GENERAL

asturias cantabria

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Introduction

Asturias and Cantabria, two neighboring autonomous communities on Spain’s northern coast, share a rich tapestry of history, culture, and natural beauty that makes them a hidden gem for travelers and residents alike. While each region boasts its own distinct identity, they are bound together by the Cantabrian Sea, the rugged Picos de Europa mountain range, and a shared passion for tradition and hospitality. In this guide, we explore the geography, history, culture, and practical aspects of living and visiting Asturias and Cantabria, offering a comprehensive overview that will help you appreciate why this part of Spain is often described as a “hidden paradise.”

Geography and Climate

The landscapes of Asturias and Cantabria are a harmonious blend of dramatic coastlines, lush valleys, and towering peaks. Asturias covers an area of roughly 10,600 square kilometers, while Cantabria stretches about 5,000 square kilometers, together forming a continuous strip of green that runs along the western edge of the Cantabrian Sea.

Mountainous Backdrops

The Picos de Europa National Park, a shared treasure, dominates the interior of both regions. Its granite spires, deep gorges, and alpine meadows provide a playground for hikers, climbers, and nature lovers. The Sierra de Teverga in Asturias and the Sierra de la Demanda in Cantabria offer quieter, less-visited routes that reveal the true serenity of the mountains.

Coastal Charm

Asturias’ coastline is famed for its golden beaches, such as Playa del Silencio and Playa de la Espiguera, and its picturesque fishing villages like Cudillero. Cantabria, meanwhile, is home to the bustling port city of Santander, the historic town of San Vicente de la Barquera, and the idyllic beach of Playa de los Lances. The sea’s influence creates a mild, humid climate with average temperatures ranging from 12°C in winter to 22°C in summer.

Climate Variations

Both regions experience a temperate oceanic climate, but subtle differences exist. Asturias tends to be slightly cooler and wetter, especially in the western valleys, while Cantabria’s eastern parts enjoy a bit more sunshine. The high humidity and frequent drizzle are part of the local charm, fostering lush vegetation and dense forests that cover the hillsides.

Historical Overview

Asturias and Cantabria share a deep-rooted history that stretches back to prehistoric times, with archaeological sites dating to the Paleolithic era. Their strategic position on the Atlantic coast made them key players in Roman, Visigothic, and Moorish periods, before becoming essential strongholds during the Reconquista.

Roman and Visigothic Legacy

Roman influence is evident in the remnants of ancient roads, aqueducts, and the city of Astorga, a Roman gateway

to the interior. Cantabria's ancient settlements, such as the Castro de la Vela, reveal a mix of pre-Roman and Roman artifacts that highlight the region's importance as a trade corridor.

The Birth of the Kingdom of Asturias

Asturias earned its reputation as a bastion of Christian resistance in the 8th century, with the legendary Battle of Covadonga marking the first significant victory against the Moors. This event is commemorated in the Cathedral of Oviedo, a UNESCO World Heritage site that houses the Royal Relics, including the Holy Chalice.

Modern Times

Throughout the Middle Ages, both regions prospered through mining, agriculture, and maritime trade. In the 20th century, the discovery of iron ore and coal spurred industrial growth, especially in Asturias's mining towns. Today, a shift toward service industries, tourism, and renewable energy reflects a dynamic adaptation to contemporary economic realities.

Cultural Heritage and Traditions

Asturias and Cantabria are cultural mosaics, where ancient customs coexist with modern creativity. From music and dance to festivals and religious celebrations, the region's cultural life is vibrant and deeply rooted in its natural surroundings.

Music and Dance

The **gaita**(bagpipe) is a staple in both regions, often accompanied by the rhythmic beating of drums during local festivals. Traditional dances like the "Bailado Asturiano" and Cantabrian "Danza de la Pinta" showcase the communal spirit and rhythmic heritage of the people.

Festivals and Celebrations

- Fiesta de la Candelaria in Oviedo (Asturias) – a colorful religious and cultural festival that attracts thousands of visitors each March.
- Feria de la Noche de San Juan in Santander (Cantabria) – a midsummer celebration featuring bonfires, fireworks, and local delicacies.
- Feria de la Cueva de la Mora in the Picos de Europa – an annual event that honors the region's mining heritage.

Architectural Highlights

Asturias is renowned for its Romanesque churches, such as the **San Pedro de la Rúa** and the **San Julián de los Prados** in Potes. Cantabria's architectural gems include the **Santuario de Covadonga** and the **Casa del Arte**in Santander, which blend modernist design with traditional elements.

Tourist Highlights and Natural Wonders

Both regions are a haven for nature lovers, adventure seekers, and cultural tourists. From hidden coves to ancient monasteries, there is something to captivate every traveler.

Picos de Europa National Park

Spanning both Asturias and Cantabria, this park is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. Popular activities include hiking the **Ruta del Cares**, a scenic trail that winds through a dramatic gorge, and exploring the **Garganta de Cares**, a limestone canyon that offers breathtaking views.

Coastal Attractions

Asturias' **Ría de San Martín** is a natural harbor that hosts the famous **Festival de la Cueva de la Mora**. Cantabria's **Capilla de las Maravillas**in San Vicente de la Barquera is a cliffside chapel that offers panoramic views of the sea.

Historical Sites

The **Cathedral of Santa María del Naranco** in Oviedo, a pre-Romanesque masterpiece, showcases intricate stonework and a serene atmosphere. In Cantabria, the **Roman Bridge of Burgos**stands as a testament to the region's ancient engineering prowess.

Adventure and Sports

1. Kayaking in the Río Sella – a crystal-clear river that flows through the Picos de Europa.
2. Paragliding from the cliffs of Gijón (Asturias) for panoramic views of the coastline.
3. Surfing at Playa de la Concha in Santander, known for its consistent waves.

Gastronomy: From Cider to Seafood

Asturian and Cantabrian cuisine is a reflection of the region's natural bounty. The emphasis on fresh ingredients, simple preparation, and hearty flavors makes the local food an experience in itself.

Asturian Cider

Asturias is famous for its **sidra**, a fermented apple drink traditionally poured from a height to aerate it. The cider houses, or **sidrerías**, offer a convivial atmosphere where visitors can learn the art of cider pouring and enjoy a full meal.

Seafood and Fish

Both regions boast a variety of fish dishes. Asturian specialties include **fabada asturiana**, a hearty bean stew, and **cocido montañés**, a chickpea-based stew. Cantabrian cuisine features **marmitako** (tuna and potato stew) and **bacalao a la Vizcaína**, a salted cod dish cooked in a tomato-based sauce.

Cheeses and Dairy

The lush pastures provide ideal conditions for cheese-making. Asturian **queso de Cabrales** is a blue cheese with a strong flavor, while Cantabria offers **queso de la Tierra**, a creamy goat cheese that pairs wonderfully with local bread.

Local Desserts

Asturian **arroz con leche** and Cantabrian **churros con chocolate**are popular sweet treats that can be enjoyed in local cafés or as part of a traditional breakfast.

Economy and Industry

Historically reliant on mining and agriculture, Asturias and Cantabria have diversified their economies in recent decades. Today, service sectors, tourism, renewable energy, and technology hubs play significant roles.

Mining and Energy

While iron ore mining has largely declined, both regions have invested in renewable energy projects, particularly wind farms along the coast and hydroelectric plants in mountainous areas.

Tourism

Tourism remains a cornerstone of the economy. The combination of natural parks, cultural heritage, and culinary

experiences attracts millions of visitors annually, creating jobs in hospitality, transportation, and guide services.

Technology and Innovation

Asturias hosts a growing tech sector, especially in the cities of Oviedo and Gijón, with initiatives aimed at fostering startups and research in biotechnology. Cantabria's capital, Santander, is emerging as a financial hub, with a focus on sustainable finance and digital banking.

Transportation and Connectivity

Both Asturias and Cantabria are well-connected by road, rail, and air, making travel within and beyond the region convenient.

Road Network

The AP-9 motorway links Asturias to the rest of Spain, running along the coast, while the A-8 connects Cantabria to the northern corridor. Local roads provide easy access to rural villages and scenic routes.

Rail Services

Renfe's high-speed AVE trains connect Oviedo and Santander to Madrid and Barcelona, with intermediate stops that allow travelers to explore the countryside.

Airports

Asturias' **Gijón Airport** offers domestic flights and seasonal international routes, while Cantabria's **Santander Airport** serves both business and leisure travelers.

Public Transport

Both regions feature efficient bus networks that connect urban centers with rural areas, and the city of Gijón has a modern tram system that enhances local mobility.

Living in Asturias and Cantabria

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