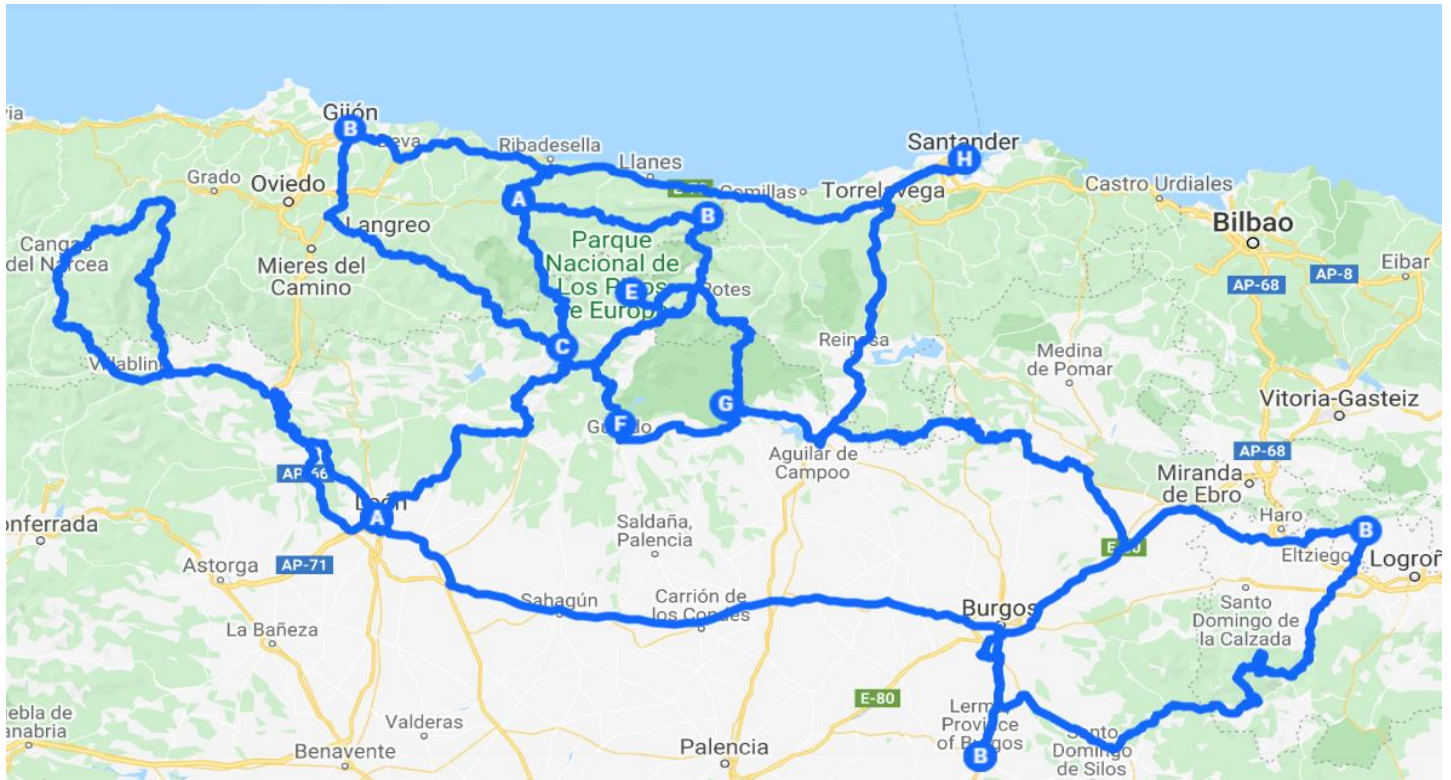


# 2016, Paradors of Northern Spain

9<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> September 2016

Following our escorted tour baptism on “The Italian job”, we decided to undertake a complex journey with the same travel company, the trip would be an autumn exploration of the regions of the Picos de la Europa in Northern Spain.



We are familiar with the arid southern areas of Spain having explored them quite extensively, therefore the lush landscape and rugged coast of Cantabria and Asturias were very interesting as they are closer to the southwest United Kingdom. Following a very smooth overnight crossing from Portsmouth, we disembarked with an Aston Martin also on the tour, from the Port of Santander late afternoon, for the short drive to our first Parador.

Paradors are fabulous hotels, many located in converted historic buildings throughout Spain. On this tour, “Paradors of Northern Spain”, we would explore four such properties over eight days, starting at the Parador de Cangas de Onís, in the former twelfth century San Pedro de Villanueva Monastery.



*Porsches on the road*

Our introduction to the region began on Sunday with a short drive to the seaside town of Gijón, before heading through glorious countryside to the Picos de la Europa, Spain's first National Park. We enjoyed a welcome lunch stop in New Riaño, a new village built to replace the submerged Riaño, lost when the dam that created the beautiful Riaño Lake was constructed. The roads around this region are very quiet and the scenery is breathtaking, the before completing a circular tour returning to Cangas.



*Hostal de San Marcos Parador in Leon*

Day two consisted of a cross country jaunt to the city of León and our third region, Castilla y León. This palacial Parador is the Hostal de San Marcos, one of the most extraordinary historic hotels. Construction of the building began in the 16th century, it was built to house the peninsula's western headquarters for the Military Order of Saint James. Its thick walls still bare witness to important episodes in Spanish history: they hosted the order's chapter meetings and witnessed tragic periods, including its use as a concentration camp during the Spanish Civil War.



The Parador in León was ideal for exploring the lakes and mountains of the Parque Natural de Somiedo. During our circular tour we experienced some of the rain that allows the region to remain verdant and we passed another of the chain of hotels, Parador de Corias before returning to León.

The next morning a motorway sprint to Burgos and its fabulous cathedral, final resting place of Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar, a Castilian knight better known as “El Cid” and immortalised by Charlton Heston in the 1961 film. He was born in the town of Vivar, about six miles north of Burgos.

The Gothic Cathedral of Saint Mary of Burgos started in 1221, is arguably the most impressive in all Spain. The interior encompasses seventeen different, chapels ranging from rudimentary to truly extravagant. Central to the cathedral, under the great dome, is the marble slab of the tomb of “El Cid” and his wife Doña Jimena Día, who upon his death bought his body here for internment, following the fall of Valencia when it was besieged by Almoravid forces.



*The exterior of Burgos cathedral*



*Parador at the Ducal palace of Lerma*

Based in Lerma for two days we were able to explore our fourth region, famously known as a wine, La Rioja.

Our first day on a circular drive we visited the wine gateway of Laguardia, a walled pedestrian town with narrow rambling streets and an impressive bell tower at the Church of Santa María de los Reyes with 360 degree views over the plains below. Adjacent to the church located in Plaza el Gaitero are two incredibly realistic bronze sculptures of boots and cases by artist Koko Rico, titled “Viajeros/Bidaiaariak Izenekoa” (passengers).



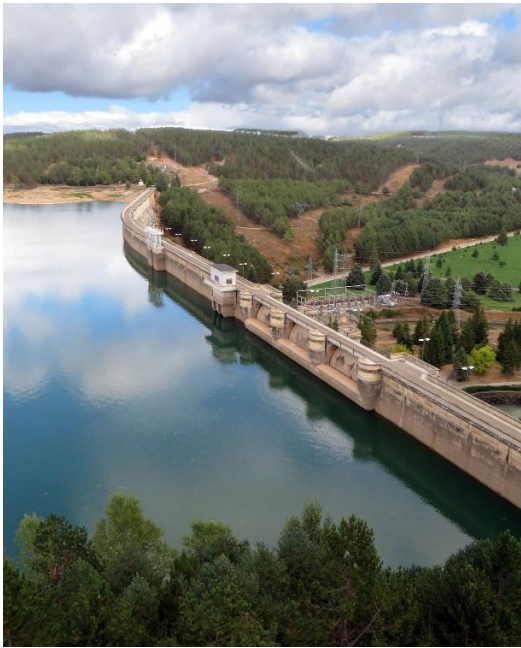
*Koko Rico sculpture*



*Wine tour at Bodegas Ysios*

Close to Laguardia is the Bodegas Ysios with its distinctive modern reception building, designed as a temple to wine. It was owned by a Spanish bank between 1999 and 2001, then purchased by Allied Domecq as was, before that itself was absorbed into current owners, Pernod Ricard. It now sits in Pernod Ricard Bodegas, alongside the far larger Campo Viejo brand. The winery was set up to be an ‘only Reserva’ producer “ultra premium, estate-grown, 100% Tempranillo from 25-to-30-year-old vines in the prestigious Rioja Alavesa region”. It was designed to be a 1,000,000 bottle a year facility. Heading back to our cars, we completed the loop on more superb sweeping roads that returned us to Lerma and a group meal in the Parador restaurant.





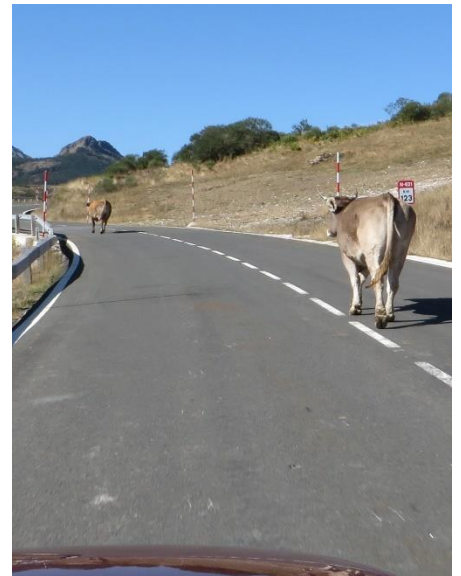
*Embalse de Aguilar*

Next morning, our journey from Lerma would take us through the beauty of the Natural Park of Alto Ebro and Rudrón gorges (declared a Natural Park by the Spanish government in 2008). Some of the gorge walls are 200 metres in height. A highlight is the waterfall of Fuente de Orbaneja, and its blue pools of water.

Our journey then took us to the town of Aguilar de Campoo where after a short break we climbed to the viewpoint outside the town for the reservoir and dam of the “Embalse de Aguilar”. Next we proceeded to cross the dam on our way to the final hotel of the tour where we would be based for three nights. This was the modern Parador de Cervera de Pisuerga, located in the Fuentes Carrionas nature reserve. Although a new hotel it is constructed in traditional log style and situated in a wooded area, offering spectacular views, with the waters of Ruesga Reservoir beside it and the Picos de Europa mountains as a backdrop. At over 1000 meters above sea level the Parador is in a quiet spot, but is very close to Cervera, a town in the heart of the Montaña Palentina region, which has preserved its traditional, rural character.

The first run from the Parador began with a route that took us to the coast, although glorious roads. The weather had taken a turn for the worse, we decided to leave the group in the search of some wine that we had enjoyed previously. This deviation would lead us back to the Parador at Cangas de Onís. On our arrival we were welcomed by the sounds of an Asturian wedding in full swing, locals in traditional dress with pipes and drummers was a lovely sight to behold. Sadly we did not find the same wine but as the sun had come out we were feeling blessed, we made good time on the journey back.

Our final circular tour from this Parador began in the Natural Parks of Fuentes Carrionas and Fuente Cobre-Montaña Palentina; following the reservoirs of Camporredondo and Compuerto on an excursion back to the Picos, including Fuente Dé, a remote park area accessible by one road. This lead a single strand cable car which climbs 753 metres, situated in the heart of the Picos de Europa. At an elevation of 1823 metres it takes just four minutes from the valley floor to the top of the mountain.



*Bovine chicane*



*Fuente Dé cable car*

For the more adventurous and visitors with longer in the park, the alternative to the cable car is an exposed hiking track but as we were adhering to a timetable, rather than climbing the hard way on the mountain path, we boarded the cable car.

During our ascent we passed through thin clouds on a spectacular journey to the summit, fortunately the clouds soon parted to give us unrestricted views across the valleys and peaks. There is an observation deck and café as well as trails further into the mountains. We had time to take a short hike for photographs, followed by a welcome hot chocolate before boarding the cable car back to the valley floor.

We retraced the park road back to the entrance before heading north, rejoining the beautiful driving road at Ojedo on our journey back to the Parador for our final evening.

Bidding farewell to the majority of our fellow tourists who were driving home through France, the Aston and us returning on the ferry. In summary, this region of Spain is picturesque and unspoilt by mass tourism, the roads are first class and practically empty, you are as likely to encounter cows as you are cars, and it is well worth a visit before it is discovered by too many tourists.