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**THE SUNDAY TIMES**

# Three great Spanish trails

Uncluttered but still cultured, Spain is perfect for road (or rail) trips. Just pick one of these cracking adventures, and away you go

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*Chris Haslam and Anthony Peregrine*  
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Andalusia, Huelva Province, El Rocio pilgrimage at Pentecost (Pawel Wysocki)

## The Flamenco Road - six days

A good road trip needs a soundtrack, and this loop through the dramatic scenery of the provinces of Malaga, Cadiz, Seville and Cordoba comes with one more passionate than most. This is the heartland of flamenco – the distilled essence of Andalusia.

The music starts in Malaga, where you should spend your first night at the simple Pen-sion

Juanita (00 34-952 213586, [pensionjuanita.es](http://pensionjuanita.es); doubles from £37) for the sole reason of seeing the gypsy songstress Susana Alarcon Manzano at the Centro de Arte Flamenco (692 82 9885, [kelipe.net](http://kelipe.net)). The next morning, mind blown and heart broken, get out of town, west on the E15.

At Algeciras, take the N340. The large landmass on your left is Africa, and there are a couple of miradores en route from which to admire one of the world's most stupendous views. Look for a right turn onto a track just before the 87km marker, near Tarifa. It leads to a birding station at Cazalla and offers a much better outlook than the tourist hot spots.

Beyond Tarifa, the Costa del Sol gives way to a wilder, emptier Atlantic coastline, characterised by unceasing winds and high surf. This is the Costa de la Luz and, to see it, you need to turn off the N340 at the Venta del Retin and drive through trendy Zahara de los Atunes and on to Franco's summer retreat, Barbate. Hole up for the night in Caños de Meca, a pretty, hippie seaside village nestled in the lee of Cape Trafalgar. Sleep at the boutiquey Madreselva (956 437255, [madreselva.grupocalifa.com](http://madreselva.grupocalifa.com); doubles from £62), eat fish at La Pirata (Avenida Trafalgar 67; 956 437396), then head down for the impromptu flamenco jam sessions in the laid-back bars along the beach.

Next morning, continue north via Conil de la Frontera to Jerez, for lunch — bocadillos de jamon and a glass of fino is the traditional favourite here in Lorca's city of gypsies, grief and musk. Check in at La Fonda Barranco (956 332141, [lafondabarranco.es](http://lafondabarranco.es); doubles from £75), a charming B&B owned by an Irishman, David Murray, and spend the afternoon at a sherry bodega — try Garvey (956 319650, [grupogarvey.com](http://grupogarvey.com)), which has a wonderful museum of sherry labels, some by Goya and Miro.

Next: Seville, and the Triana barrio. Take yourself to Casa Anselma, on the corner of Calle Antillano Campos, where Anselma, a flamenco star, will tell you which other bars are worth your money — if you promise to end up back in hers. Seville is awash with hotels, but a good budget choice is El Rey Moro (954 563468, [hotelelreymoro.com](http://hotelelreymoro.com); doubles from £55).

From here, take the A8006/A436 along the Guadalquivir to Cordoba, the crucible of Andalusia. More beautiful and less touristy than either Seville or Granada, it oozes mystery as Cadiz radiates light. There are dark secrets here, in the Callejon de la Juderia, the colonnaded forest of La Mezquita and the beautiful gardens of the Alcazar. Newly reopened are the Royal Stables ([turismocordoba.org](http://turismocordoba.org)), where, on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, you can see the fabulous Andalusian thoroughbreds.

There's also good flamenco — not in the touristy Tablao Cardenal, opposite the Mezquita, but in the Meson Flamenco La Buleria (957 483839), on Calle Pedro Lopez. Stay at El Conquistador (95 748 1102, [hotelconquistadorcordoba.com](http://hotelconquistadorcordoba.com); doubles from £80) and drink with the locals in the Taberna Casa Salinas, on Puerto de Almodovar.

Next day, head south, taking the N331 to the gorgeous Roman town of Antequera in time for lunch, which should be porra antequerana — like gazpacho, but better. Best spot for this is the restaurant El Escribano, on Plaza de los Escribanos.

See the sights — the hidden nun who sells pastries from behind a revolving wooden door in the Convento de las Descalzas — then stroll among the surreal boulders of El Torcal before driving half an hour south to Malaga.

*Chris Haslam*

**Details:** you can fly to Malaga from more than 20 UK airports, as well as Dublin, Cork and Shannon. Airlines include EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)), Ryanair (0871 246 0000, [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)), Flybe (0871 700 2000, [flybe.com](http://flybe.com)), Jet2 (0871 226 1737, [jet2.com](http://jet2.com)), British Airways (0844 493 0787, [ba.com](http://ba.com)) and Monarch (0871 940 5040, [monarch.co.uk](http://monarch.co.uk)). A week's car hire starts at about £160, booked through [travelsupermarket.com](http://travelsupermarket.com).



Andalusia, Córdoba district, Calleja de las Flores (Schmid Reinhard)

## Adrift in Asturias - five days

As I drove out one midsummer morning, I came to Cudillero and went over a cliff. Crammed into a rock cleft, the fishing village is effectively perpendicular. I pulled up inches from the port. Then I ordered a cider in the village square. It's what you do in Asturias.

The cider was no better than any other cider — a kid's drink in adult clothes. It was the only fault I found with this gnarled green stretch of northern Spain. Here, the crinkle-cut Atlantic coast soars sharp to the Cantabrian mountains. There are meadows and peaks up there, and forests, and bears. Above Cudillero, check in at Casona de la Paca, a colonial-style mini mansion (El Pito, Cudillero; 985 591303, [casonadela.paca.com](http://casonadela.paca.com); doubles from £66 in low season and £88 in high).

Next day, explore the nearby coast, its serrated edges and sculptured coves, then turn inland to Pravia, for the San Juan basilica. Asturias is replete with pre-romanesque churches built after the Moors were repulsed. Twelve centuries on, their simplicity remains sublime.

Take the valley road to the regional capital, Oviedo, home of the Formula One driver Fernando Alonso. You'll require his skills to tangle with the traffic, but you need to see the old centre and the gothic cathedral. Now out east to Valdedios, for another fine pre-romanesque chapel, then, via Villaviciosa, up (and up) to the farming hamlet of Lugas. The baronial La Corte de Lugas hotel awaits (985 890203, [lacortedelugas.com](http://lacortedelugas.com); doubles from £93/£121, B&B).

On day three, swing down to the coast and the dunes of Colunga. Nearby, the Jurassic Museum ([museojurasicoasturias.com](http://museojurasicoasturias.com); £6, children £4) recalls the abundance of local dinosaurs.

Later, turn inland again to the Sueve hills. Head for Arriondas, the village of Collia and the Posada del Valle (985 841157, [posadadelvalle.com](http://posadadelvalle.com); doubles from £58/£67). British-run, the hotel hangs from a hillside, offering a rustic welcome and astounding mountain views.

Book in for two nights. That's a minimum for romping round here, first in the Picos de Europa. These are the real kick of Asturias, gigantic elders among mountains, flanked with gorges, lakes and roads to spin the heads of vertigo-sufferers.

Best behaviour, please, in the shrine town of Covadonga, where, in AD722, and with the help of the Virgin, King Pelayo smashed the Moors. Beyond, the land rises high and mighty to Lakes Enol and Ercina, and to the Cares Gorge — a stunning 12-mile walk.

Later, you'll return to the seaside at Ribadesella — and the Tito Bustillo caves, with their startling paleolithic paintings ([ribadesella.com](http://ribadesella.com); £3.50, booking essential on 985 861120). The unparalleled depictions of Stone Age sexual organs will furnish matter for reflection along the splendidly ragged coast towards Llanes and, finally, Santander.

*Anthony Peregrine*

**Details:** fly from Stansted to Asturias airport, 20 minutes from Cudillero, with EasyJet ([easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com)). Return from Santander to Stansted with Ryanair (0871 246 0000, [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)). Car hire starts at about £109 for four days, inclusive, with Holiday Autos (0871 472 5229, [holidayautos.co.uk](http://holidayautos.co.uk)) or Auto Europe (0800 358 1229, [auto-europe.co.uk](http://auto-europe.co.uk)).

## El Expreso de La Robla - four days by rail

This year sees El Gran Lujo arrive, the first all-suite luxury train in Europe. An eight-day journey on this rolling hotel will set you back £3,500pp. Mercifully, there's an alternative, launched just last year. El Expreso de La Robla runs on the same rails, taking less time and less money to cover the same gorgeous route, albeit in slightly less luxurious surroundings.

It plies the route between Bilbao and Leon, stopping here and there to allow the 56 guests to board coaches for excursions to local tourist attractions. These include the staggering Ojo de Guare — a cave complex in Sotoscueva — Leon cathedral and the romanesque town of Fromista, outside Palencia. You'll discover a damp, green and untamed land of dark forests and deep gorges, fearful religion and strong drink — beware of the high-wattage riojas poured by the blue-uniformed waiters.

*Chris Haslam*

**Details:** visit [elexpresodelarobla.com](http://elexpresodelarobla.com). Kirker (020 7593 2283, [kirkerholidays.com](http://kirkerholidays.com)) has four days on the train and two nights in Bilbao, staying at the four-star Indautxu hotel, from £1,149pp, including flights from London.