

2019 Spain & Portugal

21st May – 4th June 2019

This tour to Spain and Portugal would be one to remember. A whole catalogue of problems despite very careful planning by our driving holiday company which was initially thrown out the window after Brittany ferries announced their flagship had suffered an engine fire in one of its four propulsion units, that would necessitate a change of port, (the vessel was unable to maintain a fast enough cruising speed to meet the timetable)



Originally sailing from Portsmouth, we were advised it would now be Plymouth. We made the arrangements for a hotel in the West country and were ready to set off that afternoon until an urgent call from our tour company told us of Brittany ferries total cancellation of our crossing for the next day now due to rudder failure.

Brittany ferries could not offer a workable alternative so an immediate decision was made to use the channel tunnel and drive through France, not too much of a problem for our car alone, but we were going to join with another couple of friends.

After some seriously fast packing, we set off on Monday 20th May from Yorkshire and our friends from Hertfordshire. Our aim being to meet at the Eurotunnel flexi terminal that afternoon. It was very fortunate that our travel company are used to working on their feet. Whilst dealing with our tickets they were themselves returning through France. In our favour, the tours we had been participants on in the past gave us some ideas for hotels we could use on the drive down to Spain.



Tilques chateau

The next stage went perfectly, an easy drive to Folkstone, we arrived to see our friends already making good use of the complimentary food and drinks. We had been busy and booked into a familiar Chateau in Tilques and on arrival at the hotel our friends were very impressed with the choice. We took a deep breath and hoped for no further problems.

The first leg of the charge through France to Poitiers was taken to avoid motorway tolls where possible. We had an 'Emovis Tag' for France and Spain from previous tours but the other car was without the French version. The navigator, being five feet nothing was unable to reach the toll machines which in France only cater for left hand drive, necessitating the driver getting out which caused delays much to the consternation of the local drivers. We bypassed the majority but some were unavoidable.

The next blip we encountered during a heavy thunderstorm on the outskirts of Poitiers, with condensation forming over the inside of the windows we found our air conditioning was not working, an oversight on my part but not something we had noticed beforehand in cool spring weather at home. That aside, we made our way to the Best Western hotel chosen for the second stop and settled in for the evening.



Good company at our first Parador

I am going to skip all of the following problems with the hotel, the remaining French and Spanish toll tags, to just say we arrived at our first Spanish Parador on time Wednesday evening, although a little flustered.

Our plan to utilise the ferry to Santander was to give us an opportunity to stay at three additional Paradors before joining the group. By pushing on through France we managed to maintain the planned schedule and explore some new areas of Northern Spain.

Our first Parador, located on the outskirts of the quiet town of Limpas was in a huge converted palace. On arrival we were marshalled, ironically into a 'Brittany ferries' cordoned parking area, where we joined some touring classic cars.

This location was an ideal start on a meandering scenic drive through the Basque country and beautiful Cantabrian mountains, before arriving at our second Parador. Occupying the lovely mansion of the Barreda-Bracho family and located in the town square in Santillana del Mar its origins date back to the 8th century. The town is unusual in that it is only open to pedestrians, although residents at the hotel can enter to access the Parador parking.



Resting on the glorious Asturian coast



Joining the remainder of the group

Leaving the Parador, we began an exploration into the Picos de la Europa mountains and lakes. Quite a busy day, over two hundred miles of glorious roads and scenery to Thursdays Parador, located in the beautiful Asturian town of Cangas del Narcea.

It is an impressive monastery declared a National Historic-Artistic Monument known as El Escorial Asturiano. The Parador basement contains a museum with archaeological remains of the first construction, dating from the early eleventh century.

Spanish coastline enjoying some rare access to quiet beaches, before climbing into the foothills of the Picos de Europa mountains, arriving at the Parador de Cangas de Onís in the former San Pedro de Villanueva Monastery that we had visited in 2016. Here we joined the other cars in our group for a social evening meal together.

On Friday we began by visiting the spectacular Northern

Departing Cangas, we headed west for a beautiful drive across the Parque Natural Somiedo crossing the border from Asturias to Galicia, passing through the town of Lugo, famous for its Roman walls, before completing our journey to our hotel for the next two nights in the spectacular cathedral city of Santiago de Compostela.

By good fortune the two-night stay and city location helped out as the little MX-5 we had travelled through France with had thrown a fault code necessitating a visit to a conveniently located Mazda dealership. With the help of Google translate we overcame the language barrier and the car was left at the dealers for its inspection. The hotel reception was very helpful in coordinating with the garage and in short time the analysis and repairs we completed.



On the famous Camino de Santiago

Being a little behind the rest of the group, we took a short cut to the spectacular Costa da Morte to Cabo Fisterra, quite literally "the end of the world" taking a stroll to the lighthouse which for many is the end of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage, routing around the coastline before returning to Santiago.

The following morning, our group was all together and heading to the first stop in the small town of Padron. We took a stroll into town and a church which has a large stone preserved in the alter. Legend claims that Padron got its name from this stone, to which the boat transporting the dead and decapitated body of the Apostle St. James, was tied during a stop off at "Iria Flavia" whilst on route to Santiago.



Parked Porsches on Toxa

We drove a circular tour the following day, along the Atlantic coast south to Castro de Santa Trega, a Celtic village dating from 600 BC and to the summit of Monte Santa Trega for a group photographic opportunity. From there we crossed the border into Portugal heading south west to the Rio Lima on beautiful roads briefly crossing back into Spain then returning into Portugal on a beautiful driving route through the Peneda-Gerês National Park. The area is famous for the Espigueiros of Soajo, stone storage huts on legs which despite looking like burial tombs, were used by early settlers to warehouse and protect food crops. Reaching the Rio Minho, which forms the northern border between Spain and Portugal, we continued along the Portuguese bank to the border town of Tui and the crossing back into Spain and our Parador in Baiona.

Our next stop was Toxa, an Atlantic island where we visited the small twelfth century church of San Caralampio, which is entirely covered in scallop shells, before continuing along the beautiful Atlantic coast road through picturesque towns and villages to Pontevedra, then South through Vigo to our hotel in Baiona. This is a stunning Parador, converted from a medieval fortress which is situated on a headland overlooking the historic harbour from where "The Pinta", one of the fleet of Christopher Columbus, arrived in 1493 bringing news of the discovery of the New World.



Monte Santa Trega photographic stop



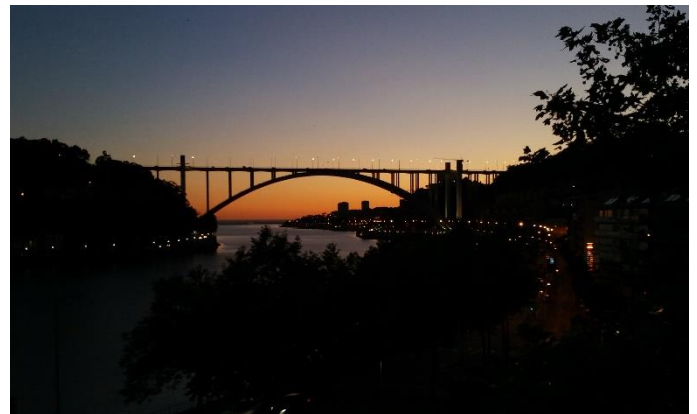
Bom Jesus do Monte Sanctuary

We then headed Southwest to the Vincci Porto Hotel. Built on the site of Porto's abandoned fish market, it is our location for two nights where we could rest the cars, in the cool of an underground garage and enjoy the stunning views from the rooftop bar.

Porto is still home to an active historic tram service which we utilised to explore the city, taking a boat trip to escape the throngs gave us a great chance to see the bridged the city is famous for. We also hopped on the tourist bus to get an understanding of the city and cross some of the bridges we had passed under shortly before.

Bidding farewell to Baiona we took the main roads to Braga to visit the sanctuary of Bom Jesus do Monte. The design of the Sanctuary with its Baroque nature emphasised by the zigzag stairways, influenced many other sites in Portugal.

As the pilgrims climbed the many stairs, (by tradition encouraged to do so on their knees) to the temple of God, the church on the top of the hill. Like good pilgrims we braved the heat and sun to climb the stairs, to the summit although not on our knees, where we found some convenient bars and a carpark.



One of the Porto bridges from the rooftop bar

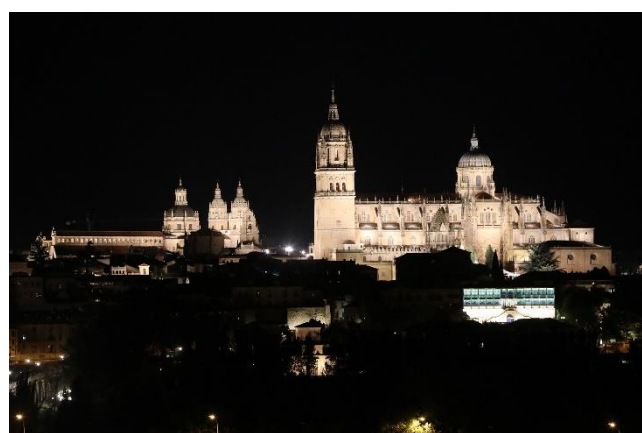
It is whilst here we learn from our guides that Brittany ferries have cancelled the return ferry crossing, the damage to the vessels steering box being a major repair, and pretty much expected. The confirmation however was a blow to the group, in contrast to the outbound crossing, many of the cars were due to return by ferry so once again so hard work by our escorts ensued to arrange hotels and tunnel crossings for those affected.

Leaving Porto we set off on possibly the highlight of the trip, the business that is synonymous with the country, Port production. Driving along the Douro River valley, following its banks east through vineyards we pass signs for many famous names along the roadside. We have chosen to visit possibly the most familiar, Croft, at their flagship Quinta da Roêda estate. The visitors centre is housed in the old stables from where we enjoyed a guided tour, and afterwards a lavish buffet lunch which everyone enjoyed in the shade of the vine covered courtyard, a welcome break from the forty degrees heat.

Having made our purchases, we left the vineyard and our lack of air conditioning proved to be a problem as it was just too hot in the sun to have the roof down. We resorted to shading ourselves with the windows open and the fan on full to try and counter the heat.



Arriving at Crofts, Quinta da Roêda



Salamanca skyline from our Parador

There was a welcome drop in temperature to a “cool” thirty degrees as we climbed to the high plains on our way back to Spain which felt like heaven. We entered Spain crossing the Saucelle Dam which straddles the border of Spain and Portugal on the Douro River, four kilometres west of the town of the same name. We needed fuel and were grateful for a stop in the sleepy little town of Vitigudino to purchase cold drinks and petrol, it was one of very few villages showing any signs of life. The attendant was bemused by the arrival of the English sports cars, but happy for the business. Our route then followed a tributary of the Duoro, the River Tormes, to our Parador in the Spanish city of Salamanca where we enjoyed a group meal for those not glued to the football on TV that evening.

Sunday 2nd June, embarking on the homeward leg and our last day as a formal group, we headed east across country on excellent driving roads, to the 15th century Moorish styled and moated Castillo de Coca for a tour and drinks break. From there we continue north east to the Castle town of Cuéllar in the Province of Segovia, where we stopped for lunch before continuing east to the familiar Parador hotel in the town of Lerma that we had visited previously, on the 2016 Paradors of northern Spain tour.

On Monday we parted company with the main element of the group who were charging up the motorway to Le Mans. We chose to retrace our outward travel through France. Perhaps foolishly, we used the same hotel in Poitiers, thinking the problems outbound must have been a blip in service, but sadly they plummeted to new low. A great location but that was the only thing in the hotels favour.

Our final night away was spent close to the euro-tunnel at the Château de Cocove which is a superb building set in stunning surroundings, where we enjoyed the best food of the entire tour with a massive thunderstorm for entertainment.



Château de Cocove

We made the channel tunnel crossing without any further problems and set course for home. There was a sting in the tail however, as we received a speeding ticket in France, shortly after crossing into France from Spain where we were clocked three kilometres an hour over the speed limit.

This was the icing on the cake considering we had tried to avoid France completely on this tour, “cest la vie” as they say.