

# Savouring Spain

Discover a cooler culinary escape in northern Spanish region Asturias, home to seafood, stews, cider houses and the country's Capital of Gastronomy 2024. Yolanda Zappaterra reports



Gijón, Spain

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Alex Segre

When I first visited Asturias 30 years ago, I thought I'd never go back. Not because it wasn't amazing – it was, and still is, one of Spain's most beautiful regions, filled with fantastic food and natural beauty. But the glorious golden beaches, pine-covered peaks, cataract-filled rivers, waterfalls and rolling green hills came at a price I hadn't been prepared for – near-incessant rain. With no car, internet or cash to spare, I holed up in cheap hotel rooms and missed much of the region's magnificence.

Fast-forward a few decades, and a more mature me is ready to see why the Asturias region – home to this year's Capital of Gastronomy, Oviedo – is drawing visitors keen to swap the sweltering south for cooler climes and classic cuisine in the north of Spain.

Despite my prior experience, Asturian days are milder and drier than they once were, so if your clients share the growing preference for 'coolclations' over the 40C temperatures of the Med, it should be on your radar.

Food and drink is affordable to all – a three or

four-course *menú del día* complete with wine costs about €15 – and unlike some areas of Spain which have hit the headlines for overtourism in recent weeks, roads are uncongested, attractions are first-class and reaching them all from the UK is easily done via a sub-two-hour flight or even by train or ferry.

## COASTAL CUISINE

Our exploration began in the beguiling seaside town of Cudillero, the short drive from the airport making us feel we were in Switzerland rather than Spain. Pastures dotted with sheep, dairy cattle and alpine-style houses gave way to a colourful near-vertical coastal town set around a picture-perfect bay.

But what really won us over was the food: hearty *fabada* (Spain's answer to French cassoulet), garlic-rich razor clams and robust blue cheese unlike anything we'd ever encountered in Spain, all washed down with the region's famous uncarbonated natural cider.

Along its 250-mile coast, Asturias's many beaches feature arresting rock formations and cliff-top hikes connecting them. Leaving behind Cudillero's *Playón* ➤



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Staple dish *fabada*; Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre, Avilés; fishing town Cudillero; *cabrales* cheese **RIGHT:** Gijón **PICTURES:** Shutterstock/Studioimagen73, Sergio Rivero, barmalini, lunamarina; Carranza



## fast fact

Fellow Spanish province Catalonia – home to 54 Michelin-starred restaurants and 300 wineries – will be 2025 World Region of Gastronomy



## BOOK IT

**Byway** offers a 10-day trip via ferry from Portsmouth to Santander, which includes four days in Oviedo, with B&B accommodation and all pre-bookable transport, from £1,263 departing October 1. [byway.travel](http://byway.travel)

**Inntravel** offers a week-long Slow Train through Asturias package from £790 based on two sharing, departing on October 11, including seven nights' B&B, local rail pass and walking notes and maps. Travel from the UK costs extra. [inntravel.co.uk](http://inntravel.co.uk)

**Expressions Holidays** offers a week at the five-star Hotel Palacio de Luces, part of the Relais & Châteaux collection, with easy Jet flights to Bilbao and car hire, from £1,550 for seven nights on a B&B basis. [expressionsholidays.co.uk](http://expressionsholidays.co.uk)

de Bayas and Playa de Aguilar, we ventured west to the stunning Playa del Silencio for a four-mile hike around the Faro de Cabo Busto headland.

Next came the medieval town of Avilés to explore the Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre – which regularly hosts plays, exhibitions, concerts and food-focused events with a cultural twist – and Gijón, a port city with a wealth of maritime heritage. Gijón is known for its Jardín Botánico Atlántico – seen in the recent BBC series *Monty Don's Spanish Gardens* – and Museum of Asturian Life, where the region's unique grain stores known as *hórreos* are explained in absorbing detail, but it also has its own famous beach, Playa de San Lorenzo. Along a one-mile beach, wave after wave of gentle breakers are perfect for fledgling surfers, plus a two-mile promenade lined with magnificent buildings – including the imposing San Pedro church and the cobbled lanes of the city's oldest barrio, Cimavilla – make it possibly the loveliest urban beach in Spain.

Views from Cimavilla's Cerro de Santa Catalina Park and Eduardo Chillida's arresting monument *Elogio del Horizonte* give a great sense of just how rugged and spectacular this coastline is, as we discovered heading farther east towards the Picos mountain range – via more clifftop walks at the Bufones de Pría blowholes and beaches like the Playa de la Griega and Playa del Sablón.

Yet Asturias isn't just about its coastline. East of Gijón, a short drive up the Sella valley from the pretty estuary town of Ribadesella, we found the Tito Bustillo Cave,

where enthusiastic guides led us along a 700-metre gallery filled with unforgettable wall paintings dating back to 22,000BC – all for a bargain €4.14.

## MARKET FORCES

Sights of a different kind are equally memorable along the route west from Ribadesella to Ribadedeva, where grand Indiano mansions exhibit the wealth amassed by made-it-good miners returning from the Americas.

Heading inland to the Picos de Europa via Arriوندas, where adventure sports on the fast-flowing Riba de Sella river are becoming increasingly popular, we took a funicular ride in Bulnes and crossed picturesque stone medieval bridges to the Sanctuary of Covadonga and its nearby lakes, both spectacular attractions that show off the region's man-made and natural wonders.

But if there is one wonder from Asturias that is unlike any other, it must be its food. At Cangas de Onís's market, we sampled some of its many cheeses – which together make it Europe's largest cheesemaking region – while admiring traditional and intricate bread loaves that wouldn't look out of place in an artisan market.

Our final day in Oviedo took in the Asturias Museum of Fine Arts, the Cathedral and the Mercado El Fontan, followed by an evening climb to Santa Maria del Naranco, one of a clutch of gorgeous 9th-century churches. And it finally gave us an appetite big enough to manage a whole four-course *menú del día* – washed down of course with plenty of cider. **TW**



WHAT TO EAT AND DRINK IN OVIEDO

Oviedo's selection as Spain's Capital of Gastronomy 2024 is little surprise given its agriculture, seafood and dairy farming. Here's our pick of must-try munches



**CHEESE:** With its many dairy farms, Asturias is dubbed 'the land of 40 cheeses' – although there are many more varieties to be found in its markets – with popular options such as *afuega'l pitu* (pictured), *cabrales* and *gamonéu*.



**HEARTY DISHES:** Forget tiny tapas – with farming folk to feed and chillier temperatures to contend with, Asturias excels in rich, warming stews and hearty dishes such as *pote asturiano* (bean stew with cabbage and potato), *cachopo* (a breaded veal fillet stuffed with cheese and ham, pictured), *pitu de caleya* (traditional free-range chicken) – and of course the region's most famous dish, *fabada*.



**SEAFOOD:** Seafood is equally varied, with catches coming from the fishing fleets of Asturias and neighbouring Galicia, both with access to the bountiful Bay of

Biscay, where cooler waters contribute to plentiful stocks of fish and shellfish. A dizzying variety including lobster, crab, razor clams, tuna, scallops and more make a base for seafood dishes such as *fabes con almejas* (a clam and bean stew, pictured), *mejillones picantes* (paprika-spiked mussels) and *chipirones afogaos* (squid fried with garlic).



**SWEET TREATS:** Bakery windows are stuffed with tempting treats such as *casadiellas* (walnut-stuffed dumplings, pictured), *carbayones* (glazed almond cream-filled pastries) and *frixuelos* (sweet crepes), popular during the annual carnival.



**CIDER:** To drink, it has to be natural cider – Asturias is one of the world's largest producers and the *sidrerías* (cider bars) of Oviedo's Calle Gascona are a great place to watch a skilful *escanciador* practising the art of pouring from a great height to create a natural effervescence.

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