

# TRAIN ACROSS SPAIN

## A tour from Barcelona to the Galician coast

Wes Gibbons 2017

For the Indie Traveller looking for something a bit different, here is an idea: travel more than one thousand kilometres across Spain coast to coast by train, staying in places less adventurous tourists will never see. The range of scenery is spectacular: across the Catalan Coastal Ranges and over the semi-desert of Los Monegros to follow the Ebro valley through the vineyards of La Rioja, then past the high plains of Castilla y Leon to the remote and scenic hill country of Galicia, finally reaching the Atlantic shoreline of *Las Rias Altas*. Equally enticing is the range of local food and wine waiting to be sampled along the journey. Traveling by train in Spain is generally civilised and stress-free (once you have your ticket) and you will have plenty of room with great views along the way. It would be wrong not to.

The route starts on the Mediterranean coast at Barcelona and travels west on a direct train via Zaragoza to La Rioja and a night in Logroño or Haro. The next day involves a shorter journey on two trains to the cathedral town of Burgos in Castilla y Leon. The third day route heads west across Castilla y Leon into Galicia to overnight in Monforte de Lemos. Here we recommend a break, staying for two nights to appreciate the town and the opportunities it offers for walking, history, wine and food. Continuing west, the route moves through Galicia to Santiago de Compostela. Admittedly something of a tourist hotspot this is nevertheless still one of the most attractive towns in Spain and merits another two night stop. Finally, the journey continues northwest to the Atlantic coast at Ferrol: not yet a tourist hotspot but changing rapidly from the dreary industrial town it once was. Here begins the “English Way” of the Camino de Santiago, and in good weather the short ferry journey across to sample *pulpo* in Murgardos is a must.

### Logistics

The east-to-west route needs a minimum of 5 days train travel and 5 nights in a hotel (Logroño or Haro, Burgos, Monforte de Lemos, Santiago de Compostella and Ferrol). However extra nights in Montforte de Lemos and Santiago (and maybe Ferrol) are strongly recommended, so a stay of 7-10 nights would be perfect. The return journey can be made by plane from A Coruña or Santiago, or night train back from Ferrol to Barcelona. The train takes 15 hours and these days will likely have only a snack bar on board (at the moment restaurants on Spanish night trains seem to have been axed), but for those who like the romance of long-distance train rides.....

It is difficult to recommend a specific time in the year for this journey, not least because the journey travels over 1100km across climatically different zones. In the summer it will be hot everywhere, especially inland, whereas in winter away from the coast in continental Iberia it will be cold and maybe snowy in places. In Galicia, the greenest of “Green Spain”, the traveller will probably see some rain, and maybe a lot of it. In the spring and early summer there will be flowers, and in the autumn the colours of grape-harvesting. There is a great deal of luck involved, so wear layers and take a



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waterproof if the long term forecast looks wet. In general however Spanish weather is more agreeable than in much of Europe and the traveller is likely to enjoy plenty of sun.

The Traveller and companion have learnt to excel in the art of travelling light. This journey is not for tourists who need their own weight in luggage in order to stay within their comfort zone. Book all travel and accommodation in advance to minimise any unpleasant surprises, keep all valuables safely in zipped pockets, relax and enjoy the journey.

### *Buying tickets with RENFE*

The first step is to buy tickets in advance. The Spanish national rail company is RENFE and you can buy online from them: (<https://www.seat61.com/Spain-trains.htm#How to use www.renfe.com>).

It is worthwhile registering with RENFE. Note that RENFE lives in a world of its own and you may need to be patient with their idiosyncrasies. Book as early as you can, although predicting exactly when tickets will become available is impossible: they suddenly appear in blocks and not all trains at once. Buy a Promo ticket which are usually a bargain if you are happy with no refund for any change of plan, otherwise try a Promo +. Always check if Preferente (or Tourist +) seats are available and at what price: it is worth paying a little extra for more space but not if the price is double. Even though you cannot choose your seat with Promo tickets, those travelling together will be placed together unless the train is nearly full. Print out your tickets and arrive at the station in plenty of time to line up for the security check. Allow 20-30 minutes before departure.

### *Book accommodation in advance*

We usually use Booking.com (but there are plenty of others) and choose places that allow free cancellation until the last minute. For Spanish Paradors it is best to register with them as an Amigo and book well in advance directly on their website (<http://www.parador.es/en>). Apart from perks like a welcoming free drink, Amigos get access to deals such as reduced price for 2 or 3 nights, or special half board rates. Outside peak times such as Saturday nights and holiday periods good deals can often be found in Paradors: in **Train Across Spain** you have the opportunity to stay in Paradors in Monforte, Santiago and Ferrol, and maybe Leon too for an extra stopover. All these Paradors are within walking distance from town centre restaurants and bars. For those unwilling or unable to pay Parador prices, all stops along the journey offer a wide range of cheaper accommodation.

## **The Route**

### ***Barcelona to La Rioja***

With 2017 timetables direct trains for Logroño and Haro leave Barcelona Sants station at 07.30, 14.10 and 15.30 and take 4-4.5 hours. The initially high speed route follows the River Llobregat into the Catalan interior, passing the cava vineyards of Penedès to reach Camp Tarragona. It then tunnels through the Catalan Coastal Ranges to cross the Conca de Barberà (another wine area) and the agricultural plains of western Catalunya. After Lleida the line crosses the River Cinca to enter Aragon and the evaporitic semi-desert of Los Monegros, reaches Zaragoza then leaves the high speed route to follow the wide Ebro Valley (Tudela de Navarra-Castejon de Ebro-Alfaro-Calahorra) to Logroño. This city of around 150,000 people is the capital of La Rioja autonomous province and has many hotel options close to the zone of tapas bars around Laurel Street (20 minute walk NW from rail station). Haro, self-styled wine capital of La Rioja, is a much smaller town with only 12,000



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inhabitants, but it too has a lively zone of abundant tapas bars known as *La Herradura* (“the horseshoe”) between La Plaza de la Paz, Plaza San Martín, and Plaza de la Iglesia:  
<http://www.lonifasiko.com/2016/07/27/haro-ruta-pinchos-tapas-la-herradura/>.

Hotel options in Haro are limited: try the Hotel Los Augustinos which is a 15 minute walk south of the rail station (past bodegas and vineyards then uphill into town after crossing the Tirón river). Tip: when drinking red wine, always ask for a *crianza*.



*Stroll past vineyards on the way from Haro station to the town.*

### ***La Rioja to Burgos***

Leave Logroño at 11.25 or Haro at 12.06 for a lovely ride up the narrowing Ebro Valley to Miranda del Ebro, arriving 12.24. There are several trains running on to Burgos (for example give yourself time for a leisurely coffee and snack in Miranda then catch the 13.27 on to Burgos arriving 14.23). The “Rosa de Lima” rail station in Burgos is modern and has a bar-restaurant. It is some distance from the city centre but buses (No. 25) run every 30-40 minutes to Plaza de España (1 euro). There are many accommodation options in Burgos, a city of 177,000 people and with all amenities: consider, for example, the Hotel Silken Gran Teatro which is 300m south of Plaza de España (passing the 14thC gothic San Lesmes church) and pleasantly situated on the banks of the river Arlanzón *en route* to the magnificent cathedral.

The most popular area to enjoy tapas in Burgos is known locally as *La Senda de los Elefantes* (“The Path of the Elephants”) and runs from the Plaza Major along Calle Sombrereía and Calle San Lorenzo, close to the cathedral.





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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=44320682>

### ***Burgos to Monforte de Lemos***

Trains leave Burgos at 12.34 and 15.25 and take 5 hours to reach Monforte de Lemos, a major rail hub for Galicia. The first part of the journey crosses the “meseta” plains of Castilla y Leon (Palencia-Sahagun-Leon) and is not especially scenic until forested hills are reached on the approach to Galicia (Astorga-Bembibre-Ponferrada). The last part of the journey, through eastern Galicia, is spectacular (O Barco-A Rua-San Clodio-Monforte), especially as the train follows the River Sil with its steep hillsides clad with grapevines in the wine region of Valdeorras.

Monforte is a town of just 19,000 inhabitants but with a long and interesting history. The rail station is a 25 minute walk east of the town centre: best to take a taxi (there are phone numbers posted if one is not waiting). Alternatively the urban walk into town is easy unless you are staying in the Parador in which case the final climb is a challenge for the unfit or overloaded. The Parador, beautifully situated in the hilltop San Vicente do Pino Monastery and palaces of the counts of Lemos, has splendid views and is a great place to stay if you can manage the trek up and down to the town centre (walk away from the rail station entrance to turn left into the Rúa Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo; 10 minutes later turn right into Rúa Dos Lagares then right again into Rúa Real and spiral up to the Parador).

Tip: when drinking red wine ask for a *mencía*. Regarding white wine you are unlikely to go far wrong with albariño or anything using the local godello grape. Recommended bar/restaurants in the town include Pulperia Os Chaos (Rúa Roberto Baamonde), Bar Rabeno (Rúa Doctor Teijeiro), Adega de Carlos (Rúa Cardenal: south end), Polar (Rúa Cardenal), Tapería El Convento (Praza



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Campo da Compañía), and Bar Katanga (Rúa Hermida Balado). For those spending more than one night in Monforte consider a visit to the museum *El Colegio de Nuestra Señora de la Antigua* (the “Escorial of Galicia”) and there is an excellent walk from town that follows the River Cabe upstream to A Parte (details are given at the end of this guide).



*The view across the River Cabe valley from Monforte Parador.*

### ***Monforte de Lemos to Santiago de Compostela***

Trains run from Monforte de Lemos to Santiago de Compostela either changing in Ourense (11.08-12.01/12.10-12.48 or 12.06-12.51/13.36-14.15 or 16.52-17.35/18.00-18.38) or direct in the evening (18.09-19.50 or 20.17-21.58). The initial part of the journey is particularly scenic as the line winds along the valleys of the rivers Cabe, Sil and Miño: this is one of the great train journeys of Spain.

Santiago de Compostela is the fifth largest city in Galicia (95,000 inhabitants) and has a relatively small but dense historic centre surrounded by modern suburbs. On arrival at Santiago rail station it is a 15 minute walk north to enter the pedestrianised old town which is the best place to stay. If the Parador is out of economic range (it is one of the most expensive in the Parador chain, and for a good reason: the building is spectacular), then there are many other options usually available. Santiago has become increasingly popular and is in danger of becoming overpriced and swamped by latter-day pilgrims, so it is best to visit out of season. But the centre still has tremendous charm and a feeling of authenticity, especially away from the touristy lower area around Rúa da Franco (although don't miss El Gato Negro, still our favourite tapas restaurant, even though it is often overcrowded).

Our preferred area is the northeast part of the old town: head uphill to Plaza de Cervantes then wander east down to the Mercado de Abastos. There are many bars and restaurants to choose from and the scene changes every time we visit so we prefer not to give specific recommendations. There is plenty of information on the web. One tip though, if it is sunny have a beer in the garden of the Hotel Costa Vella in Rúa da Porta Vella. Visit the Cathedral and its museum, and if there is time the Monastery of San Martín Pinario. Best of all just wander around the old streets and take in the vibe, especially in the evening.





*One of the four patios in the 16<sup>th</sup> C Hospital de los Reyes Católicos, now the Parador hotel in Santiago de Compostela.*



*Garden of the Costa Vella hotel.*

### ***Santiago de Compostela to Ferrol***

An afternoon train conveniently leaves Santiago at 14.17 and arrives at Ferrol at 16.04. After a stop in A Coruña, the train slowly winds its way scenically around four of the *Rías Altas* in the valley-indented Atlantic shoreline of NW Galicia. Initially following south along the Ría de Burgo the line turns east to the Ría de Betanzos then north to cross the Ría de Ares at Pontedeume and finally curve west across the Ría de Ferrol.

The train station in Ferrol lies slightly apart from the town centre but it is an easy and short walk left (southeast) to the Av. Compostela and on to the Plaza de España (consider a taxi if staying in the Parador, which is a 20 minute walk to the southwest). The grid-plan town lies immediately to the right (southwest) of the Plaza de España. It is better to choose accommodation in or



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adjacent to the town centre. Amigos will find the Parador by walking down Rúa María for 8 blocks then crossing Plaza de Amboa diagonally then 2 blocks down Rúa Real. There are many restaurants and bars, both in the town centre and at the port which lies at the end of Rúa San Francisco immediately southwest of the Parador. We do not have obvious favourites, but recommend starting your investigations with the restaurants on offer in the short street of Pardo Baixo on the east side of the town grid.



*Seafood in Ferrol: note the zamburiñas scallop shells appropriate for the “English Way” of the Camino de Santiago which starts in the port.*

Ferrol, the seventh largest city in Galicia (68,000), has none of the historic charm of Santiago but is steeped in naval history and situated on a beautiful ria. An excellent day out can be had by visiting the naval history museum (on the coast just southeast of town) then taking the short ferry trip from the port for a seafood lunch in Murgardos on the opposite side of the Ría de Ferrol. There is a scenic promenade stroll running southwest from Murgardos to the local beach, but not much else. For those needing more exercise, take the ferry back and walk north along the road for 15 minutes to connect with the footbridge and urban coastline walking trail that curves around the Enseada da Malata and follow the path as far as you can. The one-way walk takes about an hour, and both bars and bus stops can be found near the end (there are hourly No. 4 buses that run from O Graña back to the port).

For those staying more than one night and who fancy a taste of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route, then a pleasant 3 hour-walk can be enjoyed by taking a bus from the port area to the **last stop** (*ultima parada*) in Neda (buses run every 20 minutes, the trip takes 40 minutes, and costs 1.50 euros). By doing this you escape the urbanised grind of the first part of the Camino. Turn left out of the bus to locate your first scallop shell sign, cross the busy road with great care, and dive into the network of narrow lanes that lead to Fene (bars and restaurants) then on through the countryside to cross the busy road bridge across the Ría Ares and reach Pontedeume where there are buses (on the left) back to Ferrol. Like much of the Camino elsewhere in Spain most of the time you are walking on asphalt, and the middle part includes an unwelcome deviation that negotiates a



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stretch of busy traffic, but the walking is easy and there are some good views over the rias to be enjoyed. Signs are generally easy to find and follow, although you need to be vigilant in a few places.

<http://caminodesantiago.consumer.es/etapa-de-neda-a-pontedeume>



*The beach at Murgardos, a short ferry ride across the ria from Ferrol.*

### *Additional walking route: from Monforte along upper Cabe Valley*

We include this excursion simply because there is little useful information available for walks around Monforte, which is a shame as the countryside is very attractive. The route does not need any transport as you walk straight out from the town centre along the east bank of the River Cabe. Allow 5 hours, bring all food and drink, and wear good shoes or boots. The walk is easy except for one 20 minute climb up to the village of A Parte, but is definitely not recommended when the rivers are in flood.

Leaving from the Old Bridge (*Ponte Vella*) follow the east riverbank for 500m to cross a main road and continue in the same direction to pass the recreational Club Fluvial (left) to reach a green fence at the end of which slip through the gap to follow a path running alongside the river. This leads to a narrow lane which, around 2km (35 minutes) from the Club Fluvial, passes a golf club and restaurant (O Convento) where the lane bears right to reach Pacios (passing a red and white GR footpath sign). Ignoring a lane to the right, stay left (Sentido de Ruta) to Barxa then left to a BBQ area by the river. Here bear right with the river on your left passing under a road bridge then rail bridge to reach a road, turn left, cross the river, then turn right along a lane running east on the other side of the river. Stay on this lane which in 1 km passes the hamlet of Freixo after which fork right off the road on a track which reaches the lane again. Cross the lane here, staying on the track which immediately crosses a small bridge over an irrigation ditch then begins to climb east then north with wide views over the upper Cabe Valley. About 1.5km from the lane the path reaches the hamlet of A Parte



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(342m above sea level). Here continue northwest through the hamlet to a crossroads and turn right to reach the church of Santa María da Parte.



*Santa María da Parte, capped by a giant stork nest.*

Continue down the road past the church to cross a bridge over the River Cabe then leave the road by bearing right (south) on a track crossing water meadows to enter a wood and take a path forking left that leads to a footbridge. Cross the footbridge and turn right to rejoin the River Cabe, which you follow downstream as the track becomes a road which leads to a cross track where you turn right to rejoin the River Cabe, passing an old mill (right) and turning right at the Penedo sign to enter forest. This lovely forest path runs alongside the river to pass a weir and bridge (right), becoming a track then asphalted lane that swings away from the river, following an irrigation canal. 25 minutes from the weir the lane forks right to a STOP sign. Turn right to another STOP sign then right again to the bridge at O Porto (by now 75 minutes from Santa María). Here rejoin the outward route by turning left just before the bridge and follow the left bank of the river back down to the BBQ area and on past the golf club and Club Fluvial back to Monforte.

