

Picos and Plains – The Best of Northern Spain

Naturetrek Tour itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Ferry journey from Plymouth to Santander
Day 2	Arrive Santander in the evening; transfer to Espinama, Picos de Europa
Day 3/4	Picos de Europa
Day 5/7	Zamora, Duero Valley plains
Day 8	Aguilar de Campoo
Day 9	Depart Santander by ferry
Day 10	Arrive Portsmouth

Departs

August

Focus

Birds and mammals (particularly whales and dolphins)

Grading

Grade A/B. Day walks

Cost

Check Website (tour code ESP05) or brochure

Highlights

- Fin & Minke Whales, plus Common & Risso's Dolphins & seabirds in the Bay of Biscay
- Woodpeckers, Honey Buzzard in Picos valleys
- Great and Little Bustard, Stone Curlew, Black-bellied Sandgrouse in the plains.



Images (from top to bottom):
Great Bustard, Picos de Europa and Common Dolphins



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NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Introduction

Northern Spain has a very great deal to offer the naturalist. The dramatic limestone peaks of the Picos de Europa in the heart of the Cantabrian Mountains are justly famous for their scenery, birds and other wildlife. Less well known, but only a relatively short distance to the south, are the wide open plains of the upper Duero valley which offer a striking scenic contrast to the mountains and some very different but equally exciting birds. Add to this a sea crossing that provides some of the best seabird and cetacean watching possibilities that Europe has to offer and you have the makings of a very memorable trip indeed!



Naturetrek group in the Picos

Day 1

On Ship

Our holiday starts with the overnight ferry from Plymouth to Santander which departs at 1615. After settling in on board we have the evening at leisure to do a bit of sea-watching or just to enjoy the comforts of the ship and the



Fin Whale in the Bay of Biscay

atmosphere of this "mini-cruise" at the beginning of our holiday. In the evening the ship sails over the shallow waters of the English Channel, north of Brittany, before rounding the tip of north-western France and heading south into the Bay of Biscay. During the evening, we have the chance of finding typical inhabitants of Continental shelf waters, such as Harbour Porpoise, Minke Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin. Seabirds are very likely to be in evidence too and should include species which are difficult to see from land. At this time of year we need to be looking out for Balearic, Cory's, Great and even Little Shearwaters, Sabine's Gull, skuas, Grey Phalarope and

petrels that could include Wilson's. Passerine migrants often join the ship and can include surprises, like a vagrant Icterine Warbler in 2003.

Day 2

On Ship

A half day crossing the Bay of Biscay, a journey which at this time of year regularly produces sightings of a range of cetacean species. Our guides will be positioned on deck from early morning and will be scanning the sea for that tell-tale fin or that column of spray as a cetacean surfaces momentarily and "blows". In the early-mid morning

we will track along the Celtic-Biscay shelf-edge, an area of dramatic canyons and escarpments where the depth of the water beneath us will increase from around 200m to a staggering 4000m before levelling out on to the abyssal plain of the North Atlantic. In this area, a large variety of cetacean species have been recorded. The more frequently encountered species include Short-beaked Common, Striped and Risso's Dolphins as well as Long-finned Pilot Whale. August is the peak month for Fin Whale and we have seen up to 70 of these animals on this day in previous



Brittany Ferries' Pont Aven - used for our crossing to Santander

years! Other possible species include Sperm Whale and Cuvier's Beaked Whale. After a satisfying and potentially very exciting morning we will approach the northern Spanish coastline where we're due to dock in Santander at 1415 local time. Once off the ship we will pick up our minibuses and drive for two hours or so to our comfortable family run hotel in the attractive mountain village of Espinama, located at 900m in the foothills of the central (Urrielles) massif in the heart of the Picos de Europa.

Day 3-4

Espinama

We have two full days to explore the Picos de Europa and we will choose the best of them, weather-wise, to drive the short distance to Fuente De and take the cable car which ascends 800 metres to the top of the huge cliffs which form the southern buttress of the mighty Pena Vieja. Here, amongst a truly awesome landscape of towering limestone pinnacles, scree slopes and flower studded meadows we will search for a range of high mountain specialists. Alpine Choughs, Water Pipits, Alpine Accentors, Black Redstarts and the agile and attractive Chamois are all common here and with luck we might find Snow Finch and even the elusive Wallcreeper. Raptors are a conspicuous feature of the Picos too and amongst the Griffon Vultures which are so often to be seen cruising effortlessly along the skyline we must keep an eye open for Egyptian Vultures, Golden and Short-toed Eagles and Peregrine Falcons.

After a picnic lunch looking for Wallcreepers among the high peaks, we will continue to explore in a leisurely fashion, attempting to find any species which we might have missed this morning, including some special butterflies such as Piedmont's and Common Brassy Ringlets, before making our way back to the cable car station from where we descend to the vehicles and return to Espinama.

On the other day we will make the best of the scenery around us, including perhaps the magnificent Hermida Gorge, which forms the gateway to the southern Picos de Europa and then the drier, more Mediterranean climate of the Liebena Valley. We often see exciting raptors while out walking, such as Booted Eagles, Honey Buzzards and majestic Griffon Vultures. We'll also find plenty of other interesting birds and butterflies at this time of the year.



Short-toed Eagle

Day 5

Zamora

After three nights in the Picos we will head south-westwards towards Zamora. The first part of the journey takes us through beautiful green Cantabrian Mountain scenery to the top of the dramatic Puerto de San Glorio pass which, at 1609 metres, provides a magnificent, if bleak and breezy, viewpoint over the surrounding peaks and valleys. Here we may well find flocks of Choughs wafting like tattered black blizzards across the mountain sides,



Woodchat Shrikes

wing-flicking Whinchats perched atop the bracken and shy Rock Buntings hopping furtively among the rocks. This is also a good point to scan the skyline for various raptors.

From the heights of the San Glorio Pass we will descend along the picturesque Yuso river valley to Cistierna and so along the Esla valley down onto the wide open, sun-baked, rolling vastness of the Duero Plains and a very different Spain from what we've experienced so far. With a picnic stop en-route we will reach Villafafila south of Benavente by mid-afternoon and make a first brief exploration of this remarkable area of plains. Here, in

accordance with European Union directives, a large area of the plains are being farmed in a manner sympathetic to a range of sensitive and declining grassland bird species. The results of this policy are spectacular and this rather forgotten little backwater of the Castilian plains supports possibly the largest density of Great Bustards in the world. At this time of the year these magnificent birds gather into post-breeding flocks and are a conspicuous feature of the open, sun-baked landscape.

The area also holds good populations of other typical and sought after dry steppe birds such as Little Bustard, Stone Curlew, Black-bellied Sandgrouse, Montagu's Harrier and Lesser Kestrel. With luck we will see all of these during our visit as well as a supporting cast of commoner species including Fan-tailed Warbler, Hoopoe, Crested and Short-toed Larks, Tawny Pipit, Southern Grey Shrike and Northern Wheatear.

To add icing to the cake, the Villafafila area has a series of saline lagoons which, if they have any water in them at all at this, the driest time of the year, will be full of migrant waders and other water birds. White Storks often congregate in their hundreds here, alongside large numbers of duck, regular Gull-billed Terns and waders that include Wood and Green Sandpipers, Ruff, Avocet and Black-winged Stilt.



Spoonbill

After a couple of hours here we will head south to arrive at our hotel in the historic and beautiful old town of Zamora, where we will have time before dinner to watch the amazing roost of hundreds of White Storks, flying into the buildings surrounding the hotel and possibly see both Night Heron and Little Bittern along the river opposite.

Day 6

Zamora

Today we will travel west towards the Upper Duero/Douro valley which here forms the border between Spain and Portugal. This is a remote and beautiful region of oak forest, scrubby hills, granite cliffs and hidden valleys with few villages or roads.

We will take a packed breakfast with us from the hotel, giving us the opportunity for spending the most productive hours of the day in excellent habitat. We will stop first near Fariza, on the Spanish side of the gorge and do a short circular walk through an area of scrubby oak and open fields. The fields here are often full of birds, with breeding birds and juveniles supplemented by migrants passing along the gorge. We usually see many colourful and exciting species such as Bee-eater, Hoopoe, Golden Oriole, Woodchat and Southern Grey Shrike, Sardinian, Subalpine and Spectacled Warblers, Red-rumped Swallow, Thekla Lark, Woodlark, Ortolan Bunting, Black-eared Wheatear and even Black-shouldered Kite. The Upper Douro also supports a good population of Black Storks and is famous as one of the best raptor areas in the whole of Iberia and as if all this isn't enough, there are Wolves and Wild Boar too!



Naturetrek group looking over the Duero Valley

For lunch we will travel to a beautiful church and picnic site north of Miranda do Douro in Portugal, which overlooks one of the most impressive and wildlife rich parts of the gorge. This is an excellent site for watching raptors, which usually include both Bonelli's and Golden Eagles. It is also good for many other species such as Alpine Swift, Rock Sparrow and Blue Rock Thrush.

Later in the afternoon, we have several options, depending on what we have seen thus far. We may visit other watch points over the gorge in search of raptors and other soaring birds or attempt to find Dupont's Lark closer to Zamora.

Day 7

Zamora

Today we will take a packed breakfast and drive one hour east from Zamora to an area of farmland near Castronuno. We will eat breakfast watching an area of set-aside and cultivated fields which hold excellent populations of plains birds including some which are unlikely to be seen at Villafafilla, such as Pin-tailed Sandgrouse, Little Bustard, Calandra Lark, Roller, Stone Curlew and Little Owl. After exploring this area thoroughly we will set up our picnic lunch by the side of Duero river near Castronuno and enjoy the birds in the poplar trees and reed beds nearby. We often see typical marshland birds, such as Purple Heron, Little Bittern, Cetti's and Reed Warblers, Penduline Tit and



Water Rail

Water Rail whilst having lunch and are sometimes joined by parties of migrating Bee-eaters coming to drink at the river.

After lunch, we will walk along the side of the Riberas de Castronuno nature reserve, dropping some who simply want to siesta in the shade! This area is good for marshland and woodland birds and migrants are always obvious in the poplar plantations, which are often filled with vociferous Pied Flycatchers and the occasional Wryneck and Hawfinch. We are also likely to stumble into roving bands of Iberian (Azure-winged) Magpies in the Stone Pines and Holm Oak plantations nearby.

We will arrive back in Zamora with plenty of time before dinner.

Day 8

Aguilar de Campoo

Leaving Zamora after breakfast we will begin the long drive back toward Santander.

Heading north on the road to Toro and Valladolid, we will make a birding stop to search for Crested Tit, European Serin, Linnet and Western Bonelli's Warbler, amongst others. We will then continue our journey on the main motorway heading to Palencia and north towards the vast steppes of Tierra de Campos and Canal de Castilla, where we will have a good look at the area followed by a delicious picnic lunch.

Continuing on along the motorway for another hour we will arrive at Aguilar de Campoo where we will spend the last night of our tour on land before the ferry crossing from Santander the following day.

Day 9

Santander/On Ship

We're not due to leave today until 1515 so a relaxed start to the day is envisaged, before driving north for a couple of hours to Santander where we will drive to the ferry port and board the ferry for the crossing back to Portsmouth.

Day 10

Portsmouth

Breakfast time will find us south of Brittany and in potentially productive waters, where we will once again look out for Harbour Porpoise, Minke Whale and Bottlenose Dolphin, together with Balearic, Cory's and Great Shearwaters. A chance for a last bit of sea-watching and some reflection on our experiences of the last 10 days before we dock at Portsmouth at about 1415 and say our goodbyes after what will surely have been a varied and enjoyable trip. For those who need to return to Plymouth to pick up parked cars, we will be running a complimentary transfer service.

Accommodation

Twin cabins (with either twin beds or bunk beds on the ferry and comfortable hotels in Spain). All rooms with private facilities.

Food

All meals included except those on the ferry and evening dinner in Santander.

Grading

Day walks, grade A-B.

Focus

Birds, mammals and butterflies.

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.



Our hotels in the Duero Valley (left) and the Picos de Europa (right)