

ASTURIAS

Your 16-page guide to a region of Spain with a difference



in association with
The Daily Telegraph



CONTENTS

The Asturian coast	4
Oviedo	6
Asturcon ponies	7
Regional cuisine	8
Los Oscos	10
Get sporty	12
Picos de Europa	14

Words: Richard Madden

Pictures: Cover Asturias Tourism; **P2-3** Asturias Tourism; **P4-5** Superstock (2), Photolibrary.com, Spanish Tourism; **P6-7** Superstock (2), Raquel Carnicer (2); **P8-9** Asturias Tourism (3), Superstock; **P10-11** Richard Madden (4), Alamy, Corbis; **P12** Inma Adeba (2); **P14-15** Photolibrary.com (3), Richard Madden (2)

Viva Asturias

Asturias is startlingly different to our classic image of Spain. Conjure up all the stereotypical images you have ever had of Britain's favourite holiday destination. Then banish them from your mind. Instead, imagine a land of jagged mountains, lush green valleys and more than 180 miles of rugged coastline punctuated with sweeping arcs of golden sand that in places puts the coast of Cornwall to shame.

Throw in a traditional agricultural society that until recently had changed little in centuries, thriving local cuisine, prehistoric cave paintings, dinosaur remains from the Jurassic era, brown bears – and a love of the bagpipes.

Mix with a temperate climate that has an average annual rainfall on a par with the south of England's (hence the green landscape). And don't expect everyone you meet to speak English.

Now you will have some idea of what the little-known province of Asturias, bordering the Bay of Biscay on the north coast of Spain, is all about.

"Mi casa, su casa," (my house is your house) is a traditional greeting in Spain. Nowhere is this open-hearted approach to life more true than for

a people who have long had a reputation for friendliness and approachability.

Alongside these qualities lies a strong sense of independence that stretches back to the deeds of the national hero, King Pelayo, who fought off the all-conquering Moors at the famous Battle of Covadonga in AD 722.

Even most long-time lovers of Spain associate Asturias only with the Picos de Europa, the epic range of limestone mountains that attracts walkers and climbers from all over the world.

But for the adventurous visitor it has so much more waiting to be discovered, from the remote mountain valleys in the west to its startlingly beautiful coastline. Not to mention a fabulous smelly cheese called Cabrales and a traditional cider-drinking ritual that goes back centuries. Salud!

Richard Madden

• See the film by Ed Knight on Richard Madden's recent visit to Asturias at telegraph.co.uk in which he tries his hand at kayaking, riding Asturcon horses and canyoning, as well as sampling local dishes and learning the art of cider-making.



THE ASTURIAN COAST

On thriving shores

The Asturian coast, on Spain's northern shores, is dramatic and beautiful. Its splendour lies in its variety – here you'll find the ultimate blend of all the must-have ingredients that make for exhilarating cliff-top walking and great beaches.

The only problem is deciding where to head first. In truth, it all depends what you're looking for. There are wide sweeps of golden sand; craggy, intimate, coves with cathedral-like cliff arches; cosy fishing ports; busy promenades overlooking harbours lined with fish restaurants; and mile after mile of paths along sheer cliffs above the crashing waves. It's all here and more. And the sea is a whole lot warmer than our own, to boot.

Asturias has more than 185 miles of coastline with more than 200 beaches washed clean each day by the suck and surge of the Cantabrian Sea. They stretch from the border with Cantabria in the east, to ancient Castropol at the mouth of the River Eo on the border with Galicia in the west.

The Costas they are not. High-rise beachfront hotels, Brit-themed bars, and rows of lobster-hued flesh sizzling in the baking Spanish sun are, thankfully, a world away. Instead an almost meditative calm embraces the Asturian coast.

It feels like a strange hybrid of balmy Mediterranean islands and the more temperate climes of northern Europe: eucalyptus trees, tropical greenery and the whirring of crickets on summer nights near heather-stained cliffs and the blue Cantabrian Sea.

Choosing one beach or stretch



of coastline over another is an impossible task. Nonetheless, those listed below are some of my personal favourites, although not necessarily the most famous.

During the peak summer season, some of the more well-known become a victim of their own popularity. But exploring and finding your own favourites is all part of the fun.

EAST COAST

This stretch of the Asturian coastline between Llanes and Lastres has sweeping, golden beaches and vibrant, prosperous towns such as Ribadesella, all backed by the spectacular Picos de Europa mountains.

SENDA COSTERA

A designated and well-maintained coastal footpath between Pendueles and Llanes. It passes some of this coastline's most spectacular scenery including several of its famous "bufones" or

water spouts, through which the waves erupt in dramatic fashion when the weather is rough.

PLAYA DE BALLOTA

One of the gems on the coast path, this broad sweep of pink sand is lapped by a shallow lime-coloured sea with an off-lying island to complete its sense of perfection.

MID-COAST

Close to the main cities of Gijón and Aviles, the beaches on the central section of the Asturian coast between Gijón and Cudillero tend to be busier and more built up than the western or eastern stretches. That said, paradise is never far away.

CABO DE PEÑAS

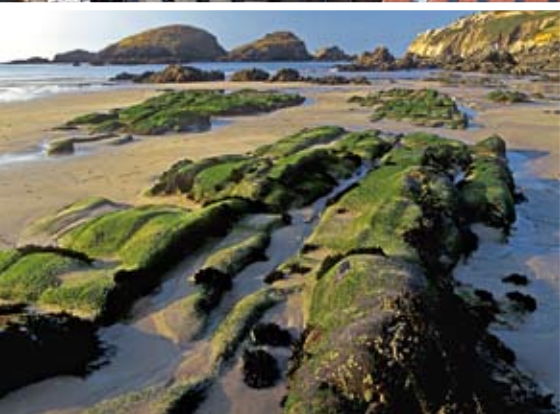
The most northerly point of Spain, Cabo de Peñas is home to impressive sea cliffs – some towering more than 300ft above the shore. The beaches are generally of a darker sand, with Xagó and Verdicio on the western side of the cape being arguably the most beautiful.

PLAYA DEL SILENCIO

This shingle and sand beach, near the busy fishing village of Cudillero, is famous for its cliff arches and the walks around the wooded headland. It's more difficult to reach than some, so is not the best for families, but is great for snorkelling and was recently voted one of the top 10 beaches in Spain.

WEST COAST

This area is generally more rugged and feels more remote, with a generous sprinkling of picturesque



Prosperity and beauty: the vibrant town of Ribadesella, top, and ruggedly handsome beaches

fishing villages. It's also home to some of the best surfing beaches in Europe.

PLAYA DE ANGUILEIRO

Home to the European Surf Championships, the beach is reached from the town centre of Tapia de Casaregio itself. It often provides ideal conditions

for surfing because the beach is shaped into a natural amphitheatre.

PLAYA DE PEÑARRONDA

A stone's throw from Castropol at the western end of the Asturian coast, this is a huge expanse of sand set in a beautifully sweeping bay. The water is clear and some

weird and wonderful rocky outcrops score highly for artistic impression.

INFORMATION

Spanish Tourist Office

www.spain.info/uk

0845 940 0180

Asturias Tourism

www.infoasturias.com

OVIEDO

City of statues

While the coast and the mountains will always be the main draw of the area, Oviedo – the ancient capital of Asturias – is a cultural and architectural jewel that should not be missed. But despite the impressive backdrop of the central mountains, a first view of the city from the road is usually of the smoking chimneys of heavy industry on the outskirts.

Don't be put off. The Old Quarter is an altogether different story. Pedestrianised, cobbled and meticulously restored, it's huddled in a compact area around the Cathedral of San Salvador, whose gothic spire dominates the city's skyline. In easy walking distance are the chilled out, tree-lined avenues of the Campo de San Francisco, the grand central park with its impressive lucky dip of exotic trees, statues, bronzes and fountains. Oviedo has also several times been awarded the prize for Spain's cleanest city.

It has been at the heart of



Asturian life for more than a thousand years. The focus of resistance for an area that was never subjugated by the invading Moors, it became the capital under King Alfonso II in AD 808. While the most ancient of the buildings date from this period, the majority of the palaces, churches, libraries and plazas were built when the city was a focus of religious pomp between the 12th and 16th centuries.

That's when the cathedral, whose elaborate arrow-shaped tower is considered one of the finest of its kind in Spain, was constructed. Among the other religious treasures to be found within is the famous Camera Santa, now a museum, with its collection of medieval jewels and religious artefacts.

The citizens of Oviedo have an endearing obsession with contemporary bronzes and statues. They adorn almost every important public space and make a half-day spent wandering the old quarter a delightful chance to take in the ancient and modern. My favourite square is the Plaza del Fontán, surrounded by pastel-coloured balconied buildings – a great place to drink a coffee and watch the world go by. Which is what a visit to Oviedo should be all about.



Cultural corners: Oviedo's cathedral and the Plaza del Fontán

Hot to trot

After years on the endangered list, the Asturcon pony, first recorded in Roman times, is at last making a comeback. At the Yeguada Albeitar, a hotel and riding lodge owned by Inma and Benito Garrido in the western mountains, I was lucky enough to ride one.

"They may be quite short but Asturcons are known for their exceptional strength," Inma says. "They are also very friendly and forgiving, perfect for children learning to ride."

The semi-wild Asturcon ponies are predominantly black and traditionally live in the hills. Their pure bloodline was in danger of being diluted due to a dwindling population, but now small numbers are bred by members of ACPRA, the Asturcon breeding association.

For years, Inma and Benito (who is a vet) have produced pure-bred



Nature and nurture: nestled in 16 acres of land, the hotel is a perfect spot for children

Arabs for Spain's top riders, but now they have a breeding pool of eight Asturcons, too.

Watching these spirited creatures cantering on the hillside at sunset, their characteristic small heads, short ears, large eyes and shaggy manes reminded me of Britain's Dartmoor ponies, which are also descended from Celtic stock.

When the breed nearly became

extinct in the Seventies, numbers dwindled to 30 or so but today there are thought to be more than 400 of these magnificent animals living in the hills.

"Not many people are lucky enough to ride in countryside like this, and people who stay with us like to help looking after the horses as well," says Inma.

"Our aim is to create a family atmosphere."

Now Inma, Benito and their son Borja, who at 21 is already a top showjumper, are hoping that families who visit Asturias will stay at their hotel and introduce their children to riding through this unique breed.

INFORMATION

Hotel rural Yeguada Albeitar

Oneta, Asturias

www.hotelescuestre.es

0034 985 509 778

albeitar@asturnetes



Food, faba-lous food

Asturias is famous for its rustic cuisine and is home to some of the finest restaurants in Spain.

Trademark dishes rooted in local tradition are always a sure sign of a strong sense of regional identity. And nowhere is this more true than in Asturias. The most characteristic Asturian dish of them all is Fabada Asturiana, a rich stew made with the local faba beans (a bit like our butter beans but not to be confused with them). This was for centuries the staple fare of a largely agricultural society.

The ingredients of Fabada Asturiana also include shoulder of pork, black pudding, chorizo and a sprinkling of saffron – a solid mix of protein and carbohydrate, perfect for keeping the muscles strong during long hours in the fields.

These days Fabada is on the menu almost everywhere, and despite its humble origins it's served in the top restaurants of a region whose reputation for gastronomic excellence is growing exponentially.

Casa Gerardo, whose speciality is Fabada, even has a Michelin Star. "The faba bean was originally brought back from South America by the conquistadors," Marcos Moran, the owner and head chef, informs me, "and ever since it has been a part of Asturian life.

"For modern tastes we reduce the fat content but Fabada is still enjoyed by everyone from royalty downwards." A photograph on the wall of King Juan Carlos and his wife dining at the restaurant is proud testament to his claim.

The restaurant, in the town of Priendes in central Asturias, has been in the Moran family for five



generations. Appropriately enough, it has been converted from the traditional stone farm buildings of the original family home. In the dining area all is wooden beams and brown Asturian stone, while behind the scenes is the gleaming stainless steel of a modern hi-tech kitchen. And appropriately enough,

in one corner stands a sculpture of the ubiquitous faba bean on a marble plinth.

Fish is also central to the Asturian dining experience. Hardly surprising when one considers that 90 per cent of the population live within 15 miles of the coast. My introduction to Asturian gourmet fish dining came at the restaurant of San Pelayo in the charming little village of Niemburu in eastern Asturias, a stone's throw from the famous Picos de Europa mountains, which lie a few miles inland.

Miguel Naves buys his catch fresh every day at an auction in the fish market at the nearby port of Llanes. Red mullet, hake and sea bass are all served at the restaurant but Miguel's speciality is monkfish. The restaurant has been designed to reflect local fishing traditions, with porthole windows, nets, aquariums and blue glass in abundance.

It was here that I also had my first taste of the local cider. Cider-making (and consumption) is every bit as important in Asturias as it is in our own West Country. Think scrumpy and you will get a good idea of the look (and strength) of Asturian "sidra". It is fermented from three different types of apple (sour, bitter and sweet) and matured in barrels of chestnut wood.

Sidrerías in Asturias are as common as tapas bars. But the drinking of cider has its own traditional set of rituals. Stored in a plain green bottle with no label, it's a still cider that gets its "fizz" from the way it is theatrically poured from shoulder height in one hand into a glass held as low as possible in the other. Then it's down in one.



Flavours to savour: clockwise from top left, inside San Pelayo; typical Asturian fare; a mouthwatering creation by Miguel Naves; local speciality, hearty Fabada Asturiana

You may be invited to try pouring it yourself but, if you want to keep your clothes dry, leave it to the professionals. The taste is crisp and dry – slightly more sour than we're used to – but it slips down with surprising ease.

No roll call of Asturian cuisine would be complete without a mention of the many cheeses for which the region is also famous. As a fan of non-cow's-milk cheese, I was delighted to discover the local Cabrales cheese, which is made from a mixture of cow's, goat's and sheep's milk. It's a "blue" cheese – a bit like Roquefort – which is left to mature in limestone caves but is deliciously mild.

"The reason Asturias has so many different cheeses," Miguel tells me, "is because of geography. In the old days



communication in the mountains was difficult and each valley developed its own cheese." What a good reason to keep modern "advances" at bay.

INFORMATION

Casa Gerardo

Priendes, Carreño
0034 985 887 797
www.casa-gerardo.com

San Pelayo

Niembro, Llanes
0034 985 407 376
www.restaurantesanpelayo.com

Cider – Sidra Cortina

Amandi, Villaviciosa
0034 985 893 200
www.sidracortina.com

Cheeses – Casa Buj

Llanes
0034 985 401 072
www.casabuj.com



Rural retreat

Sadly, the mountains of western Asturias have been largely ignored by visitors – until now.

When even the locals have little knowledge of the treasures in their own back yard, you can be sure that, as a tourist, you have stumbled into virgin territory. This is as true of the mountains of western Asturias as any other region in Spain. Chat to a waiter or a taxi driver in the main cities of Gijón, Avilés or Oviedo and they will be happy to wax lyrical about the legendary Picos de Europa mountains to the east, but very few will have first-hand knowledge of the mountains to the west.

"Until recently people had no real concept of the interior as everyone went on holiday to the coast," says Patricia Cid who runs a hotel in the mountain village of Santa Eulalia de Oscos in the mountains near the border with Galicia. "This area was once a major centre for blacksmiths, weavers and potters, but during the industrial revolution everyone

moved to the cities, the old skills died out and the rural areas were decimated." The area surrounding the three villages of Santa Eulalia, Villanueva and San Martín – known as the Oscos region – feels ancient and has a human history that stretches back to Neolithic times, as the many cave paintings from the era that have been discovered in these mountains bear witness. It is also studded with "castros", the hill forts used by local tribes to keep invading Romans at bay.

But now Asturians are starting to discover their rural heritage and life is rekindling in the mountain villages. Patricia Cid's father, Juanjo, moved here nine years ago after a career in advertising in Madrid, to restore some of the centuries-old farm buildings, which are such a distinctive part of the Asturian landscape. Casona del Bosque de Pumares, a delightfully elegant hotel with preserved period features that don't impinge on guests' comfort, is the result.

This is a walkers' paradise with

a network of marked trails, which – despite their remoteness – are nonetheless easy to follow. Unlike the dramatic, jagged limestone outcrops of the Picos de Europa to the east, where the urge is to climb ever higher, here the mountains are more rounded, with enticing forested valleys and paths following the course of the river between remote mountain villages.

To explore these forests is to enter an ancient world full of myths and legends, where even



LOS OSCOS



Local colour: Batan's old mill, far left; autumn in the Picos, left; a restored hórreo, above

in peak season you are unlikely to meet more than a handful of walkers in a day. Emerging from the valley one evening as I returned to the welcoming warmth of my hotel, a startled deer skittered across my path and two old men leaning meditatively against their sticks greeted me with a throaty "Buenos tardes" as I passed.

Over a drink in the courtyard of the hotel, Juanjo shows me a particularly fine example of one

of the traditional "hórreos" that he has restored. These wooden grain barns can be seen all over Asturias and were traditionally thatched or covered in local slate and raised from the ground on distinctive mushroom-shaped legs.

"They are raised up so air can circulate and dry the grain," explains Juanjo, "and they were shaped that way to prevent mice crawling up."

On my final night, I ventured further south into the mountains to

another delightfully restored and atmospheric farm building in a hillside village near Cangas del Narcea. This area is part of the Parque Natural Reserva Biológica Nacional de Muniellos, which was created to protect ancient woodland that is home to many endangered species, including a small population of brown bears.

Only 20 walking permits a day are issued for the reserve, so do plan ahead, and the feeling of entering an isolated and ancient world is intense. Returning for a meal in the village bar, full of friendly locals playing cards and chatting with one another in a rural dialect I was unable to decipher, felt like coming back to a metropolis. Now that's remote.

INFORMATION

Hotel Casona del Bosque de Pumares

Sta Eulalia de Oscos
0034 985 62 12 97

www.casonapumares.com

Casa de Aldea Casa Mario

Cangas del Narcea
0034 985 911 198

www.casamario.net

Adventure unlimited

Mountains and rivers are a potent combination, especially when it comes to adventure sports. With no shortage of both, Asturias is an adventure playground offering almost limitless potential. The focus of the region are the Picos de Europa mountains in general, and the River Sella in particular.

The river runs through the town of Cangas de Onís, gateway town to the Picos mountains and basecamp for adventures of all kinds, from walking, climbing and caving to kayaking, canyoning and quad-biking. It's a magnet for outdoor enthusiasts and has a lively nightlife too. Adventure tour operators are numerous here.

The Sella is one of the most famous rivers for paddle sports in Spain, largely due to the 12-mile canoe race from the mountains to the coast, which takes place annually on the first Saturday in August.

The race grew out of a three-way competition between friends in 1929. It now attracts thousands of competitors from all over Spain, and indeed the world, and is billed as the "International Descent of the River Sella".

The downside to all this is that while the Sella is perfect for first-time paddlers, with only short stretches of white water, it can also become very crowded in the peak season. That's exactly why Kaly Menéndez opened his own adventure sports lodge in the less well-known western mountains near the town of Villayón.

Kaly and his enthusiastic group of young guides take clients canoeing and kayaking on the tranquil River Navia, and on canyoning expeditions in a nearby



river gorge. "This area is rarely visited by foreigners," Kaly tells me one morning as, surrounded by dense woodland, our kayaks slide silently over the glassy surface of the river, "but without doubt it's one of the most beautiful in Asturias."

Later I joined him and his team as – clad in thick wetsuits and carrying ropes and an impressive array of jangling carabiners – we stood triumphantly under the spray at the foot of a trio of waterfalls in

the nearby woods at Oneta. Canyoning, like the many other outdoor activities on offer in Asturias, is a sure-fire way of forging an intimate bond with both the region and its people.

Asturias is also a walkers' paradise, with any number of well-marked trails both through the magnificent Picos de Europa mountains in the east and the lesser-known mountains in the west, particularly in the Oscos-Eo region. Famous trails in the Picos include the day walks to the Ordiales viewpoint from the Covadonga Lakes, the walk to the base of the Naranjo de Bulnes, and through the spectacular rock tunnels in the Cares Ravine. Each year, 300,000 people walk this route, reaching heights of 2,000ft along narrow passes.

There are also many stunning sections of the coastal footpath. The 20-mile section between Pendueles and Llanes is dotted with small villages and beautiful beaches, while further east, near the border with Cantabria, are the



Action packed: kayaking on the Sella, above; opposite page, horse riding and canyoning

famous Bufones de Pria. These eroded blowpipes in the coastal rocks spurt jets of water high into the air during rough weather. It's a spectacular sight.

For those who prefer to travel on two wheels, there's no shortage of options for either experienced mountain bikers looking for a challenge, or cyclists preferring a day's gentle riding in the hills, and there are bike rental companies throughout the region. The Turon Valley Green Way, crossing the old mining valleys

south of Oviedo, is part of a major 60-mile biking route currently under construction.

If you hanker after height, the Picos de Europa – the first national park in Spain and a designated biosphere reserve – is home to some of the most famous climbing routes in Europe, most notably the challenging Pico Urriello (Naranjo de Bulnes).

Easier "non-technical" climbs and scrambles will challenge and reward fit and keen walkers,

with some of the most spectacular views you're ever likely to see including the Peña Santa de Enol, the highest peak in the Picos de Europa, and the Cavadonga lakes.

INFORMATION **Kalyaventura at Serandinas**

0034 689 565 640

kalyaventura@hotmail.com

River Eo Boat Tours

Francisco, Albatros V
Figuera, Castropol
0034 647 823 376

Peaks of perfection



Rock of ages: clockwise from above, a hiker's view of the Picos; the mountains provide a picturesque

The Picos de Europa National Park is one of Spain's iconic landscapes – a hiker's paradise of jagged limestone peaks, lush green valleys and crystal-clear streams.

For first-timers, the Picos de Europa offers a roll-call of must-see sights that won't disappoint, while long-time lovers of this wilderness region come for the expeditions.

A good starting point is the gateway town of Cangas de Onís, a 30-minute drive from the east coast. It's the perfect basecamp for activities such as hiking, climbing, kayaking on the Sella, quad-biking and paintballing.

The jewel in the crown for most walkers is a view of the Naranjo de Bulnes (dubbed the "Matterhorn of Spain"), a surreal limestone peak that towers over the village of Bulnes like a giant tooth.

It gets its name (naranjo means "orange tree") from the warm glow

of the evening sunlight reflecting on the white limestone.

In summer – with planning and a fit physique – it is possible to reach the base of El Naranjo on a day's walk from Bulnes. Most visitors though prefer a gentle

amble along the mountain paths to a "mirador" (viewing point), followed by a meal in one of the village bars.

Bulnes has a wild setting – perched on a rocky outcrop and surrounded by sheer mountain rock faces. It is famous for being the last village in Spain to be connected to the grid, but today all signs of modernity have been disguised and the old farm buildings with their terracotta-tiled roofs, many now converted into restaurants and bars, offer a reminder of a simpler, rural age.

There are no cars and no roads, and, until 2001 when a funicular was tunnelled through the mountains from nearby Poncebos, Bulnes was only connected to the outside world by mule path.

On an autumn day, I set off from Bulnes into the mountains. Following steep paths, my solitude was broken only once – by the





backdrop to local villages; Don Pelayo; the cave of Santina, Covadonga

chattering of a group of English school army cadets, each carrying a loaded backpack, on a Duke of Edinburgh Gold Award expedition. Further on, I discovered lush green meadowland – the perfect picnic spot if ever there was one – where I tucked in greedily to fresh bread, Iberian ham and local cheese.

After being frustrated on the way up, I was rewarded on my way back down with a stunning view of El Naranjo as the clouds drew back in dramatic fashion to reveal the star performer. Bewitched by the view, the sound of cowbells tinkling, and the sight of sheep and mountain goats grazing contentedly, dragging myself back to the 21st century was hard indeed.

Tempting as it is to head for the higher peaks, it would be a pity to miss a visit to the red-stoned Catholic basilica at Covadonga. Standing on a plateau at the head

of a mountain valley, it was built to commemorate the victory over the invading Moors under Pelayo, the 8th-century king and Asturian hero whose statue gazes out over the mountains from the plaza in front of the church.

Further up still are the Covadonga lakes, a beauty spot with a picture-perfect mountain backdrop. On the day I visited they were shrouded in mist, but what the scene lacked in visibility it made up for in atmosphere.

"Mordor," mutters a voice in a husky Spanish accent, just as I emerge, startled, from behind a giant boulder. On one of the

many footpaths that snake off into the countryside, my unexpected companion and I find ourselves staring down into the Tolkienesque scene of an abandoned pit, where the gaping mouths of eerie black tunnels disappear into the cliff face.

Mercifully, a plaque in front of a giant metal sculpture looming out of the mist explains the area's previous incarnation as a mine, before being designated part of the Picos de Europa National Park in 1918.



INFORMATION Spanish Tourist Office

0845 940 0180

www.spain.info/uk

Picos de Europa

www.asturiaspicos

deeuropa.com

Asturias Tourism

www.infoasturias.com