

Travel

Asturias – why Spain's cool coast is this summer's hot destination

With sandy beaches, snowy peaks and silent valleys where bears still roam, this northern region is a verdant, versatile 'climate refuge'

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Every year it happens — and it's getting worse. By mid-July the Spanish countryside has settled into its frazzled, heat-exhausted high-summer look. And I too begin to feel similarly frazzled and exhausted, as if the parched air is sucking the moisture from my very soul.

Thankfully the remedy is simple. At the close of July, when I can stand it no longer, I climb into my car and head north from my home in Extremadura, traversing the dusty plains of Castile and the bleak mountains of León before arriving in what has become my summer happy place: the verdant, rugged, often chilly, always well-watered region officially known as the Principality of Asturias.

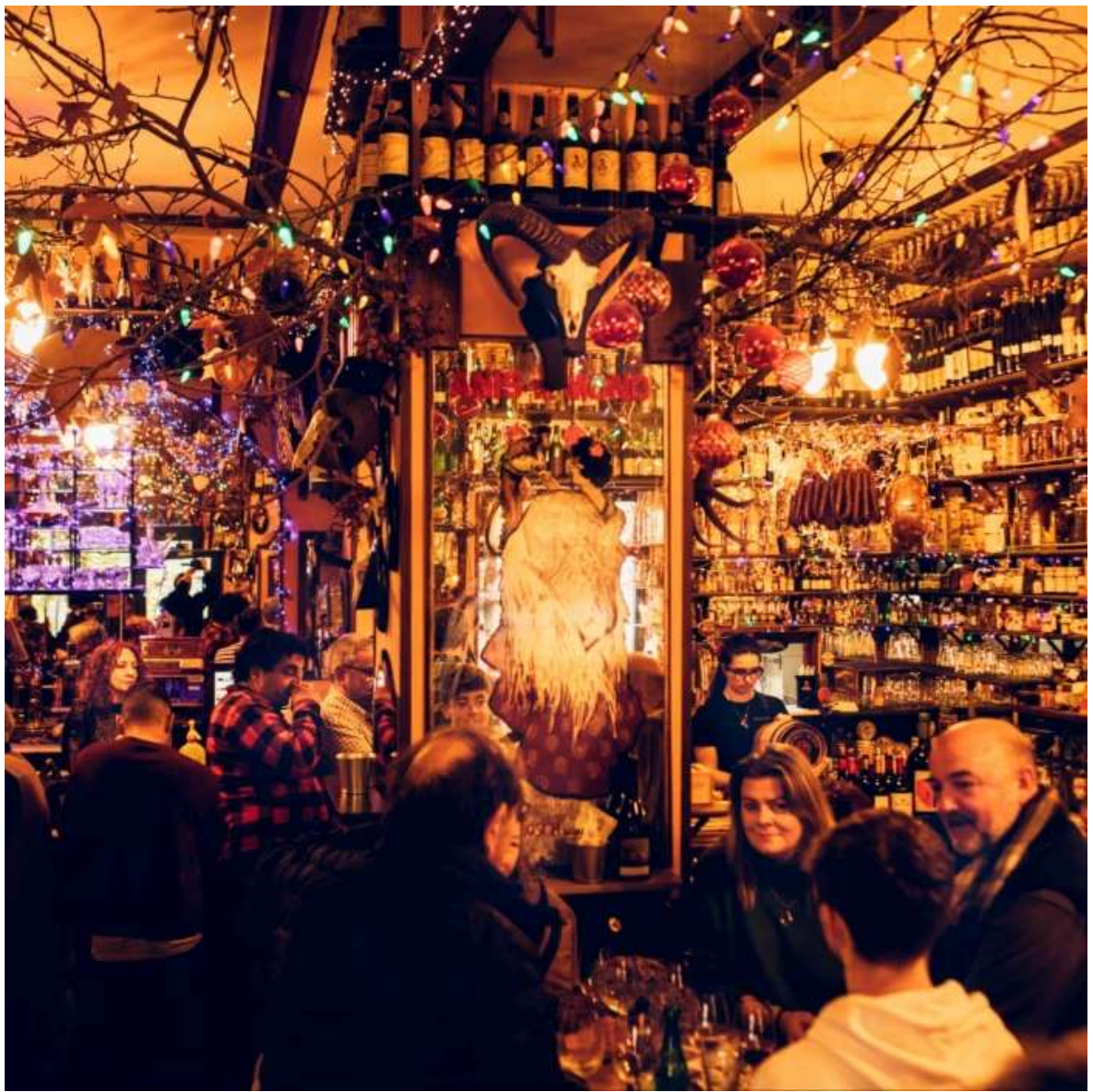


A wedge-shaped chunk of Spain's north coast, fatter at the western end and thinner in the east, Asturias is one of the four “autonomous communities” ranged along the Cantabrian coast from Galicia to the Basque Country.

Fast-flowing rivers run through it from south to north, debouching in a coastline studded with harbour towns and arrayed with glorious scenery. In the Picos de Europa it has a proper mountain range, rearing up like a great white wall behind the Atlantic Ocean. It has a fine trio of cities: the charmingly buttoned-up capital Oviedo; ebullient, surf-tastic Gijón; and handsome Avilés, finally emerging from its post-industrial slump. Though powerfully idiosyncratic, with its own distinctive culture and language, Asturias is in some ways a microcosm of Spain as a whole, cramming into its 10,000-odd square kilometres everything from snowy peaks to sandy beaches, rustic eating houses to avant-garde restaurants, and from raucous local fiestas to silent valleys where bears and wolves still roam.



The beach at Lastres © James Rajotte



Casa Pachu in Oviedo, 'where the cider flows freely' © James Rajotte



Fabada asturiana at Llar de Viri in the village of San Román © James Rajotte

Although for me it has always been a retreat from the heat, there is much talk these days of the region repositioning itself as a “climate refuge”. Historically, for northern Europeans the Cantabrian seaboard was simply too chilly and rainy to cater to our summer holiday needs. But with temperatures along the Mediterranean coast regularly hitting the high forties, there are early signs that Spanish tourism’s traditional north-south divide may be about to swivel on its axis.

It’s a moment many *asturianos* are privately dreading. “We’re not ready for the hordes,” one of them told me recently. Doubtless some of these locals, not to mention a good number of wised-up foreigners, will be furious with me for flagging the delights of this hitherto under-visited region.

Why am I not unduly worried? Mainly because the principality lacks the hotel beds and infrastructure to become a sun-sea-and-sangria pleasure zone in the manner of the Costas. But also because the climate, though a good deal less rainy and chilly than it used to be, is still notoriously unpredictable. Of the two weeks I spent last summer in the coastal village of Cudillero (where a 19th-century lighthouse opens this summer as a spectacular lodging, see below) there were only a handful of “beach days”: the rest were overcast and/or bathed in a gentle drizzle.

PLAY | 00:13

© James Rajotte

No matter: those were the days I’d get in the car and drive. Up to the glacial lakes of Covadonga, glittering like sapphires among the limestone crags of the Picos. Down to the forests of Fuentes del Narcea in the wild interior — among the largest areas of first-growth deciduous woodland in the whole of Europe. Over to my favourite rustic restaurant, El Llar de Viri in the village of San Román, for a big bowl of *fabada asturiana*, the long-simmered signature dish of beans and smoked sausage, and a bottle of local cider.

So Asturias may not be for everyone, but it certainly is for me. And my commitment to the region seems set to deepen even further in the coming years — I’ve just bought a house there.

Here are a dozen reasons why there’s a buzz about Asturias this year:

1 *Getting there*



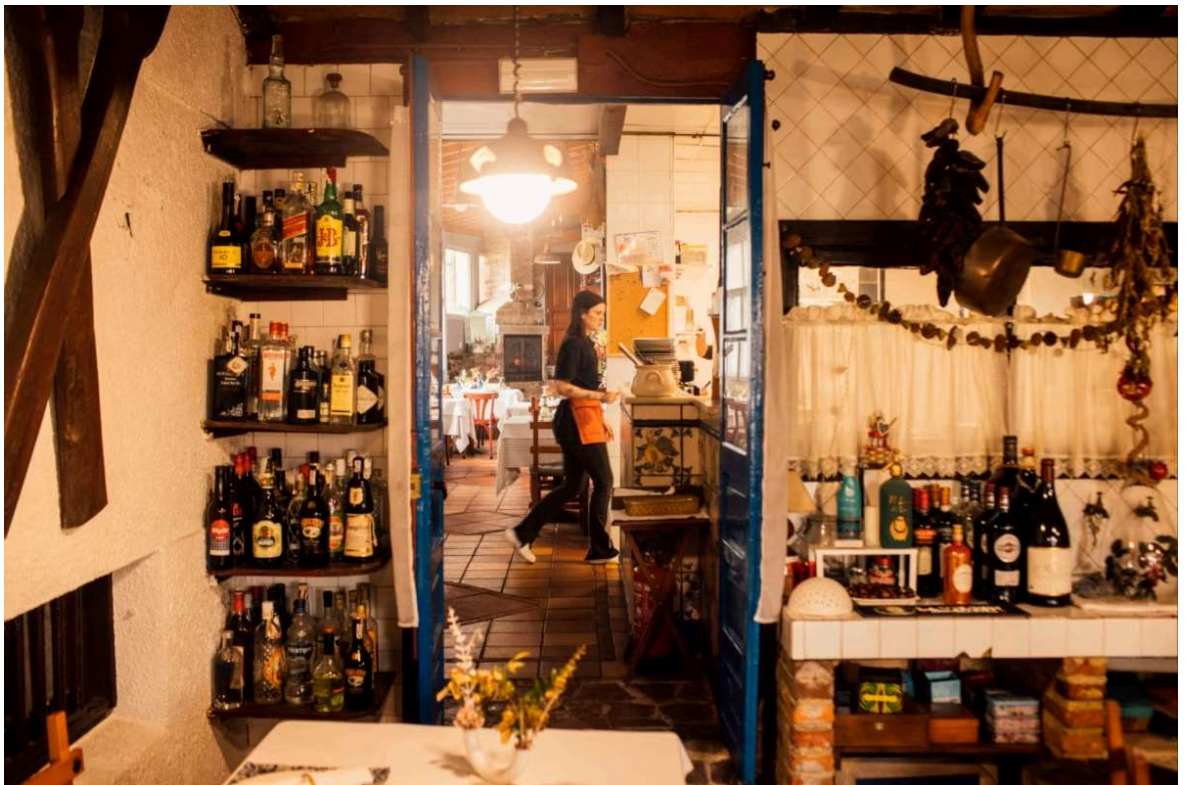
The new high-speed train on its inaugural run from Madrid to Oviedo © Europa Press/Getty Images

After two decades of construction — and with a €4bn price tag — a new high-speed rail link from Madrid to Oviedo was inaugurated at the end of November.

Travelling through 40km of new tunnels (one of them 28km in length), the new Variante de Pajares route removes the need for trains to climb over the Cantabrian Mountains and cuts the journey time by about 80 minutes to as little as three hours 11 minutes. (New trains due to enter service this year should trim the journey still further, to under three hours.) “This marks a before and after,” said President of Asturias Adrián Barbón at the inauguration. “With it begins a decade full of transformations in our land.”

The line opens up the region for short-break tourism from the rest of the country, but for those coming from overseas Asturias has its own airport, 27km west of Gijón (and 700m from the nearest beach), with direct flights from London, Düsseldorf, Amsterdam, Milan and Rome. There's much to be said, however, for arriving by car. The A66 motorway north out of León, which swings between high-mountain passes and plunging gorges, offers one of Spain's most eye-popping drives. In high summer, emerging from the 4km Negrón road tunnel into Asturias's green-on-green world of chestnut woods and rich pastures is especially magical.

2 *Oviedo, Spanish Capital of Gastronomy 2024*



El Llar de Viri in San Román © James Rajotte

The chocolate-box capital Oviedo has many charms but the focus this year is on its excellence as a food city. Start with the bustling Mercado del Fontán, founded in 1885 and a hunting-ground for fine Asturian products such as *verdinas* (dried green beans) and salt-cured anchovies. Then cruise the city's timeworn *chigres* (rustic bars) such as Casa Lín on Avenida de Colón and Casa Pachu on Calle Alfonso III el Magno, where the cider flows freely along with platters of *fabes con almejas* (thumb-sized beans with clams), stuffed onions or *cachopo* (melted cheese and ham sandwiched between two breadcrumb veal steaks). The menu at the classic [Casa Fermín](#) on Calle San Francisco — where Meryl Streep dined with Antonio Banderas after receiving her Princess of Asturias Award for the Arts last year — includes wild salmon from the Sella river. Pastry shops, of which Oviedo has many ([Rialto](#) and [Camilo de Blas](#) both have two locations; [Peñalba](#) is on Calle Milicias Nacionales), specialise in local sweetmeats *carbayones* and *casadielles*.

Oviedo's gastro-capital status will rightly draw attention to the region's food culture in general. With a total of 12 Michelin stars at 11 restaurants (two for Nacho Manzano's [Casa Marcial](#) in the hamlet of La Salgar, outside Arriondas), culinary sophistication has not passed Asturias by — but the real joy of eating here is the honesty, simplicity and heartiness of the local cooking.

oviedocapitalgastro.com

3

*The best beaches in the
Iberian peninsula (whisper it)*



Playa del Silencio, where the beach is surrounded by dramatic rock formations © James Rajotte

Though it pains me to divulge this best-kept secret, some of Spain's most perfect *playas* are to be found along the coast of Asturias. Barayo, for instance: a pristine valley protected from all possible development, inhabited only by otters, a river reaching the sea in a majestic arc of sand. Or Playa del Silencio, aptly named, where dramatic rock formations encircle a lonely beach. And lovely Torimbia, a mouthwateringly beautiful sandy bay which, like many in Asturias, can only be reached on foot. Be warned though: the water is cold, the waves often unruly.

4

*The cider house
rules, OK*



At a bar in the Cimadevilla district of Gijón, cider is served 'escanciada' — poured in a thin stream from arm's height © James Rajotte

Apple orchards replace vineyards in this temperate northern region and, though a small wine industry exists, the region's drink of choice is cider. Here it's served *escanciada*: poured by the waiter in a thin stream from an arm's height, oxygenating the drink for a kick of freshness that *asturianos* love. (Increasingly, you're encouraged to do this yourself using a contraption brought to the table.) The *sidra* is traditionally poured in small quantities, then downed in one, though form dictates that a little is always left at the bottom of the glass. At hundreds of *sidrerías* across the region, bottles of fresh cider are served along with plates of fried monkfish, smoked chorizo and slabs of cheese. I recommend an evening on the Calle Gascona, boisterous heart of Oviedo's cider scene, and the salty *chigres* of Cimadevilla district above Gijón harbour. turismoasturias.es

5

Solo Palacio and the new rural luxe



Solo Palacio hotel, near Pola de Lena © James Rajotte

Truly outstanding hotels have been a little scarce here, notable exceptions being the [Palacio de Luces](#) (outside Lastres) and [PuebloAstur](#), the takeover and extravagant makeover of an entire country village near Villar de la Cuesta. But newcomer Solo Palacio, which opened its doors in June last year, has sensationally redefined the whole idea of luxe in the rural Asturian context. (Doubles start at €265 per night but can rise to more than €1,000, a figure that has caused quite a stir locally.) This grand country estate dating from the 15th century, once the seat of the aristocratic Miranda-Quirós family, has been sensitively reconfigured into nine apartments whose interiors (by Madrid-based designer Sofía Tejerina) are in full-on rustic-minimalist, wabi-sabi mode. Though apparently in the middle of nowhere, Solo Palacio lies just 15 minutes from the new high-speed train station in Pola de Lena. solopalacio.com

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Pre-Romanesque architecture



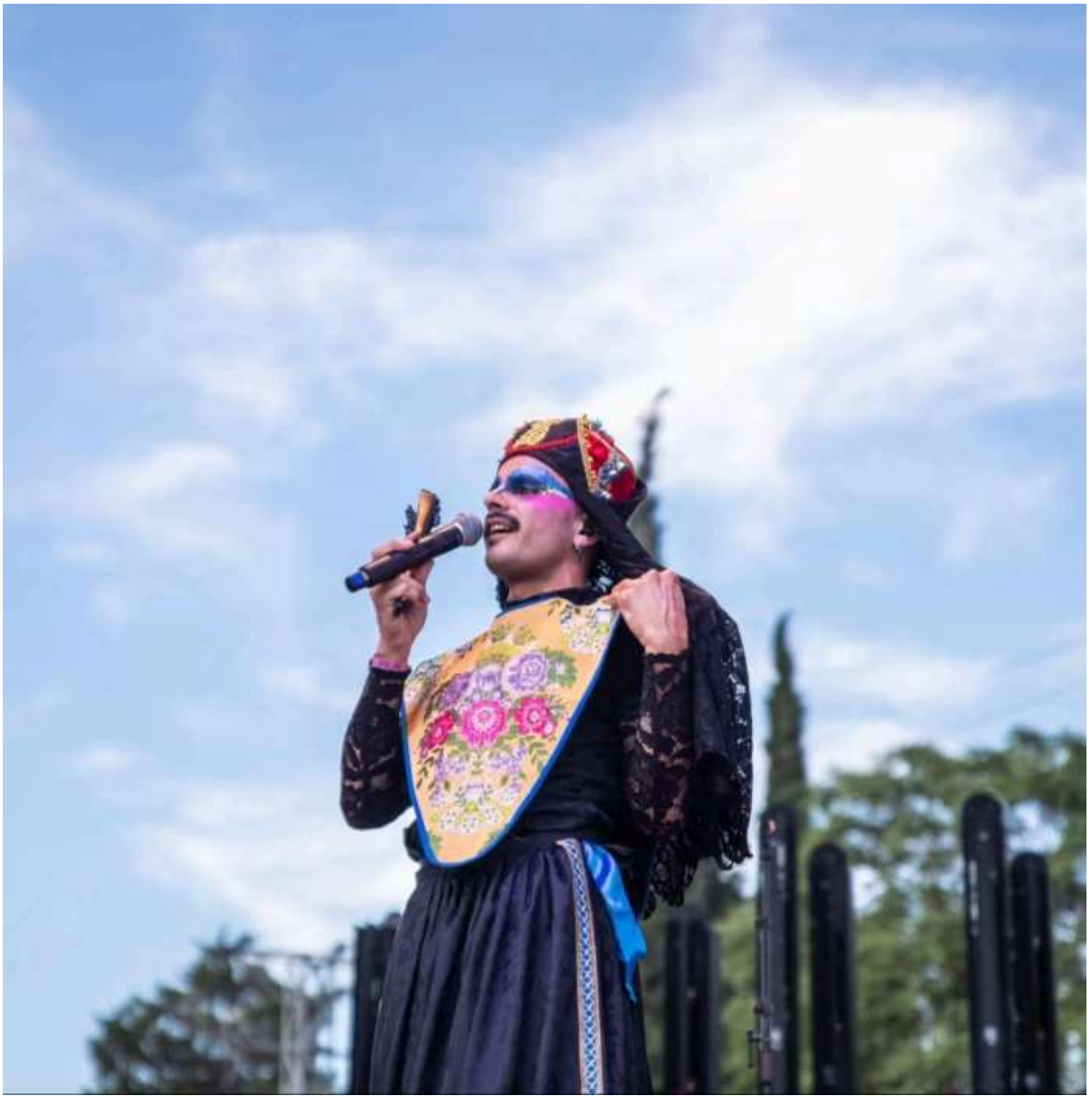
The church of Santa María del Naranco, on a hilltop overlooking Oviedo © Getty Images

Asturias is home to some of Spain's most venerable buildings. Over the years I have practically collected the set of pre-Romanesque Asturian churches dating from the sixth to ninth century. Among my top picks are Santa María del Naranco, in a meadow high above Oviedo, built for King Ramiro I in the mid-ninth century, and San Julián de los Prados, whose stucco walls are covered in paintings. The church of Santa Cristina de Lena, perched on a hillside above the industrial town of Pola de Lena, is tiny and primitive, and somehow moving in its humility.

spain.info

7

Rodrigo Cuevas, Spain's newest queer icon



Rodrigo Cuevas on stage in 2022 © Aitor Rodero Aznarez/Alamy

This musician and self-styled “cultural agitator” mashes up traditional Asturian music with electronica and a wildly transgressive fashion sense, flying a flag for the LGBTQ community all the while. As he drags (pun intended) rural culture into the 21st century, it’s said he is doing for *asturiano* folk what Rosalía has done for flamenco. The result has taken Spain by storm, winning Cuevas the prestigious National Contemporary Music Prize last year. His new album *Manual de Romería* is just out on Sony Music. [rodrigocuevas.sexy](https://www.rodrigocuevas.sexy)

8
Bears



Thanks to environmental protection and habitat restoration, some 350 bears now roam the mountains between Asturias and neighbouring Cantabria © Alamy

The species *Ursus arctos cantabricus* was once common in Spain. But by 1973, when the brown bear was finally protected under Spanish law, fewer than 60 of them remained, corralled in the highlands of the north. Genetic diversity was increasingly compromised as the remaining populations became isolated from each other. Half a century later, though, a combination of watertight environmental protection, habitat restoration, scientific research and outreach among local communities has brought about something like a miracle. Around 350 bears now roam the mountains between Asturias and neighbouring Cantabria and the number is still increasing year-on-year. Bear-spotting tourism is a growing phenomenon in Somiedo and Fuentes del Narcea — two of Asturias’s 24 nature reserves — where lodgings in the villages cater to a new kind of visitor. Steppes Travel has teamed up with nature-tourism outfit Wild Spain Travel to offer a seven-night tour, “On the Trail of Bears in Northern Spain”; see steppestravel.com

9 *Las guisanderas*

PLAY | 00:08

Lunch is prepared at Casa Eutimio in Lastres © James Rajotte

The figure of the *guisandera* (“stew-maker” is as close as English gets) is pivotal in the culture and cuisine of Asturias. Typically, she is both cook and hostess at her own homely restaurant, and a stalwart guardian of time-honoured local recipes such as *pote* — a stew of beans, meats and cabbage — maize-flour *tortos* and *arroz con leche* (Asturian rice pudding). Among the several dozen of these traditional eating houses, I suggest those of Elvira Fernández ([El Llar de Viri](#)), Aida Rosales and her daughter María Busta ([Casa Eutimio](#)) and Joaquina Rodríguez ([Casa Chema](#)).

10 *Avilés and Niemeyer*



The Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre in Avilés © James Rajotte

The city of Avilés was once Asturias's industrial powerhouse (it still plays host to the ArcelorMittal steelworks). Then came pollution, neglect and economic decline. More recently, though, the Oscar Niemeyer International Cultural Centre, a group of sculptural white forms designed by the Brazilian architect and inaugurated in 2011, has helped bring about an improvement in its fortunes analogous to the "Guggenheim effect" in Bilbao. This summer it promises a packed programme of art, music, dance and cinema, as well as guided tours of Niemeyer's buildings. niemeyercenter.org

11
Cheese



A cheese shop in Cangas de Onís © James Rajotte

The lush pastures of the principality are ideal for dairy farming, and herds of brown cows are ubiquitous. Asturian milk is of high quality and cheese is a major element of the local gastronomy. According to the regional government, as many as 329 artisanal cheese varieties are made here. Curiosities include Afuega'l Pitu, whose chalky texture and piquant taste you either love or loathe, and the strange Casín, a tiny, rock-hard, powerfully flavoured cheese rescued from imminent extinction by livestock farmer Marigel Álvarez.

But the finest of Asturias's many cheeses, in my opinion, are Gamonéu — traditionally made with a mixture of cow's, sheep's and goat's milk by high-mountain shepherds during the summer months — and pungent Cabrales, up there with Roquefort and Stilton among Europe's great blue cheeses. You'll find this fragrant fromage all over the region but the mountain towns of the Picos de Europa are the heartland of Cabrales production. turismoasturias.es

12 *El Faro de Cudillero*



The lighthouse in fishing village of Cudillero © James Rajotte

Tim Wittenbecher is a lighthouse collector. Obsessed with these structures since childhood, he has built up a growing portfolio that includes a lighthouse on the North Sea coast of Germany, one on the island of La Palma and one on Ischia, each converted into a romantic and comfortable place to stay. Wittenbecher's latest property is a stone-built 19th-century lighthouse on a rocky bluff near the Asturian fishing village of Cudillero. Following a thorough restoration, the Faro de Cudillero opens for business in June this year. The windows of its two well-appointed apartments (note the underfloor heating and open fireplaces) offer swoon-inducing views along the coast. Wittenbecher's second Asturian lighthouse, in the seaside town of Ribadesella, is slated for 2025. floatel.de

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