

San Andr's de Teixido village nestles in green countryside on the dramatic coastline near Cabo Ortegal in the R'as Altas.



Galicia isn't quite a separate country, but this distinctive northwest corner of Spain, separated from the rest of the nation by both geography and culture, is a far cry from stereotypical Spanish images. The regional capital, Santiago de Compostela, is world-famous: An enchanting city whose soaring Romanesque cathedral is the ultimate goal of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route. Dig a little deeper and you'll discover a region that uniquely blends modern Spain and Celtic roots, complete with its own language and cultural flavor. Galicia is a fascinating secret waiting to be explored.

Cliffs & capes

Entering Galicia across the hills that divide it from the arid plains of Castile, your first surprise is the countryside: it's green, gentle and threaded by rivers. Then you reach the coast. Galicia's 1200km shoreline frequently rears up in some of Europe's most awe-inspiring cliffs and capes - as at Cabo Ortegal, where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Bay of Biscay, or Cabo Fisterra on the savagely beautiful Costa da Morte (Coast of Death, named for the hundreds of ships that have foundered on its jagged shores). Between the lighthouse-crowned capes, the coastline penetrates inland thanks to a series of rias. The inlets along the west-facing coast, named the Rias Baixas, stretch up to 30km inland, while those along the north-facing coast, the Rias Altas, are generally shorter but backed by more dramatic scenery.

The coast is strung with hundreds of mostly sandy beaches, ranging from the glorious 2km sweep of Praia A Lanzada to remote cliff-foot coves such as Praia do Picon. It's a superb coast for meandering. The many scenic marked footpaths include the recently inaugurated Camiño Natural da Ruta do Cantabrico running 133km from Ribadeo to O Vicedo. There's surf too: Praia de Pantín hosts a World Surf League event every August/September. Wetsuits required - this is the north Atlantic! Several archipelagos off the Rias Baixas comprise Galicia's only national park, the Parque Nacional de las Islas Atlánticas de Galicia. The park's jewel is the vehicle-free Illas Cles, a bird sanctuary where you can walk to panoramic viewpoints and laze on gorgeous, lagoon-backed Praia das Rodas.

Europe's best seafood

Thanks to all that coast and dozens of fishing villages, Galician markets and tables are loaded with seafood whose variety, quality and freshness have few serious rivals in Europe. You never dreamed octopus could

taste as good as it does in pulpo · feira - tender slices of tentacle sprinkled with olive oil and paprika. You can find this quintessential Galician dish elsewhere in Spain, where they call it pulpo a la gallega, but it never tastes half as good outside Galicia.

There's a multifarious variety of crabs, good fresh fish and masses of shellfish. The most prized delicacy is percebes (goose barnacles), courageously gathered from wave-lashed rocks by specialist percebeiros.



Praia da Mar de Fora beach near Fisterra on the Costa da Morte.