



Cantabria & Asturias

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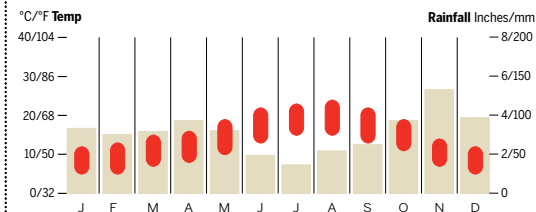
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Why Go?

You can traverse either of these two regions from north to south in little more than an hour. But don't. The coastline is a sequence of sheer cliffs, beautiful beaches and small fishing ports. Behind it, gorgeously green river valleys dotted with stone-built villages rise to the 2000m-plus mountain wall of the Cordillera Cantábrica, which reaches majestic heights in the Picos de Europa. The beauty is endless and ever-changing. The damp climate makes sure that you'll eat and drink well too: on offer are quality meat, local cheeses, and cider from Asturias' apple orchards, as well as the fruits of the sea. And travellers with a feel for history will be in their element: early humans painted some of the world's most magnificent prehistoric art at Altamira and elsewhere, and it was at Covadonga in Asturias that the seed of the Spanish nation first sprouted 1300 years ago.

When to Go

Oviedo



May, Jun & Sep
Best time: temperatures are up, rainfall and prices are down, crowds are away.

Late Jul
Santander's Semana Grande brings the summer fun.

Late Aug Join thousands of tipplers at Gijón's Fiesta de la Sidra Natural (Natural Cider Festival).

CANTABRIA

For modern travellers, Cantabria offers a bit of everything. The coastline is a sequence of soft cliffs, beautiful beaches and colourful fishing ports; summer seaside days are perfectly possible (unreliable weather permitting). The inland mountains – sliced up by deep, multibranched valleys connected only by steep passes – are sprinkled with sleepy towns and villages and prove a feast for the eyes, whether you drive the country roads or walk the trails.

Lively capital Santander provides a slice of urban life, with buzzing beaches and bodegas. Santillana del Mar and Comillas entice with their medieval and Modernista trappings. The prehistoric art of Altamira, El Castillo and Covalanas caves is some of the oldest and very best in the world, and Cantabria's rugged ranges culminate in the abrupt mountain walls of the Picos de Europa in the west.

Santander

POP 130,603

The belle-époque elegance of El Sardinero aside, modern Santander is not the most beautiful of cities. A huge fire raged through the centre back in 1941, leaving little that's old or quaint. But Cantabria's capital is an engaging one, nonetheless, making the most of its setting along the northern side of the handsome Bahía de Santander. It's a lively spot to spend a night or two, with fine urban beaches, busy shopping streets, a heaving bar and restaurant scene, plenty of surf, and some intriguing cultural attractions. It's a popular summer holiday resort for Spaniards.

Sights

★ Museo de Prehistoria y Arqueología de Cantabria

MUSEUM

(☎942 20 99 22; www.museosdecantabria.es; Calle de Bailén; adult/child €5/2 Sunday afternoon free; ☉10.30am-2pm & 5-8.30pm Wed-Sun mid-Jun-mid-Sep, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Wed-Sun mid-Sep-mid-Jun) Santander's excellent, elegant prehistory and archaeology museum showcases Cantabria's immense archaeological wealth, with explanatory matter in French, English and Spanish. The detailed, interactive multimedia displays range from early hominid remains to giant steles (stone disks) carved by the pre-Roman Cantabri-

ans, a replica Roman patio, prehistoric cave art and the medieval Spanish kingdoms of Asturias and León.

★ Península de la Magdalena

PARK

(☉8am-9pm) At the eastern tip of the bay, this sprawling parkland is perfect for a stroll and popular with picnickers. Kids will enjoy the resident seals and penguins, the replica Spanish galleons, and the little train that choo-choos around the headland (adult/child €2.15/1.45). The views of nearby beaches across the crashing sea are sensational.

Palacio de la Magdalena

PALACE

(☎942 20 30 84; www.palaciomagdalena.com; Península de la Magdalena; tours €3; ☉tours hourly 11am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, hourly 10am-noon Sat & Sun) The eclectically styled, English-inspired palace crowning the Península de la Magdalena was built between 1908 and 1912 as a gift from the city to the royal family, which used it every summer until 1930. Detailed 45-minute guided tours (in Spanish) lead you past oak floors, bronze chandeliers, surprisingly simple bedrooms, a chestnut-wood-carved staircase and the king's former study. Visits are reduced in summer, when the palace hosts the **Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo** (www.uimp.es), a global get-together for specialists in all sorts of disciplines.

Jardines & Paseo de Pereda

PARK, PROMENADE

(Pereda's Gardens; Paseo de Pereda) The pretty, recently refurbished Jardines de Pereda are named after 19th-century Cantabrian writer José María de Pereda, whose seminal work, *Escenas Montañesas*, is sculpted here in bronze and stone.

The bayside promenade fronting these gardens continues east to the Puerto Chico (Little Port) marina. Half the city strolls or jogs here on summer (and, often, winter) evenings. Both Paseo de Pereda and Calle Castelar, opposite the Puerto Chico, are lined with grand buildings flaunting typical glassed-in balconies.

Mercado La Esperanza

MARKET

(Plaza La Esperanza; ☉8am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) Behind the city hall, in the western part of central Santander, you'll find the 19th-century cast-iron Mercado La Esperanza, a colourful market with masses of fish and seafood downstairs, and meat, cheese, fruit and *orujo* (firewater) from Potes (in the Picos de Europa) upstairs.