

SUNFLOWER

Picos de Europa

walks and
a drive



1 DRIVE

26 WALKS/GPS

ONLINE UPDATES

This is a sample from the
PDF edition of

Landscapes of the
**PICOS DE
EUROPA**

a countryside guide

Ninth edition



Teresa Farino

This shorter sampler includes some of the introductory text, and an example car tour and walk. There is a total of 136 pages, plus a pull-out map, in the full book.



SUNFLOWER BOOKS



Preface

Thirty-five years ago, when I first heard the words ‘Picos de Europa’, I had no idea what or where such a locality might be. Then, during a university field trip in 1985, I fell in love with this dramatic mountain range to such an extent that I gave up a permanent job in England and came back to live here. Nowadays I eke out a precarious existence as an environmental journalist and leader of wildlife excursions, a lifestyle that is more than compensated for by the incredible diversity of plant and animal life that inhabits the Picos de Europa.

The Picos de Europa form the high point of a long ridge of mountains that runs along the north coast of Spain, the Cordillera Cantábrica. Varying in altitude from 150m to 2648m (about 500-8700ft), the Picos range is divided into three spectacular limestone massifs: Cornión in the west, Urrieles in the centre and Ándara in the east. These are separated from one another, and from the surrounding ranges, by precipitous gorges, carved out over millennia by some of the southernmost salmon rivers in Europe.

The scenery is spectacular: wherever you are, jagged peaks dominate every horizon. The highest forests are composed mainly of beech, giving way to mixed woodlands of Pyrenean oak, ash, sweet chestnut and lime lower down, while in the hotter, drier parts of the Picos, the forests are composed of drought-tolerant evergreen species such as holm and cork oaks, with a luxuriant understorey of shrubs more usually associated with Mediterranean habitats.

It is thought that this part of Spain has been colonised by man for around 25,000 years, following the discovery of a large number of caves housing Palaeolithic paintings. But it was not until about 5000 years ago that man started to change his environment, gradually clearing the extensive forests to provide grazing land for his newly-domesticated livestock, creating a mosaic of tiny pantile-roofed villages, meadows and woodlands. The antiquity of these grasslands has resulted in a diversity of plantlife unrivalled in western Europe today: for me this is one of the most attractive features of the Picos de Europa.

Beef is the basis of the local economy, and a cyclical system, centuries old, still persists today: the sole inputs are energy from the sun and human labour, while the ‘harvest’ is a crop of young stock for sale at the autumn *ferias*. During the

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summer, the cattle are taken up to the natural pastures that occur in the high mountains, freeing the meadows in the valley bottoms for the production of hay. At the onset of the first snows, the cattle return to the valleys, where they spend the winter in barns in the villages, munching their way through piles of sweet-smelling dried grass. The manure that accumulates during this period is spread on the meadows in the spring, thus replenishing the nutrients and ensuring a good crop of hay the following year.

The rugged terrain has meant that modern technology has been slow to affect the Picos de Europa: even now, many farmers still scythe their meadows by hand, eschewing modern machinery, as well as artificial pesticides and fertilizers. Ancient breeds of cattle, particularly adapted to a high mountain environment, are still widely used today, particularly the small, red *casina* in Asturias (see photograph on page 115) and the wide-horned, grey-roan *tudanca* in Cantabria (see the photo on page 38).

Over the past twenty years the Picos de Europa have gradually been discovered by the outside world, and today these mountains are renowned all over Europe for their spectacular scenery, abundance of wildlife and the traditional way of life practised by their human inhabitants. Part of the attraction, for me at least, is a determined resistance to outside technology, such that life here goes on in much the same way as it has for centuries — man in harmony with his environment.

As a mountain area gains in popularity, a surfeit of guides tends to appear on the shelves of bookshops across Europe. In the case of the Picos de Europa, however, little has been written in any language, except for a handful of serious mountaineering tomes. This book will, I hope, appeal to people like me, with a love of mountain landscapes and their wildlife, but a marked aversion to 1500m/5000ft ascents on foot!

Much of the sheer grandeur of the Picos de Europa can be experienced from a car, but it is not until you start to explore on foot that many of the more memorable qualities of these mountains come to light. For example, there is little to beat being literally at arm's length from soaring griffon vultures as you ascend to the isolated montane village of Tresviso ... marvelling at the wealth of wildflowers and butterflies that inhabit the meadows between Pido and Fuente Dé ... encountering endemic alpine flora in the almost lunar landscape of the Vega de Ario ... or wandering through the unique cork oak forests of Tolibes, accompanied by the furtive movements of different species of lizard.

In August 2025 at least four major fires affected the Picos. While the area will again be open when you use this book, the fire damage will be evident for at least a year or two. Vegetation does re-establish itself very quickly here, so burnt-out heath will soon be green. Mature trees, woodlands and farm buildings will be scarred for far longer.

— TERESA FARINO

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Useful books

Very little has been published about the Picos de Europa in any language, but the following may be useful if you read Spanish:

Argüelles, M *et al* (1988) *Naturaleza y Vida en los Picos de Europa*. Incafo, Madrid.

Luceño, M and Vargas, P (1995) *Guía Botánica de los Picos de Europa*. Piramide. A photographic guide to the flora, in colour.

Menéndez de la Hoz, M (2005) *Guía de visita del Parque Nacional de los Picos de Europa*. O A Parques Nacionales, Madrid.

Nava, H S and Fernández Casado, M A (1995) *Picos de Europa: Flora de Alta Montaña*. Ministerio de Medio Ambiente, Madrid.

Field guides in English

Polunin, O and Smythies, B E (1988) *Flowers of South-West Europe — a field guide*. Cambridge University Press.

Grey-Wilson, C and Blamey, M (1995) *Collins Pocket Guide: Alpine Flowers of Britain and Europe*. HarperCollins Publishers, London.

Mullarney, K, Svensson, L, Zetterström, D and Grant, P J (2010) *Collins Bird Guide*. HarperCollins Publishers, London.

Thorogood, C (2016) *Field Guide to the Wild Flowers of the Western Mediterranean*. Kew Publishing, London.



Picnicking

In such a rural area as the Picos de Europa, the opportunities for ‘freelance’ picnicking are virtually endless, while formal facilities are few and far between, and tend to be limited to unattractive roadside areas.

I have included only a few of the more spectacular picnic sites in the following two pages, all of them easily accessible in the course of the car tour and requiring a walk of no more than 30-35 minutes at most.

The location of all these picnic settings is indicated on the *touring map* by the symbol **P**. (A few picnics are also highlighted on the relevant *walking maps*.) Please remember to **wear sensible shoes and take a sunhat** (the symbol **○** after the title indicates a picnic **in full sun**). It’s a good idea to take along a plastic groundsheet as well, in case it’s damp or prickly underfoot.

PICNIC FOOD — SPECIALITIES OF THE PICOS DE EUROPA

Picnickers in the Picos are spoiled for choice in terms of the delicious local produce available. **Cheeses** are a real speciality, with almost every village producing its own variety. In the southern valleys of Liébana, the many artisan cheeses have obtained a blanket denomination of origin, under the heading *quesucos de Liébana*. Particularly worth trying are Río Deva, from Camaleño, which is a creamy cows’-milk cheese, and the varied produce from the Peña Remoña dairy in Pido, especially the fresh goats’-milk cheese, which is delicious with *membrillo* (quince jelly).

The most renowned cheese of the region, however, is *queso picón*, a smooth blue cheese, classically produced from a mixture of cows’-, sheep’s- and goats’-milk, in the remote mountain villages of Bejes and Tresviso: it always comes away with the top prizes in the Barcelona cheese festival, and also has denomination of origin status.

Very similar to *picón* is *cabrales*, produced in the Asturian villages of the region of the same name, on the northern flanks of the Picos, while a more commercial, but equally tasty product comes from the Posada de Valdeón dairy ‘Picos de Europa’; you might also like to try their blue cheese ‘paté’, sold in Kilner jars.

If you’re not a cheese fan, maybe the locally produced **hams** and **sausages** will tempt you. Air-cured hams, sliced wafer-thin, are particularly mouth-watering, although they may be something of an acquired taste: *jamón serrano* is the local variety, but you will notice the difference in flavour if you try the more expensive *jamón ibérico*, produced from the black *pata negra* pigs of southwestern Spain, which are free-range and fattened on acorns.

Almost every region of Spain has its own distinctive method of making *chorizos* — the spicy, cured pork salamis which are so delicious either raw or cooked — and I find the northern Spanish ones particularly tasty. The best *chorizos* are always home-produced, but unfortunately EU legislation

1 COLLADO DE LLESBA (touring map and map page 74, photograph page 12) ○

by car or taxi: no walking

🚗 at the Collado de Llesba (see Car tour, page 24)

Magnificent panorama of the central and eastern massifs, but no shade. Avoid weekends/public holidays. An information board at the Puerto de San Glorío shows a 10km circuit that links up with Short walk 1 on page 13, but the beauty of the Naranco Valley is sure to suffer if the proposed ski station is built.

2 LAGO DE LA ERCINA (touring map and map pages 120-121, photograph pages 122-123) ○

by car or taxi: 10-20min on foot

by bus: 10-20min on foot

🚗 at the car park by the Lago de la Ercina (see Detour 2, page 32).

Important: read note about vehicle access on the back of the fold-out map.

🚌 ALSA (Tel + 34 902 422242; website: www.alsa.com/en/web/bus/home) to Los Lagos de Covadonga, at the end of the route from Cangas de Onís to the lakes in the Picos de Europa National Park (summer only). See bus timetables on the reverse of the fold-out map. *Walk as far as you like around the shores of the attractive glacial lake and picnic on the short, springy sward, with magnificent views in all directions. Avoid weekends and public holidays — including Mondays in high summer;*

prevents their sale to the public, so you'll have to make do with the local butchers' varieties.

Most of these cheeses and meat products are available from any supermarket, no matter how small, as they are widely eaten by the local people. Lower prices, however, can be obtained by buying direct from the producers, at the **weekly markets**. Potes, the capital of Liébana, celebrates its markets on Mondays, and Cangas de Onís on Sundays (beware trying to buy *anything* in Cangas on a Monday, as all the shops are shut ... and the banks too). Both markets are in progress from about 10am to 2pm.

The **bread** in Liébana and Valdeón is far superior to that in Asturias, mainly because the bakeries are still wood-fired in these southern valleys. Bakers' shops, however, are few and far between: most bakeries deliver to the many villages around the valleys on set days each week, but you can buy direct (there is one bakery in Posada de Valdeón and several in Potes), or from the supermarket.

Supermarket hours are from about 10am to 2pm, then about 4.30pm to 8pm, but they usually run out of fresh bread by the afternoon. Many villages have bars that double as shops, which are open at all hours (from about 8am to 11pm or later), but are usually a bit more expensive.

A word about **alcoholic specialities!** Asturias is renowned for its scrumpy-like cider (*sidra*), a small quantity of which is poured from a great height into a large, finely-blown glass, to be drunk immediately, before it loses its 'fizz'. Liébana is famed for its *orujo* or *aguardiente*, distilled from the skins and pips of grapes left over from wine-making. Similar to Italian *grappa*, the neat version is 50° proof and takes the back out of your throat, but nowadays less formidable varieties are on offer, flavoured with herbs, honey or fruits. Liébana is also home to a very sweet aperitif wine called *tostadillo*, but if you prefer something a bit drier before your meal, try a *blanco de solera*, which is a cross between white wine and *fino* sherry.



Picnic 1: view from the Collado de Llesba; Cantabria's highest mountain, Peña Vieja (2613m/8570ft), rises in the background.

when the shops and banks are closed in Cangas de Onís, and the local people head for the hills. Very little shade.

3 MIRADOR DE PIEDRASHITAS (touring map)

by car or taxi: 30min on foot

no access by bus

 park at the Puerto de Panderruedas (see Car tour, page 26)

Take the track heading due north from the col, which leads up through the beech forest to a stone-built viewpoint with a magnificent panorama over the Valdeón valley and the central massif of the Picos de Europa. Shade in the beech forest.

4 EL CABLE (touring map and map pages 82-83, photographs pages 80, 84, 86) ○

by car or taxi: 10-15min on foot

by bus: 10-15min on foot

 park at the cable car station at Fuente Dé (see Detour 4, page 34)

 PALOMERA (Tel +34 942 880611) from Potes to Fuente Dé (summer only; see bus timetables on the reverse of the fold-out map)

Take the cable car from Fuente Dé up to 1800m/5900ft and walk in any direction until you have left the crowds behind, to picnic amongst the alpine flowers in the limestone rock gardens. If you are lucky, you might even persuade some alpine choughs to share your meal with you, as they are notorious scroungers and relatively unafraid of man! Avoid July and August and weekends throughout the year. No shade.

5 ARROYO DE MOSTAJAL (touring map) ○

by car or taxi: 10-15min on foot

no access by bus

 park on the bridge that crosses the Río Yuso at the point where its two main tributaries (the Arroyo de Mostajal and the Valle de Puerman) join: the bridge lies on a sharp hairpin bend between Portilla de la Reina and the Puerto de Pandetrave (see Car tour, page 26).

Walk northwest from the bridge and picnic in the lush meadows by the clear waters of the Arroyo de Mostajal. The wealth of wildflowers here is almost unbelievable. No shade.



Touring

The Picos de Europa range, for all its grandeur, covers a remarkably small area — only some 40 kilometres across and 20 kilometres from north to south (25 by 13 miles). But the terrain is so abrupt that there are no roads through the centre of these mountains, and the only possible touring circuit is a route around the edge of the Picos, with periodic excursions up into the heartland.

The route described on pages 24-35 is *the* classic car tour in the whole of the Cordillera Cantábrica. Although the main circuit is less than 200km, the roads are unbelievably tortuous, given that you have to cross four mountain passes and negotiate the two extensive limestone gorges that separate the Picos from the adjacent ranges. It is just about possible to complete the circuit and the four detours on a long summer's day, but *a more relaxed, two-day tour is by far the better option.*

I have described the car tour starting from Potes, the

View south to the Naranjo de Bulnes. This incredible, sheer-sided limestone monolith was not conquered by man until 1904. The plant diversity of the haymeadows in the foreground is incredible, owing to the lack of pesticides and artificial fertilisers, and a centuries-old system of management.



market town that lies at the centre of Liébana, in the southeastern corner of the Picos. A possible overnight stop would be in Cangas de Onís, situated at the opposite corner of these mountains, or in Cabrales (Arenas or Carreña) on the northern edge of the range. All four towns offer a wide choice of accommodation.

The touring notes are brief: they include little history or information that can be found in pamphlets available from the tourist offices. Instead I concentrate on the ‘logistics’ of touring: times and distances, road conditions, and taking you to the most interesting sights — and the places to which I hope you will return to **walk**. Only on foot can you make the most of the Picos de Europa.

The large fold-out touring map is designed to be held out opposite the touring notes. Symbols used in the text are explained in the map key.

Take along **warm clothing, food and drink**; you may experience delays. **Allow ample time for stops**: the estimated driving times, both for the main tour and the detours, include only short breaks at viewpoints labelled  in the notes.

All motorists should read the country code on page 46 and go quietly in the countryside. ¡Buen viaje!



Car tour: HIDDEN SECRETS OF THE PICOS DE EUROPA

Potes • Puerto de San Glorio • Portilla de la Reina • Puerto de Pandetrave • Posada de Valdeón • (Caín) • Puerto de Panderruedas • Desfiladero de los Beyos • Cangas de Onís • (Covadonga) • Arenas de Cabrales • (Sotres and Tresviso) • Panes • Desfiladero de La Hermida • Potes • (Fuente Dé) • Potes

200km/125mi; about 6-7 hours' driving without detours (add 18km/11mi, 1h for Detour 1 to Caín; 38km/23.5mi, 1h30min for Detour 2 to Covadonga; 52km/32.5mi, 2h for Detour 3 to Sotres and Tresviso, and 51km/32mi, 1h15min for Detour 4 to Fuente Dé).

En route in the main tour: **A** at Fuente Dé and Puerto de Pandetrave; Picnics (see **P** symbol and page 10): 1, 3, 5; Walks: 1, 2, 3, 5; Short walks **A** 1, 2, 3, 5, 6

You can start this tour at any point, but unless you leave at the crack of dawn, or spend a night en route, you will probably not have time to take in all the detours. Wherever you are based in the Picos de Europa, there will almost certainly be one detour that could be left for another day (the glacial lakes in the Picos de Europa National Park from Cangas de Onís, Sotres and Tresviso from Cabrales, or Fuente Dé from Potes, for example). Beware of tour coaches occupying the whole road in the narrow gorges and on the zigzag up to the lakes above Covadonga. In addition, some stretches of road are rather vertiginous, especially the section between Potes and the Puerto de San Glorio, that between Sotres and Tielve, and the route from Covadonga up to the glacial lakes. Between November and May, some of the mountain passes, especially San Glorio, may be snow-bound: check with the local tourist office or police station beforehand if in any doubt. It is advisable to fill up with fuel before starting out, as petrol stations are few and far between, and the more remote ones offer only four-star and diesel.

This car tour circumnavigates all three massifs of the Picos de Europa: Cornión in the west, Urrieles in the centre and Ándara in the east. The scenery changes by the minute: sheer limestone gorges alternate with gently-rounded foothills, bleak upland heaths and verdant, tree-lined valleys.

Head south out of **Potes**★ (🚗🏠🚧🚗🚗) on the N-621 towards León, taking the turn-off between Hostería Picos de Europa and Mesón Los Camachos (Walk 1 starts and ends at this junction, in the setting shown on pages 48-49). The road passes through **Vega de Liébana** (8km 🏠🚧🚗🚗), then snakes up in a long series of hairpin bends. The highest pass on the main route is the **Puerto de San Glorio**★ (27km 🚗🚗; 1609m/5275ft): the view from here looking east is absolutely superb first thing in the morning, when the valley bottom is often filled with a sea of low-lying cloud (see page 75). But you can go higher still if you turn right and walk up to the Collado de Llesba (along the start of Walk 5), from where you would enjoy the view shown on page 12 (**P1**).

West of San Glorio, the road takes you through a broad valley of subalpine meadows, dotted with thousands of narcissi in spring and small herds of cattle in summer, before arriving at a sharp right-hand bend in the road at 31km, where Short walk 1 starts, with the village of **Llánaves de la Reina** (🏠🌳) just around the corner. Continuing through

Regional dancing is still popular with young people in Asturias, and the troupes travel all over the north of Spain to entertain at local fiestas, such as here in Potes, at the Fiesta de la Cruz.





Snow at the Puerto de Pandetrave

a narrow gorge of dark conglomerate rocks, you arrive at **Portilla de la Reina** (36km ✂), a hamlet where human beings are vastly outnumbered by goats. Turn off right just past the village (A), signposted to SANTA MARINA DE VALDEÓN.

You are now heading north on the LE-2703 along the **Río Yuso** valley (passing P5 at the 44km-point), winding gently up to the **Puerto de Pandetrave** (A; 1562m/5125ft; photograph above). From here a spectacular view of the Valdeón valley, sandwiched between the western and central massifs of the Picos de Europa, opens before you. Continue down into the valley in the setting shown on page 29 until you are just above Santa Marina de Valdeón (53.5km (♠✂Δ)). The old road goes through this picturesque hamlet, but your route continues on a new bypass above the village, reaching a T-junction at 57km, where you turn left to head into the centre of **Posada de Valdeón** (56.5km †♠✂⊕; 939m/3080ft).

Posada is the ‘capital’ of the valley and a good place to break for a morning coffee, while you decide if you have time to make the detour down the Cares river valley to Caín (notes page 30) or take Short walk A2 (page 14).

From Posada take the LE-2711 to the southwest, immediately passing a left turn to the NATIONAL PARK INFORMATION CENTRE and then the village of Soto de Valdeón (✂Δ) off to the right. The road meanders up to the **Puerto de Panderruedas** (67km; 1450m/4760ft), from where you can take a stroll up through the beech forest to the north, to the Mirador de Piedrashitas (P3).

From the pass, continue until you come to the junction



Using cows for ploughing is still common in the Picos de Europa.

with the N-625 (72km), where you turn right towards CANGAS DE ONÍS, crossing the forest-clad **Puerto del Pontón** (1280m/4200ft) a few minutes later. From here the road winds down into the **Río Sella** valley in a series of hairpins, passing through the village of **Oseja de Sajambre** (84km 🏠🚧). Below Oseja the road enters the depths of the spectacular 10km-long **Desfiladero de los Beyos**★, carved out over millennia by the Río Sella through sheer walls of limestone.

You emerge from the gorge into the fertile lowlands that surround the town of **Cangas de Onís**★ (118km 🏠🚧🏠🏠🏠🏠🏠), the first Christian capital of Spain at the start of the *Reconquista* (the seven centuries it took to oust the Moors from Spain). Look out for the inaccurately named **Puente Romano**★ (actually dating from medieval times) which spans the Sella at this point, and the **Capilla de Santa Cruz**, a 15th-century chapel built over a Celtic dolmen. Cangas de Onís, with its many cafés and restaurants, is an ideal place to stop for a snack — or even lunch — while you decide whether or not to take the detour up to the basilica and glacial lakes in the Picos de Europa National Park (notes page 31).

Head east out of Cangas de Onís on the AS-114, passing the Covadonga turn-off (AS-262) after 4km and winding through fertile lowlands dotted with villages containing numerous Asturian granaries known as *hórreos* (Δ at Avín). If Short walk 🚶3 (page 16) appeals to you, you pass the turn-off right to La Molina by the Alto de las Estazadas restaurant at **Canales** (141km). On the approach to Carreña de Cabrales you pass through some splendid limestone country. Widening this road, workmen discovered a cave adorned

with magnificent Palaeolithic paintings (unfortunately closed to the public in order to preserve them).

Just as you enter Carreña, you could make a detour left up to the village of **Asiego** (📍), which boasts an incredible view of the central massif of the Picos and the Naranjo de Bulnes (Picu Urriellu)★ (2519m/8265ft; see pages 22-23); turn right 150m before the village, following signs to ‘MIRADOR PEDRO UDAONDO’. Then return through **Carreña de Cabrales** (146km 📍✂️⊕), capital of the parish of Cabrales and renowned for its strong blue cheese of the same name. A few bends beyond Carreña, just before you come to the tiny roadside village of **Póo de Cabrales** (📍✂️📍), a viewpoint on the right also offers a fabulous view of the Naranjo de Bulnes. From here it is only a stone’s-throw to the bustling market town of **Arenas de Cabrales** (149.5km 📍✂️📍), from where you could branch off on the AS-264 to Sotres and Tresviso, in the heart of the Picos (notes on page 32).

Continuing eastwards along the AS-114 (📍 after 2km) from Arenas you almost immediately enter the sombre depths of the lower **Cares Gorge**; the river here is always the most dazzling shade of turquoise, due to the reflective properties of calcium salts suspended in the water. The road follows the river, passing through several small villages (most with roadside restaurants) before reaching **Panes** (172km 📍✂️⊕), a rather gloomy town situated at the confluence of the rivers Cares and Deva (turn left for 📍).

In Panes you turn right and start on the home run along the N-621, although a 22km-long, spectacular gorge — the **Desfiladero de La Hermida**★ — lies between you and Potes. About 10km from Panes, pass the entrance to the hydroelectric station at **Urdón** (just where you enter the province of Cantabria), which marks the start and finish of Walk 3, a steep ascent on an ancient mining track to Tresviso.

At the midpoint of the gorge lies the village of **La Hermida** (184.5km 📍✂️) itself, so embedded in the depths of the defile that for five months of the year the sun never shines here. A turning on the right leads to Bejes, where Walk 2 begins and Alternative walk 9 starts and ends; 4.5km south, by a fishermen’s refuge on the right, a trail on the left leads to Short walk 📍5 (page 18).

A little further on, you pass the pre-Romanesque church of **Santa María de Lebeña** (📍) on your left (on the opposite bank of the river), complete with Mozarabic horseshoe arches and Celtic altar-stone (to visit it, turn sharp left just beyond the bridge, signposted ‘LEBEÑA’). Just *before* the

bridge, you pass a road on the right leading to Allende (192km), where Walk 2 ends.

A couple of kilometres further on, the walls of the gorge abruptly drop away and you enter the almost Mediterranean valley of Liébana, dotted with evergreen oaks and vineyards. Some 200m before **Tama**, pass the turn-off left to 'ESANOS/SAN PEDRO DE BEDOYA' (197km) for Short walk 6 (page 19); then pass 6 on the right a couple of kilometres after the village. In **Ojedo** turn right at the roundabout, to cross the **Río Bullón** (access to Walk 4 is via the CA-184 signposted to Cervera de Pisuerga and Palencia). Once back in **Potes** (200km), carry on through the town to **Fuente Dé**, the headwaters of the **Río Deva** (Detour 4, page 34).

As you drop down into the Valdeón valley, you have this view of Santa Marina de Valdeón, backed by the western massif of the Picos de Europa.





Walking

While writing this book I have tried to include routes that take in *all* the main ecosystems of the Picos de Europa, not just the high mountains, on which most attention has been focused to date. You will find walks that take you through superb haymeadows — considered to be some of the richest Atlantic grasslands in the world — as well as through extensive forests of beech, Pyrenean oak and the evergreen Mediterranean woodlands of Liébana. The celebrated walk through the sombre depths of the Garganta del Cares is included here, as are a number of routes that explore the vast wilderness of limestone that forms the heartland of the Picos.

In addition to the classic routes, I have also included some walks that lie well off the beaten track, where your only human encounters will be with the local people: shepherds and cowherds, or folk harvesting the natural bounty of these mountains — chestnuts and walnuts, chanterelles, trout and even snails! Above all, I hope that this book will encourage you to explore further afield in the Picos, where every corner turned holds another surprise, another memorable encounter with a world apart.

A few words of caution. **Do not underestimate the Picos de Europa. The higher reaches of these mountains are true wilderness, and must be treated with respect: *never* try to link one walk with another on uncharted terrain.**

Most of the walks in this book are within the capability of any reasonably fit person, although in some cases there is a risk of vertigo. Of course, you must take the season and weather conditions into account before embarking on a walk: some of the routes into the higher mountains may be snowbound between November and May, while low-lying cloud may make route-finding difficult, as well as obscuring all the best views. **Remember too that storm damage can create hazardous conditions for walking *at any time*.**

If you are not an experienced walker, you may like to cut your teeth on some of the very short walks described in the Picnicking and Short walks sections on pages 10-21, before progressing onto the shorter versions of the main walks.

Gradings, waymarking, GPS, maps
There is a quick overview of each walk's **grade** in the Contents, but note that this is the grade of the *main* walk,

and there may be a less demanding shorter version: for full details, see the walk itself. Here is a brief overview of the three gradings:

- easy-moderate — ascents/descents of no more than about 300-500m/1000-1800ft; good surfaces underfoot; easily followed
- moderate-strenuous — ascents/descents may be over 500m/1800ft; variable surfaces underfoot — you must be sure-footed and agile; possible route-finding problems in poor visibility
- very demanding — only suitable for very experienced hillwalkers with a head for heights

Any of the above grades may be followed by:

- *possibility* of vertigo — for those with no head for heights at all
- *danger* of vertigo — you must have a very good head for heights

Assigning grades to walks is *very* subjective. Until you are used to the terrain in the Picos, you might like to walk with a group. Several companies offer **guided walks**, especially in Cangas de Onís, Cabrales and Potes: ask at the local tourist office. In Liébana, you could contact the Casa Gustavo Guesthouse in Aliezo, near Potes, for information (Tel +34 942 732010): the English owners have an extensive knowledge of the southern Picos.

Waymarking has proliferated in the Picos in recent years, especially in the valleys of Liébana and Cabrales. Red and white stripes indicate that you are following part of a *Gran Recorrido* (long-distance footpath), while yellow and white stripes indicate a shorter *Pequeño Recorrido* (day walk). However, please note that your route will not necessarily follow such waymarks, and might require you to take a path marked with a yellow/ red and white 'X'. In addition, most of the high-level routes have some sort of informal waymarking, be it paint-splodges on the rocks or a series of cairns, but I would advise you never to *depend* on such systems, and **always carry a map and compass (or GPS)**.

Free **GPS track** downloads are available for all the main walks: see the Picos de Europa page on the Sunflower website. You will be aware, however, that — like informal waymarking — GPS readings should *never* be relied upon as your *sole* reference point.

The **maps** in this book have been adapted from 1:50,000 maps published by the Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN) (N°s 55, 56, 80 & 81). These four IGN maps cover the whole of the Picos and much of the surrounding area, and can be purchased in bookshops locally or from www.ign.es. For the high mountains, I also recommend the 1:25,000 maps produced by Miguel Angel Adrados: the western massif is covered by *El Cornión — Macizo Occidental*, the central and

eastern massifs by the map entitled *Los Urrieles y Ándara*. Both are widely available throughout the Picos.

Where to stay

For walks in the southern reaches of the Picos de Europa, the best base is probably **Potes** (although it can get very busy in high summer), as there is a wide choice of accommodation and buses serving three of the four valleys that diverge from the town. You could also try one of the

Transhumance of native tudanca cattle in Pesaguero



villages on the Potes–Fuente Dé road, which may be more peaceful, especially at weekends.

On the north side of the Picos, **Cangas de Onís** is the best choice if you want to explore Covadonga and the glacial lakes, while **Arenas** is a better base for the region of Cabrales, including the Cares Gorge. Again, both have a wide selection of accommodation.

If you are **camping**, there are sites near Arenas de Cabrales, Avín and Cangas de Onís in the north, and in Turieno, San Pelayo, Mieses and Fuente Dé in the Río Deva valley west of Potes in Liébana, as well as a more tranquil one near Vega de Liébana, about 8km up the road that connects Potes with the Puerto de San Glorío. Valdeón also has two campsites: one at Soto de Valdeón, and one near Santa Marina, but walking from these bases is extremely difficult, as the sides of the valley are very steep and the bus service is all but non-existent.

Weather hints

Situated only about 25km/15mi from the sea, the northern reaches of the Picos de Europa are profoundly affected by depressions sweeping in across the Atlantic Ocean, such that the climate is warm but wet, and the tops of the mountains are often shrouded in mist. In contrast, the southern valleys lie in the lee of the highest peaks in northern Spain outside the Pyrenees, and in consequence, precipitation is lower and the climate is markedly Mediterranean in character.

In winter snow falls heavily down to about 1000m/3280ft, sometimes persisting until June on the highest north-facing slopes. Thus some of the walks in this book may be impassable in winter — and even the car tour, which crosses four mountain passes, may not be feasible.

Some mornings in the summer you may wake to find the cloud level barely above your head: this is the result of a temperature inversion, and by midday the cloud has usually dissipated completely. In contrast, I have a marked mistrust of summer mornings that dawn unusually clear, as they often lead to an afternoon thunderstorm: *do* make an early start under such conditions.

Be warned that mists can build up in the high mountains at any time of day or in any season, so always take adequate clothing, extra rations and a compass/GPS. Remember, too, that at altitude the rays of the sun are much stronger, so even if a cool breeze is blowing, make sure you wear your sunhat and apply a high-factor sunscreen.

Organisation of the walks

The 11 main walks in this book are divided between the northern and southern reaches of the Picos de Europa, using Cangas de Onís, Arenas de Cabrales and Potes as the principal points of departure.

When planning a walk, you might start by looking at the large fold-out map of the Picos de Europa inside the back cover, which shows you at a glance the general terrain, the road network and the location of the walks that are nearest to you. Then turn to the route notes and the accompanying large-scale maps.

Each walk is described in the direction that I feel is the most attractive and poses the fewest transport problems (generally any ascents come early on in the route). Please feel free to try them in reverse — or to shorten ‘out and back’ routes, if you have friends who are willing to play taxi.

To give you an idea of the settings of the various walks, there is at least one photograph for each.

Each itinerary begins with planning information: distance, grade, necessary equipment and details of access. Pay particular attention when I refer to the ascent: although the average walker may be able to tackle 600m/2000ft without too much difficulty, anything more requires a higher level of fitness.

Times are given for various landmarks in each walk, but please bear in mind that everyone walks at a different pace, and that your speed will also vary according to the load that you are carrying, the time of day, weather conditions, etc. As a rule of thumb, calculate 13 minutes for every kilometre on the flat, plus an extra 13 minutes for every 100 metres of ascent. Bear in mind as well that some of the more difficult *descents* may also slow you up.

No time for stops is included, so make sure that you allow plenty of extra time for lunch, birdwatching or botanising, and photography.

The following symbols are used on the walking maps:

	main road		waypoint		mountain refuge
	secondary road		church.chapel		cable car
	minor road or motorable track		shrine or cross		funicular
	jeep track		cemetery		specified building or habitations
	path, narrow trail		best views		campsite
	firebreak		bus stop.parking		hydroelectric plant
	main walk		spring, etc		quarry, mine
	alternative walk		good picnic spot		quarry, mine
	other described walk		steep drops		quarry, mine
					height in metres

**Walk 1: POTES • FRAMA • LUBAYO •
COLLADO DE PORCIEDA • TUDES • PORCIEDA •
INVERNAL DE TOLIBES • POTES**

Additional photographs pages 25, 38

Distance: 14.3km/8.9mi; 4h35min

Grade: ● moderate, with a short, stiff climb of about 550m/1800ft in the space of just 3km, followed by a gentle descent of the same; mostly on tracks and feasible all year round.

Equipment: stout shoes (preferably walking boots), sunhat, cardigan, raingear, picnic, water

How to get there and return: If you are not already in Potes,  PALOMERA (Tel 942 880611) runs from Santander to Potes. Or : park in Potes, near the junction with the N-621, signposted 'RIAÑO, LEÓN' (43° 9.296'N, 4° 37.205'W; see parking places on the map).

This walk is definitely best undertaken in the morning, firstly in order to make the most of the splendid views of the Picos de Europa from the Collado de Porcieda, and secondly because the steep ascent is a killer on a hot afternoon! The route takes you through three of the most remote villages in Liébana, with charming vernacular architecture, and gives you a taste of the typically Mediterranean vegetation of this southeastern corner of the Picos. In particular, the descent through the cork oak forests of Tolibes is a unique experience in the Cordillera Cantábrica, as these trees usually are confined to more southerly regions.

Start the walk close to the EASTERN END OF Potes, where the N-621 turns off towards 'LA VEGA, PTO SAN GLORIO' (1). Walk about 30m/yds up this road, past the Hostería Picos de Europa, then turn left immediately along a narrow lane marked 'CALLE CAMINO VIEJO', asphalted at this point. You are walking parallel with the Potes–Ojedo road, visible

The eastern massif — Ándara — of the Picos de Europa, with Potes, the market town of Liébana, in the foreground.

The highest peak visible is Sagrado Corazón (literally 'sacred heart'), to which a pilgrimage on foot from Potes takes place every five years.



down on the left, through an area of fenced pastures and chalet-style houses. Ignore all the side turnings leading to the various dwellings and follow the lane until you arrive at a T-junction (10min). Here turn up to the right, and enter the **Río Bullón** valley on a narrow lane; ahead you can see the village of Frama, nestling in the valley bottom.

After dropping down towards the river and passing a substantial arched footbridge on the left, stay on this undulating concrete lane until you reach the first of the houses in Frama. The hedge on the right is dominated by evergreen Mediterranean shrubs and trees, including holm oak, strawberry tree, *Phillyrea latifolia*, wild privet and Mediterranean buckthorn, interspersed with deciduous species such as field maple, spindle, wild cherry and turpentine tree — the latter known as *cornicabra* in Spanish, on account of the galls shaped like goats' horns with which it is often infested. Up to the right, the slopes are clothed in a mosaic of haymeadows, patches of Monterey pine and vineyards.

Pass a water trough on the right, then a track joins you from the right. A couple of minutes later, approaching the outskirts of **Frama**, come to a house, also on the right, just



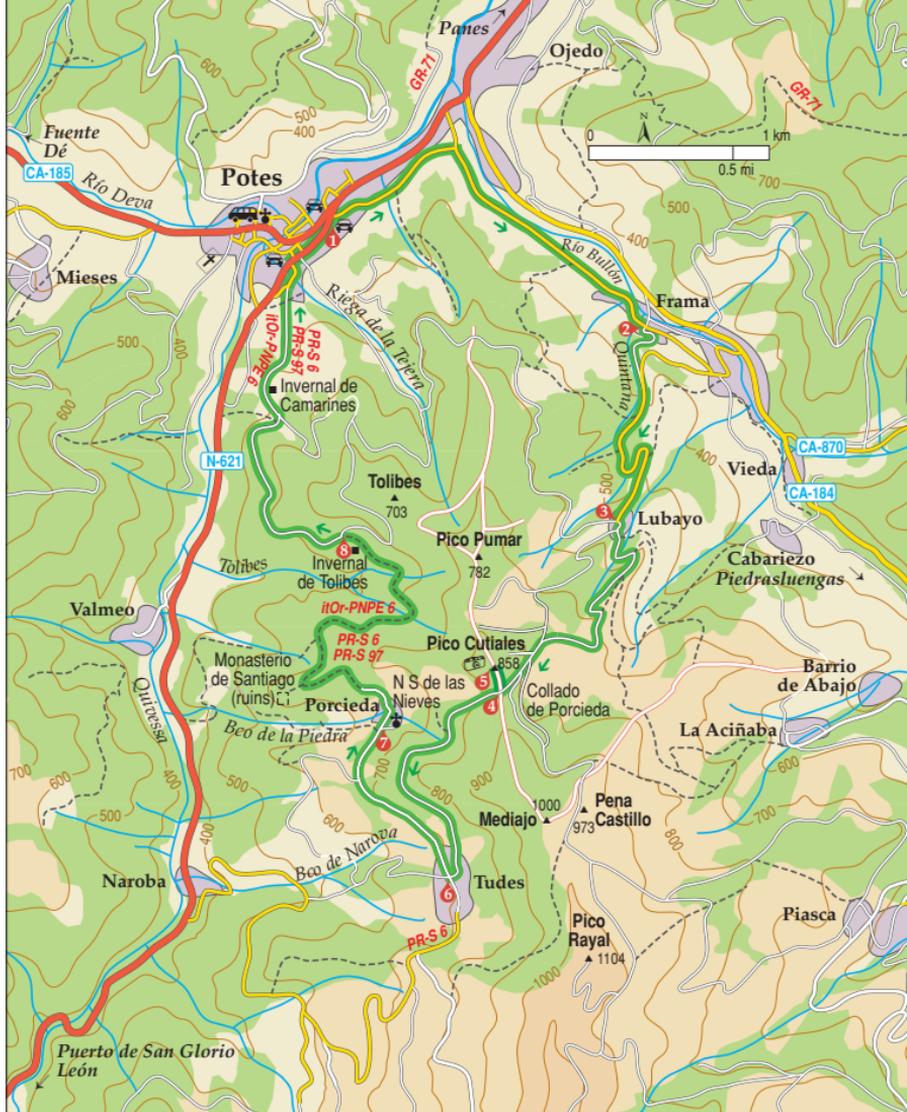
after which you ignore a right turn leading up to a double galvanised iron gate. Pass a disused trout farm on the Río Bullón down on the left, by an old mill-house, then emerge into a LARGE OPEN AREA (2) used for village fiestas at about **30min**. Of the three routes leading out of the far side of this plaza, take the right-hand one, a stony track that climbs steeply and veers round to the right almost immediately. This is the start of the ascent to Lubayo and the Collado de Porcieda.

The track ascends more or less parallel with the Riega Quintana, down on the right. Heathlike vegetation, dominated by Spanish gorse, ling, Cornish heath and bell heather, clothes the rocky outcrop on the left, while the banks of the stream support willows and tall poplars. A few minutes up, a grassy track joins from the left, and at **45min** your track meets a narrow tarmac road, where you turn right.

This is the main access road to the remote village of Lubayo. After a few minutes you come to a crossroads where your route crosses the **Riega Quintana**; keep straight ahead here. Steep ascents alternate with more level sections that give you time to catch your breath and admire the view of the eastern massif of the Picos de Europa to the north and the long ridge of Peña Sagra (shown in the photograph on page 73) to the east. You arrive in **Lubayo** (3) at **1h20min**, the approach heralded by a steeper section of concrete underfoot and walled meadows on either side. Many of the houses in this village are built from blocks of stone without any form of mortar in between, and most have wooden balconies, often adorned with grapevines.

Head straight up through the village, ignoring any side turnings, until you arrive at a FORK WITH A STONE WATER TROUGH in the centre, just before the last building. Keep left here, soon reaching a rather rough track that climbs very steeply; a walled meadow is on the left and a shaly bank topped with overhanging holm oaks on the right. This track then bears left and winds up through more open terrain, dominated by brooms and greenweeds, tree heath, gorse and bracken, the evergreen oaks having disappeared completely. Many birds frequent this habitat, including stonechats, circl buntings and — in summer — red-backed shrikes, the latter known as ‘butcher birds’ on account of their habit of impaling their prey — grasshoppers, small lizards, etc — on thorns (or barbed-wire fences!), in a sort of avian ‘larder’, to eat them at their leisure.

Keep ascending on the main track, veering left and then sharp right, until you arrive at a THREE-WAY JUNCTION



(1h30min): take the right-hand fork here (the most obvious), which again climbs steeply, ignoring a track off down to the left almost immediately. It takes you through very dry, rocky terrain, decorated with such aromatic Mediterranean shrubs as round-headed thyme, French lavender and sage-leaved cistus. Goldfinches, rock buntings and yellowhammers abound here, especially in winter. Keep heading up the hill as the track veers sharply left and then curves right.

By 1h50min most of the hard work is done for the day, and the track levels out somewhat as you come to the edge of a meadow. Ignore a track down to the left (straight on) and veer right, almost immediately ignoring a track down to the left. Keep heading up the hill, as the track bends right and then left, climbing towards a plantation of Monterey pines on the top of the hill. Just before these mature pines, you hit a junction and turn left. You are now climbing gently

between the bulk of the plantation on your right and a line of cypresses on your left. This area has recently been bulldozed with several new tracks: ignore a track to the right, then one to the left, another to the right and another to the left, then a final track to the right. Some 400m/yds from the junction where you turned left, you arrive at the **Collado de Porcieda** (4; 2h10min), scarred by a wide firebreak running along the crest of the ridge. For a stunning view of the Picos de Europa, turn right here and climb steeply for about 150m/yds to the SUMMIT OF **Picu Cutiales** (5) from whence you can peruse Ándara in the foreground and the shadowy silhouettes of the higher peaks of Urrieles beyond.

Retrace your steps to the **Collado de Porcieda** (2h20min), and turn right along a narrow stony track that descends sharply through young Pyrenean oak woodland interspersed with flowering greenweed, white-flowered *Cistus psilosepalus* (see opposite) and scrubby holm oaks. Directly ahead of you is the bulk of the Sierra de la Viorna, topped by a large stone cross: it is from here, according to legend, that an arrow was shot, and where it landed the Monastery of Santo Toribio was built. Immediately below you, down on the right, is the hamlet of Porcieda, which you will visit later.

Almost 10 minutes down from the col, just before the track levels out, ignore a backwards-angled right turn that leads into the meadows above Porcieda. Contour around the hillside and then drop down more gently towards the village of Tudes, first through holm oak scrub and then through dry, acid meadows and shaly outcrops.

Just before you reach the village of **Tudes** proper, pass a stone house on the right (2h45min); the track is now concrete underfoot. About 60m/yds further on, the track forks. Bear right here, ignoring an immediate right turn, to drop down between stone houses to a T-junction after 50m, where you turn left on a tarmac road into the VILLAGE SQUARE (6), shaded by mature walnut trees and boasting a wooden picnic table and a set of swings. To visit the cheerful village tavern, decorated with murals (including portraits of the villagers), leave the picnic table on your right, and follow the road towards a charming tourist apartment complex called La Casa de las Chimeneas; La Taberna del Inglés is located just past the entrance to this complex, on the left (2h50min).

Once refreshed, retrace your steps to the village square, this time leaving the picnic table on your left, and go straight on, past an artistically arranged woodpile on your left and, a few metres further on, past the T-junction where you entered

the village (on your right). Follow this road until you emerge at the western edge of the village where, ignoring a left turn marked by a water trough sunken into the road, you veer right towards a lovely stone farmhouse with a semi-cylindrical bread oven roofed with pantiles.

Standing with the bread oven on your left, your onward route is clear: a narrow tarmac track lined with slimline poplars and lopped and topped ash trees, which runs parallel with the one that led you down into the village. At this point, you will be following the PR-S 97, waymarked with yellow and white stripes, as well as the red posts of the birdwatching route 'ItOr PNPE 6'.

About five minutes after leaving Tudes, ignore a track down to a modern white house on the left. Keep straight on here, then descend on an unmade track through extensive dry meadows and holm oak forest, until you come to a JUNCTION at about **3h10min**. Take the right-hand fork across the meadow, then start dropping again until you reach another junction, where you again take the right-hand option. You have now — briefly — joined the PR-S 06.

Just before you enter the village of **Porcieda**, fork left (7), so as to leave the chapel of **Nuestra Señora de las Nieves** on your right. This shrine is the only building in a reasonable state of repair in the whole hamlet, as nobody but a multitude of birds, including Iberian green woodpeckers and bullfinches, lives here today, and most of the houses are on the verge of ruin.

The narrow track leads you into the 'centre' of the hamlet at **3h15min**, towards a faintly whitewashed stone house with a small wooden balcony. Your route lies to the left of the whitewashed house, on a track that bends round to the left, past a wooden door in a tall stone wall on the right-hand side. It then veers immediately to the right, signposted 'Potes' (PR-S 97), and runs slightly uphill between meadows lined with tumbledown stone walls, home to lizards galore.

Within a few minutes you reach the holm oak woodland again, here veering to the left up the hill on an uneven rocky trail. About five minutes later, ignore a small path off to the right and continue on the main trail, which climbs slightly





Harvested cork oaks. These trees are more usually associated with southern Spain and Africa.

Opposite: the ash tree on the left has just been lopped and topped; the one on the right is about to undergo its biennial pruning.

then drops towards the tip of a westwards-pointing spur known as **El Convento**. Some 300m/yds after this junction, just before your onward path veers sharply to the right, a turning to the left leads directly to the ruins of the medieval **Monasterio de Santiago**.

On rounding the tip of the spur, you find yourself on the edge of the largest

cork oak forest in the Cordillera Cantábrica: this tree is more usually associated with southwest Spain and northwest Africa, and its presence here is a true botanical anomaly. The cork is harvested every decade or so by traders from Extremadura, who remove their booty on mule-back. A delightful path runs through this luxuriant evergreen woodland, before widening substantially on veering around to the right and across the northern face of the spur. Follow this undulating trail through the cork oaks as it contours around the two tributary valleys of the **Riega de Tolibes**, ignoring all side turnings. Just after you cross the principal valley of the Riega de Tolibes, the trail becomes a wide motorable track (**3h35min**). You drop down to the **Inveral de Tolibes** (8), in a large meadow on the left, at **3h50min**. Plenty of strawberry trees accompany the cork oaks, providing a year-round feast for a wealth of small birds: short-toed eagles are also known to nest in these woods.

From the Inveral de Tolibes you follow the track and waymarks all the way down to Potes, ignoring the right turn to Valmayor a couple of minutes later. The cork oaks thin out on the sunnier slopes, with the rock outcrops on the right supporting natural *bonsais* of many species, primarily prickly juniper and holm oaks. The remains of terraces on these west-facing slopes indicate that they were probably used for growing grapes in times past, as is still the case on the opposite side of the valley. At **4h10min** a track joins from the right,



then, a minute or so later, concrete appears underfoot, with the recently renovated **Invernal de Camarines** above you on the right: at this point, the forest and scrub surrender their domain to meadows and pastures, interspersed with small blocks of Monterey pines.

Pass a small house on the left, then come to a breeze-block building on the right (**4h20min**). Five minutes later you arrive at a T-JUNCTION: keep right here, heading towards Potes. The concrete lane takes you down over the **Riega de la Tejera**, where you turn sharply left, passing the Sierra de Anjana *orujo* (a local type of firewater) factory on the left before emerging onto the N-621 (**4h30min**). Turn right along the road, which will take you back to the Hostería Picos de Europa in Potes, where you started the walk, at **4h35min**.

Picos de Europa

Ninth edition

The Picos de Europa, in northern Spain, is one of Europe's last mountain wilderness areas. Rather than giving brief itineraries for a large number of walks, this guide instead offers a wealth of information about the dazzling array of plant and animal life you can expect to see when **exploring the range by car or on foot**. Teresa Farino is an all-round naturalist and wildlife tour leader in Spain and Portugal. Her other books include 'Travellers' Nature Guides: Spain' and 'Wild Spain'.

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