) and unload their catch, then sampling fish, molluscs and urchins at the *sidrerías*.

BEACHES

The coast around here is a particularly appealing sequence of cliffs and beaches. The nearest beach is the fine, sandy **Playa de Aguilar**, a 3km drive or walk east. Those to the west include **Playa Concha de Arredo** (4km) and the pretty **Playa de San Pedro** (10km).

Playa del Silencio (also called El Gavieiru), 15km west of Cudillero, could certainly qualify as one of Spain's most beautiful beaches: a long sandy cove backed against a natural rock amphitheatre. Take the exit for Novellana and follow signs to Castañeras.

SLEEPING

Accommodation in the village of Cudillero is limited, especially during the low season when some places shut down.

Camping L'Amuravela (☎ 985 59 09 95; www.lamu.ravela.com in Spanish; sites per 2 people, car & tent €18.10; 1 Mar-Nov; ☼) At the village of El Pito, about 1.5km southeast (uphill) from the town centre, this is the closest camping ground to town. Facilities include a big playground and bungalows for up to five people.

Hotel Casa Prendes (☎ 985 59 15 00; Calle San José 4; d €78) This blue-fronted stop is a nicely main-

tained port hotel. Single rates (€45 to €55) are available outside August. The same people also rent apartments.

La Casona de Pío (☎ 985 59 15 12; www.arrakis.es/~casonadepio in Spanish; Calle Riofrio 3; s/d €66.35/83.50) Just back from the port area is this charming stone house, featuring 11 very comfortable rooms with a rustic touch, and a good restaurant.

Plenty of hotels, *casas de aldea* (village houses), *pensiones* and apartments are scattered around the countryside within a few kilometres. Ask at the tourist office.

EATING

There's no shortage of eateries down towards the port: a meal with drinks is likely to cost you around €25 in most places.

Sidrería El Patrón (Calle de Suárez Inclán 2; meal €20) Back up the road a bit from the port, this is where many locals hang out for *raciones* of seafood or cheese and sausage or ham platters (€5 to €15).

El Faro (☎ 985 59 15 32; Calle del Riofrio 3; meal €20-30; 1 Thu-Tue) is an attractive eatery hidden one street back from the port. A combination of stone, timber and blue décor creates a welcoming atmosphere in which to dig into an *arroz caldoso* (a seafood and rice stew).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus station is at the top of the hill, 800m from the port, and the FEVE train station is 1km further inland. See p517 and p521 for more information.

Luarca

pop 5180

More dishevelled than Cudillero, Luarca has a similar setting in a deep valley running down to a larger harbour full of small fishing boats. It's a base for some good nearby beaches.

The **tourist office** (☎ 985 64 00 83; www.luarca-turismo.com in Spanish; Calle Caleros 11; 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-2pm & 5-7pm Sat, noon-2pm Sun) is behind the town hall.

Kids will not want to miss the **Aula del Mar** (☎ 985 47 03 70; admission €3; 11am-1pm & 4-9pm), 1.5km uphill in the Villar district. It features a collection of giant squid, along with some 700 other marine species.

BEACHES

Sandy, 600m-long **Playa de Cueva**, 7km east of Luarca, is one of the best beaches in the district, with cliffs, caves and occasional

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Villa La Argentina (☎ 985 64 01 02; www.villalaargentina.com; s/d/ste €84.50/90/112.35; 10-12) This 1899 *casa de indios* (named for those Spaniards who made their fortune in Latin America) is now a comfy 12-room hotel amid lovely gardens that drips with *belle époque* elegance. Antique furniture brings warmth to the rooms, with their high ceilings, chandeliers and understated decoration. Between meals, play tennis or billiards, or dip in the pool. It's in the Villar district about 1.5km southeast (uphill) from Luarca.

decent surf. Five kilometres further on, **Cabo Busto** will give you some sense of the Asturian coast's wildness as waves crash onto the jagged, rocky cliffs. **Playa de Otur**, 8km west of Luarca, and **Playa de Barayo**, 1km further, are good sandy beaches in pretty bays. Barayo is a protected natural reserve at the mouth of a river winding through wetlands and dunes. To reach it, turn off the N634 at Puerto de Vega and head for the village of Vigo, then follow signs (which are painted on the road) for the beach. From the car park, the beach is accessible by a well-marked 30-minute nature hike.

SLEEPING & EATING

At least seven hotels and *hostales* are on or just off the central Plaza de Alfonso X, including three cheapies in Calle Crucero. Several seafood eateries dot the waterfront.

Hotel La Colmena (☎ 985 64 02 78; Calle de Uria 2; s/d €40/55; j) On the corner of the street and Plaza de Alfonso X, this comfortable hotel has some nice touches, such as the dark parquet floors, high ceilings and tall windows.

Restaurante Sport (☎ 985 64 10 78; Calle de Rivero 8; meal €30-35; 1 Thu-Tue) This seafood restaurant is hidden a few steps away from the waterfront. It's an elegant dining option, where you might slurp a half-dozen oysters (€7.20) as a starter. Catch of the day is sold at €6 per 100g, as are such north-coast delicacies as *percebes* (goose barnacles; €10).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Seven daily ALSA buses run to/from Oviedo (€7.65, 1½ hours) and along the coast as far as Ribadeo (Galicia). A couple come from Gijón,

too. The FEVE train station is 800m south of the town centre: three trains run daily to/from Cudillero and Oviedo, and two along the coast to/from Ferrol (Galicia).

Coaña & Río Navia

The small town of Coaña lies about 4km inland of the port of Navia, west of Luarca. A couple of kilometres beyond is the **Castro de Coaña** (☎ 985 97 84 01; adult/child €3/1.50, Wed free; 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 11am-3pm Mon-Fri, 11am-1pm & 4-5pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar), one of the best-preserved Celtic settlements in northern Spain and well worth visiting.

From the *castro* (Celtic-fortified village), a road snakes its way high above the cobalt-blue Río Navia, through classic Asturian countryside – meadows alternating with rocky precipices – to Lugo in Galicia, crossing some of Galicia's least-visited and wildest territory, around the town of Fonsagrada.

Tapia de Casariego

pop 4480

This welcoming fishing haven makes a pleasant lunch stop if you're driving, but little more. If you get stuck here, you'll find a half-dozen options for stopping overnight. Beaches along the next few kilometres west, such as **Playa Anquileiro**, **Playa La Paloma**, **Playa de Serantes** and **Playa de Santa Gadea**, all boast surfable waves, and there are several surf shops in Tapia.

Castropol & Around

pop 4380

Ría de Ribadeo marks the frontier between Asturias and Galicia. Spanning the broad mouth of this, the first of the many grand estuaries that slice into Galicia's coast, is the Puente de los Santos.

Whitewashed Castropol village, on a rise a few kilometres up the eastern side of the *ría* (estuary), is a tranquil alternative to Ribadeo, Galicia, the town on the other side. From Castropol, the N640 southwest to Lugo forms a little-travelled back route into Galicia.

Camping Playa Penarronda (☎ 985 62 30 22; sites per 2 people, car & tent €32.30; 1 Easter-Sep) is set on the fringe of the broad, open Playa de Penarronda beach, 7km northeast of Castropol, and offers a café and shop as well as bicycle hire.

One of two hotels at the northern entrance into Castropol, **Hotel Casa Vicente** (☎ 985 63 50 51; Carretera General; s/d €37.45/51.40) has 14 rooms, half of which give matchless views of the *ría*.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Palacete Peñalba (☎ 985 63 61 25; www.telpalacetepenalba.com in Spanish; Calle Granda s/n; d €99-130) Like a haughty countess, this lovely early-20th-century mansion complex stands amid almost 2 sq km of sculpted gardens studded with palms, magnolias and statues in Figueras del Mar, 4km north of Castropol and a mere 200m from the beach. A total of 19 rooms are spread out over two buildings, one of them a Modernista gem. The best rooms are akin to royal apartments, furnished with the careful taste of a bygone era.

INLAND WESTERN ASTURIAS

Although it's mostly difficult to reach unless you're driving, there's some gorgeous country in southwest Asturias. Even just passing through on alternative routes into Castilla y León, such as the AS227 via the 1486m Puerto de Somiedo, or the spectacular 1525m Puerto de Letiriegos on the AS213, can be rewarding.

Salas

pop 1600

Drivers between Oviedo and Luarca could take, instead of the standard highways, the pretty N634, which snakes up and down lush valleys northwest of Oviedo. At Salas, 48km from Oviedo, it soon becomes clear that the town's most famous son was Grand Inquisitor Fernando de Valdés Salas, who also founded Oviedo's university in the 16th century. His castle has been converted into the Hotel Castillo de Valdés Salas, and his elaborate alabaster tomb is inside the nearby Colegiata de Santa María.

Charming Hotel Castillo de Valdés Salas (☎ 985 83 01 73; www.castillovaldesalas.com in Spanish; Plaza Campa; s/d €64/80), gathered around a quiet courtyard lined by a polished timber gallery, is in a beautiful 16th-century building. Rooms are simple enough but attractive with parquet and iron bed heads. The enchantment is in the rest of the building.

Regular ALSA buses run to/from Oviedo (€3.65, 1¼ hours).

Senda del Oso

Between the villages of Tuñón and Entrago, southwest of Oviedo, the Senda del Oso is a 20km concrete walking and cycling path that follows the course of a former mine railway

through fields, riverbank woodlands and canyons. About 5km south of Tuñón, the path passes the Monte del Oso (Bear Mountain), where Paca and Tola, two Asturian brown bears orphaned by a hunter in 1989, live in semi-liberty in a 40,000-sq-metre compound. Each day around noon, except during their hibernation from about December to February, the bears are fed at a spot where their compound borders the path and you stand an excellent chance of seeing them. One kilometre southwest of this spot, in Proaza, is the Casa del Oso (☎ 985 76 10 53; admission free; h 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun), with a restaurant, shop and interesting exhibits on Spanish brown bears, which, apart from a handful (about 20) in the Pyrenees, survive only in the Cordillera Cantábrica, where they number around 170.

In Proaza, Hotel Peñas Juntas (☎ 985 76 14 63; Plaza de la Abadía; d with bathroom €50) has cosy rooms.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The bear feeding spot is a 15-minute walk from the AS228 Trubia-Tuñón-Entrago road, 2km north of Proaza: watch for the 'Cercado Osero' sign and car park. Three daily buses run from Oviedo bus station to Entrago via Tuñón and Proaza. During the main visitor periods, you can hire bicycles at various points along the Senda del Oso.

Parque Natural de Somiedo

If you fancy exploring some dramatic mountain country that few foreigners know of, consider this 300-sq-km protected area on the northern flank of the Cordillera Cantábrica. Composed of five valleys descending from the cordillera's 2000m-plus main ridge, the park is characterised by lush woodlands and high pastures dotted with thatched shepherds' shelters. It's also the main bastion of Spain's remaining brown bear population.

Each of the valleys has a number of marked walking trails, which you can find out about at the park's Centro de Recepción (☎ 985 76 37 58; h 10am-2.30pm & 4-9pm mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri & Sun, 10am-2.30pm & 4-9pm Sat mid-Sep-mid-Jun) in the small village of Pola de Somiedo. Pola also has a bank, supermarket and half-a-dozen budget and midrange places to stay. One of the best walking areas is the Valle de Lago, whose upper reaches contain a number of glacial lakes and high summer pastures. There is a camping ground, *hostal*

and hotel in Valle de Lago hamlet, a good starting point for walks, 8km southeast of Pola de Somiedo.

Two daily buses (one on weekends) run to/from Oviedo to Pola de Somiedo (€6.55, 1¼ to two hours).

PICOS DE EUROPA

These jagged, deeply fissured mountains straddling Asturias, Cantabria and the north-east of Castilla y León province amount to some of the finest walking country in Spain, offering plentiful short and long outings for striders of all levels, plus lots of scope for climbers and cavers, too.

Beginning only 15km from the coast, and stretching little more than 40km from east to west and 25km north to south, the Picos still encompass enough spectacular mountain and gorge scenery to ensure a continual flow of Spanish and international visitors. They comprise three limestone massifs, whose geological structure is unique in Spain and similar to that of the Alps: the eastern Macizo Ándara, with a summit of 2444m; the western Macizo El Cornión, rising to 2596m; and the particularly rocky Macizo Central or Macizo Los Urrieles, reaching 2648m. The 647-sq-km Parque Nacional de los Picos de Europa covers all three massifs and is Spain's second-biggest national park. Some websites worth checking out include www.turismopicosdeeuropa.com



WARNING

The Picos de Europa are not the highest mountains in Spain, but walkers and climbers should come armed with a dose of respect. The weather is notoriously changeable, and mist, rain, cold and snow are common problems. Higher up, few trails are marked and water sources are rare. Paying insufficient attention to these details has cost several lives over the years. National park information offices and tourist offices will readily give you a list of mountain-safety tips.

(in Spanish), www.liebanaypicosdeeuropa.com and also www.picosdeeuropa.com (in Spanish).

Virtually deserted in winter, the area is full to bursting in August and you should always try to book ahead, whether you are heading for a hotel or a mountain *refugio* (refuge).

Orientation

The main access towns for the Picos are Cangas de Onís in the northwest, Arenas de Cabrales in the central north and Potes in the southeast. Paved roads lead from Cangas southeast up to Covadonga, Lago de Enol and Lago de la Ercina; from Arenas south up to Poncebos then east up to Sotres and Tresviso; and from Potes west to Fuente Dé. The mountains are roughly bounded on the western side by Río Sella and the N625 Cangas de Onís–Riaño road; on the north by the AS114 Cangas de Onís–Arenas de Cabrales–Panés road; and on the east by Río Deva and the N621 Panés–Potes road.

MAPS & GUIDEBOOKS

The best maps of the Picos, sold in shops in Cangas de Onís, Potes and elsewhere for €4 to €5 each, are Adrados Ediciones' *Picos de Europa* (1:80,000), *Picos de Europa Macizos Central y Oriental* and *Picos de Europa Macizo Occidental* (1:25,000).

Information

The national park's main information office, in Cangas de Onís, is **Casa Dago** (☎ 985 84 86 14; Avenida de Covadonga 43; 17 9am–2pm & 5–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–3pm Sun Easter–mid-Oct, 9am–2pm & 4–6.30pm Mon–Sat mid-Oct–Easter). Other park information offices are in **Posada de Valdeón** (☎ 987 74 05 49;

Travesía de los Llanos, 17 9am–2pm & 5–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–3pm Sun Easter–mid-Oct, 9am–2pm & 4–6.30pm Mon–Sat mid-Oct–Easter) and in **Cillorigo de Liebana** (☎ 942 73 81 09; Avenida Luis Cuevas 2A; 17 9am–8pm Jul–Sep, 9am–6pm Oct–Jun) in Cantabria. Basic information on walks and accommodation is available at these offices. Local tourist offices can usually provide information on nearby sections of the park, as well as on their own towns.

Cangas de Onís, Arenas de Cabrales and Potes all have banks, ATMs and good supermarkets. Cangas and Potes are the best places to buy walking boots, waterproof clothing and other outdoor equipment.

Camping within the national park is permitted only above 1600m and only overnight: tents can only be erected in the evening and must be taken down in the morning.

WHEN TO GO

The weather across northern Spain is similar to what you'd find in the UK, Ireland or Brittany, and in the Picos it's notoriously changeable, although the southeast parts of the Picos are drier than further north and west.

In August most of Spain is taking its holidays and finding rooms anywhere near the Picos is hard. July is not far behind. May, June and September are the best times to visit – more tranquil and just as likely to be sunny as August. Most serious walkers and climbers choose September, as it tends to be the driest month. Drivers should note that chains are often needed in winter.

WHAT TO BRING

For the walks mentioned here, you don't need special equipment. But sun protection (hats, sunscreen, sunglasses, adequate covering of clothes) is essential, as is a water bottle – sources of drinkable water are irregular. Walking boots are advisable, if not absolutely necessary on every route, and even on a sunny day you should take some items of warmer and waterproof clothing. For any treks or climbs off established tracks, you'll need the appropriate gear and experience.

GUIDED WALKS

The national park offers free guided walks of between three and six hours daily in July, August and September. Routes vary according to the day of the week; pick up a programme at an information office. Most guides speak Spanish only.

FAUNA

Although some wolves and the odd brown bear still survive in the Picos, you're highly unlikely to see either. Far more common is the *rebeco* (chamois), a kind of cross between antelope and mountain goat. Around 6500 of them skip around the rocks and steep slopes. Deer, foxes, badgers, wild boar, hedgehogs, squirrels and martens, in various quantities, inhabit the more wooded areas.

A variety of eagles, hawks and other raptors fill the Picos' skies, but you'd be lucky to catch sight of the majestic *águila real* (golden eagle) or the huge scavenging *buitre leonado* (griffon vulture) or Egyptian vulture. Choughs, with their unmistakable caws, accompany walkers at the highest altitudes.

Getting There & Around

Trying to taste the main delights of the Picos by public transport can be a frustrating matter, if you're not hanging around long enough to crisscross them on foot. Just a few bus and train services – mostly summer only – will get you into the hills or to the edge of them.

An alternative to the buses for getting around the Picos area is taxis. Apart from regular taxis that stick to the better roads, such as **Taxitur** (☎ 985 84 87 97, 689 14 38 81) in Cangas, there are also 4WD taxi services that can manage some of the mountain tracks. One of the latter is operated by **Casa Cipriano** (☎ 985 94 50 24; www.casacipriano.com in Spanish; s/d €30/50) in Sotres (p534). A regular taxi costs around €28 from Cangas de Onís to the Lagos de Covadonga, and about €20 from Arenas de Cabrales to Sotres or Potes to Fuente Dé.

BUS & TRAIN

Details of the following bus and train services change from time to time but the broad outlines described below are likely to be maintained.

Oviedo–Panés

From Oviedo, ALSA has up to 12 buses daily to Arriondas (€4.80, 50 minutes to 1¼ hours) and 10 to Cangas de Onís (€5.35, 1½ hours). About half of the Cangas buses continue to Arenas de Cabrales (€7.60, two hours 10 minutes), and one or two go on to Niserias and Panés. At Panés you can switch to/from buses running between Santander and Potes (but make sure you get the timetables right!). Depending on the day, the last bus from Panés towards Oviedo leaves at 4pm.

Arriondas is also on the FEVE railway line between Oviedo, Ribadesella, Llanes and Santander.

Cangas–Covadonga

Up to four ALSA buses daily run to Covadonga from Cangas de Onís (€1.10, 20 minutes). In July, August and early September services are more frequent. On weekends and holidays year-round, three buses run from Oviedo to Covadonga (€6.15); in summer there are two on weekdays as well; otherwise, change in Arriondas or Cangas. The last bus down from Covadonga is at 8pm in summer, and as early as 5.15pm at other times.

Covadonga–Lago de Enol

In July, August and early September four or five buses a day travel from Covadonga up to Lago de Enol (30 minutes) and return.

Cangas–Ribadesella/Llanes

To travel just between Cangas and Ribadesella or Llanes you normally need to change buses at Arriondas, which is linked with the pair of coastal towns by up to 12 buses daily and four FEVE trains. In July, August and early September, however, up to three daily buses run from Cangas to Ribadesella and return.

Cangas–Oseja de Sajambre

A weekday (twice daily from late June to early September) bus links these two spots (€2.30, one hour).

Poncebos & Garganta del Cares

From July to early September up to three buses go between Arenas de Cabrales and Poncebos Monday to Friday (but only one on weekends). In the same period a daily ALSA bus runs in the morning from Oviedo to Cangas de Onís and Posada de Valdeón, then in the afternoon/evening from Poncebos back to Cangas and Oviedo. The idea is that you walk the 8km road along the Cares valley from Posada to Caín, then along the Garganta del Cares gorge to Poncebos, and be picked up at the end. Buses to/from Llanes, Ribadesella and Gijón connect with this service at Cangas de Onís.

Arenas de Cabrales–Llanes

ALSA buses link Arenas de Cabrales with Llanes daily in the morning and afternoon (€2.60 to €4.95, one to two hours depending on the route).

Santander–Picos

From Santander, **Autobuses Palomera** (☎ 942 88 06 11) travels via San Vicente de la Barquera to Panes, Urdón, La Hermida, Lebeña and Potes (€6.25, 2½ hours), and returns, two or three times daily. In July and August, the line is sometimes extended to Fuente Dé (about 50 minutes) and adds one or two return services between Potes and Fuente Dé.

WESTERN PICOS

Arriondas

pop 2210

Arriondas is the starting point for easy and popular canoe trips down pretty Rio Sella to various end points between Fries and Llovio (13km to 16km). That is about the limit of the interest in this otherwise dreary provincial town.

At least a dozen agencies in town will rent you a canoe, paddle, life jacket and waterproof container, show you how to paddle and bring you back to Arriondas at the end. Try these agencies:

Astur Aventura (☎ 985 84 10 02; www.asturaventura.net in Spanish; Calle Río Piloña)

Jaire (☎ 985 84 14 64; www.canoasdelosella.com in Spanish; Calle Juan Carlos I No 7)

The standard charge, including a picnic lunch, is €23 per person. Excursions set off around 11am. Bring a change of clothes. Agencies in Cangas de Onís and nearby coastal towns offer much the same deal, including transport to Arriondas and return.

This stretch of the Sella has a few entertaining minor rapids, but it's not a serious white-water affair, and anyone from about eight years old can enjoy this outing, which for most people lasts four or five hours. In summer you can stop off at a couple of temporary riverside cafés.

The river is easily at its busiest on the first Saturday after 2 August when 1500 canoes head downriver from Arriondas to Ribadesella, in the **Descenso Internacional del Sella**, a major international canoeing event.

Arriondas has a range of accommodation, including the basic **Camping Sella** (☎ 985 84 09 68; sites per 2 people, car & tent €15; ½ mid-Jun–mid-Sep), about 100m from Río Sella, and **Hotel La Estrada** (☎ 985 84 07 67; www.laestradahotel.com in Spanish; Calle Inocencio del Valle 1; s/d €45/70; p). Breakfast is included in the room price at La Estrada.

Cangas de Onís

pop 3990

Good King Pelayo, after his victory at Covadonga, moved about 12km down the hill to settle the base of his nascent Asturian kingdom at Cangas in AD 722. Cangas' big moment in history lasted 70 years or so, until the capital was moved elsewhere. Its second boom time arrived in the late 20th century with the invasion of Picos de Europa tourists. In August, especially, the largely modern and rather drab town is full to bursting with trekkers, campers and holiday-makers, many desperately searching for a room – a common story throughout eastern Asturias in high summer.

INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (☎ 985 84 80 05; www.cangasdeonis.com in Spanish; Jardines del Ayuntamiento 2; ½ 10am–9pm Jul & Aug, 10am–2pm & 4–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun Sep–Jun) is just off the main street, Avenida de Covadonga. **Casa Dago** (☎ 985 84 86 14; Avenida de Covadonga 43; ½ 9am–2pm & 5–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 9am–3pm Sun Easter–mid-Oct, 9am–2pm & 4–6.30pm Mon–Sat mid-Oct–Easter) provides national park information. Cangas has a fair smattering of banks with ATMs.

SIGHTS

The so-called **Puente Romano** spanning Río Sella, which arches like a cat in fright, is almost certainly medieval rather than Roman, but no less impressive for the mistaken identity. From it hangs a copy of the Cruz de la Victoria, the symbol of Asturias, which resides in Oviedo's cathedral.

The tiny **Capilla de Santa Cruz** (Avenida Contranquil; ½ 10am–1pm & 3–6.30pm Tue–Sun Jul–mid-Sep, Sat & Sun mid-Sep–Jun) marks the site of a millennia-old shrine, though the chapel itself was placed there in the 1940s. Within the crypt is a megalithic tomb.

Parque de la Naturaleza La Grandera (☎ 985 94 00 17; ½ 11am–8.30pm daily Easter–Sep, Tue–Sun Oct–Easter) at Soto de Cangas, 3km east on the Covadonga road, offers the chance to observe captive bears, wolves, birds of prey and other Spanish wildlife that you would be pretty lucky to see on the trail.

ACTIVITIES

Many agencies offer a range of activities, including canoeing on Río Sella, horse riding (€15 per hour), canyoning (€36 for two to three hours) and caving (€22 to €25 for two to three hours). There are several agencies:

Cangas Aventura (☎ 985 84 92 61; http://cangasaventura.galeon.com in Spanish; Avenida de Covadonga 17)

Frontera Verde (☎ 985 84 14 57; www.fronteraverde.com; El Portazgo)

Los Cauces (☎ 985 94 73 18; www.loscauces.com in Spanish; Avenida de Covadonga 23)

SLEEPING

Cangas has loads of hotels and a few *pensiones*, and there are plenty more of both, plus numerous *casas rurales*, in villages within 10km to 15km of town. Along the road towards Arenas de Cabrales, Soto de Cangas, Mestas de Con and Benia de Onís all have several options. Most places in town can also inform you of apartments available for rent.

Hostal de Casa Fermín (☎ 985 84 84 91; Paseo de Contranquil 3; d €42) Located 500m past the Capilla de Santa Cruz, in a vaguely bucolic setting, this brick structure has bright, simple rooms and a popular summer *sidrería*.

Hotel Santa Cruz (☎ 985 84 94 17; www.hotelsantacruz.net; Avenida Constantino González 11; s/d €64/83) Between the Capilla de Santa Cruz and a big riverside playground, this modern hotel goes for the rustic look. You can increase the comfort factor by opting for a double with its own Jacuzzi (€118).

Hotel Los Lagos (☎ 985 84 92 77; www.loslagos.es in Spanish; Jardines del Ayuntamiento 3; s/d €77/96; a) A standard, middle-ranking hotel, this spot offers a range of rooms. The better doubles are quite spacious and spotless; others are a little cramped. Lodgings are above what is probably the best restaurant in town, Los Arcos (right).

Parador (☎ 985 84 94 02; www.parador.es; Calle de Villanueva s/n; d €144.45; p a) Housed in a one-time monastery amid greenery near Río Sella, this *parador* is the star accommodation option in Cangas. The best rooms are sprawling affairs and the common areas ooze centuries of history.

EATING & DRINKING

Meson Puente Romano (☎ 985 84 81 10; menú del día €10) The terrace is just below the bridge, or you could opt for the lugubrious cellarlike dining room. The set lunch is *fabada* (a hefty Asturian bean stew) followed by *arroz con leche* (rice pudding). The management warns that both dishes are 'abundant'.

Sidrería Restaurante Casa Mario (☎ 985 84 81 05; Avenida de Covadonga 19; meal €20) On the main street just off Jardines del Ayuntamiento, this

sidrería has good *raciones* – try the fish in sea-urchin sauce.

Los Arcos (☎ 985 84 92 77; Jardines del Ayuntamiento 3; meal €30–35; ½ daily) This prize-winning eatery will win you over with such cunning contemporary interpretations of traditional cooking as *ventresca de atún con crema de espárragos*, *polvo de jamón y cubitos de melón* (a tasty cut of tuna stomach with cream of asparagus, ham powder and cubes of melon).

La Sifonería (☎ 985 84 90 55; Calle de San Pelayo 28; ½ Wed–Mon) In business since 1896, this minuscule *sidrería* is well worth dropping by for the fluid stuff and some nicely prepared gourmet snacks.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

You will find the bus stop and local ALSA bus company office opposite the Jardines del Ayuntamiento on Avenida de Covadonga.

Covadonga

The importance of Covadonga, 11km southeast of Cangas de Onís, lies in what it represents rather than what it is. Somewhere hereabouts, in approximately AD 722, the Muslims received their first defeat in Spain at the hands of King Pelayo, who set up the Asturian kingdom considered to be the beginning of the Reconquista – a mere 800-year project.

The place is an object of pilgrimage, for in a cave here, the **Santa Cueva**, the Virgin supposedly appeared to Pelayo's warriors before the battle. On weekends and in summer the queues at the cave, now with a chapel installed, are matched only by the line of cars crawling past towards the Lagos de Covadonga. The **Fuente de Siete Caños** spring, by the pool below the cave, is supposed to ensure marriage within one year to women who drink from it.

Landslides destroyed much of Covadonga in the 19th century and the main church here now, the **Basilica de Covadonga**, is a neo-Romanesque affair built between 1877 and 1901. About 100m from the basilica is the **Museo de Covadonga** (☎ 985 84 60 96; adult/child €3/2; ½ 10.30am–2pm & 3.30–6.30pm Tue–Sun), filled with all sorts of items, mostly donations by the illustrious faithful.

Lagos de Covadonga

Don't let summer traffic queues deter you from continuing the 10km uphill from Covadonga to these two beautiful little lakes. Most of the day-trippers don't get past patting a few cows'

noses near the lakes, so walking here is as nice as anywhere else in the Picos. In August the road can close for an hour or two when the car parks near the lakes can't accept anymore vehicles.

Lago de Enol is the first lake you reach. It's linked to Lago de la Ercina, 1km away, not only by the paved road but also by a footpath via the Centro de Visitantes Pedro Pidal (h 10am-6pm Easter-early Dec), which has information and displays on the Picos and a bookshop. There are rustic restaurants near both lakes, closed in winter. Bathing in the lakes is banned.

When mist descends, the lakes, surrounded by the green pasture and bald rock that characterise this part of the Picos, take on an eerie appearance.

WALKS FROM THE LAKES

Two relatively easy trails begin and end at the lakes. The first leads about 5km south-east, with an ascent of 600m, from Lago de la Ercina to the Vega de Ario, where the Refugio Marqués de Villavicosa (Refugio Vega de Ario: % 650 90 07 60; bunks €8.30), attended and with meal service daily from Easter to early December, has sleeping space for 40 people. The reward for about 2½ hours' effort is magnificent views across the Garganta del Cares (Cares Gorge) to the Macizo Central of the Picos.

The alternative walk takes you roughly south from Lago de Enol to the Refugio de Vegarredonda (% 985 92 29 52; www.vegarredonda.com; bunks €8.30, meal €12.50) and on to the Mirador de Ordiales, a lookout point over a 1km sheer drop into the Valle de Angón. It's about a 3½-hour walk (one way) – relatively easy along a mule track as far as the Refugio de Vegarredonda, then a little more challenging on up to the *mirador*. The 68-place *refugio* is attended year-round.

Desfiladero de los Beyos

The N625 south from Cangas de Onís follows Río Sella upstream through one of the most extraordinary defiles in Europe. The road through the Desfiladero de los Beyos gorge is a remarkable feat of engineering. Towards the southern end of the defile, you cross from Asturias into Castilla y León.

Hotel Puente Vidosa (% 985 94 47 35; www.puentevidosa.com in Spanish; s/d €55.30/64.50; p √), gloriously perched on a bend in the Sella by a waterfall, is 20km south of Cangas. The converted stone house contains 19 lovely rustic rooms with gorge(ous) views, and wood panelling. A pool, sauna and Jacuzzi are being added.

Oseja de Sajambre

pop 380 / elevation 650m

Once inside the province of Castilla y León you'll soon strike Oseja de Sajambre, an average place with magnificent views across the gorge.

The *Hostal Pontón* (% 987 74 03 48; Carretera General; s/d €33/37) is on the main road. You'll probably also be able to find someone who rents rooms privately. There are a couple of restaurants and grocery shops.

Soto de Sajambre

pop 100 / elevation 930m

Pressing on 4km north from Oseja de Sajambre, you reach this much prettier village by a freshwater stream, a great base for hikers. Walks from Soto de Sajambre include La Senda del Arcediano, a very scenic trip of five or six hours north to Amieva, manageable by most walkers, and a more difficult trail eastwards to Posada de Valdeón.

Offering meals and comfortable beds is *Hostal Peñasanta* (% 987 74 03 95; Calle Principal s/n; d €36.50, s/d without bathroom €24.50/30.50), housed in an attractive old stone structure. The owners run the *Albergue Peñasanta* (bunk €9) next door (a sleeping bag is required).

CENTRAL PICOS

A star attraction of the Picos' central massif is the gorge that divides it from the western Macizo El Cornión. The popular Garganta del Cares trail can be busy in summer, but the walk is worthwhile. This part of the Picos also has plenty of less heavily tramped paths and climbing challenges once you've 'done' the Cares. Arenas de Cabrales (or just plain Arenas) and Poncebos are obvious bases.

Arenas de Cabrales

pop 830

Arenas de Cabrales lies at the confluence of Ríos Cares and Casaño, 30km east of Cangas de Onís. The busy main road is lined with hotels, restaurants and bars, and just off it lies a little tangle of quiet squares and back lanes.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Buses stop next to the tourist office (% 985 84 64 84; h 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Easter & Jul-Sep), which is a kiosk in the middle of town at the junction of the Poncebos road.

SNP Viajes (% 985 84 64 55; www.snptravel.com; Plaza del Castañedo) is an English- and Dutch-speaking

agency that can set you up with guides for walking and cycling treks.

FESTIVALS

On the last Sunday in August a cheese festival is held in this home of fine smelly cheese. Thousands come to enjoy the exhibitions, processions, cheese-making demonstrations and tastings.

SLEEPING

Arenas has a camping ground, about 10 other accommodation options, as well as holiday apartments.

Camping Naranjo de Bulnes (% 985 84 65 78; sites per 2 people, car & tent €22) This large and efficiently run camping ground sits within a chestnut grove, 1.5km east of the town centre on the Panes road.

Hostal Naturaleza (% 985 84 64 87; d €36) About 800m from the centre of Arenas along the road to Poncebos is this quiet little house with a series of smallish but well-scrubbed rooms. The owner, Finá, also has a couple of houses for rent in Arenas.

Hotel Rural El Torrejón (% 985 84 64 28; www.eltorrejon.com in Spanish; r incl breakfast €53) A bright red country house welcomes the weary traveller with tastefully decorated rooms in a rural style with lots of fragrant wood. The setting is idyllic, beside Río Casaño, a couple of minutes' walk from the village centre.

EATING

Restaurante Cares (% 985 84 66 28; meal €25-30) On the western approach into town, this is one of the best restaurants for miles around. Dig into a hearty *cachopo* (breaded veal stuffed

with ham, cheese and vegetables) and finish with *delicias de limón* (between lemon mousse and yogurt).

Garganta del Cares

Nine kilometres of well-maintained path high above Río Cares between Poncebos and Cain constitute, perhaps unfortunately, the most popular mountain walk in Spain; in August the experience is akin to London's Oxford St on a Saturday morning. If you do arrive with the holiday rush, try not to be put off – the walk is a spectacular excursion between two of the Picos' three massifs. If you're feeling fit (or need to get back to your car), it's quite possible to walk the whole 9km and return as a (somewhat tiring) day's outing; it takes about seven hours plus stops.

PONCEBOS & FUNICULAR DE BULNES

Poncebos, a straggle of buildings at the northern end of the gorge, set amid already spectacular scenery, is exclusively dedicated to Picos tourism. A road turning uphill just above the *Penisión Garganta del Cares* leads 1.5km up to the hamlet of Camarmeña, where there's a lookout with views to El Naranjo de Bulnes in the Macizo Central.

A few metres up the Sotres road, just below Poncebos, is the lower end of the *Funicular de Bulnes* (% 985 84 68 00; adult/child return €16.95/5.10; h 10am-8pm Easter & Jul-Sep, 10am-12.30pm & 2-6pm rest of year), a tunnel railway that climbs 2km inside the mountain to the hamlet of Bulnes, which is inaccessible by road. The funicular functions year-round, making the seven-minute trip every half-hour in either direction.

Hotel Garganta del Cares (% /fax 985 84 64 63; Calle de Poncebos; s/d €38/62; h closed 10 Dec-15 Jan; p) offers beds and meals (*menú del día* €8) that are the closest to the Garganta del Cares trail. A classier hotel lies next door.

GARGANTA DEL CARES WALK

By doing the walk from north to south, you save the best till last. Follow the 'Ruta de Cares' sign pointing uphill about 700m along the road from the top end of Poncebos. The beginning involves a steady climb upwards in the wide and mostly bare early stages of the gorge. After about 3km you'll reach some abandoned houses. A little further and you're over the highest point of the walk. You should encounter a couple of drink stands along the way (the stuff is transported by horse).

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Torrecerredo (% 985 84 67 05; www.fade.es/torretours/home.htm; s/d €45/60; p) Taking its name from the Picos' tallest peak (which can sometimes be glimpsed from the dining room), the Torrecerredo is a relaxed place set on a hillside just outside Arenas. Hosted by a friendly Anglo-Spanish couple that also leads excursions, it has 19 solar-powered rooms and a delightful terrace looking over the countryside, plus all-you-can-eat breakfasts (€5 extra). Follow the signs to the left as you enter Arenas from Cangas – it's about 300m uphill.

SAY CHEESE

Northern Spain, with its damp climate supporting healthy herds of dairy cattle (rare elsewhere in the country), makes a greater quantity and variety of cheese than other regions. In Asturias alone some 30 varieties are produced. The Picos de Europa region produces a particularly high number of traditional cheeses, and the Cabrales area, running up into the mountains from the central northern rim of the Picos, is home to one of the most celebrated of all, a powerful bluey-green creation much appreciated by connoisseurs.

The basic raw material of *queso de Cabrales* is untreated cow milk, particularly when obtained in May, June and July. Traditionally, this is mixed with lesser quantities of goat and/or sheep milk, though these are included in less than 20% of cheeses today. The cheese is matured for up to six months in mountain caves.

It's the penicillium fungus that gives the cheese its characteristic hue and creamy consistency – not to mention a rather strong odour. In this case, the bite is every bit as powerful as the olfactory bark, as a good Cabrales cheese tends to have considerable kick.

You can learn more about Cabrales cheese-making at the **Cueva El Cares** (☎ 985 84 67 02; adult/child €2.50/1.50; 🗓 10am–2pm & 4–8pm Apr–Sep, Sat & Sun only Oct–Mar), an exhibition cave south of Arenas along the Poncebos road.

Cabrales goes to town over its cheese on the last Sunday of August, with Arenas hosting cheese-making demonstrations, a cheese judging (with the winning cheese being auctioned for as much as €1200), a folklore festival and thousands of free Cabrales *bocadillos* (filled rolls).

You can distinguish a genuine Cabrales cheese from imitators by its label, which will show a five-pointed green leaf along with the crucial wording 'Denominación de Origen Protegida Cabrales'.

Less well known but equally loved by cheese-lovers is *queso picón* made in eastern Cantabria, especially in the villages of Tresviso and Beges (or Bejes). This is a mix of cow's, sheep's and goat's milk, although there are no set rules on the proportions. It is a high-quality, high-odour cheese.

As you approach the regional boundary with Castilla y León, the gorge becomes narrower and its walls thick with vegetation, creating greater contrast with the alpine heights above. The last stages of the walk are possibly the prettiest, and as you descend nearer the valley floor, you pass through a series of low, wet tunnels to emerge at the end of the gorge among the meadows of Caín. Along the way, there are several paths – most of them on the slippery side – leading down to the river.

CAÍN

If you're coming from the south, the trailhead of the walk is at Caín, where the rickety (and picturesque) road from Posada de Valdeón comes to an end.

Casa Cuevas (☎ 987 74 27 20; r with/without bathroom €36/26) has basic rooms. There are at least two fancier places to stay, plus a couple of bars and restaurants. You'll find further lodgings in the string of villages south of Caín, including Cordiñanes and the rather drab Posada de Valdeón.

Sotres

A side road heads up 11km from Poncebos to Sotres, the highest village in the Picos at 1045m and starting point for a number of good walks. There are five places to stay, most with their own restaurant.

Casa Cipriano (☎ 985 94 50 24; www.casacipriano.com in Spanish; s/d €30/50) is a favourite haunt of mountain aficionados. Aside from the simple but cheerful rooms, the staff offers a professional mountain-and-caving guide service. The cosy restaurant area downstairs offers set meals for €8.

Hotel Peña Castil (☎ 985 94 50 80; www.hotel.penacastil.com in Spanish; s/d €40/60) offers 10 impeccable if smallish rooms in a renovated stone house. The rooms have graciously tiled floors, some wood panelling and fine showers, and some have perky balconies.

WALKS AROUND SOTRES

A popular route goes east to the village of Tresviso and on to Urdón, on the Potes–Panés road. As far as Tresviso (10km) it's a paved road, but the final 6km is a dramatic walking trail,

the **Ruta de Tresviso**, snaking 850m down to the Desfiladero de la Hermida (see right). Doing this in the upward direction, starting from Urdón, is at least as popular. An alternative track winds off the Sotres–Tresviso road and down via the hamlet of Beges to La Hermida, also in the Desfiladero de la Hermida.

Many walkers head west from Sotres to the **Collado de Pandébano**, about 90 minutes' walk away up on the far side of the Duje valley. From Pandébano it's possible to see the 2519m rock finger called **El Naranjo de Bulnes** (Pico Urriello), an emblem of the Picos de Europa and a classic challenge for climbers.

Few walkers can resist the temptation to get even closer to El Naranjo. It's possible to walk in around three hours from Pandébano to the **Vega de Urriello**, at the foot of the northwestern face of the mountain, where the **Refugio de La Vega de Urriellu** (☎ 985 92 52 00; www.picourriellu.com in Spanish; bunks €8.30) is attended, with meal service, year-round.

Otherwise, you can descend for about an hour west to **Bulnes** (see p533). Bulnes is divided into two parts, the upper Barrio del Castillo and the lower La Villa. All amenities are in La Villa, including the six-room **La Casa del Chiflón** (☎ 985 84 59 43; www.casadelchiflon.com; d/tr/q €59/70/80; 🗓 Mar–Nov, Sat & Sun by reservation Dec–Feb) **casa rural** and **Bar Bulnes** (☎ 985 84 59 34), with good home cooking. You can also get to Bulnes by walking southeast up from Poncebos (about 1¼ hours).

Niserias

East of Arenas de Cabrales, the AS114 follows the attractive Río Cares valley downstream towards Panes. About 15km from Arenas is the peaceful hamlet of Niserias, at a particularly pretty bend in the Cares.

You can't miss the cheerful, deep yellow country house **Casa Julián** (☎ 985 41 57 97; www.casajulian.com; s/d €51/64.20). In business since 1949 and long part shop part digs for fishermen coming to try their luck in Río Cares, it is today a welcoming stop for modern travellers. The place is divided into hotel and *hostal* (double €44.90), the latter across the road. In August it has doubles only. The restaurant does great fish dishes.

La Tahona de Besnes (☎ 985 41 57 49; www.latahona.debesnes.com; d €64–115) comprises a beautifully renovated set of old stone bakery buildings in a leafy river valley 1.75km north of Niserias (take the Alles road and follow the signs). It

has attractive double rooms, a few apartments and a good restaurant. You can go horse riding here, too.

EASTERN PICOS Panes

Panes is where the AS114 from Cangas and Arenas meets the N621 running from the coast south to Potes. It has a range of accommodation. Hotel Trespalacios on the main street is the main bus stop.

Desfiladero de la Hermida

The N621 south from Panes follows Río Deva and enters the impressive Desfiladero de la Hermida gorge. You cross into Cantabria here at Urdón, the bottom end of the Ruta de Tresviso path, 2km before the hamlet of La Hermida. There's not much at La Hermida, but the bubbling Deva, the Picos looming to the west and a couple of *pensiones*.

Lebeña

About 8.5km south of La Hermida, is a spot that warrants visiting. A kilometre east of the N621 stands the fascinating little **Iglesia de Santa María de Lebeña** (admission €1; 🗓 10am–1.30pm & 4.30–7.30pm Tue–Sun), built in the 9th century. The horseshoe arches in the church are a telltale sign of its Mozarabic style – rarely seen this far north in Spain. The floral motifs on the columns are Visigothic, while below the main *retablo* (altarpiece) stands a Celtic stone engraving. They say the big yew tree outside was planted 1000 years ago.

Potes

pop 1580 / elevation 291m
Overrun in peak periods, but with some charm in the old centre (restored in attractive traditional stone and slate after considerable damage during the civil war), Potes is a popular staging post on the southeast edge of the Picos. Spanned by the medieval San Cayetano bridge, Río Quiviesa joins Río Deva at the heart of the village, with the Macizo Oriental (also called Macizo Andara) rising close at hand.

The **tourist office** (☎ 942 73 07 87; Plaza de la Serna; 🗓 10am–2pm & 4–7pm Mon & Thu–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun) shares a building with the bus station on the west side of town. Inquire there about the various adventure outfits operating from Potes and offering everything from horse riding and quads to canoeing and canyoning. It

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa Cayo (☎ 942 73 01 50; www.casacayo.com; Calle Cantabria 6; s/d €25/45) This is the pick of the bunch in Potes, with helpful service and attractive, comfy, wood-beamed rooms. Open the timber window shutters early in the morning to listen to the nearby burbling river. You can eat well in its excellent restaurant for about €20. Try the *cocido lebaniego completo* (€13), a feast that starts with unlimited noodle soup followed by a plate loaded with meat, sausage, chickpeas, potato, cabbage and spinach.

Right in the centre of town, the squat **Torre del Infantado** was built as a defensive tower in the 15th century and is now the town hall, having long served as a prison. A bit further down the river, the 14th-century **Iglesia de San Vicente**, deconsecrated in the 19th century, is a nice example of rustic Gothic architecture.

SLEEPING & EATING

With 14 hotels and *pensiones* , there is no shortage of accommodation here. They are by and large simple, straightforward places.

Pensión La Antigua (☎ 942 73 10 31; Calle Cantabria 9; s/d €40/50) This is one of the most attractive *pensiones* here, with crisp rooms (lots of timber beams, parquet floors and some rooms with skylights) in the heart of the old town.

Tasca Cantabria (☎ 942 73 07 14; Calla Cantabria; meal €15-20; 11 Thu-Tue) For a cheerful meal try this old town eatery, where you can try local faves such as *cocido lebaniego* (noodle soup followed by a plate loaded with meat, sausage, chickpeas, potato, cabbage and spinach) or *lengua con tomate* (tongue with tomato; €7.20).

Around Potes**MONASTERIO DE SANTO TORIBIO DE LIÉBANA & PIASCA**

Liébana valley, of which Potes is in a sense the 'capital', lies between the southeast side of the Picos de Europa and the main spine of the Cordillera Cantábrica. Christian refugees from Muslim-occupied Spain to the south fled to this front-line valley in the 8th century. The Muslim army defeated at Covadonga is said to have been wiped out while retreating through this valley by a massive landslide near Cosgaya (an event immediately attributed to the Almighy by the Christians).

The settlers brought with them the Lignum Crucis, purportedly the single biggest chunk of Christ's cross, which had supposedly been transported from Jerusalem by Bishop Toribio of Astorga in the 4th century. The holy relic has been housed ever since in this monastery (11am-2pm & 4-7pm), 3km west of Potes (signed off the Fuente Dé road). About 500m further on is the tiny **Ermita de San Miguel**, a chapel with great valley views.

The relic, which according to tradition features the hole made by the nail that passed through Christ's left hand, is an extraordinary magnet for the faithful. It's kept inside a crucifix of gold-plated silver, which is housed in a lavish 18th-century baroque chapel off the monastery's austere Gothic church (dating from 1256).

Head of the monastery in the latter half of the 8th century was Beato de Liébana, who won fame in medieval Europe for his lavishly illustrated *Commentary on the Apocalypse*. Copies of this illustrated tome were distributed throughout Europe and came to be known as Beatos. Around 30 survive scattered across Europe today, but the original was lost.

The Romanesque **Iglesia de Santa María de Piasca**, 2.5km off the CA184 road about 8km southeast of Potes, was at the heart of the other main medieval monastery established here, but now gone. The sculpture is among some of the most exquisite in the region.

Potes to Fuente Dé

The 23km CA185 from Potes to Fuente Dé is a beautiful trip, with several places to stay (including three camping grounds) along the way. At **Camaleño** is the **Hostal El Caserío** (☎ 942 73 30 48; s/d €30/45), housed in a cluster of beautifully restored old structures, including what used to be the town's cantina. **Cosgaya**, 13km southwest of Potes, is home to the majestic twin stone townhouses of the **Hotel del Oso** (☎ 942 73 30 18; www.hoteldeloso.com in Spanish; s/d €57.80/73.80; Ⓢ), which face each other across Río Deva and road.

ESPINAMA

This is the last stop of any significance before Fuente Dé, and probably makes a more appealing base if you have your own transport. A 4WD track from here leads about 7km north and uphill to the **Hotel Refugio de Áliva** and on to Sotres.

There's a surprising choice of decent places to stay in Espinama, all with restaurants. The family-run **Hostal Remoña** (☎ 942 73 66 05; s/d €25/45) has large rooms, some with balconies over rushing Río Nevandi.

Fuente Dé & the Teleférico

At 1078m, Fuente Dé lies at the foot of the stark southern wall of the Macizo Central. In four minutes the **Teleférico de Fuente Dé** (cable car; ☎ 942 73 66 10; adult/child return Easter & Jul-Sep €12.50/3, rest of the year €10/3; 11 9am-8pm Easter & Jul-Sep, 10am-6pm rest of year, closed 7 Jan-Feb) here whisks people 762m to the top of that wall, from where walkers and climbers can make their way deeper into the central massif.

Be warned that during the high season (especially August) you can wait for hours at the bottom to get a seat. Coming down, you simply join the queue and wait – OK on a sunny day, but a little unpleasant if the queue is long.

ACTIVITIES**Walking & Climbing**

It's a walk of 3.5km from the top of the *teleférico* to the Hotel Áliva, or you might catch one of the private 4WD shuttles that do the trip for €4 per person. From the hotel, two trails descend into the valley that separates the central massif from its eastern cousin. The first winds its way some 7km south down to Espinama, while the other will get you north to Sotres via Vegas de Sotres. If there is a demand, 4WDs cover the Sotres and Espinama routes.

Other possibilities for the suitably prepared include climbing Peña Vieja (2613m) and making your way across the massif to El Naranjo de Bulnes. This requires proper equipment and experience – Peña Vieja has claimed more climbers' lives than any other mountain in the Picos. Less exacting is the route of about two hours leading northwest

from the *teleférico*, passing below Peña Vieja by marked trails to the tiny (three-place) **Refugio Cabaña Verónica** at 2325m near Horcados Rojos.

SLEEPING & EATING

Fuente Dé has one camping ground and two hotels (including an *ugly parador* – a luxury, state-owned hotel), both of which offer 4WD trips into the mountains.

Hotel Rebeco (☎ 942 73 66 01; d €60; Ⓟ) This handsome stone lodge is the better-value option. Eleven of the 30 rooms include loft levels that are suitable for kids.

Hotel Refugio de Áliva (☎ 942 73 09 99; d €70; 11 Jun–mid-Oct) Set 1700m high, this 27-room hotel features a restaurant and café as well as a sundeck.

Potes to Posada de Valdeón

Drivers will be rewarded by a drive from Potes around to the southern approaches to the Picos. Take the N621 (direction Riaño) south of Potes and you are soon on a narrow road winding through the verdant Valle de Liébana. After about 8km, you reach the cute crossroads hamlet of La Vega de Liébana (ALSA buses call in here), with a handful of places to stay. Branch east the 12km for Cucayo via Dobres (11km), a lovely trip that rises to about 900m. Cucayo is the end of the road. Around you are scarred mountain peaks and green fields below. Stay at the marvellous **Posada de Cucayo** (☎ 942 73 62 46; www.laposadadecucayo.com; d up to €55), nine of whose 10 spacious and tasteful doubles enjoy sweeping views.

Back in La Vega, the road southwest quickly penetrates a gorge before rising to the often fog-bound Puerto de San Glorio pass (1609m). It then drops down quickly on the Castilian side of the frontier. At **Portilla de la Reina**, take the narrow and still pretty country lane northwest to **Posada de Valdeón**, where you are at the southern gateway to the Picos.

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