



EXPLORE!

Northern Spain by Rail
12 days

Spain - Trip code RSP

Northern Spain by Rail

On this holiday we have the opportunity to experience the sights and sounds of Northern Spain as we travel by rail along its spectacular coast. Our journey takes us through a number of regions including the unique Basque area and Spain's oldest national park, the Picos de Europa mountain range. Along the way we'll stay in a variety of historical cities, including Santiago de Compostela, Leon, Bilbao and Oviedo. It's the ideal way to see the highlights of the lesser-visited north of Spain.

Trip highlights

- ★ **Rail Journeys** - Travel by rail throughout northern Spain including the unique Basque country
- ★ **Picos de Europa** - Walking amongst the beautiful landscapes of Spain's oldest national park
- ★ **Bilbao** - Sample txakoli wine and admire the coastal views in the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve
- ★ **Leon and Santiago de Compostela** - Two of Spain's most historic holy cities

ACCOMMODATION GRADE:

Premium

Our premium accommodation is hand-picked and chosen for its character, location or local importance. These properties have excellent facilities and a higher level of comfort and service. They provide the perfect wind down after an active day.

TRIP PACE:

Moderate

Moderate pace tours are ideal if you want a holiday which combines exciting activities and experiences with plenty of time to relax and unwind. Typically you'll be active and busy for part of the day but then also have time to rest and recharge your batteries.

GROUP SIZE:

10 - 16

Maximum group size ranges from between 6 to 20 people, depending on the type of trip, the transport and accommodation used and activities included. We rarely have groups that are smaller than five or six people and the average is 12 people plus an Explore leader.

Itinerary

Itineraries on some departure dates may differ, please select the itinerary that you wish to explore.

DAY 1 - Join trip in Bilbao

Arrive in Bilbao and check-in at the hotel. Situated on the banks of the Nervion River, on the northern edge of the Iberian Peninsula, Bilbao is home to the iconic magnificence of the Guggenheim, one of the world's most famous museums and one of its most spectacular architectural creations. Lying amongst the verdant landscapes of Vizcaya Province, the city is the largest and most culturally dynamic in the Basque region, providing us with the perfect start to this incredible journey.



Accommodation: Sercotel Coliseo (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: None

DAY 2 - Train to Puente San Miguel; free afternoon in Santillana del Mar

Heading west this morning, we take a taxi to Bilbao railway station and board a train towards the mountainous landscapes of Cantabria. The journey will take us to Puente San Miguel and from here we travel by road the short distance to Santillana del Mar. This afternoon is free for you to discover the town's many historical building including the Gothic architecture of the Merino and Don Borja Towers. You may also wish to visit the Collegiate Church of Santa Juliana, which is considered to be one of the best examples of Romanesque architecture in Cantabria and has now been declared a National Monument. Alternatively just a short taxi ride from the town it's possible to visit the Altamira Cave Museum where you can see a replica of Stone Age rock paintings found in a nearby cave and to learn the history of the original artwork that dates from circa 13,000 BC.



Accommodation: Parador Santillana (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast & Dinner

DAY 3 - Funicular and scenic walk in the Picos de Europa Mountains

Today we take a taxi back to Puente San Miguel rail station and continue west by train, following the coast of the fertile Costa Verde towards the old fortified port of Llanes. On arrival in the small village of Unquera we will travel by bus up into the Picos de Europa, the beautiful mountain landscapes that lie to the south, whose towering peaks were the first comforting sight beheld by returning sailors to the European mainland. Arriving in the small village of Poncebos we take the funicular railway up towards the remote community of Bulnes, where we can bask in the expansive grandeur of these mountains and take in the dominating heights of the Naranjo de Bulnes, at 2,519 metres high, it's one of the highest peaks in the national park. Spain's first national park, the Picos are made up of three distinct massifs that extend across Cantabria, Asturias, and Castile and Leon, offering a grand expanse of mountains and canyons that are home to a wealth of flora and fauna, including wolves, the last remaining brown bears in Western Europe and the ever-present chamois. We'll take an easy walk through this spectacular setting before returning down to Poncebos on the funicular. Alternatively there is the chance to walk down into the valley through the dramatic Canal de Tejo Gorge (2 hours duration covering six kilometres, 400 metre descent). Later in the afternoon we drive to our hotel in Llanes.



Accommodation: Hotel Don Paco (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 4 - Train to Oviedo; afternoon free to explore Cider Street

This morning we have some free time to relax in Llanes before walking the short distance (5-10 minutes) to the station to board the train to the university town of Oviedo. The rail journey takes us across the fertile plains of Asturias and onto Oviedo, the cultural and economic centre of the region. This was one of the few regions of Spain that didn't fall under the influence of the Moors and its medieval heart has a cathedral at its centre. We arrive in the early evening and take a taxi to our hotel. Tonight you may choose to discover the old town and to sample the local tapas, such as cebolla rellena - baked onion stuffed with minced meat, olive oil and egg, and in Cider Street you can sample the local tippie, which is poured from a height into your glass, in order to aerate the liquid and bring out the fullest flavour of the cider.



Accommodation: Hotel Princesa Munia (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 5 - Free day in Oviedo; chance to visit the Asturias Railway Museum

A free day gives us the opportunity to explore the city and admire its past grandeur, especially around the grand Plaza Alfonso, which includes finely preserved palaces and the Gothic facades of its cathedral. In the cathedral's exquisite interior are the tombs of the Asturian nobility, as well as a superb 9th century chapel, the Camara Santa, which contains a wealth of Asturian art and golden relics. The city also has an excellent art gallery and archaeological museum and its outskirts are dotted with superb Pre-

Romanesque churches, including the magnificent Santa Maria des Naranco and the 9th century church of San Julian de los Prados, which is believed to be the largest of its kind left in Spain.

Perhaps you might prefer to board a train and discover further afield. You could visit Colanzo or Laviana in the Rio Nalon Basin or take the train to Gijon and visit the Asturias Railway Museum, built on the site of the old Renfe (Spanish railways) station that dates back to the 1870's. The museum was conceived to preserve the railways unique local history and its permanent exhibition provides a fascinating insight into the relationship between the railways and the development of Asturias over the past century and a half.



Accommodation: Hotel Princesa Munia (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 6 - Train to Galicia and visit to Cathedrals Beach; arrive in Santiago

Leaving our hotel early this morning we take a taxi to Oviedo station and board the train to Ribadeo, as we head into Spain's remote north-western corner and the fertile landscapes of Galicia, a region whose inhabitants are fiercely proud of their Celtic origins and whose traditions and language offer an interesting contrast to much of the rest of mainland Spain. Arriving in Ribadeo this afternoon we then continue our journey by bus to nearby Cathedral Beach. Here the force of the ocean has carved out arches, columns and caves in the rock cliffs that line the sandy beach. Standing beneath these during low tide it feels as though you're beneath the eaves of a cathedral.

We drive on to Santiago de Compostela, a city that during the Middle Ages was one of the most important places of pilgrimage anywhere in the Christian world. After arriving at our hotel this evening is free for you to explore the city and sample Galician cuisine. Fresh seafood is especially popular, so perhaps try the vieiras - scallops, which are the symbol of the Camino pilgrimage route; scallops are normally served plain or cooked with onions and peppers and coated in breadcrumbs.



Accommodation: Hotel San Fransisco (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 7 - Free day to explore Santiago and perhaps visit the cathedral

Today is free for you to discover this enigmatic city at your own pace, its historic centre is small enough to explore on foot. In the majestic main square of Praza do Obradoiro is the 12th century Baroque cathedral, which is one of Christendom's holiest of shrines. Lying at the end of the famous pilgrim route of the Camino de Santiago, its crypt is believed to hold the tomb of Saint James himself and the building's rich fusion of Romanesque and Baroque styles is truly a work of the most exceptional architectural craftsmanship. Alternatively, you may prefer to wander the narrow streets and visit more of the architectural treasures that are dotted around the city such as the Monastery of San Martino Pinario and the Gelmirez Palace. There are also a number of good museums like the Museum of Galician Culture, Pilgrims Museum and the Cathedral Museum. And, at the end of the day, what's

better than to relax with a reviving drink on the Praza das Praterias and watch the world pass by.



Accommodation: Hotel San Fransisco (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 8 - Train to Ponferrada; chance to see the Las Medulas rock formations

Taking a taxi to the railway station we will board the morning train to Ponferrada in the Castile and Leon region, a landscape of expansive plains and rolling hills dotted with historic castles. On arrival this afternoon we take a taxi to our hotel and you are then free to discover Ponferrada. The city's name stems from pons ferrata, a medieval bridge (reinforced with iron) that was constructed to aid the passage of pilgrims travelling along the Camino de Santiago towards the sacred city. You might choose to visit its imposing fortress, which was constructed by the Knights Templar between the 12th and 14th centuries to protect the pilgrims, and in its time was considered one of the largest citadels in northwest Spain.

Alternatively you might like to take a taxi to Villafranca del Bierzo to walk along part of the pilgrim route, enjoying something of the idyllic landscape and quiet villages as you walk in the footsteps of the countless devotees whose feet have trodden these trails for centuries. Or perhaps to travel by taxi to nearby Las Medulas to view the UNESCO-listed rock formations. The red rock towers and sheer mountain faces found here aren't a naturally occurring phenomenon; in the 1st century AD the Romans carved out this ancient quarry in search of gold and this process left us with the unique landscape that we see today.



Accommodation: Hotel Bierzo Plaza (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 9 - Train to Leon; opportunity to visit the cathedral and historic centre

After a little more free time this morning in Ponferrada we take a taxi to the railway station and board the train to Leon, a city that once lay at the heart of the region's Reconquista from the Moors during the 11th century. On arrival we take a taxi to our hotel and you have the rest of the day free to explore. The central buildings of the city are its great Gothic cathedral and the equally superb Romanesque Basilica de San Isidoro, both of which are without doubt two of the finest examples of their kind to be found anywhere in Spain. The cathedral is unique for the quality and magnificence of its stained-glass windows, which span seven centuries of history and cover subjects as diverse as religion, mythology and even medieval life, whilst San Isidoro is the final resting place of dozens of Christian kings and noble families, buried over centuries, beneath the stunning 12th century frescoes. Radiating out from the Plaza Mayor, the narrow streets are filled with cafes, churches and old houses that provide a range of options for an afternoon of fascinating sightseeing.



Accommodation: NH Collection Plaza Mayor (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 10 - Free morning in Leon before taking the train to Bilbao

We have a free morning in Leon for you to discover more of the sights. You might like to take a stroll and stop to sample a range of tapas and wine in the Barrio Humedo, which is an area of the city concentrated within the old Roman city walls. Admire the exterior of the Casa Botines, which was designed by Gaudi, and the Renaissance facade of the Guzmanes Palace.

Later this afternoon we return to the station by taxi and embark on our rail journey (taking around five hours) through the spectacular mountainous scenery of the Basque region to Bilbao. We arrive in the city in the evening and take a taxi to our hotel.



Accommodation: Sercotel Coliseo (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 11 - Taste txakoli wine and explore the dramatic coastline

Today we drive out of the city to explore the nearby stunning coastal scenery. We start with a stop in San Juan where we can take in the views over the Urdaibai Biosphere Reserve. This wide river estuary is home to extensive wetlands where it's possible to spot fish eagles, spoonbills and other birds that are scarcely seen elsewhere on the Iberian Peninsula. We continue to Mundaka, which is a quaint fishing village that is popular with local surfers as the wave's crash into the small sandy beach front. In Guernica we'll stop off at a traditional bodega to sample the delicious slightly sparkling dry white wine, txakoli, and to see the Assembly House and Tree of Guernica. This old oak tree trunk has become a symbol of freedom for the Biscayan people and is an important monument. On the way back to Bilbao we'll stop off at the UNESCO-listed Bizkaia Bridge, known as the hanging bridge, it connects the two banks of the Nervion Estuary and looms high above the waters below. Time permitting they'll be the opportunity to take the panoramic lift 50 metres high and then stroll across the high walkway of the bridge or to take the gondola that hangs underneath it across the river to admire the views.

We arrive back to Bilbao in the late afternoon and you are free to explore. Perhaps this afternoon or tomorrow morning (depending on the time of your flight home) you might like to visit the famed Guggenheim Museum, stroll in the old town, take the funicular railway up Mount Artxanda to admire the city below, or visit the Arts Museum.



Accommodation: Sercotel Coliseo (or similar)



Premium Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 12 - Trip ends in Bilbao

Trip ends after breakfast at our hotel in Bilbao.

 Meals Provided: Breakfast



Why book this trip

If you're looking to ride the rails along northern Spain's spectacular coastline and through the Picos de Europa mountain range then this is the trip for you. As well as seeing some of the country's most captivating scenery, on this tour you also have the option of upgrading your stay by travelling on one of our Premium departures, where you can unwind after a busy day exploring in comfortable hotels for the majority of nights of your holiday. Please select the 'RSP PREMIUM' itinerary on the drop down menu for further details.

What's included?



Included meals

Breakfast: 11
Dinner: 1



Transport

Bus
Taxi
Train



Trip staff

Explore Tour Leader
Driver(s)



Accommodation

9 nights premium hotel
2 nights standard hotel

Trip information

Country information

Spain

Climate

Overall, spring, early summer and autumn are ideal times for a Spanish trip - though the weather varies enormously from region to region. The high central plains suffer from fierce extremes, stiflingly hot in summer, bitterly cold and swept by freezing winds in winter. The Atlantic coast, in contrast, has a tendency to damp and mist, and a relatively brief, humid summer. The Mediterranean south is warm virtually all year round. Spain's Islands the Canaries and Balaerics experience very mild winters and warm summers making them ideal year round destinations.

Time difference to GMT

+1

Plugs

2 Pin Round

Religion

Roman Catholic

Language

Castilian Spanish, Catalan, Galician, Basque

Budgeting and packing

Optional activities

The following excursions and/or activities are usually available and may be arranged locally. Estimated costs are provided below for guidance only, are on a per person basis unless shown otherwise, and may depend on the number of participants. Prices quoted are correct as of the date these tour notes were originally issued but may change at any time due to currency fluctuations. Please note: These activities are booked and paid for direct with the supplier and do not form part of your Explore holiday contract.

Santillana del Mar: Collegiate Church of Santa Juliana entrance €3.00 per person; Altamira Cave Museum entrance €3.00 per person plus a taxi journey at approximately €8.00 per vehicle per way.

Oviedo: Asturias Railway Museum in Gijon entrance €2.40 per person ; train journeys to Laviana, Colanzo or Gijon approximately from €3.50 to €12.00 per person.

Santiago de Compostela: Museum of Galician Culture entrance €3.00 per person, Pilgrims Museum entrance €2.40 per person, Cathedral Museum entrance €6.00 per person; guided walking tour of Santiago Cathedral and surrounding squares €120.00 per group (sight entrance fees not included).

Ponferrada: Templar Castle entrance €6.00 per person; return taxi to Villa Franca approximately €90.00 per vehicle for a return trip (maximum 8 persons per vehicle); return taxi to Las Medulas €100.00 per vehicle for a return trip (maximum 8 persons per vehicle).

Leon: Cathedral entrance €6.00 per person or a guided visit (including entrance) is €12.00 per person; San Isidoro entrance €5.00 per person.

Guernica: Peace Museum entrance €4.50 per person.

Gexto: Bizkaia Bridge walkway from €8.00 per person or gondola from €0.40 per way per person.

Bilbao: Guggenheim Museum entrance €13.00 per person; Arxanda Funicular €1.50 per way per person; Art Museum entrance €7.00 per person.

Clothing

Lightweight cotton clothing is best from June to September, light rainwear may be needed at any time of year, but especially after the start of September, and a warm fleece/light jacket is recommended for cooler evenings and nights at the beginning and end of the season. Don't forget a swimming costume.

Footwear

Good comfortable trainers or lightweight walking shoes. Sandals for relaxing.

Luggage

20kg

Luggage: On tour

One main piece of baggage and daypack. Remember you are expected to carry your own luggage so don't overload yourself.

It's very important that you pack light and are able to lift your case. There is limited storage on the trains and the steps to board can be steep. A soft sided bag is best and the smaller bag you can use then the easier this will be for you to lift it on board and to store it.

Equipment

A water bottle, sunhat and high factor sunscreen are all essential. A head torch (for use on day 4 of the trip) may be useful to bring, however is not essential.

Tipping

Explore leader

At your discretion you might also consider tipping your Explore Leader in appreciation of the efficiency and service you receive.

Local crew

Although entirely voluntary, tipping is a recognised part of life in this region of the world. Some local staff will look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided. Accordingly, you should allow approximately €10-20 for tipping.

In order to make things easier for you, the Explore Leader may organise a group's tips kitty and if this is the case, they will account for it throughout the trip.

Country Information

Spain

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price

£8.00 - 12.00

Dinner price

£16.00 - 20.00

Beer price

£1.50 - 2.50 (depending on the region/area in Spain)

Water price

£1.4

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Euros

Recommended Currency For Exchange

We recommend you take the majority of your spending money in Euros cash.

Where To Exchange

We recommend that you change any currency into Euros prior to arrival. Bureau de Change are generally only found in major cities and large airports.

ATM Availability

In cities and most major towns.

Credit Card Acceptance

Visa and Mastercard are generally accepted in larger restaurants and some shops.

Travellers Cheques

Not recommended.

Transport, Accommodation & Meals

Transport Information

Bus, Taxi, Train

Essential Information

FCO Advice

We strongly recommend that you check your government's travel advisory for up-to-date information and advice about your destination: safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs. For UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice click here.

For more information from Explore about travel advice, click here

Under 18 immigration guidance

Please note that some countries require proof of parental consent when travelling overseas with under 18s. Please check requirements with the relevant embassy or consular office well in advance of travel if this applies to your party.

Price Guarantee

Once your booking has been confirmed we guarantee the price will not increase, whatever the circumstances. Before booking please ensure you have read our important tour pricing information. [Booking Conditions](#)

Visa and Passport Information

Spain: Visas are not required by UK, Australian, New Zealand, US and Canadian citizens. Other nationalities should consult their local embassy or consular office.

If you do require assistance in obtaining a visa then you may consider applying through Explore's recommended visa service in the UK, Travcour. See www.travcour.com to download the relevant visa application for your trip, if applicable (UK citizens only), along with details of how to apply for your visa through Travcour. The Team at Travcour will be happy to answer specific questions relating to visa applications, please call them directly on 0208 5431846.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, with the correct validity for your chosen destination.

Booking conditions

Before booking your Explore trip, please ensure that you read both our [Essential Information](#) and [Booking Conditions](#).

Transfers

[Find out more about Trip Transfer Terms and Conditions before you book.](#)

Booking a land only package with Explore

Customers who have chosen to book on the 'Land Only' arrangements of our tour, please ensure that you have checked your tour specific 'Joining Instructions' prior to booking your own travel arrangements. Your joining instructions can be found below in the dates and prices information.

You may also be eligible for the Free Explore Transfer.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will now receive a Free Transfer, provided you arrive and depart on the tour only itinerary start and end dates. The transfers will be from the Explore designated airport or train station to the joining point of your tour, and then back from the ending point to the designated airport or train station. The exception to this rule is customers who are booked on a tour where the joining and ending point is at the designated airport or train station.

Free transfers are not available for Self-Guided, Polar, Tailormade or Tours for Churches customers.

If you are not eligible for the Free Transfer then you will need to make your own way through to the joining and ending point. On a majority of our tours Explore will be able to provide a private transfer at an additional cost. Please ask for a quote at the time of booking.

For more information regarding the Explore Free Transfer click here

Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Explore that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country. Please ensure your policy includes medical emergency helicopter evacuation in the event of illness or injury and covers the entire duration of your holiday. If you are trekking at altitude please ensure that there is no upper altitude limit which may limit or exclude cover for your trip. The cost of many of our Polar Voyages will exceed the capped amount covered by standard insurance premiums and you will be required to pay an additional premium to cover the full value of your trip. Please ensure that you are covered for the full amount of your holiday cost, as insufficient cover could invalidate a claim under the policy. Medical and repatriation insurance cover is not mandatory for UK residents who are travelling on trips within the United Kingdom.

Read more information about what travel insurance is required.

Flight information

Explore offers a wide range of flexible flying options to make joining and leaving our trips easy. [Read more about them here.](#)

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Booking a flight inclusive package with Explore

We have a good selection of flights not only from London but from many regional airports around the UK allowing us to compare fares between scheduled carriers as well as low cost and charter airlines. Our dedicated flights team will match the best flight options to your arrival and departure airport.

On our website we display a UK flight inclusive package guide price which is generally based on a London departure. To avoid paying supplements or to secure your preferred flight option, we recommend booking as early as possible, especially for peak travel dates.

Included activities

On this trip we will take a number of long train journeys, so as well as enjoying the ever-changing views we'd recommend taking snacks and drinks and entertainment such as a book, audio books or an electronic book reader, games device or tablet, pack of cards or a quiz book.

Spain

Vaccinations

Nothing compulsory but Tetanus is usually recommended as a precaution. Please check the latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at [Explore Travel Health](#) and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.
