

EUROPE'S HIDDEN GEM

Just 24 hours by ferry from Portsmouth is Asturias – a little-known region of northern Spain that's a bonafide motorcycle paradise

IF YOU'VE EVER got the ferry to Bilbao or Santander, you've probably ridden through a small part of Asturias on your way south. But until recently few travellers turned right at the port exit, and set off to explore Spain's northern coast. Which is a pity, because Asturias is crammed with motorcycle goodness.

The roads are a joy, ranging from technical coastal routes over-looking the Bay of Biscay to twisty high mountain passes that climb almost as high as any Alp. Then there are fast sections down wide valleys following rivers through lush woodlands. The variety is enormous.

AsturTarmac's guides have spent all their lives riding the Asturias roads and have amassed a vast amount of local knowledge – they'll know which roads will dry fast after a night of rain.

One difference from other tours is that you're based for two or three days at the

same hotel, which means no packing and unpacking – you just head off to discover another corner of Europe's best kept secret.

» How do I get there?

The easiest way is to take your bike on the 24 hour ferry to Santander or Bilbao. The tour price includes return tickets using Brittany Ferries, with a cabin.

» When should I go?

Your best bet is June to October, where even in high summer the temperatures rarely exceed 28C.

» What are the best roads?

Several motorways have changed the region, making it easier to get to places fast should you wish, but also turning great A-roads into deserted playgrounds if you know where to look. On the coast, there are technical twisty roads that will put some

heat into your discs (and forearms) and then there are the mountains with narrow passes leading to peaceful meadows and forests. The tours comprise up to 12 days of fully-guided riding, letting you cover over 2500 delicious miles.

» What is the food like?

Much like the Galician and Basque regions in the north of Spain, Asturias cuisine is renowned for its delicious traditional dishes. Meals are included in the price and AsturTarmac use only the best local restaurants. There are also over twenty local cheeses and a famous regional cider that's well worth trying at the end of a day (ideally in one of the many charming fishing villages along the coast).

» Where is the best scenery?

There are six UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organisation) reserves which take up a third of the region, giving an idea of how rich the region is in both natural beauty and fascinating culture. With over 214 miles of coastline, 19 picturesque fishing villages and over 200 beaches, there are plenty of scenic spots to stop for a breather. Depending on which tour you book, you could then weave your way into the Cantabrian mountains (home to wolves, bears, deer, wild boar) or head over to the Picos de Europa which reach a height of nearly 3000m. Such a huge variety of scenery in such a small area makes Asturias one of Europe's hidden gems.

» What sort of things are there to do off the bike?

Because of the huge variety in scenery, many of the off-bike entertainments are to do with views and wildlife. But if you're more of a beach person, there are plenty of

those too – Asturias is slowly waking up to tourism and some of the coastal resorts are becoming more sophisticated. The history of the region is worth exploring too – particularly famous are the Jurassic Museum of Asturias, Gijón Aquarium, Mining Museum and the Altamira Cave in Cantabria. Plus there are plenty of traditional open-air dances.

» Where will I stay?

AsturTarmac use four star hotels and depending on the length of your tour you'll spend two to three nights in each.

» How long do I need to stay for to get the most out of it?

At least a whole week – ideally with both weekends – is recommended. This lets you do plenty of riding and gives you time to sample Asturias culture and get a genuine feel for this natural paradise.



Heading into the Cantabrian mountains



TOUR DETAILS

» There are two basic tours, both fully guided. The Standard Tour is 10 days long, Friday to Sunday (seven hotel nights). The Open Trip is from six to 17 days long, with up to 14 full days riding. Prices for the standard tour start at £1400 including ferry, meals, hotels and insurance. Fuel can be included for £140. A support truck for luggage follows both tours.

Details:
www.astur
tarmactours.co.uk

