

## Exploring Spain With The Family .....

03/11/2016

Spanish Tit-Bits



Spanish steps: family hiking in the Picos de Europa

A family break in the mountains of northern Spain made for happy wanderers of all ages – though language skills and a cagoule may be essential

Hiking holidays with kids can go badly wrong. One walking trip we did was cited long afterwards by our youngest as an infliction of cruelty. But we had much better luck in northern Spain's Picos de Europa range. In part this was down to the beauty of the mountains, which are dramatically steep and craggy – the Dolomites of Spain.

Our first walk, the 10km Bajo los Picos trail above Mogrovejo village, began with a long uphill slog through forest, inspiring grumbles of "I'm not doing this again," till the trees suddenly opened up, to reveal a wall of mountains right above us, dizzyingly precipitous. Thereafter, the views were so captivating that complaints halted.

In the Picos de Europa national park it's possible to stay overnight in refuges – but there's little need, as almost all trails can be enjoyed as day walks. The mountain range is small, just 40km by 20km, though roads are so winding that driving a circuit round it takes a full day. To avoid hours in the car, we mostly kept to the area where we were staying, outside the national park, in the village of Vega de Liébana. We found out about some hikes from the very helpful tourist information kiosk at Vega; others we gleaned from Teresa Farino's excellent walking guide, Picos de Europa.

Even in high summer the roads and trails were surprisingly quiet. Only the main resort town of the area, Potes, felt busy. Compared with the Alps or the Lake District, this area seems to have stayed beneath hikers' radar. This may be down to association: northern Europeans associate Spain with heat, beaches and Moorish architecture, not craggy, Atlantic mountains.

The only time we experienced real crowds was when waiting for the Fuente Dé cable car. This is very popular but has just two small cars making the dizzying 800-metre climb. But our two-hour wait was relatively painless, as we relaxed in a park till we heard our numbers called out on the PA. And it was well worth it. The views at the top were spectacular, and from there we enjoyed a wonderful 8km hike through the national park, almost all downhill, past craggy mountains, still with pockets of snow, and eagles soaring above us, till we descended into beautiful, lush oak forest. The whole way we met only a handful of other walkers. The one walk that was truly busy was the spectacular hike along the Cares gorge: the most popular in the range – and even this was not overcrowded.

Many of the walks we did were outside the national park, though the landscape was still beautifully unspoiled. On a tired-foot day we followed a gentle 5km stroll round the Bedoya valley that took us through villages full of vestiges of lost times, such as a special porch for the shoeing of cows, or a tiny disused school. The Picos is still a busy-farming area but times are changing fast. Abandoned farmhouses – sometimes with sinks, furniture and other domestic items still piled on balconies – now sit beside perfectly refurbished holiday homes.

The Picos are well looked after and all the trails we followed were well-marked with signposts or painted markers on trees and rocks. We never got lost. On the few occasions when we needed to check directions people were always helpful – and the area is definitely family-friendly.

Overall Picos de Europa was delightful and I would strongly recommend the area to anyone looking for a walking holiday. Who knows, we might even be able to persuade our children to venture back into mountain country again next year.

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