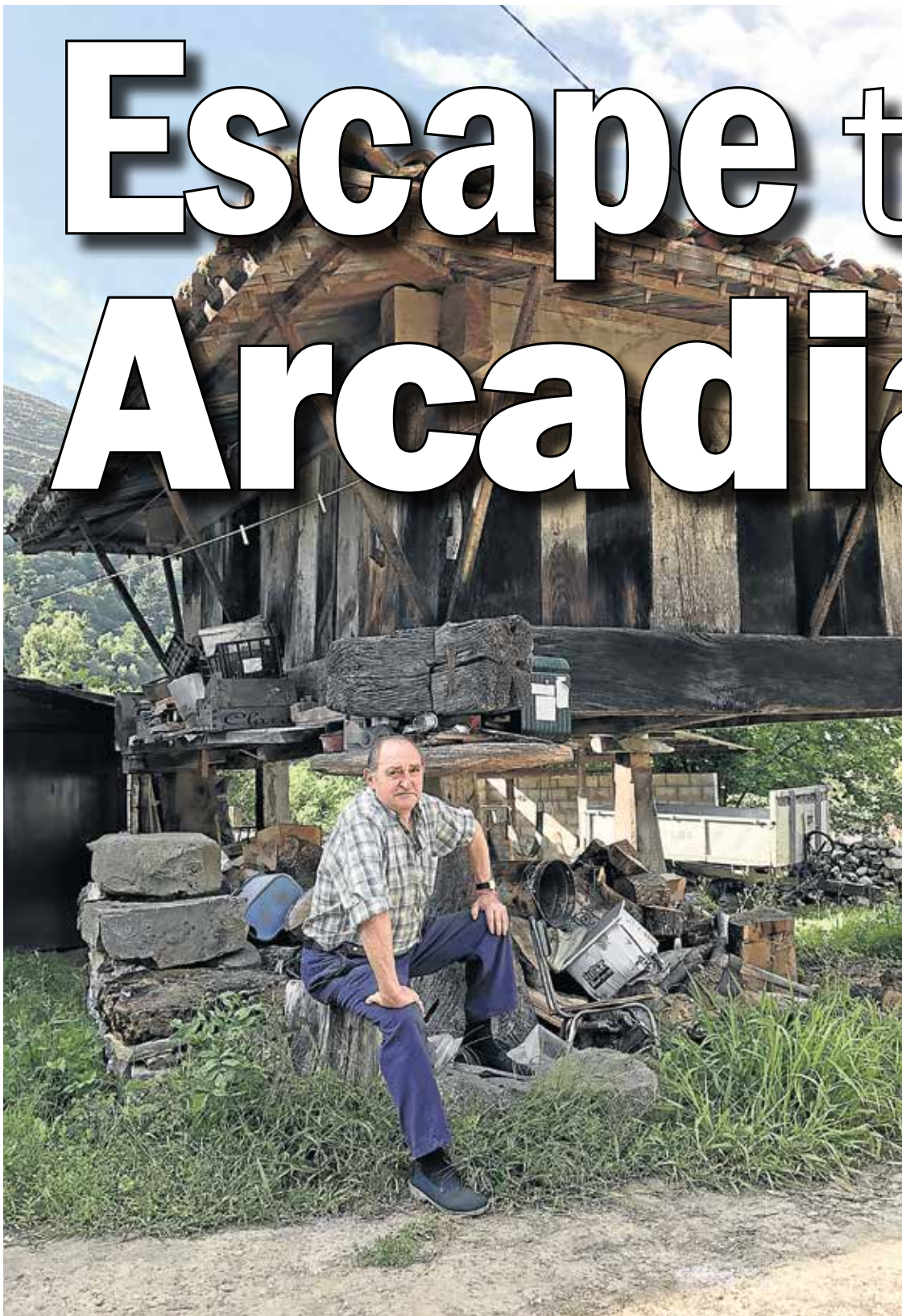


Escape to Arcadia



PASTORAL: A local with his historic Lorreo, cows line the route and a mountain stream in Espinaredo, while (right) a giant Dali statue at hotel Pueblo Astur



WE are nearing the end of one of the most spectacular walks in Spain when we finally bump into another human being.

It's midsummer and over the previous three hours the only other signs of life have had horns or wings - cows, goats and a pair of screeching eagles.

Well-marked out and well-promoted, the circular route takes you through a breathtaking gorge of virgin woodland, then up and up to high mountain pastures with incredible views.

So where is everyone?

Well, this is Asturias and, crucially, not the celebrated Picos de Europa or the nearby coastline, which in August does get busy, thanks to half of Madrid being on holiday not to mention the rest of Europe.

Our walk, near Fuensanta where the celebrated bottled water comes from, is halfway between the sea and the soaring inland picos and close to a couple of lesser-known Natural Parks (Asturias has an incredible 24 in total).

About 25 minutes from the city of Oviedo and 20 minutes to the coast, for most of the year this is a spot where you will hardly ever see a tourist.

The sole traveller we meet is clearly intrigued to see us and stops in his stride to ask where we're headed... and why? He is soon our unofficial tour guide, listing

It's said the rain in Spain falls mainly in Asturias ... But when Olive Press editor Jon Clarke swapped the crowded Costas for a summer break in this peaceful pastoral paradise, he only wore his raincoat once

other good walks nearby and insisting we make a small detour to the 13th-century tower that sits astride the river 600 metres upstream.

He's in his early 60s and has the healthy pallor of most of the locals you meet in

It has a bit of everything, from snow-capped mountains to sweeping beaches

these parts.

He is also engaging and our conversation becomes a history lesson on Asturias - it was a kingdom many centuries before Ferdinand and Isabella created Spain and it was where the reconquest against the

Moors began - until the discussion turns to corruption in Spain ...

Our informed guide turns out to be a policeman - the 'captain', no less, of nearby Gijón's Guardia Civil. Cultured and educated, he well sums up a week's holiday in this particularly unspoilt, civilised part of the peninsula.

Asturias is the polar opposite of the Costa del Sol or the Costa Blanca.

Like a microcosm of Spain it has a bit of everything, from snow-capped mountains to sweeping beaches and from simple local ventas to grand upmarket eateries, along with swathes of wild virgin countryside still inhabited by bears and wolves.

Known as 'green Spain' (a title which neighbouring Cantabria, Galicia and the Basque Region also claim) it's not hard to see why as you fly into little-known Asturias airport.

Looking more like the fjords of Norway than a Spanish coastal region, forested hillsides swoop down to apple orchards

Continues on Page 16



DOUBLE GARAGE: Asturias style way to keep your cars



Horreo-land

An 'horreo' is very much the architectural stand-out for most of Asturias. They are everywhere and come in so many shapes and sizes. Grain stores built in wood or stone, they are raised from the ground by pillars supporting 'straddle' stores that are flat and keep out rats.



From previous page

and fields of hay grazed by herds of cows. This is a pastoral paradise and perfect walking terrain, even in August when summer daytime temperatures average 23 degrees, only hitting 30 on a very hot day. Sure, you will have to contend with an average of 10 rainy days in August (with 12 in September and 11 in June and July), but these days are mostly overcast, not wet from dawn till dusk, meaning you can be out and about all day with none of southern Spain's siesta lark!

We were looking for the best place in Spain to get away from Andalucia's stifling midsummer heat but still be in shorts and t-shirts, and to get in some decent walking, a day or two on the beach and a bit of cultural stuff.

And, above all, we had come to eat the region's rated food and sample its famous cider (see article on p28), which we had enjoyed on various trips to Asturias in our 30s, in the years before our two kids were born.

Centering our holiday around a booking at the region's most famous restaurant - Casa Marcial, in Arriondas (see review overleaf), which we had also visited a couple of times back then - we packed the kids off to the grandparents in the UK and took a very reasonably-priced flight from Malaga via airline Volotea, which flies a couple of days a week.

Everything ran smoothly and by 10pm we

The view went on forever, stretching to the distant soaring picos an hour away

were sitting down to dinner at our first port of call, a fantastic small boutique hotel called el Gran Sueno (www.elgransueno.es).

With a plate of amazing ham, a simple gazpacho and a fabulous flinty 'albarino' white wine called Nibias from nearby, what more could you want?

As we'd arrived at night, we'd had no hint of the dramatic scenery awaiting us at breakfast, set up in the charming garden below our room.

The view went on forever, stretching to the distant soaring picos nearly an hour away by car. At closer range we marvelled at the vernacular architecture of the tiny village of Pintueles and its classic horreo (grain store), unusual as it was charming.

Our host Dave Haxby, originally from Brighton, moved here with his Asturian boyfriend Javier a couple of years ago.

They couldn't have made us feel more at home, plying us with suggestions for walks and places to eat. One stroll began literally from the doorstep and took us into the nearby hills along ancient tracks and (supposedly) to lunch in a restaurant halfway



CAPTION.

Hit the



Where to stay



DR

THERE is a n... stay in Astu... and breakfa... palaces. Without dou... al and luxur... puebloastur... small rural c... star luxury... euro investr... original pain... stalled, inclu... ton', a striki... the main co... There is a sp... and a big w... Spain's top... are maximis... corner of the... Another equi... lacio de Luc... com) on the



LUXURY: Pool at PuebloAstur, breakfast table at el Gran Sueno and the wonderful dining terrace at Palacio de Cutre

around. Sadly, it was closed (well, it was a Monday, albeit in August) but obligingly our hosts came to our rescue, booking us a late lunch at a nearby hotel in Torazu. Their best advice by far, though, was to steer clear of the famous walks of the Picos de Europa which got its name from

the conquistadores who saw its peaks before any other land on the way back from the New World. (We had, anyway, visited Fuente De and Cabrales gorge before.) But they talked of hour-long waits for the cable car up, hundreds of people on the

AN OSCAR WINNER

The Oscar Niemeyer cultural centre in Aviles was intended to have a similar effect to the Guggenheim in Bilbao, a short hop along the Green Coast. But, while it definitely has its allure, it is not quite as striking as the wonderful art museum in the Basque region. That said, the €44 million centre, designed by Brazilian architect Niemeyer is well worth a visit, particularly as it is a fascinating link between the city's industrial past and its medieval core, across the city's main river. It is just a stone's throw from Spain's leading steel works, Ensidesa, which can be seen smoking behind it and the whole

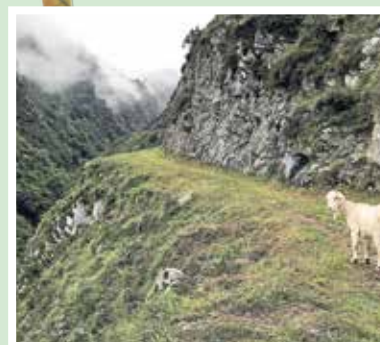
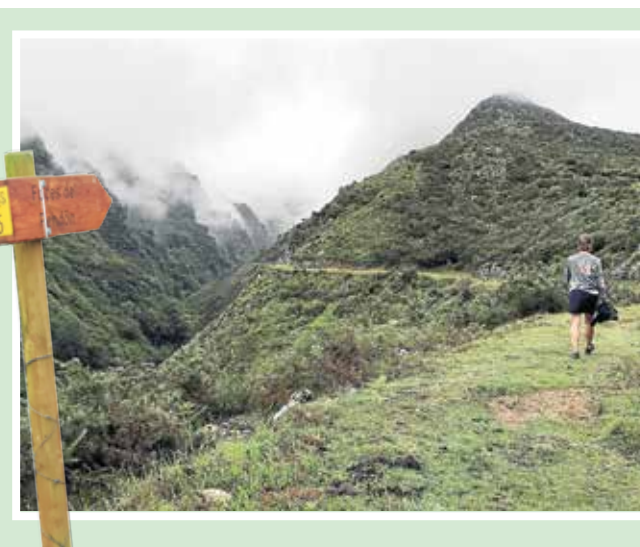


industrial backdrop is interesting. There are usually art exhibitions going on and the tower - reminiscent of a formula one race track - compliments the snail-like buildings alongside it. The centre has different architectural spaces that are distinctive for their design and functionality. The least well-known of Asturias' trio of cities (Oviedo and Gijon are the other two) Aviles is wonderfully laid-back, friendly and cultured. But it has been rightfully described as the 'Cinderella' of them all. It once had one of the best harbours on the northern coast and for centuries did well out of fishing and trade. However, not unlike another city in Southern Spain (Algeciras), in the early 1950s the rot set in and Aviles was earmarked for an industrial future by Franco's government. The wetlands of the estuary were partially drained, the course of the river altered and the giant factory complex including steel works and smelters moved in.



EYE-CATCHING: The Oscar cake

North



Take a hike

There are so many amazing walks to take around Asturias, aside from those in the celebrated Picos de Europa.

The Foces de Rio Pendon walk (left and above) is a three-hour affair and starts beside the celebrated Fuensanta water bottling plant, near the village of Nava, and heads along a deep gorge and through incredible virgin woodland before heading up into the high pastures and back.

Meanwhile, walks along the coast are equally stunning and reminiscent of the coastline in Devon or Cornwall. Below, a two-hour walk heads from Colunga's Playa Griega to La Isla and back.

INTO THE ABYSS: Pendon walk



SEASIDE OUTING: Near Colunga

DREAMS HELPED BY SALVADOR DALI

A massive range of places to stay in Asturias, from charming bed and breakfasts to stunning five star hotels. One of the most unusual is PuebloAstur (www.puebloastur.com), which was once a farm but now offers five-star accommodation. A massive multi-million pound investment has seen dozens of buildings and sculptures including Salvador Dali's 'Newborn' giant man sculpture in the courtyard. There is a variety of restaurants, a wine cellar, with some of the best views from just about every hotel. A particularly luxurious spot is Palacios (www.palaciosdeluces.com) on the coast near Lastres. This

five-star rural hotel has a spa and indoor swimming pool plus a fabulous restaurant, which is rightfully often full. You can walk from the door along dirt tracks to nearby Lastres, which has its own port and some of the best fish restaurants in Asturias. Another interesting place worth considering is Palacio de Cutre (www.palaciodecutre.com), still owned by the original landowner and full of aristocratic charm with a summer terrace restaurant offering amazing views. Finally try and get into el Gran Sueno (www.elgransueno.es), an amazing bed and breakfast, boutique hotel, with plenty of charm in a tiny hamlet not far from Oviedo. The owners are knowledgeable on the region and are more than capable of cooking for guests and providing most



PICTURE WINDOW: The dining room at Palacio de Luces

paths and the need to get up at 6am, which was the clincher, and we opted to stay nearby. But we were in no way being short-changed, with our already-mentioned hike around Fuensanta and another adventure into the wonderfully-named Ponga Natural Park.



This day out took us up a green valley to the village of Espinaredo, where we had a simple lunch and were fascinated by what is supposedly the largest concentration of horreos in Asturias, some 700 in total dating back to 1548. From here, we walked part of the inter-provincial GR109 footpath up into the hills, past the cute hamlet of Omedal and up to a ridge with one of the best views in Christendom, where we sat and devoured a perfect packed lunch. On the way back we were guided to the town of Infiesto, where an ancient wooden-clad bodega sold dozens of wines by the glass. Just what the doctor ordered. Our next port of call was only 20 minutes by car through the Sierra del Suevo towards Arriondas, where we had our much-anticipated restaurant reservation. We tried out two different hotels, both equally amazing: Palacio de Cutre (www.palaciodecutre.com), where we ate on one of the most spellbinding restaurant terraces in Spain and woke up to deer in the garden; and the five star Puebloastur (www.puebloastur.com), which is easily one of Spain's best rural hotels. In contrast, the last few days of our trip were spent on the coast near Lastres, where we planned to eat some decent seafood and visit some beaches. In the end, the weather conspired against us and with sunbathing off the schedule, we took some walks - along the coast from Playa la Griega in Colunga to the small village of La Isla, and inland from the remarkable Fito viewing point up to the nearby peak of Pienzu.



This gave us a great opportunity to see how unspoilt the coastline is in Asturias and, in particular, to enjoy its cuisine, with restaurant Gueyu Mar in Playa de Vega a particularly standout place for seafood. Best of all was holing up and relaxing in our final hotel, the Palacio de Luces (www.palaciosdeluces.com), a luxurious Relais & Châteaux affair with wonderful suites maximising on the views and a restaurant that puts just about every

other hotel establishment I have eaten in to shame. Following the advice of friendly manageress Maria Dolores to 'eat in', even when there were so many good local options, was a masterstroke and we were soon tucking into an incredible 'salpicón' of local lobster and langoustines and a tartare of avocado and tuna with mustard, passion fruit, tomato and chives. The ravioli of 'colmenillas' mushrooms in the juice of free range chicken was superb as was the red mullet with apple sauce. It perfectly set up the last day of

our holiday, spent sightseeing around the town of Aviles, the smallest of the three cities of Asturias now famous for its Oscar Niemeyer cultural centre, a much-needed tourist magnet for the city. Having already visited the capital of Oviedo (a historic masterpiece) on many occasions, and the seaside city of Gijón which is one of the definitive party capitals of Spain, it was good to spend time in more laid-back Aviles, which has a charming historic quarter, no shortage of places for lunch, before heading for the airport just 15 minutes away.



CONCENTRATION: Nacho prepares sea urchin



STYLISH: The place is beautifully lit and the dishes complement that



Dining Secrets of Andalucia editor Jon Clarke is delighted to find Asturias' leading restaurant still has oodles of rustic charm, despite a 20-year gap and two Michelin stars



Marvellous Marcial



THE first time we ate at Casa Marcial we literally stumbled across it on a muddy hike around inland Asturias.

It appeared at the top of a steep hill like a ray of sunshine after a storm ... a magical spot in a tiny hamlet with marvellous views of the soaring Picos de Europa mountains in the distance. It needed a double-take to notice that the small stone cottage had a menu on the door. On closer inspection, it jumped out as both original and good value.

While we'd missed the midday service (we'd already wolfed down a packed lunch, in any case) we were suitably inspired to pop in and book for that evening.

And what a joy it turned out to be, with its young chef Nacho Manzano not long in the kitchen and a year or so before winning his first Michelin star. The food was fresh, the service charming and Nacho himself was personable and engaging. We returned to our simple rustic hostel that night noting that it had been the highlight of the holiday.

Fast-forward two decades and we are being chauffeured from - ironically - the very same hostelry, now an incredible five star spa hotel called PuebloAstur.

This time we're clad in our glad rags and have a reservation, made three months earlier via the website. Casa Marcial is an entirely different prospect today. Manzano has been dubbed the region's top chef with two Michelin stars here (the only one in Asturias) and another in nearby Gijón. The small stone cottage has been spruced up with a Guggenheim-style extension jutting out back.

Now part of the upmarket Relais & Chateaux chain, it has all the attractive flourishes you would expect from a two-Michelin-starred joint, inside and out.

The lighting is fabulous and the decor more contemporary, yet it has managed to hang onto its original rural charms, much of this thanks (it is said) to a certain Scottish designer who spent a couple of years living nearby. The main changes have been to the menu, which is creative without losing its soul and still very much part of its surroundings. Described as being 'neither traditional, nor vanguardista, neither from the sea, nor the mountain... but a mix of them all', probably best sums it up.

What you eat at Casa Marcial is in every way up

there with the celebrated dining temples of San Sebastian and Girona. It is just not so fussy, nor so grand, and it's kinder to your pocket! Broadly, you have a choice of two set menus: a traditional one, called the 'roots menu', and a more modern seasonal version, known as the 'horizontal menu'.

And, best of all, you can divide both in half - advisable at night - and end up with nine courses instead of around 15, for €98 including IVA. Our culinary journey started with the most remarkable seafood spread, hidden in a rockpool-style presentation in which a clam, a mussel and a whelk were lurking.

It continued with a *ceviche* of avocado with the peel of sardine, which was tasty, followed by an enoki mushroom with squid and 'soil ink', which sounded odd but hit the spot perfectly, rich in both flavour and originality.

An eel served with 'scanda' wheat was delicious while the grilled grouper, served with edible flowers and mixed leaves, was cooked to perfection.

Easily the strangest dish of the night was the cow's tongue served with lentils and a *mole* sauce (that's the chocolate version, not the furry animal), but it was also one of the finest.

However, it was trumped - and it is rare that I say this - by an amazing chocolate, mint and passion fruit pudding, washed down with a fabulous 10-year-old Madeira.

On the subject of wines, I am not normally a big fan of 'maridaje' wine pairing but on this occasion we succumbed to the charms of the sommelier.

A massive fan of sherries, he explained how brilliantly they worked with the seafood/mountain mix of Nacho's food. It was hard to disagree, particularly with the amazing saltiness of the boutique UBE wine from Bodegas Cota 45 in Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a perfect partner for the seafood starters.

Other standout wines were the bone dry El Prohibido from Ribeira Sacra and the Portuguese Vertice Gouveio 2008. The red Masuria 2013 from Bierzo complemented the cow's tongue to a tee.

All in all, it is great to see that the changes at Marcial haven't affected the food. Who knows, if the quality keeps up, Nacho could be heading up Asturias' first three-star restaurant anytime soon.



RETURN: Jon and Gabirella



ORIGINAL: Beef tongue



STAFF: Polite and informative



The main changes have been to the menu, which is creative without losing its soul and still very much part of its surroundings