

THE GREEN GREEN GRASS OF... SPAIN?

Roger Wheeler visits Santander and Bilbao in northern Spain

When we told friends that we were going to **Santander** they asked why we were making a fuss about visiting a bank? Andalusia is undoubtedly lovely but we'd never given any thought to the rest of Spain, in particular the north. **Brittany Ferries** are now running regular services from **Portsmouth** and **Plymouth** to **Santander** and **Bilbao** on the Spanish north coast. We decided to take a look at what is described as the chic city by the sea; Santander, and the region which the tourism people like to call **Infinite Cantabria**. We were very pleasantly surprised, it really is beautiful.

The 24-hour trip from Portsmouth on Brittany Ferries' newest ship, the **Pont Aven**, was quite painless and we arrived right in the heart of Santander. After booking into the **Hotel Chiqui**, a very nice modern three star hotel right on the biggest beach, we took the local bus for €1.10 right to the middle of this very relaxed modern city. Of course there's much more to Santander than the bank, although its HQ is here and there's a branch almost every 100 metres! The huge cathedral is a rather sober building which was rebuilt after a fire in 1941. There is also some lovely architecture with pretty plazas plus all the usual large shops and dozens of bars and restaurants. The real attraction of Santander is its beaches which offer fantastic, golden sands and very safe bathing. The restaurants by the commercial fishing port are cheap and hard to beat. We paid €12 per head for three courses and half a bottle of good local wine.

PLAYA VALDEARENAS



As frequent visitors to southern Spain; the lush and green countryside in the north was a complete surprise, though it is the wettest part of Europe. We visited in early October when the weather was fine and we even ventured into the sea, but only briefly as it's the Atlantic. The coast of Cantabria is rugged and studded with fantastic bays and secluded beaches where clothing is optional. **Valdearenas Beach** is reputed to be naturist, but it was a bit chilly in October, though it's worth the 12km trip west of Santander. On the other side is **Playa Langre**, which is stunning. There are many lovely medieval villages along the coast, all worth a detour.



Of course one of the main attractions in this region is the amazing city of **Bilbao** and **Frank Gehry's** extraordinary titanium **Guggenheim Museum** which is a stunning masterpiece. Bilbao is only 70km from Santander and is a really fascinating place. Go there by **FEVE train** from Santander or by car on the A8 motorway which is fast and direct. Bilbao is a great, vibrant city; the capital of the **Viscaya** region, which is better known as the **Basque** country. It's almost another country with a language that's totally different from Spanish and the people are very proudly Basque. Of course everyone speaks Spanish and in the main tourist areas they speak English.

While the Guggenheim has to be visited, it's the building that we went to see rather than the modern art that it houses, none of which was to our taste. If **Anish Kapoor's** cannon shooting lumps of red wax onto a wall or his piles of extruded grey cement is art then you can call me a philistine. He may have



LAREDO

exhibited at the Royal Academy, Tate Modern and Fabrica in Brighton but we found it odd and unattractive.

Bilbao's centuries old town is beautiful with a maze of small streets enclosed by tall medieval buildings and on a Saturday night all of Bilbao is there. One small drawback (for us) was the fact that in this part of Spain they seem to have ignored the non-smoking legislation; it was almost impossible to find a bar or restaurant that wasn't full of smokers. There are lots of very reasonable hotels; we checked into the economical, comfortable and very central **Hotel Ibis**, which as part of the global Accor chain and at €59 per room with breakfast was unbelievable value.



We drove back to Santander, sorry to leave as we had only scratched the surface. Taking the slow coastal road we were impressed by the valleys, rivers and generally lush countryside. We stopped at **Laredo**, an ancient fishing village with a 16th-century convent and from there we meandered along the coast calling at many of the villages and beaches. This is a stunning part of Spain, we had only seen about one percent and can't wait to go back.

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