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Its location in the Cantabrian coast and excellent communication system, make Bilbao an ideal door to the north of Spain and southwest France. Four autonomous regions along the coast (Basque Country, Cantabria, Asturias, and Galicia), run from the French border to the most western point of the Iberian Peninsula. The area, constituting the coastal route of the Camino de Santiago, is the greenest part of Spain, and offers sandy beaches and beautiful mountainous landscapes. A land full of history and culture, with plenty of leisure and gastronomic attractions. Near-by, two other interesting areas can easily be accessed from Bilbao. Rioja, the famous wine area, is one of the most important meeting points for pilgrims on the French route of the Camino— among many other interests. And Navarra, the old medieval kingdom bordering with France, also offers a wide range of cultural sites and leisure options.

Cantabrian Coast

Donostia-San Sebastián, Getaria

From Bilbao, take the A-8 motorway towards Donostia-San Sebastián, and exit in Getaria. This village of paved narrow streets and lively fishing port and marina, holds several interesting buildings: the San Salvador and Askizu churches, the San Prudencio, San Blas, and San Andrés hermitages, and the chapel of Our Lady of Piety. Getaria has also two illustrious sons, with



two sites honouring them: the monument to Juan Sebastián Elcano (first circumnavigator of the world), and the Balenciaga exhibition (soon to open as a museum), depicting

the work of the famous couturier. There is a large number of restaurants offering traditional Basque cooking, and grilled fish, the local speciality. Among others: Elkano, Kaia, Iribar, Kaibe, Txoko, Astillero and Mayflower.

To continue to our next stop, Donostia-San Sebastián, take again the A-8 motorway towards Irun. Exit in San Sebastián/Ondarreta, and continue to La Concha beach. Here, one can walk along the beach front all the way from La Concha, past Ondarreta beach, to the site of "Peine de los Vientos", a sculptural group by Eduardo Chillida. In addition to the spectacular bay, the sights along the promenade are many; among those we find the Palacio de Miramar and Monte Igeldo (accessible by car or cable-car). Other places of interest in town are Monte Urgull, Paseo Nuevo, La Zurriola beach, the Kursaal, Paseo del Muelle in the fishing port, the

aquarium, and the Old Town (Parte Vieja). The Old Town is an excellent place to enjoy Basque cuisine.

+ info
www.gipuzkoa.net
www.getaria.net
www.sansebastianiturismo.com

Castro Urdiales, Santillana del Mar

Take the A-8 motorway towards Santander, take the Castro exit (20 minutes away), and follow the signs to the town centre. Castro has been an active fishing town since Roman times; today, it is a popular Summer town, but has managed to preserve a lot of its character and appeal. A walk along its promenade will provide a good general overview of the town, starting at Brazomar beach, and ending on the other side of town in Ostende beach. Not far from this main route, we find several interesting sites: Santa María de la Asunción church and the Santa Ana hermitage, the castle-searchlight, the Roman Miliario, the medieval bridge, the monument to musician Ataulfo Argenta, and the Italianesque Ocharan castle and palace.

The most popular restaurants in Castro are located in the old town and in the port, among them Mesón Marinero and Mesón Segoviano.

The route continues on to Santillana del Mar, along the same motorway, and exiting in Torrelavega. From here, follow the signs to Santillana. This medieval village has plenty of sites to visit: the Colegiata de Santa Juliana, the Casona de los Barreda-Bracho, the Del

Águla and La Parra houses, the City Hall, and the Don Borja and Merin towers. The regional cuisine of the area can be enjoyed, among many others, in Casa Cossio, La Torre, or Zabala.



+ info
www.castro-urdiales.net
www.santillana-del-mar.com
www.turismo.cantabria.org

Cabárceno animal park

Take the A-8 motorway towards Santander and exit in Sarón. The entrance is 7 Km from here. This animal park has more than twenty animal species in its 750 Ha of land. Visitors drive by themselves among the animals, along a 20 Km of paths. In addition, the park offers cafeteria and restaurant, shops, cash machines, and public telephones.

+ info
www.parquedecabarceno.com

Altamira caves

Take the A-8 motorway towards Santander and exit in Torrelavega. Drive towards Santillana del Mar, and take the road towards Puente San Miguel; then, follow the signs to the cave complex. The Altamira caves are the most important example of the Paleolithic age, and have been declared Mankind Patrimony by Unesco. The actual caves are now closed, due to damage

caused by the massive influx of visitors. However, an excellent reproduction and exhibition has been built next to them. Bookings, highly recommended, can be made by telephone on 902 24 24 24 and 942 81 80 05, at 4B cash machines, or at the BSCH bank website, or at any of its branches.

+ info
www.cantabriajoven.com

French Basque Country

The three Basque provinces in French territory belong to the Atlantic Pyrenees department. They are: Lapurdi (capital, Baiona),



Nuestra Señora del Naranco

Behenafarroa (capital, Donibane-Garazi) and Zuberoa (capital, Maule). In the coastal area, we find several interesting cities, like Biarritz, Donibane-Lohizune (Saint Jean de Luz) and Baiona. The in-land areas have a more tranquil pace of life, set in a beautiful landscape; among the many places of interest, we can mention: Sara, the Isturitz caves, the La Rhune train, and Donibane Garazi (Saint Jean Pied De Port, entry point for the French Camino de Santiago). And do not miss the local produce, such as sheep cheese, and "gateau Basque".


To get there, take the A-8 motorway towards San Sebastián-France, and exit according to your chosen destination.

+ info
www.bilbaoair.com
www.iparralde.net

Asturian Pre-Romanesque and Romanesque route

The Asturias region holds a vast wealth of art, sculpture and architecture of the Romanesque and pre-Romanesque period. There are seven main routes within the Principality of Asturias relating to this artistic era:

1. City of Oviedo (by the Naranco mountain)
2. Mining region (Berdones, Pola de Lena)
3. The Bear Path (Nora, Tuñón, La Plaza, Villanueva de Teverga and Arrojo)
4. The Cider route (Valdediós, Amandi, Villaviciosa, Gobiendes, Villanueva and San Antolín de Bedén)
5. Western Asturias
6. The Camino de Santiago North (Llanes, Ribadesella, Avilés and Luarca)

click on  in the menu bar to save this pdf on your desktop

7. The Camino de Santiago Primitive

+ info
www.arteguias.com
www.infoasturias.com

Camino de Santiago

The Camino de Santiago has two main routes within the Iberian Peninsula: the coastal route (less known), and the one through the interior.

The coastal one begins in northern Euskadi (Gipuzkoa), and crosses Bizkaia, Cantabria, and Asturias, entering Galicia through northern Lugo; it continues onto A Coruña until Santiago de Compostela. Also known as the Cantabrian route or as the High Path, it was mainly used during the early days of the pilgrimage, most famously by the Asturias kings.

Three factors: the Spanish Reconquista, the creation by the Cluny order of what is known today as the French Camino, and the ruggedness of the terrain, contributed to its decline until modern times. In Bizkaia, the route goes through Gernika, Larrabetzu, Bilbao, Barakaldo, Portugalete, Somorrostro, Balmaseda, joining Cantabria at Haya de Ontón and Castro Urdiales.

The in-land route enters the peninsula in Roncesvalles (Navarra), continues through La Rioja and several provinces in Castilla y León, and finally entering Galicia through Lugo. It is easy to join this



route from Bilbao at any of the Rioja or Navarra stages.

+ info
www.caminosantiago.com
www.caminosantiago.org

In-land

The Rioja Bodegas

Thanks to the specific climate in the Rioja valleys – dry and with a 25° mean temperature – the region produces wines which have become world renowned for their quality. Many bodegas offer guided tours and traditional meals; most of them require advanced booking.

+ info
www.bodegasriojanas.com
www.larioja.gov.ar

The La Robla train

This is the old mining train that transported the coal from the León mines in north-west Spain to Bilbao's port. Recently restored and re-established as a tourist train, the line runs through some amazing and scarcely populated valleys like Ordunte, Mena, or Merindad de Sotocueva, and the unspoiled Palencia and León mountains, on the borders of the Spanish plateau.

+ info
www.fevve.com

Mines

The La Arboleda district, near Bilbao, was one of the main iron ore mine areas in Bizkaia. With the mines closed for more than 25 years, the area has today some interesting walks among the remains of this industrial complex.

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The mineral was taken to a loading dock in Punta Castillo, by Playa de La Arena, and loaded onto ships bound for Durham (England), as its final destination. The ore reached the dock via a wagon train line, now a walking path, where we can discover industrial archeologic ruins like burning ovens half-covered by bushes.

Pyrenees

The Pyrenees mountain range create a natural border between Spain and France, along the northern end of the Navarra, Huesca and Lleida



provinces. The whole range is widely visited all year-round by sports enthusiasts and nature lovers; in Winter, thousands of people take to the many ski resorts (alpine and cross-country) of the area. During the rest of the year, mountain climbing and a wide variety of adventure sports are practised in different areas.

The area is also known for the quality of its local produce and cuisine: from meat and fish (trout) to, and especially, the desserts, with an ample variety of cheese and sweets. And there are several wine regions in the area, with Ribera Navarra being the best known.

In addition to its natural resources, the Pyrenees hold

great examples of Romanesque art in temples and monasteries, and a long tradition as part of the Camino de Santiago.

+ info
www.lospirineos.com
www.pirineos.com
www.pirineodigital.com

Picos de Europa nature park

It has taken 300 million years for the Picos nature park to attain one of the most impressive mountain landscapes in southern Europe. The sights are often breathtaking, with high mountains, sharp cliffs and deep canyons with crystal-clear streams, that open onto rich forests and prairies. Picos de Europa is one of the major limestone rock formations in Western Europe, with 1,000 m deep caves, lakes, and clearly visible glacial erosion processes.

Among its wildlife, we find chamois in the high mountains, roe deer in its forests, and some wolves in the valleys. And there are



more than 140 bird species living here; among them capercaillie, lion vulture and the royal eagle.

+ info
www.mma.es/parques/lared/picos
www.picoseuropa.net
www.infoasturias.com

Route of The Rioja monasteries

The Rioja region has a vast wealth of monasteries, with many of them still run by the different monastic orders, the most important being Nájera, Cañas, San Millán de la Cogolla and Valvanera.

To visit the first, Nájera, take the AP-68/E-804 towards Logroño, and exit in Cenicero/Nájera (exit 10), and follow the signs to Nájera. Here, we find the Santa María la Real monastery, declared National Monument in 1889. The highlights of this gothic style monastery of the order of Cluny are the cloister of the Caballeros, and the Vera Cruz chapel. During July, the Chronicles of Nájera are staged here.

Thirteen Kilometres further south in Cañas, we find Santa María del Salvador. This XII century cistercian monastery is known for its capitular work, and for the crafts works by the female monks in the female monastery, one of the oldest in Christianity.

Going westward, again on the LR-331, we reach San Millán de la Cogolla, and its two monasteries, Suso and Yuso. The first was founded in 984, and Yuso in 1053. They are of great importance, as this is where the first texts in Spanish, along with some words in Basque, were found (X century). The book where they appeared is known as the Glosas Emilianenses, and can be contemplated during the guided tour of Yuso.

Continuing along the LR-331, we reach Valvanera monastery. Located in the San Lorenzo mountain range, it holds the shrine of the Virgin

de Valvanera, patron-saint of Rioja. Built in the XI century, this romanesque monastery is a pilgrimage site, and known for its collection of X century miniature illustrated codex.

Route of Navarra monasteries

From Pamplona, we drive for 50 Km along the N-135, to the XII century Roncesvalles monastery. Set in a idilic mountainous landscape, the Colegiata de Roncesvalles (as it is also known) marks the entrance of the French route of the Camino into Spain – the main route for European pilgrims. Here we can also visit the San Salvador sanctuary and its X century chapel, where the mythical Roldán died, although his tomb is located at the monastery.

On leaving Roncesvalles, take the N-135 to Burguete, and then the NA-172 to Villareta. There, take the N-150 towards Lumbier and join the N-240 towards the Yesa dam area. Near the dam we find the Leire monastery – one of the oldest in Navarra, built during the Goth period. The monastery is the site of the pantheon of the kings of Navarra. Today Leire also serves as hostel for the pilgrims on their way to Santiago. On the way back to the dam, we find one of the most beautiful castles in Spain, Castillo de Javier, birthplace of San Francisco Javier, co-founder of the Jesuit order with Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

From Javier we travel on the NA-5411 to Sangüesa, and take the NA-132 to Tafalla; continue on the A-15

motorway, exiting in Marcilla, then taking the N-121, and later the NA-124 to Carcastillo. Here we find one of the best examples of cistercian architecture: the monastery of La Oliva.



Suso monastery, The Rioja

Although overall of gothic style, the church has some romanesque elements. The monastery is located in one of the most important wine areas in the country (Ribera Navarra) and makes its own wine.

We return to Marcilla taking the A-15 motorway, then the A-68 and leaving it on exit 18. We then take the N-121 towards Tarazona until we reach Tulebras and its Santa María de Tulebras monastery (1149). This is the first female monastery in Spain of the Cister order. Its most important elements are the cloister, church and Palacio Abacial.

From Tulebras we again take the N-121 for 2 Km, and then take the NA-6900 for 14 Km until we reach the NA-6940. This road will lead us to the town Fitero, known for its thermal waters and spa. The town's monastery is certainly one of the most beautiful and

impressive in Navarra. It also belongs to the cistercian order, with two clearly differentiated architectural periods: the medieval (XII-XIII) and the modern (XVI-XVII). To the former belongs

its Templo Abacial and Sala Capitular, while the cloister, convent, library and Palacio Abacial belong to the latter.

We continue the route to visit two other important monasteries: Iratxe e Irantzu. We leave Fitero by the NA-693, taking the A-68 motorway. Upon reaching Calahorra (in Rioja), take the LR-134 towards the Navarran town of San Adrián, and take the



NA-122 towards Estella; just before this town, take the NA-111 to Ayegui. Here we find one of the best preserved monasteries, Iratxe. Built between the X and XVII centuries, is one of the few to have reached our times

without further remodelling. Taking again the NA-111 into Estella; from there, take the NA-120 to Abarzuza, and follow the signs to the sanctuary of Iranzu. This cistercian site, built in the XII century, is an elegant and austere construction, with a gothic cloister and spectacular Capitular Hall.

We go back to Estella, where we take the NA-111 towards Pamplona, until we reach Puente la Reina, and then onto Muruzabal. Here we find the hermitage of Nuestra Señora de Eunate, the jewel of romanesque art in Navarra. The building has an octagonal plan surrounded by a cloister, and with a pentagonal apse.

We leave Muruzabal taking the road back to Puente la Reina, then the NA-111 to Pamplona. From there, we take the A-15 to Irurtzun, and the N-240 to Huarte-Arakil. Here, in the heart of the Aralar range, we find the sanctuary of San Miguel Excelsis. This romanesque monastery was one of the most important centres of European goldsmithing in the XII century. The monastery's church has three naves and three apses. The chapel, late romanesque, has a silver effigy of Sain Michael.

And thus concludes our route through Navarra's romanesque; we return to Huarte-Arakil, and then continue on the N-240 to Vitoria-Gasteiz, where we will take the N-622 and later the A-68, back to Bilbao.