

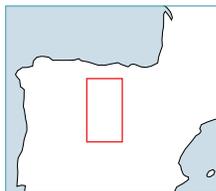
Explore

Interior of Burgos
Cathedral

Castilian *treasures*



There's far more to discover in the plains between the **Spanish ferry ports and Madrid** than just vast horizons, says **Nick Rider**



Anyone driving south from Bilbao or Santander can feel, when they cross the Cantabrian mountains, that they're entering empty space. Around 40 miles from the coast the tight green valleys of the Basque Country and Cantabria give way to drier, rockier gorges, before you drop down onto what seems like an endless sea of rolling brown fields interrupted only by rows of poplars and tiny villages close-clustered around church towers.

If you wish, you can cross this vast *meseta*, or tableland, of Old Castile on the A1 *autovía* to reach the motorways around Madrid in three hours. But take time to meander off the highway and you can discover a hugely enjoyable mix of history, dramatic landscapes, distinctive food and fabulous wines.

The roads from Bilbao and Santander meet at Burgos, the first capital of medieval Castile, which is set around a



NICK RIDER/AGE FOTOSTOCK/ALAMY



PETERLUBACH

magnificent 13th-century **gothic cathedral** **A** – a UNESCO world heritage site that boasts carvings of extraordinary quality. Around the cathedral the broad squares of the old city are ideal for strolling and café-sitting.

Burgos's medieval greatness left many other traces, especially still-occupied monasteries. On the eastern edge of the city is a little-known marvel in the **Cartuja de Miraflores (Charterhouse of Miraflores)** **B**, where in the 1480s the famous Queen Isabella of Castile commissioned a tomb for her parents from master-carver Gil de Siloe. It is astonishing: a star-shaped block of alabaster covered in exquisitely carved images, standing below an equally breathtaking altarpiece, by the same artist, in wood. The monastery, however, is an utter newcomer by comparison with the remarkable prehistoric site of Atapuerca (see right). →

Atapuerca: the first Europeans

The discoveries made in the hills of Atapuerca, nine miles east of Burgos, have transformed ideas of prehistoric Europe. Previously it was thought the first hominins or early humans arrived on the continent around 500,000 years ago, but it has been shown that the Atapuerca caves were continually occupied from as far back as 1.2 million years ago. More than 6,000 early human fossils have been found at Atapuerca since 1976, the most striking being those of *Homo antecessor*, a formerly unknown ancestor of modern humans who lived there around 800,000 years ago.

Tours of Atapuerca are run by Burgos's Museum of Human Evolution, a high-tech addition to the city that impressively showcases finds from Atapuerca such as *Miguelón*, one of the most complete prehistoric skulls ever found. Atapuerca tours are normally in Spanish only, but group bookings in English are available, and a free English app can be downloaded from the museum website.

Museo de la Evolución Humana
Paseo Sierra de Atapuerca, Burgos
+34 902 024 246 museoevolucionhumana.com

Sailing to Spain

Brittany Ferries sails up to seven times a week from Portsmouth and Plymouth to Santander and Bilbao. Plus you save money by booking your ferry and Spanish hotels together. Find out more at brittanyferries.com



1 Romanesque cloister, Santo Domingo de Silos monastery 2 The majestic Ducal Palace in Lerma

Stay

La Tenada, Carcedo de Burgos

A welcoming B&B in a village outside Burgos with three very individual and surprisingly luxurious rooms.
+34 947 290 293 latenadahotelrural.com

Castilla Termal Monasterio de Valbuena, San Bernardo

A stunningly seductive luxury hotel in a medieval monastery amid vineyards, incorporating an intact Gothic cloister as well as an opulent spa, pools and a fine restaurant.
+ 34 983 683 040 castillatermal.com

Concejo Hospedería, Valoria la Buena

An extraordinary discovery in remote Valoria, blending old and new with great flair in a historic tower-house, a labour of love for owner Enrique Concejo. The restaurant is equally exceptional, offering inventive cuisine along with Enrique's fine Cigales wines.
+ 34 983 502 263 concejobodegas.com

Posada Hoces del Duratón, Sebúlcor

Unusual hotel and restaurant full of antique character in a village at the west end of the Duratón gorge – a good base for exploring.
+ 34 921 521 424 posadadelduraton.com

Essential aids to finding small, characterful hotels across Spain are the associations and booking services Ruralka (ruralka.com) and Rusticae (rusticae.com).

A short way south of Burgos, a turn onto the Soria road (N234) leads you into a broad valley that seems, more than most places, 'steeped in history'. Just east at **Quintanilla de las Viñas** is one of the oldest Visigoth churches in Spain, built around 690, with strange, semi-pagan carvings. Back on the Soria road another turn, west this time, will take you out of the brown valley and into a densely wooded gorge along the River Arlanza. It twists and turns, past another monastery at San Pedro de Arlanza, to Covarrubias, an almost impossibly lovely village of medieval bastions, churches and half-timbered houses, with plenty of restaurants too.

Not far south is the most famous of Castile's monasteries at **Santo Domingo de Silos**, with a glorious Romanesque cloister. Perhaps more than any other, Silos retains a special atmosphere; its monks are famed for maintaining Gregorian chant, which is sung at services open to the public.

A road leads west back to the AI at Lerma, a small town of eccentric grandeur. Around

1600, King Philip III effectively appointed the Duque de Lerma as Spain's first prime minister. The Duke made his country seat an extension of the court, and so little Lerma acquired the massive **Ducal Palace** that dominates the main square, now a plush Parador hotel. Visitors also head to Lerma for its roast-meat restaurants and local *morcilla* black sausage.

Thirty miles south of Lerma you enter the valley of the River Duero and, stretching west of Aranda de Duero, the **Ribera del Duero** wine region. For many, Rioja may still be the obvious name in Spanish wines, but recently, especially inside Spain, the rich reds of *la Ribera* have had a higher reputation. Alongside great wines it naturally offers a fine range of places to stay, eat and enjoy luxury living. Historic **Aranda** is also renowned as a capital of Castilian roast-meat cuisine, with *asadores* or roast-houses that fill to bursting at weekends.

At the heart of the Ribera is **Peñafiel**, dominated by perhaps the most dramatic of Castile's hill-castles, atop a massive crag. It

High protein

Roast meat is at the heart of Castilian cooking – especially milk-fed lamb (*lechazo*) and suckling pig (*cochinillo*), slow-cooked in wood-fired ovens. Aranda de Duero is the great *lechazo* centre, with an array of *asadores* or roast-meat restaurants, but towns like Lerma and Sepúlveda all have their own selections, favourites for Sunday lunch.



now hosts a wine museum, and from the great tower there's a sweeping view. One of Peñafiel's stranger features is the series of *luceras* – weird mushroom-like towers – that crop up all around the old town, providing ventilation for underground wine cellars. Another is the Plaza del Coso, a broad square that doubles as a bullring, one of few like it left in Spain.

The Ribera del Duero is wonderful for wine tourism, with dozens of *bodegas* or wineries offering tours. Most cover similar ground – explaining different stages of wine-making and finishing with a tasting – but each *bodega* has its own character, from cutting-edge contemporary complexes to traditional cellars and gracious country estates. Comparing styles can be almost as enjoyable as the superlative wines.

Northwest of the Ribera is **Valoria la Buena** in Cigales, a still historic but far smaller and

less well-known wine denomination. Production is only a fraction of that of the Ribera, so *bodegas* and wine visits also tend to be more intimate. While virtually all Ribera del Duero wine is red, Cigales is equally known for finely structured rosés.

Valoria country roads lead back to Peñafiel and then across some of Castile's most rugged landscapes to the famous hilltown of Sepúlveda, strung out along a ridge. It stands at the head of the **Hoces del Río Duratón**, a magnificent winding gorge carved by the River Duratón and lined by cliffs that host the nests of griffon vultures. The gorge is now a natural park, great for walking and kayaking, and further west it contains one more historic monastery – **Monasterio de la Hoz**, a dramatic ruin above the river. And from Sepúlveda, it's a short run back to the motorways south.



Peñafiel Castle towers behind Ribera vines

BON APPETIT/ALAMY

Wine exploring



UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/DEAGOSTINIA/LAMY

Bodegas Portia, Gumiel de Izán

North of Aranda is the Ribera's most awe-inspiringly modern winery, designed by Norman Foster, like a Bond villain's lair built into a Ribera hill. +34 947 102 700 bodegasportia.com

Bodegas Protos, Peñafiel

The oldest modern-style winemaker in the Ribera is another modern architecture showcase. Tours are a passage through time, beginning in historic tunnels beneath Peñafiel Castle to cross a street underground and emerge into a magnificently airy wooden-roofed space added by Richard Rodgers in 2004-8. +34 983 878 011 bodegasprotos.com

Tinto Pesquera, Pesquera, and Condado de Haza, Roa

More traditional in style, the original *bodega* of Alejandro Fernández, now 83, who began the revival of Ribera wines using only Tempranillo grapes in the 1970s. The family's other Ribera estate at Condado de Haza near Roa is a beautiful chateau-style *bodega* with delightful views over surrounding vineyards. grupopesquera.com

Emilio Moro, Pesquera

Another creative Pesquera winemaker offering a particularly wide range of tours, including 'harvest workshops' during the autumn grape harvest. +34 983 878 400 emiliomoro.com

Finca Villacreces, Carretera N-122, near Quintanilla de Onésimo

A gorgeous estate on the Ribera's so-called Milla de Oro or 'golden mile', with a pine wood among its vineyards that creates a special microclimate. Visitors can tour the vineyards on electric-powered bikes before their cellar tour. +34 983 680 437 www.villacreces.com



Concejo Bodegas, Valoria la Buena

Enrique Concejo produces 150,000 bottles of Cigales reds and rosés a year, compared to millions at major Ribera *bodegas*. Tours include visits to vineyards, and to a fascinating warren of 300-year-old *bodegas* built into a hill. Plus, he has a special hotel and restaurant (see 'Stay' section). +34 983 502 263 concejobodegas.com

Further information

Official Portal of Tourism, Junta de Castilla y León: turismocastillayleon.com
 Ribera del Duero Wine Route: rutadelvinoriberadelduero.es
 Cigales Wine Route: rutadelvinocigales.com