

# 8 EPIC, OFF-THE-BEATEN-TRACK ADVENTURES IN SPAIN THAT WILL TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY

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September 15, 2019 By Talek Nantes Europe , Spain 0  
Comments

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2019

Looking for adventures in Spain that are unusual, delightful, memorable and beyond the guide book? Read on. We've developed a curated list of things to do in Spain that fulfill that criteria and then some.

These Spanish activities and adventures are unique in that you can't do them anywhere else. They include some of the best must-see places in Spain as well as things you must do.

The time in these locations can be adjusted to a 2 or 3-week itinerary in Spain or more depending on your time and interests. Or they can be compartmentalized for several unique Spanish itineraries. The assumption is you'll be traveling by car which for purposes of this trip is the best way to travel in Spain.



Roman bridge in Cangas de Onis in Asturias, northern Spain

From exploring the Roman ruins in Merida to hiking the Picos de Europa trails to partying in the streets of the Principality of Asturias, join me on a Spain adventure tour you will want to experience for yourself.

## EPIC ADVENTURES IN SPAIN

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### Walk Among the Roman Ruins in Merida, Spain

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In southern Extremadura region, you find the city of Merida, the ancient Roman capital of the province of Lusitania founded in 25 BC at the height of Roman power. Today it is a capital of culture, art and a surprising little gem of a city.

I've never seen such extensive Roman ruins! I was surprised to see that Merida boasts the largest and most impressive Roman ruins in Spain. They are everywhere; amphitheaters, forums, columned temples, fountains, bridges...and they are impressive.

If you are interested in Roman history and architecture, a two-day visit to Merida will convince you that Merida has the best Roman ruins in Spain.



Be sure to include the [Museo Nacional de Arte Romano \(National Museum of Roman Art\)](#). This beautifully curated, three-floor museum has some of the best Roman mosaics in existence. Here you can learn more about the Romans in Spain and how their influence is apparent even in modern Spain.

About an hour and a half north of Merida I had one of my most memorable travel experiences in front of the Alcantara Roman bridge. I had heard the bridge, built in 107 AD by order of Emperor Trajan, was worth the trip to the outskirts of town.

When I got there I was overwhelmed by the graceful arches and beautiful symmetry. This magnificent structure, over 2000 years old, was still in use. I walked across it several times to admire its beauty from several angles.



I imagined what this place was like when the bridge was being built so long ago. What was the architect thinking? Was he worried about being over budget? Was he happy with the design? Was he thirsty in that hot sun? Was he satisfied with the work so far? Did he put his heart and soul into this impressive combination of artistic grace and practical functionality? Or did he just want to get it done so he could go back home to his family?



As I was getting ready to leave I noticed a plaque attached to the bridge over one of the arches. It said, "Pontem perpetui mansurum in saecula" (I have built a bridge which will last forever). I felt the architect had read my mind and answered my questions from 2000 years in the past.

He was proud of his work and wanted visitors in the future to know it. It was as if he tapped me on the shoulder, pointed to his bridge and said, "Hey, you...check this out. Pretty cool, huh? Do I rock or what?" That was one of those travel experiences that make it all worthwhile.

## **Stay at a Renovated Monastery, Convent, or Church for a True Spanish Adventure**

One of the most interesting places to stay in Spain are the government-run renovated monasteries, abbeys, castles, and palaces know as paradores.



These historic medieval structures have been gutted, renovated and refurbished to look like they did at the time they were built.

They can be a bit pricey but if you can manage at least a one-night stay, go for it. It's an unforgettable experience and one of the best things to do in Spain.



Although the paradores are all over Spain, one parador I found especially beautiful is a renovated monastery, Real Monasterio de Santa Maria de Guadalupe, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The prices are reasonable and the place is unique. The rooms are decorated with the sparse, rustic furniture and period adornments giving you a feeling of traveling back in time. The best part is that the parador is in the village of Guadalupe, itself a spectacular little gem of a town well worth a two-day visit at least.

## **Visit the Cradle of the Spanish Conquistadors**

History buffs (that would be me!) will love this! Many of the conquistadors that explored new worlds came from the Extremadura region in western Spain, specifically from the town of Trujillo.



Among the famous names are: Hernan Cortes, conqueror of the Aztec empire, Francisco Pizarro, conqueror of the Inca empire, Vasco Nunez de Balboa, first European to see the Pacific, Hernando de Soto, explorer of the south-western United States and Ines Suarez, defender of Santiago, Chile.



During the time of the conquistadors in the early 16th century the region of Extremadura, meaning “westernmost,” was an impoverished region of Spain, far from the centers of power. The harsh conditions and lack of opportunity drove many ambitious young people to try their luck elsewhere. Once one intrepid explorer found fortune in the New World others followed.

Many of the conquistadors did, in fact, find fortune but sadly at the expense of the local populations. Upon their return from the New World, they built spectacular homes many of which can still be seen and visited today. In the town of Trujillo you can see the legacy of the conquest in the meticulously preserved residences surrounding the principal plaza with its impressive statue of Francisco Pizarro, Trujillo’s native son.

## Hike the Cares River Trail in Picos de Europa National Park

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One of the coolest things to do in Spain is hiking the many trails. It is the ultimate of adventures in Spain.



I had been hearing and reading about hiking the Cares River trail in Picos de Europa National Park for years. The park is a hiking mecca filled with breathtaking trails.

The Cares River trail, also known as the Cares Gorge, is said to be the most challenging of the Picos de Europa hiking trails. It runs right through the heart of the national park between the provinces of Asturias and Leon in northern Spain.

The land is crisscrossed by rivers, deep gorges and dotted with lakes, forests, and peaks, some over 7,000 feet high. The wild landscape is vast and just stunning.

The recommended round trip hike covers 24 kilometers. You can start the trail in either of the two provinces of Asturias, formally known as the Principality of Asturias, and Leon. We started from Poncebos in Asturias to Cain in the province of Leon.

Armed with walking sticks, a block of local cheese and a slab of bread we started out. Other than the first couple of kilometers, which are very steep, the trail is easy terrain albeit high. It runs parallel to the Cares River for a good 6 to 7 hours back and forth.



The trail is alarmingly narrow in some parts high above the river which flows along the valley floor.

Now and again the path takes you through small tunnels carved out of the rock and across bridges that hang precariously over the abyss. All the while, rocky mountainsides tower up on either side of the trail.

Vultures are disturbingly pervasive. Try negotiating a narrow mountain pass several thousand feet above a plunging gorge with 10 vultures circling over your head. Talk about nerve-racking.

After your hike, try the regional specialties, goat cheese, fabada (sausage and bean casserole) and pote asturiano (bean stew with potatoes and meat). These are heavy dishes designed to keep mountain folk going for hours during the winter months. It was delicious!

There is so much to do in this often neglected but unique part of Spain. There are several adventure sports outfitters in the area offering rafting, caving, climbing, biking, paragliding, horseback riding, and kayaking. With all these options you won't run out of things to do in northern Spain.

## Explore a 250-Million-Year-Old Cave

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The Cueva del Soplao are a network of 250-million year old caves with spectacular interior formations that are a must-see in Spain.

The road leading to the cave is miles of winding and challenging kilometers. Give yourself twice the amount of time you think you'll need to access the caves.

Visits are timed so it is crucial you arrive on time. The timing is done to preserve the caves and avoid overcrowding. Tickets are €13.50 for adults. Purchase beforehand to ensure you lock in your preferred times.

From beginning to end the experience is unique. They put you on a little train meant to resemble a mine cart. The train enters the cave and goes deeper and deeper until you are in total darkness. An employee greets you with a flashlight and guides you into a clearing.

Once at the clearing, the lights go on, and you get your first sight of the stalagmites, stalactites, and crystallized formations. It is astonishing! I've never seen anything like it. The staff really knows how to maximize the cave's stunning features to amaze visitors. This is likely to turn into one of your most memorable adventures in Spain.

The explanations the guide's give are interesting enough to satisfy the curious layperson and entertaining enough to amuse kids.

On the way back you take the same train and are dropped off at the gift shop (where else). There is also a little café in the entrance.



## Journey through Medieval Santillana del Mar

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Facing the Bay of Biscay, in the north of Spain, almost on the border between Asturias and Cantabria is one of the best places to visit northern Spain, Santillana del Mar.

Visitors have long described Santillana as “the prettiest village in all of Spain,” this charming village looks much like it did in the 1400s. The winding cobblestone streets are lined with perfectly -preserved stone houses. Little alleyways open to sunny plazas with outdoor cafés under big umbrellas shielding patrons from the blazing daylight.



The Colegiata de Santa Juliana, an impressive church with accompanying cloisters, is the town’s main sight. This historical structure dating from the early Middle Ages was built in order to preserve the remains of Santa Juliana, the town’s patron saint.

El Porche Restaurant is a good place to eat in town. The lunch special for €14 is great value for the money to eat in such a beautiful place.

## Experience the Picturesque Fishing Villages of Galicia and Asturias in Northern Spain

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Scattered across the northern Spanish coastline are some of the best reasons to visit northern Spain. There are the picturesque fishing villages facing the Bay of Biscay and the pristine areas of Galicia and Asturias.

Here you can enjoy the crisp local wine and seafood so fresh you can watch the fishermen bringing it into port. Going from one fishing village to the next tasting the towns' seafood specialties makes for a perfect 3 or 2 week northern Spain itinerary.



<https://youtu.be/bcu2zcBdkCk>

Some of the best fishing villages to visit in Spain include Baiona and Combarro in Galicia; Cudillero, Lastres, Llanes and Ribadesella in Asturias, and in Cantabria, Castro Urdiales. There are many more but these are great examples of classic Spanish fishing towns and among the best things to do in Galicia and Asturias in Spain's northern coast.

The perfect place to stay on Spain's northern coast while you explore the fishing villages and the surrounding area is the Hotel Miracielos in the picturesque town of Llanes.

The establishment is centrally located steps from the beach, has attentive staff, and serves traditional Spanish cuisine. Plus it's seriously good value for the money...a real find!



Another epic adventure in Spain is to traverse the northern coast in a luxury train. The Transcantabrico Clasico runs from foodie-heaven San Sebastian in the east to the end of the Camino de Santiago in Santiago de Compostela in the far west, a spectacular albeit pricey Spanish adventure.

## Party in the Streets of Oviedo, Spain

Oviedo, the capital of Asturias in northern Spain is off the typical tourist circuit and one of Spain's most underrated cities. I can't imagine why because the city has so much to offer.

Oviedo's top museums, the Museum of Fine Arts and Archeology are remarkable. The city boasts several UNESCO World Heritage sites from the 8th and 9th centuries, and it is a foodie powerhouse. One extraordinary restaurant in the center of town is La Corte de Pelayo specializing in local Asturian cuisine.

A short walk from La Corte de Pelayo is one of the best Spanish activities you can engage in, partying on Gascona Street.



Gascona Street is ground zero for the famous cider bars, or sidrerias, where waitstaff pour cider into glasses from several feet in the air without missing a drop! You've probably seen photos of this unique Spanish tradition.



<https://youtu.be/Uej49VD9djg>

The street is lined with restaurants serving local cuisine and bars serving tapas and wine as well as cider. Local musicians gather at these establishments and play traditional Asturian music.



<https://youtu.be/A8-0xPVa7gA>

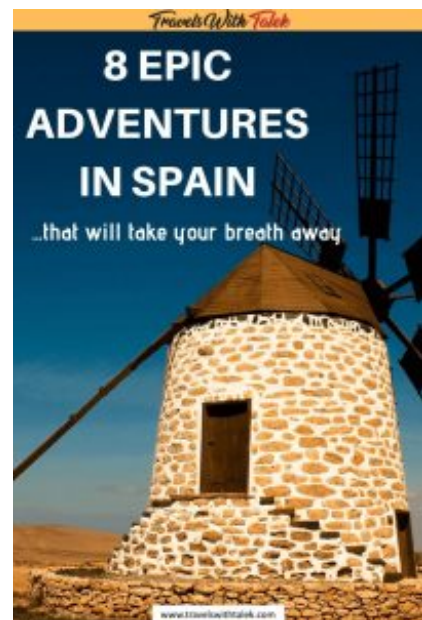
The customers join in the singing and frequently follow the musicians out to the next restaurant. The revelry continues way into the evening in the restaurants and on the streets. A meal here is a rip-roaring good time and a must-have Spanish experience!

Want to know more about Spain? Check out these reference materials packed with useful information to help you create your own adventures in Spain.

What are some of YOUR ideal adventures in Spain?

BTW, if you are getting ready for your trip, make sure to take advantage of these useful, **money-saving links** to book your trip:

- Research and **book your flight** with Skyscanner. I have found them to be the best because they list all airlines including the budget ones. You are always sure of having researched all options.
- For **car rental in Europe** that has flexible pickup and drop-off options, I recommend Auto Europe.
- You can also **book your car rental** through Skyscanner.
- **Book your accommodation** with Booking.com. I find they have the widest selection and a nice, user-friendly, transparent website.





- If an **Airbnb** experience is more your style, book [Airbnb here](#) and get a \$40 credit towards your first stay.
- **Protect your trip** and, more importantly, protect yourself with travel insurance. I use [World Nomads](#) and have been very happy with them.
- Looking for a **small group tour** to unforgettable destinations with top professionals? [Intrepid Travel](#) is your choice.
- For more **general tours** to any destination or attraction, **book with** [Viator](#). Check them out.
- Need a visa? **Get your visa** for all countries with [iVisa](#).

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