

Trek
in
Spain

I. The Picos de Europa: Central Massif Circuit

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The Picos de Europa are the jewel in the crown of the Cordillera Cantabrica mountains in Northern Spain. Almost exclusively composed of limestone they were laid down beneath the ocean some 300 million years ago in the Carboniferous era. Since then the same tectonic thrusts which were responsible for the Alps and Pyrenees about 200 million years ago have caused this limestone block to be uplifted well above sea level. Thereafter erosion has been at play with various ice ages and millenia of rainfall eroding this block into three main massifs; East Central and the West.

The forest of the Picos de Europa are nearly all deciduous with beech and oak dominating the lower slopes. However, hazel, ash, and field maple also thrive. Above these woods are the hardy scrubs of broom and juniper which give way to the high pastures and limestone rockfields. The nutrient rich soils also encourage a wealth of wild flowers throughout the summer.

With this wealth of largely deciduous vegetation there is a abundance of insects in the summer, and these in turn support large populations of small passerine type birds, some species of which can thrive through the winter. The black woodpecker and the Capercaille are also rare residents in the deciduous woods. Some raptors and the Griffon and Egyptian vultures manage to survive, largely in the zone above the treeline.



Day 1. Goats are common in the Picos de Europa, especially on the rockier northern side where they can exploit craggy pastures. They are rounded up each evening for safety and milked

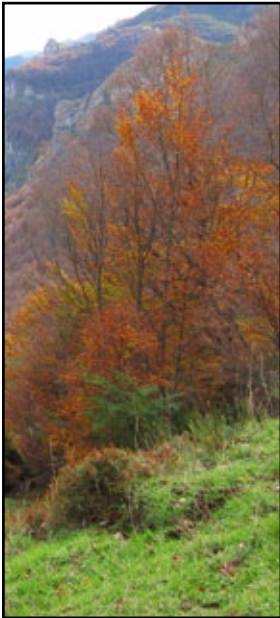
The fruitful deciduous woods also support a rich wealth of mammals. Cantabrian Brown bears are found in the valleys to the south of the Picos de Europa mountains. The Iberian wolf is found in and around the mountains. Shepherds use large mastiff dogs to guard their livestock from these predators. Chamois can be seen grazing the grassy ledges between outcrops near the treeline. In the woods Wild boar thrive on the rich forest floor. Both Red deer and Roe deer graze the forest glades and lower pastures. Wildcats and Genets also have a foothold in the valleys around the Picos de Europa massifs, especially on the south side, where they prey on rodents such as the rare Pyrenean desman and more common voles or mice.

Human influence in the Picos de Europa is significant but is largely restricted to gentle farming in the surrounding valleys and shepherding on the mountain pastures. Many of these pastures have been created over the centuries by clearing the montane forest and scrub. Continual grazing now keeps these pastures clear. During the summer months shepherds take their flocks and cows up to the high pastures and stay in stone mountain huts. They retreat to the lower pastures in the deciduous woods and the valleys with their animals when the snows arrive. This once thriving transhumant farming is now in decline but it is still common place. Much of the milk from the animals is made into artisanal cheeses.

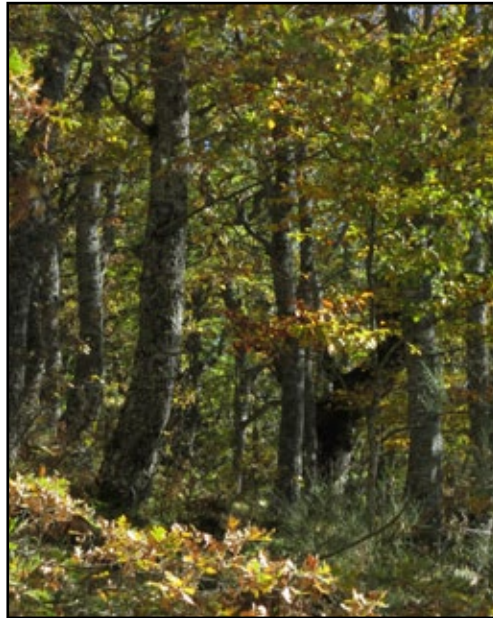


Day 1. The common cattle breed in the Picos de Europa is the Asturian Mountain, It is a small beef cattle with great foraging abilities, grazing the mountain pastures from April to December

The Picos de Europa



European Beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, cover large areas of the southern slopes of the Picos de Europa



Pyrenean oak, *Quercus pyrenaica*, are the dominant woods on the southern flanks. There are also other varieties in the Picos de Europa, namely Holm, Sessile and Cork oaks



Common Hazel, *Corylus avellana*, grows well higher up on the north side of the Picos de Europa

This circuit of the Central Massif in the Picos de Europa is an easy, low-level, 4-day trek. It does not go amongst the high, jagged spires and as such is rather tame. However, is a good poor weather option. On the other hand it does take one through some of the highlights of the Picos de Europa and round the bases of the lofty mountains and across the pastoral culture of the region.

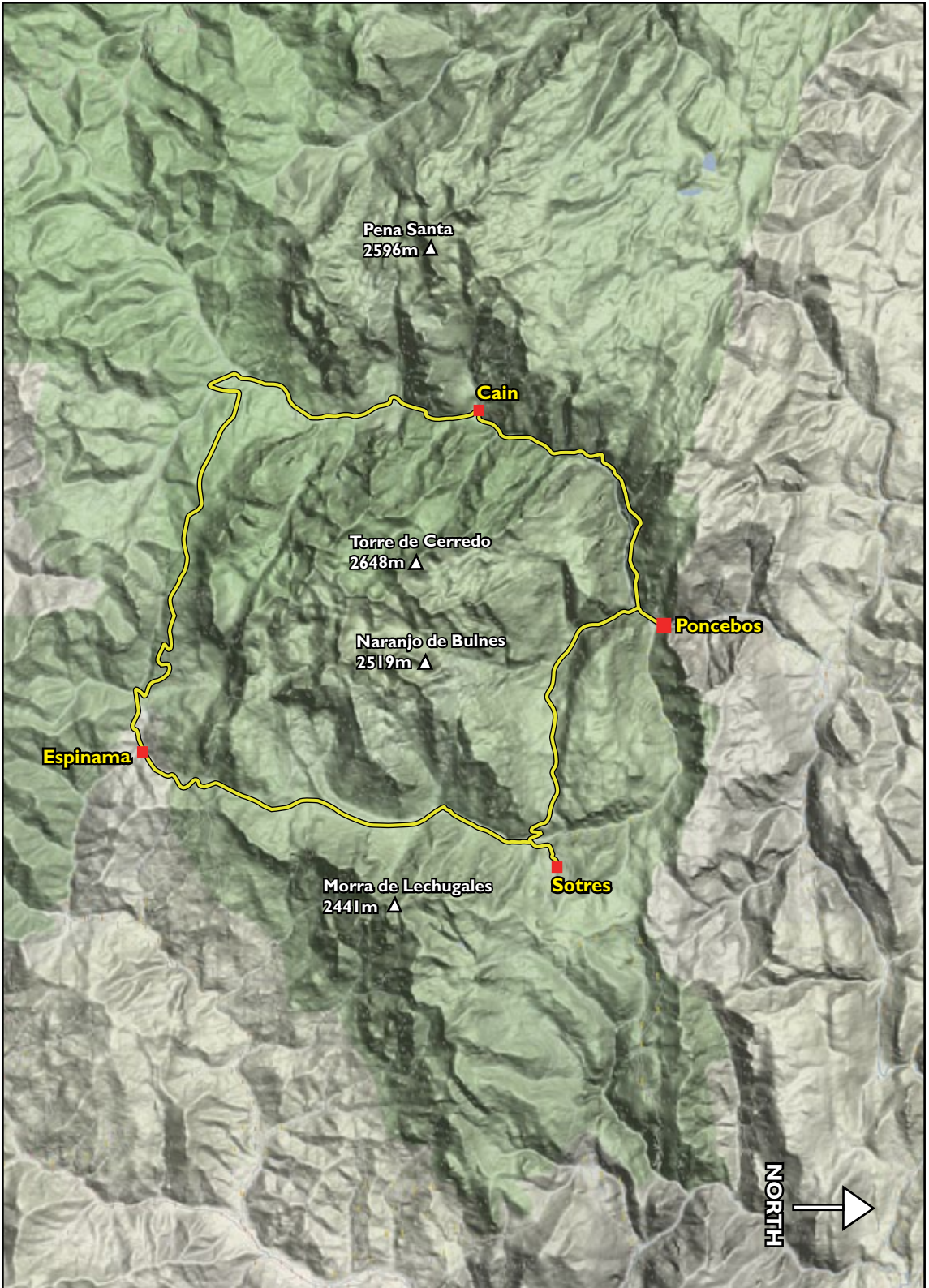
On each of the first 3 days the route goes from a relatively low level, up through woods and pastures to the alpine meadows, over a grassy pass and then back down into the delightful woods again. On the last day it goes down the famous 1000m deep Cares gorge to complete the circuit.

There are refuges in the heart of each massif and some of these are open throughout the year, but this circuit does not go near them. Instead it uses hotels and hostels in the 3 villages. There is a good choice and while it will be necessary to book before hand it should always be available outside

the peak summer weeks. These hotels are at least open until early December and often all year. The hotels will be able to make up packed lunches.

Perhaps the best time to go is in late spring and autumn. May, June, September and October being the prime months. During July and August the temperatures will be excessive and the hotels and paths busy. The weather is likely to be stable in the spring but in the autumn there is more risk of rain. The winter will not really arrive in force until late December and snow will linger for a couple of months. Indeed the area around Sotres is popular for ski touring.

2 maps cover the entire Picos de Europa at a scale of 1:25,000. Published by Ediciones ADRADOS. The ISBN numbers 9788493317782 & 9788493317799. There is not really a relevant walking book on the Picos de Europa. However Robin Walker's Cicerone guide, ISBN 9781852840334, is good for detailed exploration and climbs in the massifs.



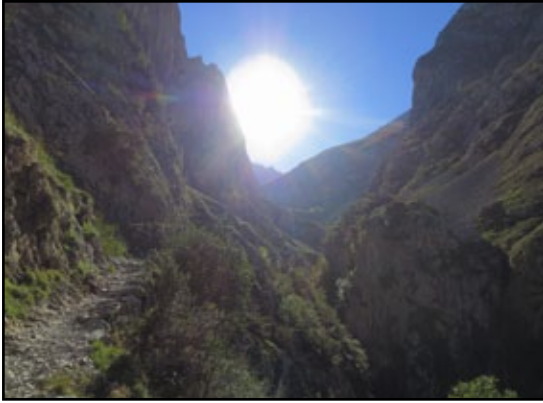
Map of the 3 massifs of the Picos de Europa: The East, Central and West. This 4 day trek essentially goes round the Central massif. For ease of fitting the map is not aligned to the north and the west is uppermost. To view in a correct alignment rotate the page anticlockwise 90 degrees in Adobe Acrobat.



Day I. The village of Bulnes does not have a road to it but is served by a small funicular railway which comes up entirely underground from Poncebos. It brings enough tourists up to sustain the village which would otherwise have been abandoned, except for a few elderly pastoralists.



Day I. Approaching the watershed between Bulnes and Sotres at 1220m. This is at the end of a 1000m climb which takes you from the rocky floor of the Cares gorge up through the meadows around Bulnes, then the hazel woods above this village to emerge onto the high alpine pastures, which are communal



Day 1. From Poncebos the route crosses the Cares gorge on an old narrow stone footbridge. It then climbs up a steep gorge-like side valley called the Canal del Texu for a good hour to reach the pastoral bowl wherein lies Bulnes village



Day 1. Bulnes was an important pastoral village on the north side of the Pico de Europa. However lacking a road it was likely to be abandoned until a discreet funicular was built. It is now a thriving village with tourism supplementing the herding



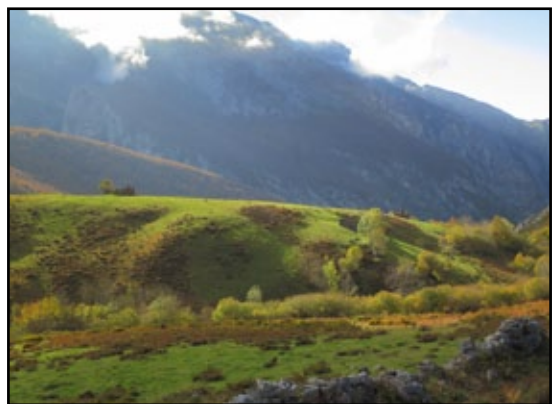
Day 1. A herd of goats above Bulnes. The goats are watched over by a goatherd all day and then put into stone sheds for the night to protect them from predators. Their milk is made into cheese.



Day 1. The Naranjo de Bulnes, 2518m, is an iconic mountain. The easiest way up is the South Face Direct but this is still a "Severe" grade at the hardest section and involves 250m of climbing



Day 1. Hazel trees on the north side of the Picos de Europa provide a rich harvest of nuts. These are both collected by locals for food and foraged by domestic pigs to fatten them for the winter.



Day 1. The pastures above Bulnes are communal. There are many old stone barns scattered around the mountainside for individual farmers to shelter their livestock in and to make cheese in



Day 2. The chapel Ermita de La Santuca de Aliva lies in the large alpine pastures of Puertos de Aliva at nearly 1500m. This lonely, isolated chapel shows just how important the large pastures are



Day 2. Looking down the valley towards Sotres from the Puertos de Aliva pastures. The mountains on the left are the Central Massif and on the right is the Eastern Massif of the Pico de Europa



Day 2. On the descent from the alpine pastures at Puertos del Alvia to the village of Espinama one drops down from 1400m to 900m and into the thick deciduous woods of the Liébana region. These woods are largely Pyrenean oak and European beech but there are many other types. These woods provide great habitats for many species of bird and mammal, and also provide locals with wood and building materials



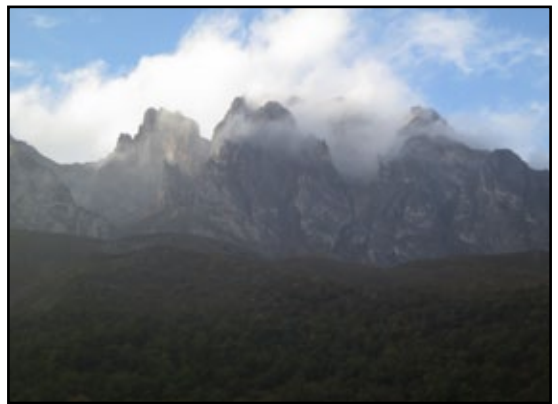
Day 2. The high pastures of Puertos de Aliva are on a high plateau on the saddle between the East and Central massif of the Picos de Europa. In the summer they are grazed by sheep, cows and horses but in the winter they are snow-covered



Day 2. invernales de Igüedri is a picturesque hamlet of houses which are located just over the treeline above Espinama. They are used to shelter the cattle in during part of the winter when the higher pasture are covered in snow.



Day 3. A typical Asturian Horreo. These wooden buildings sit on straddle stones made of wood or stone. This is so moisture or rodents cannot enter and ruin the cereals stored in the granary



Day 3. The jagged limestone peaks tower well over 1000m above the farms in the valley near Cordinanes, As the Cares river descends further the valley sides encroach to form a deep gorge



Day 4. The Cares gorge is 1000m deep with a narrow path clinging to rock ledges and tunneling through buttresses. It crosses the gorge twice on high footbridges, like Puente de Los Rebecos here



Day 4. The narrow path in the Cares gorge was built to service a canal carrying water. However, it has now become a popular walk but it is not for those who suffer from vertigo, as it is exposed



Day 3. Above the village of Espinama are the meadows around Fuente De on the south of the Central Massif of the Picos de Europa. Fuente De is nestled at the bottom of a huge cirque of limestone cliffs. There is an old cable car which takes tourists from the valley floor to the plateau at the top of the cliffs



Day 3. Looking down the Valdebaró valley beyond the village of Espinama into the heart of the Liébana region. This region is composed of 4 valleys which drain from the surrounding mountains meeting at the town of Potes creating a huge lush bowl. The combined river exits down a gorge which was previously inaccessible. Hence Liébana region was quite isolated and has developed its own cultural identity

Picos de Europa: Central Massif Circuit

Day	Start	Finish	Km	Up	Down	Time	General
1	Poncebos	Sotres	12	1210	400	5.5	<p>Park at Poncebos, 230m, and walk up the Cares gorge road for a km. Here a path leaves the road, drops to the river and crosses it on an stone footbridge. The footpath now climbs up the side valley between the near sheer limestone walls climbing 400 metres until it opens up into a bowl where the hamlet of Bulnes lies at 650m with its hostels and cafes. From Bulnes our route now climbs east up a stony path through hazelwoods for 500m. This pastoral section is much more idyllic than the dramatic gorge of the morning. After 2 hours the pastoral valley opens up into a more alpine valley with splendid views to the north side of the Central and Eastern Massifs of the Picos de Europa. Especially spectacular is the towering spire of Naranjo de Bulnes, 2518m, one of the most famous of the Picos de Europa landmarks. At the east end of this treeless alpine valley is a shallow grassy watershed and from it the very picturesque village of Sotres appears a few km away. The descent down the east side of the watershed quickly leads into the hazel, oak and beech woods again. Between the copses are pastures ringing with the sound of cowbells. After descending for 3 km on a good track there are a few hairpin bends leading down into a deeper valley full of old rustic cowsheds. Sotres is just a short climb up on the otherside of this main valley. It is a larger village served by a mountain road with a few hotels around its main square.</p>
2	Sotres	Espinama	16	610	730	5	<p>Retrace you steps for a km back down the road from Sotres into the valley, where all the rustic stone and tile animal barns are. Here take the track which leads up the pastoral valley teeming with flocks of sheep and herds of small brown mountain cattle. Walk up the gentle gradient of this valley which separates the Eastern and Central Massif of the Picos de Europa. After a good hour the track passes a cluster of a further dozen stone animal barns. On each side of the valley here are lofty jagged mountains rising up a further 1000 metres on each side. From here the valley starts to rise for a good hour to gain a smooth grass covered moraine ridge which sweeps down from the base of the mountains above, beside a long disappeared glacier. The valley now levels out as it reaches this smooth grassy watershed at about 1500m. Large flock of sheep guarded by groups of lean powerful mastiffs graze the green grass here near a small chapel. The descent down the other side of the watershed into the Laliebana valley on the south side of the Picos de Europa is down a track. It passes some pastures and then an idyllic cluster of animal barns before entering the oak and beech forests. The track plunges down into these passing many grazing cows and horses in the forest glades under jagged peaks. After a total of 2 hours of descent it finally reaches the charming roadside village of Espinama. Here there are a number of hotels to choose from.</p>
3	Espinama	Cain	25	990	1460	8	<p>From Espinama cross the river and climb up to the rural hamlet of Pido. Head west on the track to the confluence of 2 streams and leave the track heading up woods and fields on a rough track to reach a good track climbing south from Fuente De. There are great views here up to the cirque of mountains and down the wooded Laliebana valley. This track turns west and climbs for 5 km through woods and scrub to the 1800m high Valdeon ridge saddle. From here there is a path which traverses the hillside for 3 km to a small knoll. There are great views here to the hamlets in the valley and beyond to the Western Massif of the Picos de Europa. It is a further 3 km of descent on a small well-marked path to a forested knoll and then village of Posada de Valdeon just beyond. There are two routes to Cain from here; either down the quiet tarmac road for the entire 9 km or adjacent to the road for 7 km and then 2 km on the road for the final stretch. Either route takes you through pastoral landscapes and then descends into oak woods. For the last 3 km the sides of the adjacent massifs close in to form a deep gorge which the road clings to, with the river tumbling beside it. The gorge opens out for a brief kilometre and it is here the extraordinary village of Cain thrives at the end of the road. There are shops and hotels here as it is a popular destination for walkers coming up the gorge from the north. We descend that way tomorrow.</p>
4	Cain	Poncebos	12	200	420	3.5	<p>Leave Cain, walk a short distance and cross to the east side of the gorge by a narrow lake. Recross to west again and begin an extraordinary kilometre where the path follows a series of tunnels along the side of the very narrow and deep gorge with the clear river flows in a deep slot below. About 30 minutes from Cain the path reaches the famous Puente de Los Rebecos footbridge spanning the narrow gorge to the east side again. After a short km it crosses a final footbridge to settle on the west side. Often the path passes a near level canal of water for the hydroelectric station at Poncebos and our path was built to service that canal. For the next hour the path follows a narrow ledge with some tunnels. There are no guard rails and the sheer drops often exceed 100m. For the third hour the path climbs above the narrow slot at the foot of the gorge and traverses over a stony shoulder descending from the mountains above. It climbs above the canal of water which enters a tunnel to cut through this shoulder. The path then descends the other side crossing the canal and the path continues down to the depths of the Cares gorge again. It reaches the bottom by the river just where you crossed it on a old stone bridge 3 days previously at the start of the climb to Bulnes hamlet. Just follow the road down for a km to gloomy Poncebos to complete the varied circuit of the Central Massif of the Picos de Europa.</p>
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