

RETURNING to the MOUNTAINS

The magnificent medieval villages of Spain’s Pyrenees are celebrating their cultural and culinary rebirth, discovers **Lina Zeldovich**.

photos by: Gobierno de Arago and Lina Zeldovich



I am walking on a centuries-old cobblestone street in Alquézar, a medieval village in the Aragon region of Spain’s Pyrenees, looking for a family-owned bakery Panaderia O’Forno, famed for a specific rare treat. Called dobladillo, it’s a thin, crispy folded pastry filled with almond paste, and Alquézar is one of the very few places to relish it. Dobladillo proves worth my quest — the crunchy nutty-sweet combination is beyond indulging. The same can be said about every bite of food I’ve tried here so far.

Nearly abandoned in the aftermath of Spain’s Civil War and World War II, Alquézar has come roaring back in recent years — as have other villages in the Aragon region. The descendants of the families that had left to work in big city factories are returning to their ancestral homes, reviving Aragon’s farmlands, and this movement has given rise to the entirely new concept

of rural gastronomy, with some restaurants rivalling Michelin-level cuisine and others earning the actual stars.

“My grandmother left Alquézar at 15 for a better future,” says my guide Elena Anguita, who is part of this turnaround trend — she came back to help revive her region via tourism. “Today, things have changed. People want to enjoy beautiful nature, drink good wine and eat delicious food — and we have plenty of that.”

Aragon has always been known for generational vineyards, centuries-old olive trees and fertile valley soils. Add to it a dramatic architectural mix of Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Mudéjar architecture — a blend of Islamic and Christian influences — with the Pyrenees as the backdrop, and you have a perfect European road trip to the places less trodden. Here are other timeless Aragon villages to relish.



BUERA

Alquézar’s neighbouring village, Buera, where residents keep chickens and grow vegetables in their gardens, still maintains an 18th-century olive oil press inside Torno de Buera, an olive oil museum that also offers tastings. After that, head over to Nyibeta Degustacion, another testament to the region’s revival. Started by chef Raúl Hernández and his partner Mónica Alujas, who moved to Buera from Barcelona, Nyibeta rivals Michelin-starred places where the pair worked previously. The laid-back eatery surprises with a long list of creative tapas that range from salmon tataki to traditional treats like *fideuá de pulpo*, a twist on paella with octopus and short noodles. A chilled strawberry soup with floating ice cream is another must.

from top left: hikers trek in Ordesa and Monte Perdido National Park; the Tirolina Ordesa zipline is said to be the longest in Europe and the fastest in the world; fall in the Pyrenees is spectacular; nearly abandoned in the aftermath of Spain’s Civil War and World War II, Alquézar came roaring back



TORLA-ORDESA

A springboard for the Monte Perdido National Park, Torla-Ordesa is hugged by green hills and swaddled in flowers. It’s also home to the Tirolina Ordesa Pirineos zipline, said to be the longest in Europe and the fastest in the world with a speed of 160 km/h. Hiking, biking and flying over the Pyrenees is sure to make you hungry, so stop at La Cocinilla for unique dishes like cod loin with honey, pig’s cheeks or a traditional shepherd treat of breadcrumbs cooked with eggs and grapes. Save space for dessert — a puff pastry with roasted apples and crème anglaise. Craving something savoury? Nearby, Quesos Bal de Broto makes several types of cheeses and offers tastings and tours of its cellar.



LARUÉS

A tiny village of under 100 residents, Larués boasts another rural gastronomic find — Molino de Larués, a slow-food restaurant founded by chef Joaquín Moreno, who adds modern twists to traditional recipes and serves his creations inside handmade pottery. Moreno is part of the “zero kilometres” movement in which food ingredients must travel as little as possible, so his dishes are created with hyper-local meat, dairy and produce. A tomato-and-cherry soup with a dollop of ice cream will leave you with a long-lasting memory.

CANFRANC-ESTACIÓN

Built-in the 1920s as a marvel of 20th-century engineering, Canfranc-Estación was once the second-largest railway station in Europe. But when train travel went out of style in the 1970s, the station fell in disrepair, as did the little hamlet it was part of — until recently.

Restored by the Barceló Hotel Group, Canfranc-Estación came back as a five-star hotel with a Michelin-star restaurant set inside an antique train car. Fittingly named Canfranc Express and reminiscent of the Orient Express, the restaurant delights with dishes that look like edible art — perfectly in tune with the rest of your stay. ■



from top left:
A tomato and cherry soup with a dollop of ice cream is a testament to the chef's creativity at Molino de Larués; Quesos Bal de Broto makes several types of local cheeses and offers tastings as well as tours of their cellar; Once forsaken, Canfranc Estación is now a five-star hotel with a Micheline-star restauran